

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW

Wednesday 21 February 2024

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas

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

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 9:15.

MEMBERS

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

Ms Abigail Boyd

The Hon. Greg Donnelly

Ms Cate Faehrmann

The Hon. Wes Fang

The Hon. Sam Faraway

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Emma Hurst

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The Hon. Bronnie Taylor

PRESENT

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

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

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

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

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW additional round of inquiry into budget estimates 2023-24. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Mark Banasiak, and I am Chair of the Committee. I welcome Minister Moriarty and accompanying officials to this hearing. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Agriculture, Regional New South Wales and Western New South Wales. I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence that they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing, so I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants, and I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of those procedures.

Mr Chaudhary is appearing today via videoconference, so I have a few notes on virtual hearing etiquette to minimise disruptions and assist our Hansard reporters. If the participant loses their internet connection and is disconnected from the virtual hearing, they are asked to rejoin the hearing by using the same link provided by the Committee secretariat. I ask Committee members to clearly identify who questions are directed to. I ask everyone to please state their name when they begin speaking. Could the witness on videoconference please mute their microphone when they're not speaking and remember to turn their microphone back on when they're getting ready to speak. If you start speaking while muted, please start your answer again so that it can be recorded in the transcript. Members and witnesses should avoid speaking over each other, so we can all be heard clearly. To assist Hansard, I remind members and witnesses to speak directly into the microphone and avoid making comments when your head is turned away.

I welcome and thank everyone for making the time to give evidence. Minister Moriarty, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament. Most witnesses who appeared at the initial and supplementary hearings before this Committee also do not need to be sworn, but witnesses who are appearing in a different capacity, have a new title or did not attend the other rounds of hearings will now need to be sworn prior to giving evidence.

Ms REBECCA FOX, Secretary, Department of Regional NSW, on former affirmation

Mr STEVE ORR, Chief Executive Officer, Local Land Services, on former affirmation

Mr JONATHAN WHEATON, Acting Deputy Secretary, Regional Development and Programs, on former affirmation

Mr JAMES BOLTON, Deputy Secretary, Regional Precincts Group, on former affirmation

Mr ANSHUL CHAUDHARY, Chief Executive Officer, Forestry Corporation, on former affirmation

Mr ROSS DICKSON, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Forestry Corporation, sworn and examined

Mr SEAN SLOAN, Acting Director General, Department of Primary Industries, affirmed and examined

Dr JOHN TRACEY, Deputy Director General, DPI Biosecurity and Food Safety, on former affirmation

Dr KIM FILMER, Chief Animal Welfare Officer, DPI, affirmed and examined

Mr DAVID McPHERSON, Deputy Director General, DPI Forestry and Land Reform, on former affirmation

Mr ROB KELLY, Executive Director, LLS Regional Delivery, on former affirmation

Mr PETER TURNELL, Acting Deputy Director General, DPI Fisheries, sworn and examined

Ms KATE LORIMER-WARD, Deputy Director General, DPI Agriculture, affirmed and examined

Mr LIAM HOGG, Director Policy, LLS Policy, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank witnesses for bringing their name placard with them when they came to the table. If you can keep doing that when you come to the table, it helps Hansard.

REBECCA FOX: Excuse me, Chair. Can I just explain that Mr Chaudhary is online at the moment from India. He is on leave in India. We've sworn Mr Dickson in in case we lose the connection with Mr Chaudhary.

The CHAIR: We have received that correspondence. If we can excuse Mr Chaudhary so that he can enjoy his leave, we will seek to do that if possible. Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. We are joined by the Minister for the morning session, from 9.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. In the afternoon we will hear from the departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During these sessions, there will be questions from Opposition and crossbench members only, and then 15 minutes will be allocated for Government questions at 10.45 a.m., 12.45 p.m. and 5.15 p.m. We will now begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Sloan, when did you find out that the director general had been sacked by the secretary?

SEAN SLOAN: I had a phone call from the secretary on Tuesday 16 February. I was actually making a trip over to Adelaide. I'd visited our Narrandera research station on the Monday, and I was travelling over to Adelaide on the Tuesday. I had a phone call from the secretary asking if I would be available during the course of that week to have a discussion with her about that matter.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: In that conversation at that point, was the offer made to be the acting director general?

SEAN SLOAN: It's my understanding that Mr Hansen had recommended that I be his temporary replacement. That was conveyed to me, and I accepted that I would take that on, given Mr Hansen's recommendation. But the conversation was literally along the lines of the secretary was aware I was about to go on leave and needed to know that I'd be available during the course of the week to have that discussion if needed.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Orr, when did you find out that the secretary had sacked the then director general of DPI?

STEVE ORR: I was on leave that week. The notification came around by email on that Friday.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Dr Tracey, the same question: When did you find out that the director general had been sacked by the secretary?

JOHN TRACEY: That same day—on that Friday. We had a conversation in the morning.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Lorimer-Ward, the same question—just when you knew the secretary had sacked the then director general.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I was advised at a nine o'clock meeting on the Friday.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Secretary, when did you actually terminate the employment of Mr Hansen, the director general of DPI?

REBECCA FOX: I think I need to be very careful here about divulging personal and privacy information. I am not willing to do that. I'm happy to talk about the process, so if you could just repeat the question, I'll answer the process question, if that's okay.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It is a very straightforward question. It is very widely reported in the media as well. When did you officially terminate the employment of Mr Hansen, the former director general of the DPI?

REBECCA FOX: The process is a preliminary decision is made. Mr Hansen, and any senior executive that's terminated under section 41 of the Government Sector Employment Act, has an opportunity to provide information that they would like taken into account between a preliminary decision being made and a final decision being made. I followed that process and the final decision was made on Wednesday 17 January.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Why was Mr Hansen's employment terminated? As a long-serving—

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order: In my view, it is to engage in gross procedural unfairness in relation to a third party to attempt to publicly divulge, in a forum such as this, the reasons for his termination. It may also be unlawful under the relevant legislation.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: To the point of order: This is budget estimates. We are under parliamentary privilege. It makes this process unique and important—and important as given to members of Parliament to make sure we hold the Government to account and that questions are answered. The questions are factual, they're straightforward and they're not asking for opinion. They're not providing any misuse of the process. This is a very important issue that is facing this entire department with someone who was very well respected. We need to get to the bottom of it. That's our job.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Further to the point of order: There's a clear requirement in the standing orders to accord procedural fairness.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: This is not a court of law.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: To suggest that you would, in this forum, ask a witness to divulge the reasons for termination of someone who is not a secretary, let alone a Minister or a Parliamentary Secretary or the like, would be—it is obviously unclear what the answer would be—potentially highly damaging to a third party.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To the point of order: For the record, this is highly reported throughout the media. I can table multiple media reports that speculate from Mr Hansen and also the secretary that leadership changes were the decision. That has been reported. So I think this is in the public domain, and it's certainly well past any privilege and beyond estimates.

The CHAIR: Accepting all arguments and not having the legislation that you may or may not be depending on, in terms of whether it is legal or not legal, and not wanting to get into a legal argument that takes up 15 minutes, we do have parliamentary privilege. As the Opposition has rightly pointed out, it has been well ventilated in the media. The witness is free to answer how she sees fit. That's part of the procedural fairness. The Opposition are likely to ask follow-ups as well. The Opposition has the call.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I will repeat my question, Secretary. Why did you sack and terminate the employment of Mr Hansen as a long-serving director general of the DPI?

REBECCA FOX: Thank you. I understand the interest. I have not made any media comment, to start with, in relation to this issue at all. So anything that's reported in the media, I have not sanctioned. I have not made a media comment, and I'm not aware often of what the media says. Termination under section 41 of the Government Sector Employment Act for senior executives can be done at any time for any or no stated reason and without notice. My experience in termination of senior executives in my time in government, firstly, is that all senior executives are aware of that possibility. I think Mr Hansen has said that publicly, that he was aware of that possibility. But I can assure you that I take my obligations as an employer extremely seriously. I make these decisions with a great deal of input. I understand that they have impacts, both personal impacts and broader impacts, but reasons are not generally provided to employees, and they're not required to be provided to employees under the legislation, and we generally—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Secretary. Just to redirect—obviously, I appreciate the process of how you terminated the former director general. I appreciate how you did it. I want to know—and so do so many stakeholders in regional New South Wales and in the agricultural sector—why. Your department have been on the record. I quote from an article in *The Land*. I think it's actually this morning. I've tabled it with the Chair so the secretariat may have a copy. "The future of the NSW DPI is still no clearer" is the title. I quote:

When Mr Hansen was dismissed on Friday, January 19, there were fears among farmers and DPI staff alike that Australia's largest provider of rural research and development would be absorbed into a "super department" inside the Department of Regional NSW.

...

A spokesperson for the Department of Regional NSW would not say if there were going to be any further changes to the DPI structure or when an update on how the DPI structure was going to look would be released.

...

"As part of this process, all NSW Government departments have been asked to ensure staff, resources and culture are aligned with the government's priorities and best support the efficient and effective delivery of functions and services," they said.

This is fairly widely reported. One of your own staff within the department are speaking to the media. People want a little bit more clarity, Secretary, so again I pose the question to you: What was the reasoning behind the leadership changes that are touted in all the public domain, in the media? Why was Mr Hansen sacked as the director general?

REBECCA FOX: We've had a good opportunity over the last 12 months—and the Government has asked us to look at the way that we operate and, as you just said then, to make sure that we're operating efficiently and effectively and aligned with the Government's priorities. We've done that through a number of processes, not just the Department of Regional NSW, but right across the public sector. The first one of those reviews was a comprehensive expenditure review. That was undertaken. That allowed us to look at our budgetary position and to make sure we were well set up for the future. The second part of that is a public service review, public sector review. We've also done that. I take into account a range of inputs as I do that. I need to make sure that I have the right mix of capabilities and resources to ensure that we can deliver what the Government requires and for the communities and industries in New South Wales.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So, as part of this review, it's fair to say, from 2011 onwards the Department of Primary Industries was given its autonomy, not as its dedicated own agency but a business unit, its dedicated own business unit within whatever cluster, agency it fell under. Is it fair to say that, under this review, this functional review that you are undertaking, DPI will no longer be its own business unit?

REBECCA FOX: No, that's—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: DPI sits inside of Regional NSW, which is where the previous Government put it.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I ask the secretary again: As part of your functional review, will DPI continue to be its own business unit that sits under whatever cluster agency Government decide it will sit under?

REBECCA FOX: That is my commitment. That's what I expect to happen. I'm committed to an operating model that is very clear for our stakeholders and for our staff, and I don't see why that would change.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Will DPI continue as a dedicated entity as DPI—as their own brand—with their own autonomy, as they've had over the last decade?

REBECCA FOX: That decision is not completely in my hands. I have a view about that and I certainly have a very good understanding of well-loved brands—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What is your view, Ms Fox?

REBECCA FOX: I've worked with Public Works since 2016 and I've been through—they were the Department of Public Works, and I understand the issues with well-known brands, so my view is they should remain as a standalone division within whatever department the Government decides to make. At the moment, the Premier said at the last estimates hearing—it's my understanding that we would remain as we are, as a standalone department. I haven't got any indication that would change.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Will the Department of Primary Industries continue as its own identity called the Department of Primary Industries?

REBECCA FOX: So at the moment you know they're not a department—it's in name only. The departments are set out in schedule 1 of the Government Sector Employment Act and—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But they are their own business unit that falls under, currently, the Department of Regional NSW.

REBECCA FOX: That's correct, and they will remain as a business unit under the broader department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Will you change the name of DPI?

REBECCA FOX: I think that is something that should be looked at, and we would do that with the staff and with our stakeholders.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Why?

REBECCA FOX: As I said, that's what we've got to work through. We're being asked to be transparent and clear. A department within a department has been described to me by a very senior public servant as an administrative fiction. One of the things that the public sector review has asked us to do is make sure we are clear and transparent about accountabilities and about who does what, but that decision hasn't been made. They are the Department of Primary Industries. Mr Sloan is running that team. There has been no change.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you feel—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, but ultimately this will be a decision for Government. There is a review being conducted by the department, as there will be across all departments inside of the government, and recommendations will be made to me as the Minister, which I will consider. Recommendations will be considered by the Government in relation to what the structure looks like.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm sorry; I'm going to finish this answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, I'd like to redirect the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Asking public servants for opinions is out of the standing orders.

The CHAIR: Order! We're not going to have people talking over the top of each other. We had this yesterday and, frankly, it was extremely frustrating that we couldn't follow a simple instruction. The honourable member has the right to redirect. I would ask that he does so in a respectful manner that doesn't involve this tit-for-tat shouting over the top of each other.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Chair.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm also going to be clear that these will be decisions for Government.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I would like to redirect the question to the secretary. The feeling amongst Regional NSW stakeholder groups, very widely—and I've consulted very widely over the course of the last few months—is that part of your functional review will be about merging the Department of Primary Industries, whether it's name only or not, into the Department of Regional NSW to make it a super-department and change the name. There is huge concern that the Department of Primary Industries is one of the most credible New South Wales government agencies, which this State can be very proud of, and they will lose that credibility and autonomy under this functional review. Would you agree with that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: These are hypothetical questions because these will be decisions for Government.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Point of order—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm going to intervene here.

The CHAIR: I've got to hear the point of order.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I look forward to receiving the recommendations—

The CHAIR: Order! Minister, no matter where the point of order comes from, I have to hear it whether it is a frivolous point of order or not. Ms Taylor.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you. The Hon. Sam Farraway is directing his question, as is his job and his right to do, to the appropriate person that he designates and the Minister is coming in over the top and arguing the point. The question is directed to someone and the process is that that person then answers it.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: To the point of order: The Minister is entitled to answer any of the questions that are directed to any of the departmental people. She's within her rights to take the answer and provide it to this Committee.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: To the point of order—

The CHAIR: I don't need to hear you, Mr Donnelly. I don't want to labour the point. You are right that the witness has a right to direct a question to another witness, but the Minister also has the right to provide additional commentary and step in. The honourable member can then redirect and ask for further clarification.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I might redirect you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to finish the answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'd like to redirect specifically to you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a decision that will be made by Government. Hypothetical questions about the feelings of people in the public service are not an appropriate line of questioning in this budget estimates.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Chair, I will redirect the question—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm ultimately responsible for what happens in this department, and the Department of Primary Industries sits within Regional, as it was placed by the previous Government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —because the Minister has now swayed directly from it.

The CHAIR: Order! Minister, the honourable member wishes to redirect the question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I'd like to redirect the question to you. Are you involved in the functional review process?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The functional review is being conducted by the department because that's what we've asked the department to do. That will be a normal course of events across departments in the government. I look forward to receiving recommendations and the thoughts of the department, through the secretary, once that work is completed. I haven't received those yet but when I receive them, I will consider them and make some decisions about what my view about those recommendations is. And then the whole of Government will make decisions about how the Government wants to function.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Now that you've clarified that the agency and the department is undertaking the review, I'm going to redirect my questions to the secretary. Ms Fox, have you received feedback there is huge concern in regional New South Wales, in the agricultural sector, that this functional review will remove the credibility of the Department of Primary Industries if it is merged, even by name only, into a super-agency?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: These are hypothetical questions which I've just provided an answer in relation to. Work is being conducted. No report has been finalised and provided to me, and I'll be making the decision about the structure.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. I'm going to redirect the question to the secretary.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Hypothetical questions about the feelings of people around New South Wales are not appropriate questions to the department.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: It's not up to you to decide what is appropriate.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I absolutely respect the work of people working in primary industries. I want to praise them right here, today. But these will be decisions for the Government, which is appropriate.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Again, we'll redirect. Since the Minister has made it clear she is not part of the functional review process, I will redirect my questions to the secretary. Ms Fox, do you believe that this functional review may result in the Department of Primary Industries losing its current autonomy as its own business unit?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The process is not relevant here. The outcome and decisions made by Government is what's relevant.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: No, process is relevant.

The CHAIR: I'll hear the point of order, Mr Lawrence.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: That's a not that thinly disguised attempt to elicit an opinion on a matter of Government policy, and it's an inappropriate question to put to a public servant.

The CHAIR: I will have to rule that it did come out as seeking an opinion from a public servant. If you'd like to rephrase, you may do so.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'll redirect to the secretary. Ms Fox, will the Department of Primary Industries, post this review, have a dedicated role of director general?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order: That's an attempt, again, to get an opinion on a matter of Government policy. There's a review underway. People are feeding into the review. Presumably, decisions will be made. This is an attempt to pre-empt that and get a public servant to, in effect, express an opinion on it. It is completely improper.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: To the point of order: This is a senior public servant. Ms Fox is the secretary of a department. She can answer a question. Honestly, stop running cover and let people do their jobs.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: She can't express an opinion on a matter of Government policy. It doesn't matter how senior she is. She cannot express an opinion on a matter of Government policy. She shouldn't be put in that position.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To the point of order—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Well, then, she can say that.

The CHAIR: Order! I'll hear the comments from Mr Farraway.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: In our questioning, we have no choice but to pose these questions to the department because the Minister has confirmed she does not undertake this review. The Government has commissioned or appointed the agencies and the secretaries to conduct these reviews. These are legitimate questions about that review. As to what the final Government policy is, that will be for the Minister to answer in due course.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Further to the point of order: That's not what the question was. The question was "Will A happen after the review?" That is exactly the same as asking for an opinion, because it's attempting to pre-empt it.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Cite the standing order. Let's move on.

The CHAIR: I have to rule. The witness is free to answer how she so wishes. It's a bit of a fine line. I respect what Mr Farraway is saying about how it's out of the Minister's hands because she's not involved in this review. So the questions do have to go to a departmental witness, but the witness is free to answer how she sees fit. If she sees fit not to respond to the question on opinion, she is very capable of doing that. But I will now provide the opportunity for Ms Fox to respond to that question if she so wishes.

REBECCA FOX: And I will try to walk the appropriate line.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You just need to tell the truth; there's no line to walk.

REBECCA FOX: The functional review has not yet been considered by Government. The Department of Primary Industries has more than 2,000 staff and numerous important functions, and I would like to thank them for the work that they do in that regard. They will need a very senior executive band 3 leader leading that team.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We'll come back to it in the next session.

The CHAIR: The Committee Clerk will hand up a photo for you. For those playing at home, it's a photo that sits in pride of place on my desk of me catching a fish with my grandfather. I'm just wondering whether the Minister can actually identify the fish.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Thank you for the photo. I'm happy to take questions about any fishing-related matters, Mr Banasiak.

The CHAIR: Can you identify the fish in the picture, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Why don't you describe it to me?

The CHAIR: Do you know what that fish species is?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Why don't you tell me the story of the fish you caught with your grandfather? I'd love to hear it.

The CHAIR: I just want to see whether you can identify the fish species.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I'd like to hear the story of the photo of you with your grandfather.

The CHAIR: Let the record show that the Minister can't identify the fish species. Minister, that's actually a groper. Are you going to ban the green and the brown ones, or just the blue ones?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The ban that I have announced is in relation to blue goppers in New South Wales. They're an iconic fish—

The CHAIR: Do you realise blue goppers also come in the tinges of green and brown?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I do, and this is an announcement that I've made—

The CHAIR: Are they going to be banned as well?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to answer the question, Mr Banasiak. You've asked me a question and I'd like to answer it. I have announced that we'll be banning the catching of blue goppers in New South Wales in every form—any form—in every part of New South Wales. This is an iconic fish species in New South Wales. It's, in fact, our State fish. People have strong feelings about the fish.

The CHAIR: Minister, I'll just redirect. What do you know about the actual groper besides the fact that your mate Bob Carr made it the State fish because he has an obsession with marine parks? What do you know about this species of fish other than that it's cute and cuddly because some scuba divers decide to handfeed it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are certainly strong feelings towards this fish in the community, and we saw that play out over the summer.

The CHAIR: What do you know about the science of the fish, Minister, not the emotion?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We saw that play out over the summer when, unfortunately, a number of these fish were speared in Cronulla and Jervis Bay, and that was an unfortunate occurrence.

The CHAIR: Yes, and your department failed to apply the appropriate fines, which then exacerbated the issue.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, we have acted.

The CHAIR: Minister, I'll redirect. What do you know about the science of the fish?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to answer questions. The process—

The CHAIR: No, I'm redirecting, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You have to let me answer a question before you redirect, with respect, Chair.

The CHAIR: I got my answer. Minister, do you know what is meant by the phrase "interspecific coexistence" as it relates to the groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm really pleased to have made the announcement today, and what I plan to do is consult with recreational fishing groups and the broader community for 12 months.

The CHAIR: You had your time to consult before the announcement.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm going to consult for 12 months, which is part of the announcement that I've made, Mr Banasiak. I look forward to consulting with you and other recreational fishing groups and the broader community across New South Wales.

The CHAIR: Minister, that's not the question I was answering.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The question you were answering is an appropriate way to put it.

The CHAIR: Minister, do you know what is meant by the phrase "interspecific coexistence" as it relates to the groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, there is an entire connected world under our waters that we do have to protect, and the Government is certainly committed to doing that.

The CHAIR: I'll take it that you don't know what that means.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are committed to protecting the sea life that needs to be protected, but I also support recreational fishing in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: That's debatable.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I look to working with recreational fishers on the best way to move forward in relation to this announcement.

The CHAIR: Minister, for your education, interspecific coexistence talks about the relationship between different fish species under the water that you're claiming to protect.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Correct. That's what I just said.

The CHAIR: Are you aware that the so-called cute and cuddly groper is actually an aggressive fish towards other species and its own? Were you aware of that fact?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Those are not the facts, Mr Banasiak.

The CHAIR: No, those are the facts.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is an important fish to the people of New South Wales. The Government is very pleased and proud of this announcement that we've made today. I look forward to engaging with fishing groups about the decision over the course of the next 12 months.

The CHAIR: Minister, are you aware that the groper is actually an aggressive species of fish towards other species and even its own species? Are you aware that it actually bullies the female to stop turning male so it can keep mating? Are you aware of that?

This is all the science about the fish that you have put a ban on purely on emotion. You haven't based this on science. You have based it on emotion. Let's be clear about that.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Is that a statement or a question? I'm happy to answer questions.

The CHAIR: No, it's a fact. Minister, what is the current index of abundance of the blue groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are a number of blue groper across New South Wales—

The CHAIR: Yes. What's the number?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We're protecting it because—

The CHAIR: What's the number?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —of the community feelings around the protection of this particular species of—

The CHAIR: How do you know what the index of abundance is, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to answer your questions, Mr Banasiak.

The CHAIR: I'm asking a clarifying question. How do you know what the index of abundance is of the groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is advice that I would seek from the department, just as I did in relation to this decision.

The CHAIR: How does the department know, when they haven't done the stock assessment?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is the work that they do—

The CHAIR: Well, they haven't, Minister. I'm telling you they haven't.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —every day of the week. I'm really proud of the work that New South Wales Fisheries do within the Primary Industries department in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: We will see shortly. Minister, how—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I sought advice from them after the occurrences that happened over the summer—

The CHAIR: So what's the current stock assessment, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and this is the decision that we've made.

The CHAIR: What's the current—Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I'm really pleased that we made this decision.

The CHAIR: I'm redirecting—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's certainly supported by the broader community.

The CHAIR: —for you to answer the question, Minister. Order! What is the current stock assessment for the blue groper across New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to get a specific answer. Perhaps Mr Sloan can provide that—

The CHAIR: One would hope that you would have this—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —or I'm happy to get specific details for you and provide it on notice—

The CHAIR: One would hope that you would have this answer—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —if you would like. Mr Banasiak, I'd like to answer your question.

The CHAIR: One would hope you would have this answer ready, given that you know that you dropped this announcement a day before coming to estimates and you probably would suspect I'd be asking questions on this. One would have hoped that you would have had this peer-reviewed stock assessment ready to go to back up the decision.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order: That's not a question.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, can you table now the stock assessment for the blue groper in New South Wales?

SEAN SLOAN: Thank you, Chair. There are 100-plus species that we do assessments on to inform our management of Fisheries resources.

The CHAIR: I'm asking specifically for this one. Can you table the stock assessment net right here, right now?

SEAN SLOAN: We don't have a specific stock assessment—

The CHAIR: Thank you.

SEAN SLOAN: —for blue groper. But what we do have—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Sloan. I might pick up with you later. Minister, given that this is a 12-month trial, and you don't actually have any baseline data to actually measure against, what are you actually going to measure the success of this 12-month ban against in 12 months' time? What is going to be the yardstick? Is it going to be that the animal rights cronies are still upset about the spearing of Gus the Groper that turned out not to be Gus? What are we measuring the success of this 12-month trial ban with? How are we going to do it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The 12-month period is to consult with fishing groups, which I have said as part of the announcement. I look forward to doing—

The CHAIR: How are we going to measure—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I will do that broadly in relation to recreational fishing.

The CHAIR: How are we going to measure the success?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm also going to continue consulting with the broader community, who have made their views very clear to anyone who will listen, over the course of the summer, that this is a species people feel particularly strongly about in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: Minister, I'll redirect and take you to—two minutes, I've got. You haven't answered the question. How are you going to measure the success of a 12-month trial of banning the taking of a fish? How are you going to measure whether that's had an impact when you haven't done the stock assessment, you don't have the baseline data—we haven't had any baseline data or stock assessment on this species since 40 years ago, when the spearfishers raised it with you that it was an issue. How do we measure whether we're having an impact in a positive way or a negative way? How do we measure whether the blue groper isn't actually creating a biodiversity issue for other species like snapper, because we know through the science, not emotion, that it's actually an aggressive fish and pushes other fish species out? How are we measuring the effectiveness of this trial?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Hopefully, by the end of 12 months, people will have understood that we've changed the rules and I won't have to be talking about fines and penalties that will be issued to people if they do break the rules in relation to catching this fish.

The CHAIR: You could have helped that when you backed away from doing an education program. It is very well known within the fraternity that you backed away from doing an education program in that area and moved to this ban. If you actually went the education route, we wouldn't have this issue.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Education is a very important part—

The CHAIR: You still haven't answered the question. How are we going to measure the impact, positive or negative or otherwise, of this 12-month trial ban?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Education is a really important part of the program that we're outlining here—

The CHAIR: No, how are we going to measure? How are we going to measure?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and engaging with fishers to understand the rules that have been changed based on the sentiment of the community is something that we will be undertaking.

The CHAIR: Are you going to be—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As you will know, recreational fishers must understand the rules before they fish in New South Wales, and educating people and working with people about those rules will be a really important part of this. I don't want Fisheries officers to have to issue fines. I don't want prosecutions to have to occur. In 12 months from now, when I'm assessing it, hopefully people will have understood that rules have changed and we won't have to be issuing fines and we won't have to be prosecuting people for breaking the rules.

The CHAIR: How many fines have been issued for the illegal taking of groper in any form in the last five years?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am happy to ask Dr Sloan to provide or submit further information on that, or I'm happy to take it on notice, Mr Banasiak.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, do you have the answers to hand?

SEAN SLOAN: Not right to hand, but I can certainly pull it up, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now pass to Ms Faehrmann.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Good morning, Minister. I want to start with Batemans Bay marine park. I think you are aware of the sanctuary zones in 2019 under the former Coalition Government. There were six sanctuary zones in that marine park and the fisheries or agriculture Minister at the time said that they would allow fishing in those sanctuary zones. Fishing is still occurring in those sanctuary zones, almost one year into your Government—the Labor Government. When will you restore those sanctuary zones in Batemans Bay marine park?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The Government is committed to protecting our marine estate, and that includes our marine parks. We are also committed to working with the broader community to get the balance right. I understand that there are very passionate views about fishing in that community and I will—just as I do on every issue in this portfolio—work with colleagues inside of government and with the broader community about the work that might need to be done or not in relation to this.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, are you aware that at the time there was absolutely zero consultation by Ministers with Fisheries staff, with marine park staff, that that was going to happen? It was a purely blatantly political decision by your political opponents. Are you aware of that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I wasn't in government at that time. I wasn't the Minister responsible at that time. I don't know what the thinking was because I wasn't the person responsible and I wasn't engaging with the department about it. I understand that the decision was made. I'm in a situation now where I think it is appropriate to consider all of the information and to engage with relevant communities. We are committed to protecting our marine estate—there is no question about that—and I will engage with relevant communities, just as I do in every other area of this portfolio. That is an appropriate thing to do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of the decision that the National Party made to, essentially, allow fishing in what Labor previously declared a sanctuary zone—it is not a rezoning decision; it was a political decision overnight—you won't simply restore those sanctuary zones and then look at ways in which you can go ahead improving protection of the marine estate?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand the question and I'm happy to engage with you on it. I didn't make the decision of the previous Government. I wasn't a Minister in the previous Government. I will work with the community—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Do you think it is your job to overturn or correct bad decisions of the previous Government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Ms Faehrmann, I'm literally answering this question.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: As a Labor Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. I am working with communities—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —isn't it your responsibility to overturn, correct and improve poor decisions made by the previous Government, or are you in this role to simply continue what the National Party agriculture Minister did in Fisheries? Is that what you see as your job?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Whatever previous decisions were made by previous governments are a matter for previous governments. As the Minister responsible now, I take this very seriously, just as I do every issue in this portfolio, and I work with stakeholders who have a broad range of views. I look forward to engaging with people—continuing to engage with people—on this issue. That is the way I conduct myself in this role and that is the appropriate way to do it.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Are you aware of the grey nurse shark and its status in terms of a threatened species in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is protected.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Are you aware of what status it is in terms of threatened?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am happy to provide further details on notice, if you like, or perhaps Dr Sloan can provide some information as at right now.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It is critically endangered. It is one of the most iconic threatened species in New South Wales. They have critical habitat areas, which is where they feed and breed. Are you aware of that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm aware of its status because I've just outlined that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You weren't aware. I had to tell you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will consider this in part of the broad considerations, just as I have outlined in my previous answer.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: As Fisheries Minister, are you responsible for threatened species in terms of marine threatened species? Is that your responsibility?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have shared responsibility for the marine estate with the Minister for the Environment. I work closely with her, just as we do across government, to reach the appropriate outcomes that we need to reach. As I've said, I will continue to consult and engage with people on different views. I will get the factual information and advice from the department in relation to threatened species and the need for any kind of status or status change. That's an appropriate way to make considerations on these issues.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, just to be clear, critically endangered—there is no more status change. It is critically endangered and the next level is extinct or presumed extinct. We're not asking for an improved threatened species declaration here. It is at the brink. To protect it, its 16 critical habitat areas need to be protected from fishing. On DPI's website it says one of the main threats to the grey nurse shark, this incredibly peaceful, placid shark that people travel to the South Coast, North Coast—they dive off Magic Point to see this shark. It is critically endangered.

One of the key risks is fishing. I've seen it; I dive—fishing hooks in grey nurse shark mouths. Montague Island was one of those sanctuary zones that was revoked by former Minister Andrew Constance and former Minister Adam Marshall. They revoked sanctuary zones around Montague Island, which is where those sharks are. Right now there are boats fishing over critical habitat areas for grey nurse sharks, which are critically endangered, and you are the responsible Minister. Surely one of the first things you can do to ensure that shark is protected is to get fishing out of their critical habitat areas—out of Montague Island. What's your response to that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I work on these issues in a considered way, and that's what I will continue to do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It doesn't sound like that to me, Minister. Are you concerned that there is fishing taking place in the habitat of the most critically endangered shark in New South Wales waters, that is a tourism drawcard, that was protected under your Government previously—in terms of Labor? Are you concerned?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is there a question in this?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I'm asking the question now. Will you act to restore those sanctuary zones?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've answered this question, and I will provide the same answer. I think it's important to get the relevant information and advice from the department.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What's the relevant information?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will also consult broadly with communities that are impacted. The Government is committed to protecting our marine environment. Of course we are. I'll continue to work with colleagues to reach that outcome.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Could you tell me what that is in terms of getting that information?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I consult broadly with people across this sector because that is an appropriate thing to do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Have you received information from scientists about the status of grey nurse sharks?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check if I've received any specific correspondence or information in relation to that. I'm happy to take that on notice.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, why did the administrative arrangements orders change from 5 April, when the Government first got in—5 April 2023—where, in fact, responsibility for the Marine Estate Management Act 2014 was solely with the environment Minister? Why did that change then to a—it was reissued on 3 May, and the Marine Estate Management Act was with your department. What happened then?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I work in conjunction with my colleague the Minister for the Environment in relation to shared responsibility for this. That's an appropriate way for us to consider all of the relevant interests and information in relation to this. As I've outlined and will continue to outline—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Was it a mistake the first time, is what I mean.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —it's appropriate for me to consult and work across government to consider all of the relevant information when managing this area of my portfolio.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Between the first time it was announced in April and then the second, what happened there? Were you spoken to by departmental officials within your department? Why was that changed? Surely it was right the first time, because it is a Labor Government and that's usually what happens with Labor.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't know about the change that you're referring to, but I'm happy to check the details. I don't know the specifics of the change that you're referring to—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's interesting.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —but happy to come back and check the details about reasons why or what happened in between. No problem.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, I notice that you've protected the blue groper from fishing. Are you aware of the different rules around the 12 aquatic reserves within New South Wales waters—that, in fact, most of the aquatic reserves have different rules around take? Are you aware of those differences?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am aware that there are differences. I'm not going to be able to list them for you off the top of my head today, but I'm happy to do my best to engage with you on any questions that you've got about it.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Have you considered, given what happened in terms of the groper kill and poor information and education, potentially, for fishers, whether it is simpler, to begin with, to ensure that all of those aquatic reserves are no-take so that people understand what can be done outside of aquatic reserves? Aquatic reserves are, very simply, just 1,200 hectares of our marine estate—very, very small. Have you considered that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I consider all of the options to provide the best outcome for our marine estate. As I've answered a number of times this morning, I consider all of these issues and consult with all of the relevant stakeholders. It's important to make this as simple as possible. As I've outlined in the answer about the

blue groper, it's important that it's really clear so that people do understand the rules. I don't want to have to be issuing fines. I don't want people to be fishing in the wrong spots or for the wrong species. Educating people about the rules in a clear way is the best way to go about it. In terms of the question that you've asked, these are things that I'll consider in the way that I've outlined.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, can you tell me what the Eastern Young Cattle Indicator measures?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Off the top of my head—I'm happy to take questions on it, but for the specifics, I'll either pass to the department or I'll take them on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So you'll take that question on notice?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to engage with you, but that's—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm asking what does it measure?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll either get some information from the department—there's a whole bunch of department officials here who can assist you—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's quite an important indicator in New South Wales. If you want to take that on notice, if you don't know, that's fine. Do you know how many New South Wales saleyards are part of the indicator?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check the details of that. Again, there are people from the department here. If anyone does have the information to hand, I'd invite them to provide it. Otherwise, I'm happy to take it on notice, Mr Farraway.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: As the New South Wales agriculture Minister, do you not know which saleyards—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I engage with saleyards across the board. I'm engaging with them on a whole range of issues, including implementing electronic identification tagging. We're providing support to saleyards in order to be able to operate. I'm engaging with specific saleyards in relation to some changes that they might want to make. I engage with saleyards as required.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, do you roughly know how many—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: If there's any specific—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —New South Wales saleyards contribute to that indicator?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check the details on that, Mr Farraway.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have you been briefed on the issues that were plaguing the Northern Rivers Livestock Exchange?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't know if I've been specifically briefed on that. Again, there's departmental officials here today if you'd like to ask any specific questions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you know when that exchange was reopened or when it will reopen?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, I'm not sure if I've received a specific briefing on it, but there are plenty of people here who may well be able to—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: As the agriculture Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —provide some information.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —your office hasn't briefed you on some of the significant issues the North Coast has been facing with that livestock exchange over the past six months?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to check the details for you. Again, there are a number of officials here if people are wanting information on this topic.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Chair, for the record, it has been closed. It reopened on 7 February. It had been closed for six months. It is one of the biggest livestock exchanges in the State, but we move on. I'd like to talk about what agriculture is worth to the economy. What are the latest figures that you have about what agriculture is worth to the New South Wales economy?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Twenty-two billion dollars to the economy. It is a really significant part of our economy in New South Wales.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is that in the 2023 financial year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's the most recent figure.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What is its projected value for this current financial year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm operating on the basis that it's, I think, 22.2. But I'll check the specifics of the details for that for you. It's a very significant industry for our economy in New South Wales. I engage with the agricultural industry on that basis. It is business. It is making sure that we're getting food to people both here in New South Wales and internationally. And it is a very significant business and economic contributor to the State as a broad industry.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. I'd like to go back to Ms Fox, the secretary. You said that DPI would always have a band 3 leader. I will quote again from today's *The Land* article, which I've tabled with the secretariat, but I'm sure you probably read it before you came in this morning. Your department official said:

As part of this review the department will look at ways in which it can work towards whole of government commitments, including the election commitment to reduce senior executives by 15 per cent across the public sector.

How many public servants or executives within DPI will need to be sacked in order to meet that target?

REBECCA FOX: At the moment we haven't been given a particular number in the department. We are working with the Premier's Department on that 15 per cent election commitment, which we'll work on together as a sector. My understanding is that, certainly, natural attrition and mobility are being prioritised over terminations, but we also are required to meet our budget.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: If DPI employs 2½ thousand people, surely there will have to be significant cuts to the agency to meet that 15 per cent commitment.

REBECCA FOX: At the moment I've got no plans to reduce executive numbers there. At the moment most of the reductions that we've made to date have been in either regional development or regional precincts.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a commitment that was taken to the election. It's a whole-of-government commitment that we've been very open and transparent about as a government. A 15 per cent reduction in senior executives across the government, again, is something we took to the election. This department will take a share of that, along with every other department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. To redirect to Ms Fox, does that mean DPI will be untouched in terms of staffing level reductions and that the brunt of the 15 per cent reductions will be borne by the Department of Regional NSW more broadly?

REBECCA FOX: My understanding is that 15 per cent is not likely to be allocated to individual departments. We have to work together across the sector. We have many executives, as I'm sure other teams in other departments do, that are on term appointments. Those appointments generally are for the period of time in which they've got funding or the program continues. We will work with the Premier's Department on meeting those commitments.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, when did the functional review start?

REBECCA FOX: From memory it was September or October last year, but I can get that information to you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Who instructed you to initiate a functional review?

REBECCA FOX: The Minister asked me to do that functional review. It was done and coordinated through a team in the Premier's Department, as all the secretaries were asked to do that. There were terms of reference that were agreed, and my team has worked with a particular team set up in the Premier's Department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When will the functional review conclude?

REBECCA FOX: A draft report is concluded, and I'm not sure when it will be considered by Government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Does the draft report include recommendations?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, it includes recommendations.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How many recommendations?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have that information.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Are you able to take that on notice?

REBECCA FOX: I can take that on notice, but that could change, as well, depending on what Government considers.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When you sacked Mr Hansen, the long-serving and very respected director general, had the draft report been completed?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, the terms of reference required us to do a draft by January.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Okay, so the draft was completed in January. On Friday 19 January Mr Hansen was terminated by you, Ms Fox, so was one of the recommendations to cease and remove the role of director general of the DPI?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Speculating on what may or may not be determined by Government is back to where we were this morning.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox can answer it or not answer it; it's fine.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I look forward to receiving the report. I look forward to receiving the recommendations.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's pretty clear what's going on here, Minister. You're taking regional New South Wales for fools here.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will consider the recommendations on behalf of the Government. That would be an appropriate thing to do.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Farmers are not stupid; they know what you're doing.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And then the whole of our Government will consider the best way forward to make sure that people in the agricultural sector and primary industries more broadly are serviced in the way that they should be. I look forward to receiving the recommendations. I will then consider them.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, have you briefed the Minister or anyone within the Minister's office on the draft report?

REBECCA FOX: I have certainly had conversations with the Minister's office for input into the draft report—not on the final report, which is still to be considered by Government. But it might be helpful to know that it would be very unusual, I think, for any report to mention individuals. We are talking about outcomes for regional industries and communities in that report, rather than individuals. I can't imagine that any report that any secretary delivers will talk about individuals.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, in your briefings to the Minister's office, was there a discussion about terminating the Director General?

REBECCA FOX: No, there wasn't. It is very clear under the legislation that the employer responsibilities are mine.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Has there been a discussion about removing that role—take the individuals out of it—from within your agency?

REBECCA FOX: No, the discussion has more been along the lines of how we ensure that we are providing a better service to primary industries and, in fact, all of our regional communities.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, the secretary has confirmed that there have been discussions with your office about input into the draft report. What is that input?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Just as you would expect, I asked the department to conduct a functional review. That is part of the evidence today. I asked them to do that. You would expect that there would be some input on guidance as to what that should look like. The functional review is being conducted and I look forward to receiving recommendations, which again will be a matter for me to consider once I've received them.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, to redirect, what is your input on the draft report as the Minister for Agriculture in New South Wales, whose secretary has sacked probably one of the most respected public servants in the New South Wales Government? What are your thoughts on that recommendation or the briefing from your secretary?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There's a couple of issues that you have raised and that I think it is important that I step through to provide some proper information in relation to those. I know there is a lot of

interest in this issue. In relation to Mr Hansen, I worked closely with him. I wish him the absolute best for the future. He did a terrific job, working closely with me. I've been in touch with him since he left and I wish him genuinely all the very best for the future.

In relation to the functional review, yes, we have asked the department to conduct a functional review. My role as the Minister is to instruct the department to deliver on the Government's agenda, to deliver on the work that the Government has determined should be done in regional New South Wales and in our primary industries sector. The department's job is then to do the work that I have instructed them to do. Seeking a functional review at the beginning of government is an appropriate thing to do because, as I've said many times before, both in the House and in estimates, I want to be satisfied and I want to make sure that resources are being spent where and when they're needed. I want to make sure that the department is set up for how the Government and how I want to see it work in regional New South Wales—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister; I've got limited time.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and primary industries well into the future, and that is the process that we're undertaking.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm redirecting, Minister. Ms Fox, can you confirm that you will be appointing a full-time director general of the Department of Primary Industries?

REBECCA FOX: I can confirm that my view at the moment is—and Mr Sloan is a full-time acting director general of the Department of Primary Industries at the moment—that we need, certainly, more bolstered leadership in the Department of Primary Industries and we will have at least one senior executive band 3 role leading that team.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How many people are within that leadership role now? You're saying you're going to have one band 3 senior leadership role for the DPI. Are you saying there is more than that now, or you're saying that you are bolstering it? How are you bolstering it when you have just dismissed one of the most highly respected public servants within the Department of Primary Industries?

REBECCA FOX: One of the things that we are required to do in terms of transparency and accountability and the way that we structure our teams, and it is an opportunity that we've had through the functional review and we use a whole range of workforce principles that are set out by the Public Service Commission—they have bureaucratic-sounding titles like work value points for roles and spans of control—and what we are doing now is working through how we best set up the Department of Primary Industries to ensure that we can improve the outcomes and deal with the challenges and issues that those industries face.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can you confirm that the current deputy director generals across the different policy areas within your agency will be excluded from the functional review?

REBECCA FOX: There is no public servant in New South Wales that I'm aware of that has been excluded from any functional review. We've been asked to conduct it. All secretaries have been asked to conduct a review of their teams, right across the whole of the public service. The DPI team—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, to redirect, will any of the deputy director general roles, and there's quite a few of them. They're important roles and highly respected roles, which I respect. Will any of those roles be included as part of the Government's 15 per cent reduction in senior executives within agencies?

REBECCA FOX: We haven't yet worked out exactly how we're going to meet our allocation of senior executive roles. I need to make sure I've got the right mix of resources, the right mix of capabilities to make sure that we can deliver what the Government is requiring us. The DPI team is not being treated any differently from anywhere else that I'm aware of, in government. In fact, our roles to date, as I've said, have been deleted from areas where we had—I would say top heavy—more executives than we had staff members and not in compliance.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Secretary, I'm just finding it a little bit hard to understand. You talked about there having to be the functional review that you were directed to do, and then you talked about the fact that you've been told that you have to work within a budget, so you're looking at positions. Then you've moved on. You've sacked someone who people in the community had a lot of confidence in and has been around for some pretty horrendous sort of events through the industry for a long time, and guided and led. You then replaced that position anyway. Where's your saving? If that's the case, how can we believe that that's going to be a permanent position when you've moved on someone who, by all accounts of the Minister's accounts and your accounts, was doing a really good job—and the community's. You've moved them on and you've put someone else in, but you're saying it's not changing. That doesn't make sense. You must be going to get rid of the position.

REBECCA FOX: That's not correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Then why would you do that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is something that makes perfect sense. It's really not that hard to understand.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No. I think it's very personal, to be honest.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As a new government, we are looking at how the department is set up, just as we're doing across all of government, to make sure that it is fit for purpose for the future.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'll redirect, Minister, if you'd like to be part of this.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Just because it's existed in a particular way doesn't make it fit for the future.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'll redirect, thank you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: So it's appropriate—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm redirecting.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm answering the question. Then you can redirect, Ms Taylor.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Chair, I'm trying to redirect my question and the Minister's talking over me.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think it's important that we really make sure people do understand.

The CHAIR: Order! Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You just said you don't understand.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'd like to redirect.

The CHAIR: Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think it's straightforward that we look—

The CHAIR: Minister, can I be really clear. When a person asking a question says they wish to redirect, I would really like you or the other witnesses answering questions to pause and let them redirect. That's how we get a respectful discourse going back and forth. If we're not doing that, we get this shouting and yelling stuff we had yesterday.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Chair, I absolutely want a respectful discourse. I'm trying to engage on the issues in an open and transparent way. I think that's an appropriate thing to do in this forum.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: If I may redirect.

The CHAIR: Can the witness—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: If people want to redirect, that's fine. I have to be allowed to finish answering questions.

The CHAIR: Can the Opposition now direct you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't think I was able to finish answering the question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'd like to redirect to the secretary again. It's about your previous answers. Was the former director general a band 3 equivalent?

REBECCA FOX: It's not a band 3 equivalent. It is a band 3 role.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That was a band 3 role. So you are saying that there will be a director general of the DPI that is within the band 3 tier?

REBECCA FOX: There is no way I can set up an organisational structure that has more than 2,000 people reporting into it without a senior executive at band 3 level.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So why did you sack him?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Essentially, Ms Fox, I don't understand. You are looking to this functional review with draft recommendations. You have sacked a long-serving, respected director general, but

you have just confirmed that you are essentially going to replace him. I don't understand. Where's the review in that? Where is the change in the functionality of that role and DPI? This sounds like it was a very personal decision, whether one by the Minister, under instruction, or by yourself, secretary.

REBECCA FOX: I've already iterated today that I take those decisions very seriously. I understand my obligations as an employer, and I take a range of inputs as I make those decisions. One of them is the functional review. I also have other responsibilities as the secretary. Some of those include making sure that we are operating within our budget. The DPI team has been under significant budgetary pressure.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But you haven't changed the budget to do that, Secretary.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You've answered the question, Secretary, and it's pretty ordinary. But we'll move on. Minister, how much will the new biosecurity levy that the Commonwealth is implementing cost New South Wales farmers?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's a Commonwealth levy, as you've just indicated in your answer. That was a decision made by the Federal Government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have stakeholders raised issues about that levy with you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's a decision that has been made by the Federal Government, for them to explain—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have stakeholders raised concerns with you about that levy?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —but it's important that we are protecting our borders from biosecurity threats. Mr Farraway, I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm redirecting.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But you won't even let me answer a question. I'm trying to engage.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have stakeholders raised concerns with you around that levy?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would imagine that stakeholders would be engaging with the Federal Government. One of my key focuses, as I've said many times, is on protecting the biosecurity of New South Wales.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect, Minister, do you support—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is something that feeds into that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We've got to protect what comes through our borders. I'm trying to answer questions.

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

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's related.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: The Minister is entitled to be able to answer the question posed to her. I do understand the position with respect to redirecting, but the Minister must be given a reasonable opportunity. The Minister continues to be cut off.

The CHAIR: Yes, Mr Donnelly, in that instance I think it's fair to say that that was probably a little bit quick. If we could give her a little bit more time in the next round, that would be appreciated.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Good morning, Minister. I also want to talk about some spearfishing. Obviously, there has been an outpouring of public opposition to spearfishing and you talked about the cases of the blue groper. The other species that has received a lot of attention is the giant cuttlefish. I asked a question in the House about community concerns around the killing of these animals last year, given they're classed as near threatened. In written correspondence from your office, we've been informed that regular stock assessments are not conducted for this species. Given the community concern and the fact that this is a globally threatened species, are there any plans to conduct an assessment to try to get a better idea of the population numbers of those giant cuttlefish?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think this is a good question. I know that this is something that people have been quite passionate about. In relation to whether there is a formal conducting of the status of the fish from the department's perspective, I am happy to give some consideration to what we should be doing in this space.

Again, I acted on the blue groper because I understood the sensitivities of this issue. I am aware of the sensitivities in relation to this other one. I'm happy to look at it and perhaps come back.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Would you be willing to meet with some of the interested stakeholders that we could put forward to you to discuss that further?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, I'm happy to engage with people who have views on this from a perspective of protecting the fish. That also means I'll engage with people who do engage in spearfishing activities. That's an appropriate thing to do and, as I've said in previous answers, that's the way I conduct this role. I think it's important to hear from people. If there are people who are interested in addressing the issue, I'm happy to hear.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Great, thank you. I just want to put on the record that I'm very much supportive of your announcement in regard to the blue groper. Another election commitment that Labor made is around the review of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Can you update us on the time line of this review, what the next steps are and when we can expect to see any draft legislation being made public?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. This was a significant election commitment that we made in the election. Work is underway, internally, inside of the Government, about some proposals that we have for modernising POCTAA and also a number of other issues related to animal welfare that we made commitments on separately. But I'm trying to deal with as much as I can as a whole, at least at this stage, and then we'll work through how we deal with these issues. Work is underway now. I am keen to begin public discussions about this very soon, and I'll certainly have more to say about it soon. I want to engage with the public. The one thing I would say is that this is something that people have been surveyed about and have asked about for years and years and years. I'm very conscious of engagement fatigue in relation to this issue so I need to get the balance right between consulting and engaging with people but also delivering on the commitments that we made. Certainly we'll have more to say about it this year.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Great. When you say that consultation will start soon, are you thinking the first quarter?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm working towards trying to begin that work in the first part of this year. I won't commit to a specific date but I know how important this is to people across the community and I do want to assure people that work is well underway on what we will be bringing forward to the community to consult on.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What do you see as the top animal welfare issues that need to be addressed as part of the POCTAA review?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, this is what we'll get feedback on. I think we're certainly committed to modernising some of the arrangements that are in place. One of the perfect examples is the decision that I announced yesterday in relation to blue groper. That was off the back of spearfishing, which, as you know, was already banned but it did occur over the course of the summer and there were certainly strong views from the community about needing better measures in place in relation to that. That's why I've acted on it. I know you've got an interest in a range of issues, which you've raised before. All of these things are being considered and I look forward to getting feedback from people on suggestions of things that might need to be modernised.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you have any particular top priorities that you're looking specifically for reform?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Modernising the Act as a whole. I'm looking forward to engaging with people. I understand the question and I want to engage with you on it. I don't know that it's appropriate for me to drip feed, given that we've said we'll do it as much as possible as a whole.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: One of the key issues that my office is frequently approached about is pig dogging. Police officers within the Rural Crime division have written to the Rural Crime prevention team, calling for specific laws. There's obviously a belief that it's already illegal but they wanted to make sure the legislation was really clear that it is illegal. I understand that change would fall under your portfolio. Have you seen a copy of that police correspondence?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check. I don't know off the top of my head if I have—I may have. I certainly meet with and engage with the Rural Crime squad as often as possible on a range of issues. I'm happy to check with the team to see if I've got it but if I haven't, I'm happy to receive a copy and engage on the issue.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just handed a copy to the secretariat so I'll make sure you get a copy. I'm just wondering if you're taking any action on the calls from the Rural Crime division of the police that want to

make the laws clear around pig dogging being illegal? Has that been briefed to you at all? Or is that something you are looking at as part of the overall POCTAA review?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Of course I'm aware of the issue. It's not a specific issue that I have been specifically briefed on but that doesn't mean that it's not something that I can give consideration to. If there are things that need to be looked at then I'm happy to look at it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Have you met with the Minister for Police to discuss this and the concerns from the Rural Crime division?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I engage with Minister for Police and Counter-terrorism on a regular basis. I don't recall ever having a specific discussion about this topic but that doesn't mean that it's not appropriate for us to do that. Again, I am happy to give consideration to things that might need to be looked at.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can I get a confirmation from you, Minister, that once you've had a look at that correspondence that you will have a meeting with the Minister for Police and Counter-terrorism about that correspondence?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, sure, I'm happy to engage. I'm happy to talk to the Minister of Police and Counter-terrorism about any issue and this is one that I'm happy to talk to people about.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The Independent Office of Animal Welfare, can you give us an update on where the work is on that election commitment?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: So that's part of what I've referred to earlier, which is dealing with commitments in this space as a whole as much as we can. Again, that will depend on how consultation with the community goes but it is part of the work that is currently being conducted to provide me with advice on how we might want to structure delivering on that commitment.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you have any indication at this point around the level of funding that will be given to the independent office?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's something that we will take through the budget process.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The one that's just about to happen or—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, the work is underway for the plans around what we propose to do. Once we have done that work then we'll go through a budget process in order to—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So you're not sure which budget it will fall into?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: For the next budget, I don't think—based on the process that is currently being undertaken, I wouldn't say yes or no, but it would likely be in the future. The reason for it is—it is not sort of an accident. We said we'd make these arrangements, and we've made this commitment in relation to this work—or into animal welfare reform. The proposal or the plan is to do the work around that, cost it and go through the budget process in order to be able to deliver it. You would be aware there is not funding in the previous budget. That is because we've got this process in place in order to be able to cost it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. We have spoken previously about Labor's election commitment to ban puppy farming as well. According to the RSPCA, there are hundreds of these places. Since Victoria and the Labor Party there introduced puppy farm legislation, we've heard that a lot of puppy farmers just relocated into New South Wales. There has been a significant increase in development applications for puppy farms for the councils along the border of New South Wales and Victoria. That came up in the inquiry into puppy farming that was done by the Hon. Mick Veitch in the previous term. Given that this is a really urgent issue and that councils are struggling and there are all these approvals going through for puppy farms, what is your time line on this? Are we expecting to see legislation on this this year, or is it going to fall into this massive POCTAA review, which could see us waiting years before we see something happen?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We made a commitment to outlaw and to deal with puppy farms and we will deliver on that. I'll work closely with the Minister for Local Government and with local government on the issues that you have raised. I know that there's a lot of concern in the community about it. I think it is appropriate that I get up-to-date information on where councils are and what applications are coming through, rather than trying to engage with you on it without the facts—but I am aware of the increase in applications. I'll work with the Minister for Local Government and I am happy to provide any further details on notice or engage in the next round.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Before I pass to Ms Sue Higginson, just for your education, pig dogging is perfectly legal on private land and the public land that your department manages—just that bit of extra information for you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. What I've said is I'm happy to engage on issues as they arise, just as I do—

The CHAIR: I'm just correcting the record about pig dogging being illegal.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, good morning.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Hi.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do State forests belong to the people of New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They do.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you believe that the people should have a say in how these publicly owned forests are used and managed?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: People have a say in every decision that is made by government; that is what elections are for. We are responsible for managing State forests. Forestry Corp is in place to do that on behalf of the Government.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think the people of New South Wales support native forest logging?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are committed to a sustainable forestry industry well into the future. I know there are a number of people who work in the industry. A lot of towns rely on it. There are products that we need that come from forests.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think we should be transitioning entirely to a plantation industry and sector?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am certainly committed, and the Government is committed, to expanding our plantation estate in New South Wales. I think that's going to be an important—in fact, a very significant part of the future of the industry in New South Wales.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you understand what the polls at the moment are suggesting—not polls, sorry, surveys are suggesting in relation to the support for transitioning the industry completely?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are supportive of a sustainable forestry industry into the future. That includes—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What do you say to the 75 per cent of Labor voter who support the end of native forest logging?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't know where you are getting those figures from. I don't know what polls you're referring to.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's your data.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm just talking to you about the facts, which is that we're committed to a sustainable industry into the future.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And so what have you—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are a number of communities that rely on forestry. We need the products, again, that come. We want our State forests to be used—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What specific actions, Minister, have you taken to expand the area of plantation since October 2023?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —for all kinds of other activities. Sorry, I'm trying to answer the questions.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. I am satisfied with your answer. What specific actions have you taken as Minister to expand the area of plantations since October 2023?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We have taken action in relation to this, which I will have more to say about soon. We are also developing a forestry industry action plan which will outline the plans for the forestry industry well into the future. As you would know, Ms Higginson, and as everyone involved in this knows, the

decisions for an industry like this one can't be made overnight. If we're going to expand our plantation estate, plans need to be made for what we'll be needing 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50 years into the future. I would've preferred—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is there a shortfall?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —if decisions were made in relation to this 30 years ago, but they weren't. As the Minister responsible, I'm certainly committed to making sure that we're putting the plans in place for the future and that it's clearly articulated to the community. Part of the reason you're asking me these questions, and part of the problem with this debate in the community, is the level of uncertainty. I don't think that's fair to anybody. Our forestry action plan—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, Minister, just to interrupt you—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —will provide certainty.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —what have you done—and it's okay if the answer is nothing at this point, because you're doing other things—to expand the area of the plantation estate since October 2023?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've outlined that we are developing an action plan for the industry, which will include some work on this. I've also said that I will have more to say about some specifics about it soon. I won't be making announcements today.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is there a plan for the establishment of new softwood plantations?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We have a plan to expand the plantation estate—sorry, let me rephrase that. The action plan for the industry includes the information about expanding plantations.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is that new, not converting current native forest? These are new plantations?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, we have been doing work on the plan that can be provided to the public to have a clear understanding of where we are headed on this into the future. I'll have more to say about it soon.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What State forests have you visited since becoming Minister for forests?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've visited quite a few State forests. I'm sorry that I won't be able to list them off the top of my head, but I'm happy to provide information on notice about the forests that I've visited.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Have you visited any that have been subject to allegations of breaches of the IFOA?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will have to check because, again, I'll have to provide the details of which forests I've visited on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you concerned that the Forestry Corporation is regularly failing to reach the minimum standards with regard to the broad area habitat surveys?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I expect Forestry Corporation to follow the rules that are in place. Without exception, they must follow the rules. If there are questions or allegations that they're not, they can be put to the Forestry Corporation. There are people here today who can answer to that. They have to follow the rules. Recently, there has been some work undertaken with the EPA in terms of changing arrangements in one of the agreements down south, which will mean that there are more requirements for checking—for example, for gliders. I think that's appropriate, and Forestry will undertake that work.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you aware that it's not just down south? It's across the whole of the—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. Forestry needs to comply, and I'm sure they will.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So what have you done specifically to change any kind of behaviour or culture within Forestry Corporation to change their practice of continuing and consistent breaches to a compliance culture?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't accept the premise of the question that you're putting to me. Forestry has to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The EPA is suggesting that they're not being followed, so what have you been doing? Clearly, the EPA is doing things. They're changing protocols and doing all sorts of things. What are you doing as the Minister responsible for this State-owned corporation?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm saying that Forestry has to follow the rules. They have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I hear you saying that now. What are you doing—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I've always said that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —as the Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm telling them that they have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How are you telling them, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm telling them right now in the public domain. I engage with them on a very regular basis, as people would expect. They have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: When you say that you engage with them, who do you engage and how do you engage?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: My diary is disclosed. I'm sure you'd be able to check the records of meetings that I have. But I engage with Forestry Corporation proper on a regular basis. I also engage with people—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Who is Forestry Corporation proper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You have got people from Forestry Corporation here, if you'd like the engage with them.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You engage with these people regularly and tell them how important—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —it is to comply with the rules?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I engage with them on a whole range of issues in relation to forestry.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So if we were to look at the minutes of your meetings with Forestry Corporation—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We don't get minutes of my meetings, Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know we don't.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm telling you now in evidence—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That's why I'm asking you, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've answered.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —is that the truth? Would you have been engaging with the Forestry Corporation representatives, saying, "We've got problems in terms of your culture of compliance. I need you to start complying more"? Would I find that, in earnest?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Obviously I've answered that question, but they have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What was the answer? Is that what you do in your meetings?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Forestry have to follow the rules.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order: The Minister has repeatedly answered the question from the member. It's been the same question repeated. We are now reaching the point that arguably the Minister is being badgered by the line of questioning.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: This is my time. I'm running out of time.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: To the point of order: This is the member's time, and to say that she is badgering is actually quite outrageous. She's being respectful and she's entitled to ask the questions as many times as she likes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Further to the point of order: The honourable member asks a question the Minister answers, and it's been a ping-pong game for the last—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Stop wasting time.

The CHAIR: Was that it, Mr Donnelly?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes.

The CHAIR: I don't uphold the point of order. The Minister is able to answer the question. The honourable member can ask the same question over and over again or reword it. I've heard Ms Higginson ask questions where I would consider it badgering, but I don't think she's reached that level yet. You have the call, Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I've never thought of myself as a badger. Minister, I'm just asking for an honest answer. If we were to look at those minutes that we can't access, would I honestly find, in your conversations with those senior people you call Forestry Corporation proper, you suggesting to them that there is a culture of noncompliance and that needs to change?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Forestry Corp have to follow the rules. That is what they have to do.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, I'm asking if that's what I would find. Are you having those conversations?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What do you mean, "if that's what you would find"? With respect, I want to engage in an open format here and I'm happy to answer questions. In relation to this question, I've answered it. They have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm going to take it that the answer is, "No, that's not the conversation."

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm saying it now. You'll find it in the minutes of the hearing today.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm going to take that, Minister, as an answer of, "No, I'm not sitting down with the Forestry Corporation and telling them to comply with rules." That's what you're telling me now. Can I just turn to one quick point.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've literally said that Forestry Corp have to follow the rules. I'll say it again: Forestry Corp have to follow the rules.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That wasn't the question, Minister, but thank you. I respect your answer. In the remaining 20 seconds, are you aware of any wood being provided by the Forestry Corporation to sawmills without wood supply agreements?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not aware of any specifics, but that sounds like an operational question that you're welcome to direct to Forestry Corp themselves.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could you take it on notice?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to take it on notice and check.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The question then is: What volume of wood has gone to mills without wood supply agreements?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll have to check the answer to the first question first but, yes, I'm happy to come back to you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have one more question. This one is on a completely different topic. I disclose I have an interest, and my interest is I am a dry-land rice grower. However, I am one of the dry-land rice growers in the Northern Rivers who is not currently affected by blast. Minister, are you aware that there is a blast outbreak in the Northern Rivers?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, I am.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And that it's affecting the rice industry in the Northern Rivers?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, I am.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you aware that DPI or one of the government agencies was aware that blast was present in the Northern Rivers a decade ago but that that information was never disclosed to any rice growers in the Northern Rivers at the start of the sector's development?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't know what information was available or not 10 years ago. Obviously I wasn't the Minister at that time. If there is an allegation that you're putting, I'm happy to check the details and ask the department. You have the department here, who may be able to answer. I take the question seriously. I'm not aware of information from 10 years ago, but I am happy to check.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think it's a very serious issue that there is blast?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Of course.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If there was known to be blast on grasses in the Riverina, do you think that the rice industry would have been informed very early?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I expect, as per my previous answer, that information is provided and people follow the rules, is the best way to engage on it. I don't know what information was previously known or not known, but you've raised the question with me so I will have a look at that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you willing to meet with the Northern Rivers rice growers and the industry there and go and hear about the serious struggles, suffering and loss that they're experiencing right now?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to meet with rice growers from across the north of New South Wales, just as I'm happy to meet with everybody who needs to engage with me, so happy to do that.

The CHAIR: That takes us to 10.45 a.m. Are there any questions from the Government?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, the answering of questions has been very clear, frank and full. We're very happy.

The CHAIR: We will now break until 11.15 a.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back after that brief interlude. I will now throw straight to the Opposition for questions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, I want to go back over the process around the sacking of the director general. Can you confirm again—because I don't have it here—the date? Firstly, September 23, the functional review started, from your evidence earlier; correct?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What was the date that you received the draft report and recommendations? You said it was early January.

REBECCA FOX: That date in early January is when the draft report was finalised. I've been working iteratively through consultation et cetera.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What date in early January was that?

REBECCA FOX: Under the terms of reference, it was due on 8 January. We were actually on leave at that time, so I think we agreed with the Premier's Department that it could be handed in, but it was effectively finalised before early January.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: At what point did you send the draft report to the Minister's office for input?

REBECCA FOX: I'd have to take on notice whether we've actually sent the draft for input.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You said earlier that you had reached out to the Minister's office to seek input on the draft report.

REBECCA FOX: Yes. In relation to the report, we have certainly sought input. I don't know whether the draft has been sent. That would have probably been done either by my team or through the Premier's Department. But I can take that on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: In terms of your evidence earlier, where you sought input from the Minister's office, was that in a briefing or was that in sending the draft recommendations and report?

REBECCA FOX: I think it's been done through some briefings. I'm aware, for example, that the Premier's Department settled the terms of reference with the Minister's office.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To confirm, you terminated the employment of the former director general on Tuesday 16 January?

REBECCA FOX: No, that's not correct. It was Wednesday 17 January when I made a final decision.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: And Mr Hansen departed the Department of Primary Industries on Friday 19 January.

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Has the Minister, her chief of staff or anyone from the Minister's office ever raised with you concerns about the director general's role?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm right here. You can ask me; I'm the Minister.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But I'm asking the secretary because the secretary is undertaking the review.

REBECCA FOX: I'm not at liberty under the privacy legislations to discuss the individual employment arrangements of any of our staff or former staff. I can also say that Mr Hansen was terminated under section 41 of the Government Sector Employment Act, which is for any or no stated reason. If it was unsatisfactory performance, personally, we would use section 68 of that legislation. If it was for misconduct, we would use section 69 of that legislation—would be the standard approach that I would take in relation to senior executives.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: At what point did you advise the Minister's office that you were terminating the director general of DPI?

REBECCA FOX: I'm also required to afford any senior executive procedural fairness in that process. That procedural fairness process generally involves a preliminary decision being made, and the senior executive being given a period of time to provide to the decision-maker any information they would like taken into account. In my experience, senior executives often want taken into account the timing of their leaving, the way that they might leave those kinds of issues and then the decision-maker makes a final decision. Mr Hansen came back to me quite quickly—within one day—on that Tuesday, in that process.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Going back to the question, Ms Fox, when did you advise the Minister that you were terminating the employment of Mr Hansen?

REBECCA FOX: After I'd made the final decision on Wednesday 17 January.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You advised the Minister's office on Wednesday?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, after I'd made a final decision and communicated that to Mr Hansen.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Where in the process is the draft report? Has that been sent to the Minister's office or to the Premier's office?

REBECCA FOX: I'd have to take that on notice. I'm not aware whether it's been sent. It's certainly with the team in the Premier's Department that does that. I should also say that, in relation to termination of senior executive band 3s, I'm required to work with the Premier's Department and the Public Service Commission.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you know if that report has been sent to Cabinet for consideration?

REBECCA FOX: I'm not aware. At this point in time that process is being run by the Premier's Department—across all departments, not just our department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Again, of the recommendations in your draft report, are there changes to the role of director general?

REBECCA FOX: The draft report that I'm aware of does not refer to specific roles. It talks about outcomes for the department and it is yet to be considered by government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Don't you think it is a bit premature—as the secretary, in the middle of a functional review that has been initiated by government—to sack a very highly respected public servant, when you've made it clear in evidence today, Ms Fox, that you have no intention of changing that role?

REBECCA FOX: As secretary, I'm required to take into account a whole range of issues and I certainly, as I said before, take my employment or my obligations as an employer very seriously. The functional review, and the work that we did over three or four months in that regard, is one input into the decisions that I make. It is certainly not the only input in relation to those decisions. I made a decision that we have some, particularly budgetary, constraints with the Department of Primary Industries—they have been under budgetary pressure for a long period of time—and that I required a change of leadership in order to make sure that we have a sustainable—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, to redirect, when you mentioned budgetary positions, budgetary pressures, you have confirmed in evidence today that you require a band 3 senior leadership position to run DPI into the future. You've confirmed that Mr Hansen was a band 3 equivalent, or within band 3, so in terminating the director general, how have you saved any money for the New South Wales taxpayer? I don't understand. This process appears to be very flawed. What money have you saved on behalf of government and the taxpayer by terminating Mr Hansen?

REBECCA FOX: I am responsible for a budget this year that is \$3½ billion, so I'm required to make sure I've got the right mix and capability of resources at any point in time to deliver what we can deliver, and I'm also required to make sure that we have a fit-for-purpose and sustainable business going forward and the services that we are providing are done in the most efficient and effective way.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Ms Fox, but to redirect specifically from your previous evidence, how does replacing the director general assist you with your budgetary pressures?

REBECCA FOX: There won't be any direct budgetary saving from that termination. What we will now do is work through with Mr Sloan and the Department of Primary Industries, all of the staff, to make sure that we build a financially viable and sustainable business and the services that we provide for primary industries are improved.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You have confirmed with your evidence today that you intend to appoint a full-time band 3 leader within DPI. You have confirmed that that would be essentially a full-time role, not acting as director general. Will that role have the exact same authority and responsibilities as the previous role of director general?

REBECCA FOX: We need to work through that at the moment with the teams and, as I said, we use a range of workforce principles to do that. It's about spans of control. It is not about one person when we look at organisational structure; it's about the more than 2,000 people that work in DPI. We will work through to make sure that we have the right structure and the right organisational design to make sure that we can continue to deliver the services. There will be no change to the legislative functions, to the frontline services that that department delivers and that we deliver across our department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: If there are no changes to the legislative functions and the role—the really important role—of DPI, you have prematurely sacked the director general who leads that division within your agency. I don't understand. The question I must ask is, in the middle of a functional review, why did you make that decision?

REBECCA FOX: Again, I am bound by privacy obligations. I cannot talk about the details and the reasons for that termination. That is in accordance with the legislation, it's in accordance with the executive contracts—our standard contracts—and I did that with the issues of procedural fairness and followed that process.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You mentioned earlier that you take the role very seriously, and the actions and decisions very seriously. Have you reached out to Mr Hansen since sacking him?

REBECCA FOX: I spoke to Mr Hansen during that week often. I am very confident that the department has a long history and is very well set up to support all of our impacted employees, and I thank the people team for doing that. My chief people officer I know has been in contact with Mr Hansen.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, I'm going to be asking some questions now. Do you know why there's been a postponement of the executive staff restructure within the department?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've said a number of times, I'm not directly involved in internal machinery of the government—sorry, of the department.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Fair enough, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I direct the department to deliver on the Government's agenda and I expect them to do that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: And that's the answer I expected and I thank you for that. I redirect to the secretary. Why has the executive staff restructure been postponed?

REBECCA FOX: I'm not aware that an executive staff restructure has been postponed. We've done a significant—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Are you doing an executive staff restructure, Secretary?

REBECCA FOX: We've done a significant amount of it in two areas so far and we have not yet been given targets that we need to meet in that regard.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So you are doing one, Secretary?

REBECCA FOX: No, I don't have a plan at the moment to make any further changes other than what we've done so far but I will be required to work with the Premier's Department when we have an allocation in relation to executives.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Understood. Thank you, Secretary. Minister, what do you see as the top three biggest issues in regional New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Whenever I am out in regional New South Wales, the things that get raised with me—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Three top.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —every time I am out is housing, cost-of-living concerns—and the associated issues in relation to that—and workforce. That's why the Government's got a priority to deal with housing issues across New South Wales and I'll have a particular focus on ensuring that's delivered in regional New South Wales.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. So housing, cost of living and workforce. Minister, what about rural crime? Was that raised with you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am committed to making sure, as Minister for Regional NSW, that I'm engaging people on keeping our communities safe. I have had a briefing from the New South Wales police in relation to regional crime because I know that it's a topic of conversation that's been raised in the Parliament. I do appreciate the New South Wales police did give me a direct briefing so that I could get proper information and facts about the situation facing regional communities. Anyone who is a victim of a crime deserves support.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Of course. Thank you, Minister. If I could just redirect, please.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And we want to make sure our communities are safe.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We do, and I completely agree with you. But you actually said that you met with the Rural Crime division regularly. Who heads that up, Minister? Do you know?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Did I say "regularly"?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: No, you didn't say "regularly".

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You're putting words in her mouth.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Look, that's fine. There's no need to be aggressive.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to engage. I'm happy to answer. I want to engage.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Fair enough.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have a lot of respect for the police. I'm not sure that it's regularly; I may have said that this morning. I certainly do engage—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Sorry, it was my recollection you did. It was not meant to be tricky.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. It's not a trick answer. I engage. I'm obviously not the Minister for Police and I think the Minister for Police is doing a terrific job. I have had a direct briefing from the New South Wales police about rural crime statistics and the status—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So that's New South Wales police. You said the Rural Crime division.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, Rural Crime is part of New South Wales police.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, I understand that but that's what you said—you met with them. So you do meet with them to discuss rural crime?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've had a specific meeting from the New South Wales police about rural crime and regional crime because I know it's a topic of conversation that people—I expected it would be raised and I thought it would be important to get the facts. I support the police—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, it's not just a topic of conversation. If I could just redirect, please.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and thank the police for the incredible work they do across regional New South Wales—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, Minister, we all do. I'll just redirect.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and I want to make sure I am informed with the facts.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'll redirect, Minister. Do you support the Country Mayors Association in their call for an inquiry into crime in regional and rural areas?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What I would prefer is that we're doing exactly what we're doing, which is getting on with the job. Again, I support our police, who do terrific work across our regional communities and in our regional communities.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Hear, hear.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I support them completely. I was very grateful that they could give me a briefing, as I've referred to, on the specific works they do—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I will just redirect, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and the operational work they're doing, how they target issues across the regions—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I will just redirect. I understand that you're grateful for your briefing, and that's great, but we have a situation, in rural and regional New South Wales, of escalating crime, as you know. So it's more than a conversation and it's more than a discussion. The country mayors have been consistently calling for an inquiry since October last year, and your disclosures indicate that you haven't met with the group since they went public with the call for an inquiry. Have you discussed the matter with anyone from Country Mayors?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've discussed it with the police, which I think is more appropriate.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's a no. You haven't discussed it with Country Mayors.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I appreciate that the country mayors might want to campaign on different topics. They're great advocates for their communities, and I welcome their input on any issues that they want to raise across regional communities.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So, Minister, just redirecting that question—it was quite specific.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is an issue on rural crime and I engaged directly with the police so that I could hear about the work that they are doing.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, Minister. I am just going to redirect.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would prefer than the Government gets on with the job.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Please, Minister, I have limited time. I'm going to redirect. I understand that you meet with people. I understand that you consult with people, and that's great. But you are the Minister for Regional New South Wales that sits around the Cabinet table, and this is a really serious issue to people in the regions. It's really concerning. It's really, really serious. I just want to clarify, then. You said you've met with the police and you've had briefings, but my question was specific. The chair of country mayors is here frequently, but your disclosures say that you haven't—I'm just double-checking; it's a yes or no. Have you met with them to discuss rural crime?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: With full respect to the country mayors, I think it is appropriate that I discuss rural crime with the police, which is what I've done. I wanted to hear directly from them—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So that's a no.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —about the work that they're doing. I support them completely—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. I'll redirect my question now.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and I think it's important, as the Minister for Regional New South Wales, to understand—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, I'm going to redirect you now.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —the issues from the people who are working in the space.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I am going to redirect you. Speaking of regional councils, have you spoken to the water Minister in relation to calls from the Alliance of Western Councils to raise the storage level of Burrendong Dam to the current 120 per cent level?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not sure that I've had a specific conversation with the Minister for Water on that issue, but I'm happy to check and come back to you on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand the issues.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. The matter has been raised with you in the past by the alliance. Do you believe the idea of storing more water in Burrendong Dam has merit?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: These are questions best directed to the Minister for Water, but I do engage with my colleagues on a broad range of issues. I just previously outlined how I engaged with the Minister for Police and Counter-terrorism in relation to crime. I earlier talked about engaging with the Minister for the Environment about environmental issues. I'd suggest you—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. You are the Minister for Regional New South Wales. These are questions that are very, very specific and very focused on regional New South Wales and Western New South Wales. Just now moving on, Minister, the Yaegl Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation was successful in receiving funding for the delivery of its Yuraygir Camping project at Yamba. They have reported there are delays of some seven months in the payment of the final fifth tranche of funding, which is placing the completion of the project in jeopardy. Can you advise why the final instalment payment to the Yaegl Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation has not been released?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check the details of that. I'm happy to do so.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So you take that on notice?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to take that on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, are you aware of any other delays in the delivery of final instalment payments to successful recipients under the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery fund?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You are welcome to provide any further information to me, but no, I'm not.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You're not aware, Minister, of any delays of payments of those funds as the Minister responsible for that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not aware of any specifics, but I'm happy to engage on it if you have anything to put to me.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's fine, Minister. I will, but I'm just quite surprised that you're not aware. But that's absolutely fine. If you take that on notice, I'd very much appreciate that. In response to a supplementary question from December, you stated there were 4,279 claims on hand for reimbursements to customers through the Rural Assistance Authority as of 31 December. What is the figure for 31 January, which should be the most reliable and recently available data? I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am very happy to take that information on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The department is here. They may well have information to provide today.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: No, that's all. We've got them all afternoon, Minister. These questions are from me to you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But otherwise I'm happy to—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. I'll move on.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —answer that question on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's great, that you're going to take that on notice.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: In the supplementaries, we also asked about the total value of the unprocessed claims, and that information was apparently "undergoing validation" at the time. Is that figure available now, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Perhaps, if someone from the department has it. I would invite them to provide it.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Are you aware if it's available, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to provide any available figures—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Great, so you'll take that on notice as well?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —to the Committee, Ms Taylor.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So you'll take that on notice. Thank you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: The average time for processing claims was 35.5 days. Is it appropriate for farmers and landholders to be tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket for more than five weeks while awaiting reimbursement from the Government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There is a full process that people go through through the Rural Assistance Authority.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Understood. Do you think that's an appropriate time?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to make sure—Ms Taylor, I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, I know, Minister, and I'm trying to get through my questions.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think this is an important issue that I know a lot of people will have some interest in. I want to make sure that money, particularly in relation to assistance for people who have been through disasters, gets out the door as soon as possible.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Look, I'm sure you do, Minister. But just going back to the actual question—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are processes and checks and balances in place to make sure—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, I absolutely agree with you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —that it is going to the right places. I want the processes to be followed.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But do you think that's an appropriate time?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are also steps in place where people might need to get some work done and provide invoices. I don't think there's a blanket answer for this. The answer generally, though, is I want to see financial support get out the door to people who need it as quickly as possible, with the right checks and balances.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, many people have contacted us talking about the mental toll that processing those grants has taken. Would that be a direct reflection of the staff cuts that we've seen from the department under your instruction?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm not aware of any staff cuts in the Rural Assistance Authority. I think they do great work. I want to see money get out the door to people who need it as soon as possible.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm sure you do. That's why we're asking.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to make sure that the proper checks and balances are in place, and that's what taxpayers would expect.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Through you to Mr Sloan, given that the department should be using science and data to manage fish stocks, can you tell me what the scientific unit of measurement for a feeling is, given that that is what has been advertised as the reason for the proper closure? How do you measure a feeling?

SEAN SLOAN: Thanks, Chair. We do stock assessments every year for about 33 stocks.

The CHAIR: How do you measure a feeling? That's my question. I know you do stock assessments, but this decision was based not on a stock assessment but on so-called community feeling or sentiment. How did you measure community feeling as a scientific measurement?

SEAN SLOAN: That's the question I'm trying to answer. We do stock assessments to inform our total allowable catch setting process, and there are about 33 of those each year. We do another 53 of those each year for a whole range of species. We also do a biennial recreational fishing survey, and what I can say for blue groper is in 2021-22 our recreational survey showed that there were 387 individual goppers caught. Back in 2013-14, which was the—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I'll just stop you there. That's not really a huge recreational catch. I might go back to the Minister. Minister, you said in your statement to media last night that you will engage with the industry after the 12-month trial. Have you tested the mood of the industry since you made that announcement, given that

you blindsided them? The advisory council didn't know; associations didn't know. Have you tested whether the industry actually wants to meet with you? Because I have, and they don't.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's a matter for the industry. I want to engage with people across the—

The CHAIR: Why didn't you engage with them before the decision was made?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, I want to answer the question. I think it's a fair question, and I think people are interested in talking about protecting blue groper today across the community. There's certainly been a lot of interest in it.

The CHAIR: I'm asking you a follow-up question: Why didn't you engage with them in the first place?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am engaging with fishing groups.

The CHAIR: No, prior.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The announcement that I made yesterday was that I will be engaging with them over this 12-month period. I welcome any engagement and feedback from fishing groups across New South Wales. In relation to the second part of your question, about notifying my advisory councils, I did in fact notify my advisory councils. I wrote to them yesterday and made phone contact, and I will be asking the advisory councils to consider feedback and provide it to me, just as anyone would expect. I welcome feedback.

The CHAIR: The problem is your department was leaking this to fishermen weeks ago, and we'll get to that in a second. What other species are you going to ban based on emotion, Minister? If I call a snapper Sammy or a trevally Trevor, are you going to ban them as well?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a decision that the Government is proud to have made—

The CHAIR: Based on emotion.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —based on community sentiment.

The CHAIR: Yes, not science.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This blue groper fish is of particular importance to the people of New South Wales. It is our State fish. That is a decision that we've made, and I look forward to engaging with fishing groups over the next 12 months.

The CHAIR: Minister, do you accept that the community outrage is largely due to your department's incompetence in communicating the reasons why the fine was so low and why a more appropriate fine was not given? Do you accept that that poor communication about the reasons for the \$300 fine exacerbated the issue and exacerbated community anger—also amongst recreational fishermen, who wanted to know why the fine was so low and why they were being abused on the streets by non-fishermen when they were walking down the street with a fishing rod?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to engage with recreational fishers, and most of the engagement that I've had on this topic so far is from people who are responsible, who understand the issues, who know what the rules are and who have said to me they don't target blue groper as fish when they are fishing. I'm happy to continue that engagement with recreational fishers. I don't think anyone should be treated that way on any issue.

The CHAIR: Minister, are you aware that if I throw a line out with a bit of crab bait over a rock shelf, I might not be deliberately targeting a blue groper? I might actually be looking to target snapper but, invariably, a blue groper might come along and want to have a nibble. Am I going to be fined \$11,000 for pulling up a groper when I was targeting a snapper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, just like people understand the rules about catching fish, if you catch something that is the wrong size that you can't keep or that is a species that you can't keep, you put it back into the water. This is not an unusual situation, and I trust that people who enjoy recreational fishing will also understand the rules and will be part of this program.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for that clarification. I will redirect now to look at the poor handling and communication of this ban being leaked by your officers. In the last eight months, my office, with fishermen, have fought against four attempts to restrict access based on no science, pure emotion and vested interest. On all those four occasions, there has been no assistance and no input from the access officers that are employed and paid for by Recreational Fishing Trusts. Their salaries are paid for by the Recreational Fishing Trusts—our licences. There has been no engagement in assistance. I put that as a comment to start off with. Minister, what grade level or public service level are the access officers, currently paid by the fishing fee licences?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will ask Dr Sloan to provide that information if he has it. Otherwise, I'll take it on notice. I'm happy to do that.

SEAN SLOAN: Can you please clarify—

The CHAIR: What's the grade level or the public service level for the access officers who are paid by the fishing fee receipts? Who would be their direct line of report to—who is their line manager?

SEAN SLOAN: If I understand the roles that you're speaking to, they're policy roles that deal with recreational fishing access issues.

The CHAIR: Yes.

SEAN SLOAN: I don't know the answer to that question off the top of my head.

The CHAIR: Do you know who their line manager is? Who would they report to?

SEAN SLOAN: There's a team within the recreational fishing team that handles those matters. I'm happy to take that on notice and find out the answers. Generally speaking, those types of roles are clerk 7/8 or clerk 9/8 type roles.

The CHAIR: If you can't answer who they report to now, I might move on. You may take this on notice as well. Who gives them the authority to speak and engage with the community, and where does that direction come from? I'm assuming that would be on notice as well.

SEAN SLOAN: If it's about the access issues that we have, there are lots of different fishing access issues that crop up.

The CHAIR: To help you, I might go to a specific example. The other night at the Sutherland Shire Council, I was shown several text messages from Saltwater Access Officer Chris Cleaver, who, in response as to whether he or anyone would be attending the Sutherland council meeting to observe proceedings, at least, or support fishermen, responded to the effect of, "No, we've been told not to as the Government already has a response ready to go." Who directed Saltwater Access Officer Chris Cleaver to communicate that message to fishermen, who pay his wage?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm not familiar with that situation.

The CHAIR: Perhaps take it on notice. Minister, on the same night I was told how, a week ago, a person in a fisheries uniform followed a person wearing a fishing club shirt into a trophy store as he was getting trophies engraved. The person in uniform identified himself as a former ANSA youth champion and now fisheries officer, and, unsolicited, bragged about how the Government was going to ban the line fishing of groper and there was "nothing you could do about it". Minister, it didn't take much research from my office to identify that officer as Chris Cleaver, Saltwater Access Officer. Who directed Chris Cleaver, Saltwater Access Officer, to accost fishermen, who pay his wage, in the street to brag about them losing access?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, I take the issues that you're putting to me seriously. I'm not familiar with the situation or the allegations that you're putting to me.

The CHAIR: Perhaps take that on notice. I've got one more example to get out.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I acknowledge what you're putting to me, and I will ask the department to provide me with some advice.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. You might not be aware that I was working with Minister Sharpe's office on an access issue in a national park known as Blue Fish Point. During these negotiations, it was relayed by national parks that an access officer, instead of trying to work for a solution, recommended removing that access. That access officer, whose name is Chris Cleaver, unsolicited, called up a well-known fisherman, who had not even raised the matter publicly, and essentially attempted to silence him about not talking about it publicly. Who directed Chris Cleaver to make such phone calls and speak to fishermen, who pay his wage, in such a manner?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, I appreciate the question that you're putting to me. I am not aware of the circumstances, but I will ask the department to have a look at this and provide me with some advice.

The CHAIR: Why do we have saltwater access officers and access officers in general, whose salaries are paid by fishermen, actively conspiring to reduce access? Why am I paying my recreational fee for someone to conspire against access? Why are 391,000 licence fee holders paying their fee for the salary of a person to actively conspire against giving them access?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, I will take what you have put to me today seriously. I will look into it, and I will ask the department to provide me with some further information.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I have a follow-up question on puppy farming. As you're probably aware, dogs are currently allowed to be kept in small enclosures for 23 hours and 40 minutes a day. There is no limit on the number of dogs that any one breeder can have, there is no limit on the number of litters that they can have and there are no staffing ratios. So, technically, you can have thousands of dogs and one person working there, and it's not until animals are in a really sick and dangerous situation before any action can be done for those animals to be seized. Are these some of the issues that your legislation will address when it comes forward?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. I take those points very seriously. We certainly don't want animals to be placed in that situation. We will be sticking to, or delivering on, our commitment to ban puppy farms. But if there are cases like that and specifics that you're aware of, or that anyone who might be watching this is aware of, I would appreciate getting the details. I'm happy to deal with them while we are considering the broader legislative change.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I think there are hundreds of them. That's the problem that we've got. Have you met with any organisations or experts in this space? Have you started any kind of consultation process in that way in these early stages?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I engage with the RSPCA on a relatively regular basis. But, as I outlined this morning, most of the work that is occurring at the moment is internal to provide me with advice on how we can deliver on this commitment. And then I want to engage broadly, being mindful that people have offered views on this over many years.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I've had some complaints come to my office about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, formerly known as Dolphin Marine Conservation Park, which is the dolphinarium in Coffs Harbour. It has been reported that they're hosting an increasing number of large after-hours events with loud music and alcohol. Is this something that has come to you, Minister? Is it something that you're aware of?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't been briefed on the specifics of parties occurring after hours. Is it after hours—so when it's not open to the public?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the night-time, yes.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But not open to the public?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The events are paid events for people to come in, drink alcohol and listen to loud music, with the animals there in captivity.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't believe I've been briefed on that issue. I'm happy to have a look at it if there are concerns for the animals.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm particularly concerned, obviously, that these are alcohol-related events, with captive animals at the same facility. Technically, it's not illegal because they do actually hold a liquor licence at the facility. Given that there are potential welfare risks for animals at events where they're mixed with alcohol, are you open to looking into some of the laws and regulations around this and possibly banning events that combine animals and alcohol consumption in this way?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to help you with this and, if there's something that needs to be addressed, I'm happy to give consideration to it. Is there a particular concern, other than the fact—and I'm not making light of it—that these events are occurring around the animals? Is there a specific allegation in relation to welfare? If there is, I'm happy to look into that. I'm not responsible for liquor licensing. I'm not dismissing it. I'm happy to engage.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I understand that. I'm just talking about the animal welfare concerns around intoxicated people, loud music and then captive animals in small pools. We're talking about dolphins and seals. I know this particular facility does a lot of swim-with-dolphin events and things like that. Having heavily intoxicated people around these animals could potentially create a major animal welfare issue.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am happy to get some advice on whether there may be concerns for animal welfare in relation to the activities that are occurring there, and I am happy to consider that advice and engage with you on the issue.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for that. In estimates in October last year, when I asked about funding for POCTAA enforcement agencies, you said that you'd have more to say about this very soon. Can you provide an update on where that's up to?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: One of the commitments that we made was to review funding for these agencies. That's part of the full review that we're doing. As I said earlier, where possible, I'm trying to combine things to see if there are things that we can do quickly. If that's not the case, then we'll separate it out. We have committed to reviewing funding. You would be aware that the RSPCA received \$20 million in funding for their operations for the moment. The funding is there and has been provided while we consider what it should look like going forward.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Obviously that expires very soon. We're only months away from the 2024 budget. If that funding of \$26 million is cut, obviously they'll have to lay off large numbers of staff. They'll have to descale their operations. Is this something that you're going to make sure is within the upcoming budget so that doesn't have to happen?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's not a question of the funding being cut. An amount of \$20 million was allocated by the previous Government to be provided to the RSPCA. It has been provided. We are considering what funding should look like going forward in relation to organisations that work with government on this issue.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Have you met with the agencies in regard to the review?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't. I have engaged with the RSPCA on funding and I would have to check what specific meetings I've had with the others in relation to that issue.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The Animal Welfare League, yes. Have you received budget submissions from them?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't believe so. But, again, I'll have to check that. The funding that was provided to the RSPCA came from the Office of Local Government. It may be that some of these conversations have been had with local government, and I'm happy to check that, rather than passing it around to the Office of Local Government and the Minister to see what may have occurred.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. I wanted to ask about shark nets as well. At the budget estimates in October last year, you said that a range of alternative technologies were being trialled over the summer period. What is the update on those trials? When can we expect to see the new technologies implemented across New South Wales beaches?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've been consistent with my comments on this, and public safety is the priority for the Government, but we are trialling a range of new technologies over the course of this summer. I'm looking forward to seeing the results of what's worked and what's been effective in various beaches over the course of this summer. I believe the nets and the technology are in place—someone will give me the details—March or May. I think there are another couple of months to go.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Then you'll get the results and you'll be briefed on it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will get the results. I want to consider it. It's \$42 million over a couple of years. We want to see what works and what doesn't. That's what I've committed to doing.

SEAN SLOAN: Minister, the nets are put in place in September and they're removed at the end of April each year.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: April. There you go.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What steps are you taking to ensure that the Government is confident of the 1 September decision in regard to keeping shark nets out of our waters permanently in favour of more effective technology? Can you confirm at this point whether this is going to be the last season that we should see shark nets in New South Wales and we'll be able to switch to some of the different aspects that we've now trialled?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I can't confirm that, because I'm going to do exactly what I've said, which is to look at the results of the technologies that we are trialling over the course of this summer. If there are things that are effective, then I want to look at how we can invest in them and use them. If there are things that are not, then we need to consider that too. Ideally, in the longer term, that's where we want to head but, again, keeping the community safe while we consider these things is very important.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You're at least working towards a trial of the removal of the nets when you're confident about these other technologies. Is that the overall goal, if possible?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The overall goal is making sure that we've got the right mechanisms in place to provide safety and security to people who swim in our beaches whilst also not causing harm to animals. The nets are part of what we use to do that. We're trialling new technologies. I want to see what works and what doesn't—I'll be transparent about that once I see the results—and then we'll continue working on that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In Western Australia, the Government provides a \$200 shark deterrent rebate for members of the public to purchase a personal shark deterrent to wear when swimming, and it is particularly used by surfers who go further out in the water. These devices are scientifically proven to reduce the risk of a shark bite. Is the New South Wales Government considering a similar scheme to make sure that people can get a personal shark deterrent? Is that one of the things that is being trialled or considered?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is not something that is being trialled or considered this summer. I have read things about the suits in Western Australia. I have not been provided with formal advice on them. I am happy for people to provide me with further information, but it's not something that we're currently considering as part of the operations we have in place at the moment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, your media release this morning—it is the language of division 1 of the Fisheries Management Act. Are you making a regulation under that Act to prohibit the taking of groper from any waters?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: In terms of the things that you have put in place and that you did just this morning before budget estimates, do you think that this ban would have saved Gus the Groper?

The CHAIR: Gus is still swimming around.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, we don't think it was Gus; it was someone else.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I beg your pardon. Would it have saved the groper? Let's call it Gus, let's call it whatever.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The announcement was made yesterday—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Just before estimates.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —in relation to placing this ban on catching blue groper by any means. As everyone would be aware—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But do you think it would it have saved it, Minister? That's the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —there were significant incidents that garnered a lot of public attention over the course of the summer. I paid attention to that debate and I sought advice from the department. People have said this is a kneejerk reaction. It certainly isn't. I sought and considered advice, and now I'll be engaging with people over the next 12 months—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Just redirecting the question, Minister, do you think your new regulation would have saved the groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I look forward to this regulation saving blue groper across New South Wales, which is in line with community expectations. It's very disappointing what occurred over the summer. The groper that garnered attention were speared, as we know, and spearfishing is outlawed. But I think it's important to be really clear with people about what the rules are. We expect recreational fishers to follow the rules and so—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So you're just going to punish everyone.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is much easier to be clear about the rule in line with expectations from the community.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, I'll just redirect you now. Thank you, I'm happy with that answer. Have you met with any cattle producers recently?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You would have to define "recently", but I would have to check my diary disclosures. I meet with people—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, have you spoken to any cattle producers this year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I meet with people across the agriculture sector on a very regular basis, Ms Taylor.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, if I could just redirect you, please. I'm really trying very hard to ask you very direct questions. Have you met with any cattle producers this year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check my disclosures.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Can you provide that on notice?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, sure, I'm happy to provide that on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: When you did meet with cattle producers, as you said you have in the past, what are they telling you about prices and where the EYCI is sitting compared to last year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What I've said is that I meet with people across the agricultural sector—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, Minister, if I can just—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —as often as I can, and what people across the sector are telling me in relation to prices is that they have fluctuated. Last year they had gone down significantly for a number of reasons. People were preparing for drier conditions. As I recall details, there were also higher stock levels and things were balancing out. Prices certainly did drop. They have gone up a little since then.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But you recall that there were higher stock levels?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm conscious that decisions need to be made by farmers in every part of the sector where prices help to inform decision-making and can have implications on decision-making. That's how a market system works.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister. I will redirect you now. What about lamb producers, Minister? What are they telling you about the NTLI?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I know that lamb producers have experienced a reduction in pricing, which has also fluctuated a little in the last part of last year.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: A little?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, significantly—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Sorry, that's quite different to "a little".

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —which has also caused broader conversations about the prices that farmers are getting for their product compared to what consumers are paying in supermarkets. That's a concern that I have as well. Again, this is the way—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: If I could redirect you. If that's a concern, as you said, which is really pleasing to hear, Minister—that you find that a concern—have you spoken to your Federal counterpart about that? Have you made representations about that? Have you written emails or letters trying to represent farmers for this fluctuation in prices, as you said?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are two different points to make here, Ms Taylor.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm missus.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The fluctuation in prices is in relation to a range of factors. The price that people are paying at the supermarket is something that I am also engaged in—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, I'm well aware of that.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and what happens in between.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Respectfully, I go to the supermarket and I'm a farmer.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am trying to be helpful. I just want to clarify—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I will redirect you, Minister. My question was specific. I have a job to do here.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am trying to clarify so that I can provide you with relevant information.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But the question, respectfully, is: Have you made representation—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You're just continuing to argue with me. Mrs Taylor, I would like to be able to engage, so if you can be clear about what you're asking.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, we would love engagement. The question is, in that course of engagement, have you made representations to your Federal counterparts about the significant fluctuations—to use your words—in prices? It's a yes or it's a no, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In relation to lamb prices specifically, I would have to check, but I engage with my Federal counterparts—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Okay, Minister. Thank you for answering that. Please, can you take that on notice if you've made any representations?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —on agriculture issues on a very regular basis.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I look forward to you taking that on notice, thank you. Have you had conversations about the impacts being felt with your Federal counterparts in New South Wales relating to the Federal Government's decision to transition away from live sheep exports?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, there are not live sheep exports from New South Wales, as you would know.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, have you had those discussions?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm the New South Wales Minister. We don't have a live export market from New South Wales.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Okay. That's fine. So you haven't, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is an issue for the Western Australian Government and the Federal Government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, how many DPI research stations are there across New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to say 20. I'll check the specifics.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's all right. Take that on notice. Do you know how many renewable energy zones there are across regional New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That is not something that's within my remit, but I'm happy to take advice and come back to you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have you met with your colleague Minister Sharpe to discuss some of the concerns New South Wales farmers have with the renewable transition, and, specifically, have you met with New South Wales farmers and the Chair of their energy committee?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've met with New South Wales farmers about this issue on a number of occasions. In fact, I've been out with my very good friend Xavier Martin to some of these renewable energy zones.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What were some of the concerns, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm sorry, but I'm going to answer the question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Just to redirect—

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

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —what were some of the concerns that—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to be able to engage. This is a serious issue for farmers—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Specifically, Minister, to redirect—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and others who will be paying attention to this debate. It's important that I'm able to answer.

The CHAIR: Order! This is not going to work if we keep talking over each other. From my gathering of the toing and froing, the Mr Farraway wants to pick up on what you just said, Minister, about your meetings and discussions with the NSW Farmers president. I think we should allow him to do that so you can incorporate it in your answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, thank you for that response. What did New South Wales farmers raise with you, the concerns about the renewable energy zones?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to continue where I left off, because I think it's important information. I met with the NSW Farmers—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Specifically, what did Mr Martin have to say?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and I have been out, in fact, visiting some of these zones with Mr Xavier Martin. So not only have we met about it but also I have been out on the road in these communities with Mr Xavier Martin and the NSW Farmers—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What did he say?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —because it's important that I engage directly. I have also met with farmers who are impacted by these decisions, because I think it is important to engage with people from every perspective on really significant change that is being implemented.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I will draw you back specifically to the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are committed to delivering on our renewable energy program, which was bipartisan.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: In your answer, Minister, you've mentioned that you had met with the president of NSW Farmers. You've just confirmed in evidence that you have actually visited and toured some of these renewable energy zones across the State. Specifically, what have New South Wales farmers shared with you that their main concerns are with the renewable energy zones that are in place and the transition to renewable energy?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Their concerns are well ventilated in the public domain. It's important for me—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But I am asking you now, Minister: What has been raised?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —to meet people from every perspective about significant change that is occurring across our State. As I was saying, Mr Farraway, we are committed to delivering on our renewable energy program across the State, which, as you know, was supported in a bipartisan way. I'm pretty sure I saw media footage of the leader of the National Party digging holes in the ground on one of these properties for the beginning of one of these renewable projects.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: It's not the question that's been asked.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect, Minister, specifically, I suppose, as the New South Wales agriculture Minister, do you support the use of prime agricultural land for large-scale industrial renewable energy projects?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The leader of the National Party does.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, that's not my question. My question is to you as the New South Wales agriculture Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, it's a bipartisan program and the leader of the National Party in New South Wales

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you for the answer. Moving on to our winery industry—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —has been out digging holes in the ground to start some of these projects.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, can you give the Committee and myself a bit of an update on where the MOU is up to with NSW Wine?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am supportive of the wine industry in New South Wales. It's certainly a significant part of agriculture in the State and part of our export markets. I'm happy to work with people from across the industry who, if they need access to me—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Where's the MOU up to, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —then they are able to reach out to get it.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, the MOU.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There has been in the past, under previous governments, a memorandum of understanding in relation to funding for an organisation, but I'm available to meet with industry about any of their concerns and I actually think that's a better approach.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, to redirect, the MOU has been sitting on your desk for eight months. When will it be finalised? This is an important industry in the regions. Can you confirm today when you intend to finalise the MOU with that key industry stakeholder?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't accept the premise of the question that you're putting to me and I will go back to the answer that I was giving because it is relevant to people in the wine industry across New South Wales.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Where's the MOU up to?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect—because I've heard this.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've got to be able to answer a question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You're reiterating the same answer.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You've got to let me provide some sort of information.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You've just put an allegation that something is sitting on my desk. It's not true.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —have you had any discussions with the trade Minister, Minister Anoulack—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Point of order: A question was asked—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But you need a new answer, Cameron.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: —and before the Minister could even answer at all there was an attempt to redirect.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You need new evidence. You can't have the same evidence.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: The Minister ought to be given a reasonable period to at least answer before the Opposition jump in with more questions and more statements and talking over the top of the Minister.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To the point of order: The Minister clearly outlined that she was going to reiterate the same answer, so I was redirecting. The Minister opened herself up for redirection.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately I would have to say that's a pretty fair description of the events. Once again, if we are redirecting, we just do it politely so we don't have this talking over the top of each other.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, have you had any discussions with Minister Anoulack, the trade Minister, on the signing and agreement of that MOU?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have engaged with the Minister. I'm pretty sure—and I can check the details of this—that I've written to him asking him to consider any support that might be available from his department's or within his remit's perspective for the industry. There are some parts of work that occurs with the industry through DPI, which I will continue working with DPI and the industry on. That's been conveyed to the industry. Where there is work that we can support the industry with in terms of trade or other issues, then we will work across government. My door is open. If people across the industry want to get any support, they're welcome to reach out.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So to follow on from that answer, Minister, what specifically is the New South Wales Labor Government doing to support and be ready for when China reopens to this market shortly?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's an exciting proposition that we will have the opportunity to expand our exports back into China, from the wine industry's perspective. I hope that brings a lot of success to the industry.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So specifically, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to work with people in the wine industry about any support that they may need.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect from that answer, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They can reach out directly if they need anything.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Specifically, what is the New South Wales Government doing directly to support New South Wales wine producers to be ready and to promote New South Wales-produced wine to that significant export market? What are you doing specifically, Minister, as a government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: If you want to get specific details about supporting people to export and trade, then ask the relevant Minister. I am supportive of the industry. I am excited that they'll be able to engage with the market in China. If any particular support is needed from me as agriculture Minister or the Department of Primary Industries, the door is open.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. The South Australian agriculture and trade Ministers have announced that they have earmarked \$2 million and are sending a delegation to China in the coming weeks to support the South Australian wine market. Will you advocate for this to the Premier and to ERC, to at least match what South Australia is doing so New South Wales wine producers are in a competitive position to sell New South Wales-produced wine to the Chinese market?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've said, whatever is required to support the industry. I am happy to engage on anything that the industry thinks would be beneficial in support from government. Whether that is through my role as Minister for Agriculture, whether that is from our Minister for trade, these things can be considered across government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you match what South Australia is doing? Will you match what your Labor counterparts in South Australia are doing?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is not something that's been proposed to me by the industry, but I am happy to engage with the industry any day of the week to support them in whatever way they see fit.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. To redirect, will you match what your Labor counterparts are doing in South Australia?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I provided my answer, which is I'm happy to engage with the wine industry—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You don't know.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm literally providing an answer, and you don't like the answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, it's pretty clear.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But I'm happy to engage. I'll speak directly to the wine industry because I can't seem to get through to you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To redirect about wine—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: To anyone in the wine industry who might be watching this, you're welcome to reach out about any support that you may need.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Don't patronise them, Minister.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to our New South Wales wine producers, I believe that the Venues NSW contract is coming up for renewal very soon. Will you take to Cabinet a government proposal to ensure that all New South Wales Government properties that contract through Venues NSW only has New South Wales wines and New South Wales produce and content?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am happy to engage with the wine industry about any support that they might need. This may have been a useful question to the relevant Minister yesterday when he was in estimates—I'm not sure if you asked him—who I believe is responsible for venues and for property.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You are the Minister for Agriculture and Regional New South Wales. I think you've forgotten that. Not Corrections; Regional New South Wales.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll check the *Hansard* to see if that's what you did. But, again, to the wine industry directly, the door's open.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, have you met with your Federal counterpart, Senator Watt, on the double dipping that is going to be experienced by our agriculture sector on the biosecurity levy?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I discuss a range of issues with my Federal counterpart, just as I do with other State and Territory counterparts, where there are relevant issues to discuss. The biosecurity levy is a decision of the Federal Government, and it is one that will support our border controls to protect biosecurity in Australia, and that's very important. Farmers who will be paying the levy will benefit from having more protected biosecurity, which is a win-win.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: For importers, though, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The decisions around the levy are a matter for the Federal Government.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have you raised those issues around the double dipping that our New South Wales farmers, our orchardists, apple growers, cherry growers—a good, hardworking industry has to pay a biosecurity levy for the importation of competitive product? Do you think that that is a fair structure?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Biosecurity is everybody's responsibility, particularly for our farmers, who do an incredible job, working very hard on our orchards and producing other products, as you've outlined in that question. They benefit directly when we have improved biosecurity protections in New South Wales that directly impacts their business, as does the broader community.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Minister, I want to turn now to an issue that's been affecting primary producers in the community in the Northern Rivers and ask some questions about the Northern Rivers' Agricultural Drainage Review that was put together by Mr John Culleton. Minister, have you seen that report before?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: When did you receive that report from the department?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to check the specific date—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's fine. Take that on notice.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —for when I received it, Mrs Taylor.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you for that. I understand the Department of Primary Industries only published the report on the website on 20 December. That's almost half a year since it was handed over by Mr Culleton. Is there a reason for the delay in making that report public?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, I have been the Minister for a short period of time within that time.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Only a year.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Seems like a long time.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would imagine that's because we had to consider the report that was provided. I've also consulted with—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So you are saying there was no delay, Minister—just redirecting you to the actual question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mrs Taylor, I'm answering the question and I'd like to be able to finish.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: The question was very specific.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I know there's a lot of interest in this issue.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: There's 11—just to redirect, Minister, there's—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Perhaps I'll just speak directly to people who are engaged on this issue since you want to cut me off.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I am redirecting the question. Minister, I beg your pardon. I am redirecting the question. There are 11 recommendations that were put forward by Mr John Culleton to the Government in that report. Have those recommendations been adopted by the Government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We're dealing with this as a whole of government, working with Water and Environment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So they haven't been.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Currently there is consultation occurring with the community on these issues, and I encourage stakeholders to share their feedback. The consultation is open.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Okay, so we'll look forward to those recommendations coming.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think it is important that I am allowed to finish answering this question. There is consultation occurring.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You've answered. Thank you, Minister. It's very clear what's going on.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There is consultation occurring in the community.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I've got limited time.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am going to finish.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'd just like to ask one final question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There is consultation occurring on this serious issue across the community.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, can you confirm to the Committee today—

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Feedback is open until 21 April, and I encourage people who have concerns about this to get involved.

The CHAIR: Minister, let's just hear the follow-up question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. Can you confirm today that the New South Wales Labor Government will not privatise or sell any DPI research station under your leadership as the agriculture Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have no plans to privatise research in Agriculture or DPI in New South Wales.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The property—the research stations, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am really proud of the work that occurs on these stations and by our researchers, and I, in fact, want to celebrate it even more.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I turn to the trust fund specifically. While I start asking my questions, I refer you to page 52 of the latest trust fund report. Could someone around you get that up so you can see? Halfway down the page there is a project titled "Securing angler access for the future". Is someone able to—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: How about you put questions to me, and I will—let's engage on this.

The CHAIR: Okay. This is a project that says in its description that it:

... reviews the high volume of Crown Lands road closures, Aboriginal Land Claims and other public land disposals to secure angler access for the future.

So \$149,271 is being taken from recreational fishermen to apparently do the job of Crown Lands. When was this project actually approved? That is my first question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will answer—

The CHAIR: You probably need to refer to Mr Sloan, perhaps, or Mr Turnell.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am happy to answer it in a couple of ways. In terms of when it was approved, or the details of it, Mr Sloan is here and probably can provide specific details. In relation to the first part of the question, obviously the trust and the fees that are paid are for a broad range of work and support that is done, including in the department, to support fishing across New South Wales.

The CHAIR: I am aware of that.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But in terms of the specifics, I'm happy to—

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, when was this project approved?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, I don't know the specifics of this project. I can certainly find out for you. Since 2001 there have been 3,300 projects, and we've got 351 active trust projects, so I'll just need to look at the specifics of this one and we can certainly take that on notice and provide you with—

The CHAIR: While you're taking on notice, it was confirmed to me by Crown Lands yesterday that they were never consulted on this project. Given that you're actually circumventing their remit—it's their job to actually look at Crown land road closures, Aboriginal land claims, public land disposals—principally, you are now taking money out of our trust fund to do the job of another department. That is how it seems. On top of over \$500,000 in salaries for access officers—one would think that was principally part of their day-to-day business. How this looks to me, and how this looks to the recreational fishermen that pay for these salaries and pay for this so-called project—it looks to them that you are double-dipping.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, if I can provide some clarification around the nature of that type of work, we have a whole raft of very complex access issues, which can involve individual landholders, local councils and, in some cases, the Crown Lands department. In order for us to be able to work through those issues, it does require some resourcing. There's actually been—it's my understanding—a call from recreational fishers for us to work on that area of access for recreational fishers.

The CHAIR: So what are the salaries there for? That's to do their job, which is to improve access, and then you're taking another \$150,000 out of our fees to do the job of another department.

SEAN SLOAN: No, that project would be resourcing the work that we need to do to go and work with all those different stakeholder groups, which in some cases is private landholders, in some cases is Crown Lands or local governments. There's actually a really complex mix of issues that arise.

The CHAIR: I'm aware of them, and the recreational fishermen tell me they see no evidence of your access officers actually doing that work. I'll leave that as a comment, not necessarily a question.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, I'm happy to provide some detail on that one because I think there would be some examples we could provide to you.

The CHAIR: Any evidence of where access officers have actually improved access rather than worked to take it away would be great. Minister, given your department's poor track record in fining people that do the wrong thing—and I use the example where one of your own Fisheries staff was caught fishing in a sanctuary zone and then, from my evidence presented in estimates in 2022, actually lied to compliance officers—why should we trust that you're serious about fining people for doing the wrong thing? That person got caught doing the wrong thing, should have known better and lied to compliance officers. When it was brought to your department's attention, given that it was under the previous Minister, nothing was done. Not only was nothing done but, on top of that, that person was actually promoted. Why should fishermen trust that this so-called tough stance on people doing the wrong thing will actually be followed through, when someone in your own department does the wrong thing, gets a fine, lies about it and then gets promoted?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I appreciate the question. I'm not familiar with an incident that occurred in 2022, I think it was.

The CHAIR: It was raised in 2022. It was a staff member by the name of Jim Harnwell, who is well renowned for his expertise on marine parks and sanctuary zones. When he was caught fishing in a sanctuary zone, he tried to claim that he didn't know the area. In 2022 I stepped out quite clearly his extensive expertise in that area, clearly evidencing that he misled Fisheries compliance officers. As a result of that, from what I can see, nothing was done by your department after they were given that information, and he was later promoted. How does that sit with the public service code of ethics and principles around trust, honesty and integrity? That's clearly something that has to occur. When you go for a job interview in the public service—I've been there—you have to demonstrate those core principles. How does that demonstrate those core principles?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, I want to engage directly with recreational fishing groups across New South Wales. I want to work closely with them.

The CHAIR: That is not the question, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I hold a recreational fishing licence.

The CHAIR: Minister, I've heard these motherhood statements before.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Banasiak, you've put a proposition to me, and a question. You've got to give me an opportunity to answer it.

The CHAIR: Can we answer it without the motherhood statements?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I wasn't the Minister in 2022. I'm not dismissing the situation that you've raised, but I am answering the question that you're posing now. This Government and I as the Minister genuinely want to engage with recreational fishers across New South Wales. That is a genuine thing that I would like to do, I have been doing and I want to continue to do. Again, I hold a recreational fishing licence. I want to work with people. Ideally, I would be in a situation where we're not issuing fines at all, because I would prefer if people understood and followed the rules. I'm sure that most, if not all, recreational fishers across New South Wales would prefer the same situation. We have to have enforcement officers in place to protect our marine estate. That makes it fair for fishers across New South Wales. In an ideal situation, nobody would need to be fined because people would be following the rules. This also includes a full education campaign. As you would know, there are signs up in places and we engage directly with fishers. I want to have positive engagement with recreational fishers.

The CHAIR: Minister, I will redirect, because you haven't actually answered the question. Picking up on Mrs Bronnie Taylor's question around this issue of the blue groper, you said that you take advice from the department. Are you able to now table all of the advice that you received from the department, including any scientific studies or data that was used to make the decision to ban line fishing for 12 months?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have outlined the reasons for making—

The CHAIR: I'm asking whether you're able to table that advice. You mentioned advice. You receive advice. I'm asking, are you able to table that advice so that the Committee can review that advice and try to understand how this decision was made, so we can then communicate to recreational fishermen and explain why they were blindsided, why they had no knowledge of it and why the decision was made? I think that's fair, given how much money they contribute to the department.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to work closely with recreational fishers across New South Wales about a range of issues—

The CHAIR: Can you table the advice, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am stating in public the reasons that we've made this decision. It's a decision that has been made by the Government in relation to—

The CHAIR: Minister, I appreciate what you're saying. But you would know that fishermen come to me quite regularly when I raise issues around the trust fund and issues around decisions by the department. They say to me, "Why am I bothering to pay for my fishing fee receipt? Why am I bothering to pay for my licence?" In good faith, I have been saying, "You should. We just need to do an audit of the trust. We'll get to the bottom of it. We'll fix it up." But now, based on yesterday's decision and the poor engagement, I can't in good conscience say to people, "Get a fishing fee licence," or, "Renew your fishing fee licence." I can't in good conscience actually renew mine. My position on your fishing—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't think that's very responsible as a member of Parliament. Recreational fishers have to follow the rules. I want to engage with them directly.

The CHAIR: Minister, the time has gone—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They all do care very deeply—

The CHAIR: Minister, I will file that opinion—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —about what goes on in our waterways.

The CHAIR: —about whether you think what I did is appropriate in the box with all of the other things I don't care about. I will now pass to someone from the crossbench seeking the call.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You still hold the licence. The stunt of cutting it up—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —doesn't mean you don't have the licence.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, what is killing the fish in Menindee right now?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a matter that is being led by the Minister for Water. The Department of Primary Industries is engaged on the issue. I think it is best if I hand over to the experts, who might provide some proper information.

SEAN SLOAN: There has certainly been water quality issues and low dissolved oxygen levels at Menindee over the past few months. That has been a major challenge. Fish obviously need water, and they need to be able to have oxygen to breathe. There has been low dissolved oxygen levels, and WaterNSW has done a number of releases to try to flush that area and re-oxygenate the water. We've also had an incidence of a parasite, a worm—Lernaea is the species of the worm—that has been found on golden perch. When those golden perch get to a point where they have a level of infestation, that can cause them serious health issues. So there's two of those issues that—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you. We can explore this a little bit further. So we've got fish parasites. Minister, back to you. It's no longer the water Minister; this does fall within your remit. What is killing the fish? Parasites and water quality. Have you heard about this parasite?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What is happening in terms of the parasite?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is work that our scientists and experts in DPI are dealing with. It's appropriate that they provide that expert information. I think this is an important question, and I want to make sure that you get the right information as part of the answer.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: This is probably—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd ask the department to provide the details.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —one of the most serious things that is happening now within your portfolio. I've been speaking with locals who are urgently calling my office and saying that they fear that this is going to be one of the worst, if not the worst, fish kill events, with this parasite. Apparently, dead fish are now floating down beyond Weir 32, if you know what that means. That means they're getting into the lower Darling River and further beyond that. What have you been told by your department about this parasite and how serious it is?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand that it is serious and I think it is important to engage with this in a serious way. I have experts who are sitting around the table now who I think it's appropriate provide you with the answer.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: But I'm asking you what you've been told, as Minister, because it is a crisis in your portfolio.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think it is appropriate that the experts—this is what the experts are here to deal with. I ask that you allow the experts to provide that information. It's an important question and I invite the department—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You don't know, in other words. I'm asking you, as the Minister, what you've been told about this fish kill.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I have a department who are experts in dealing with this and I would like them to provide the answer so that you are able to get an answer to your question.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I get a sense though, because we have all afternoon with the public servants, what agency is responsible to clean up if another mass fish kill occurs? Do you know what agency is responsible?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd ask the department to provide that information or I'm happy to take the details on notice.

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Don't take it on notice because the fish kill is happening now.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But I've just asked the department to provide an answer.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: The fish kill is happening now.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Ms Faehrmann, I'd like for the answer to be provided to you, but you won't allow that to occur. I think the experts are the people who should be providing the information to the public, and they're right here and I'm inviting them to do that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I'm offering you a chance to reassure the community that you're across this, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Literally the experts are right here. You won't let them provide the information to the public.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —and you are competent enough to handle this crisis that is about to happen on your watch. This is your opportunity to reassure the community that you're across your brief.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: People are interested in the answer. There are experts right here and you won't allow them to answer. I think that's ridiculous.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Nothing to say about the fish kill and the parasite?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are experts right here who should provide specific details to people who are interested in this, but you won't let them provide it.

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Faehrmann, I can provide you with some information.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, quickly, thank you.

SEAN SLOAN: Essentially, if it's in a regional area, fish kill responses do sit with DPI. If they're elsewhere, they sit with the EPA. Out at Menindee we have taken a particular approach which followed the inquiry that was held by the Office of the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer and there is a fish kill working group that has been established and is led by the EPA. That is an active working group that meets regularly.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: But this is slightly different, isn't it, Mr Sloan—a parasite over previous situations involving water quality. I assume, with your knowledge of fisheries, that poor water quality would exacerbate parasitic diseases within fish?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, this particular parasite or worm—the *Lernaea* species—is actually quite common and it is known to elevate in numbers during the summer months when the waters are warm. It is actually not an unexpected thing, but what we are seeing at the moment, and probably due to poor water quality, is that there is an increase in its presence.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I understand locals are being told that the fish is safe to eat. Is that your view?

SEAN SLOAN: It's safe to eat in the sense that that worm species is not harmful to humans, but when an individual fish has a level of infestation and gets ulcerated to a point where it has lesions on its body, then we're recommending that people don't eat those fish. We're also recommending that recreational fishers who are fishing make sure that they clean their equipment so they don't exacerbate the issue by transferring this parasite around.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I will come back this afternoon because I have more questions on this. Minister, we will go back to the groper for a minute. Juvenile gropers, as well as many other juvenile fish, inhabit estuarine seagrasses. That is where a lot of them grow up to become adult gropers. That is their safe place, if you like. I'm just explaining it to you in case you didn't know that. Are there moves by your Government to protect more seagrasses, for example, in Botany Bay? A lot of the gropers that are seen around the area of Botany Bay, including Cronulla and other areas, probably grew up in Botany Bay. Are there moves to increase protection for seagrasses so you can actually increase the beloved groper, the State emblem of New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We're committed to supporting our marine estate in every way that is necessary. I don't have any specific plans in relation to the particular area that you talked about, but we're committed to ensuring that we are managing the estate in the appropriate way.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of managing the estate in the appropriate way, where are you at—you, as Minister; I can ask the public servants this this afternoon—in terms of the review of the existing marine park network?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Work will be conducted between myself and the environment Minister. We have joint responsibility for managing the estate, and we will do it in the appropriate way.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: "Will be" indicates that no work has been done yet between you and the environment Minister around the marine park network. Is that correct?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We work closely on this issue and many others, as I've outlined repeatedly today.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Where is that process up to between you and the environment Minister on the marine park network, recognising that it was overdue and work had started with the previous Government, and recognising that the previous Government wound back protections that people thought Labor was passionate about? Where's that up to? What can people expect within this term of government—even this year—when it comes to this process?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You've raised a number of issues there, some of which were covered this morning. In terms of decisions that were made by the previous Government, they were decisions made by the previous Government. I engage with people across the sector and across these communities to factor in all of the relevant feedback that is required because that's an appropriate thing to do, and I will continue to do that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Okay, not much luck on marine issues. I might move quickly to critical mineral strategy in relation to the protection of agricultural land. I've asked you a question about this before in the House. There's the critical mineral zone, one of the first ones that was established by the previous Government in the Central West. Much of it is over very good agricultural land, tourism areas, wine areas, grape growers and what have you. What are you doing to protect agricultural land within that Central West region from mining? There are exploration licences everywhere for critical minerals.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We've got to get the balance right across all of New South Wales in terms of balancing agricultural—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What are you doing, is the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to answer the question. It was two words that I got out.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I just don't have much hope.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's important that we get the balance right in terms of protecting agricultural land. Of course it is. But we also have a number of competing interests and we've covered a few of those today, including the one that you've raised. One of the things that we are committed to implementing is appointing an Agriculture Commissioner. The process for that is well underway, and I will be making an announcement about someone to fill that position soon.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Following on from that answer and your evidence about the ag commissioner, can you confirm whether you have considered the Hon. Mick Veitch for that role?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What I've undertaken is a process of applications, so people with relevant experience and skills have been welcome to apply. That's through the normal processes that the department is running. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to engage directly with members of the Committee—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you think Mr Veitch would be a suitable candidate?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm answering the question. I'm a fan of making sure that we've got the right processes in place for this. The process is being conducted by the department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you for the process. I will redirect, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Advice will be provided to me on candidates, and I look forward to giving them some consideration.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you think Mr Veitch, a widely respected former member of Parliament, respected by both sides of the Chamber—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Hear, hear!

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —would be a suitable candidate for that role?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think Mick Veitch is an incredible person. I think he has a lot of skills to offer.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Perhaps you shouldn't have knifed him.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not hand-picking people for roles. There is a process underway.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: If only he was the ag Minister. We wouldn't be in such a terrible situation.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to respect the process and wait to receive advice. That's what the people of New South Wales would expect me to do.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can I confirm from your earlier evidence, before I hand over to Ms Hurst, you do not support the call for the regional crime inquiry?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are getting on with the job of supporting our police to do the incredible work that they are doing protecting our regional communities.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you support the inquiry? Do you support the call for the inquiry?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: People are more interested in the Government getting on with the job of ensuring that our communities are being protected—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, let's redirect, and I'll be really specific.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, I support our police. They are doing fantastic work across regional New South Wales. They shouldn't be undermined with scare campaigns like this one.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you support the call for the regional crime inquiry?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to make sure that communities feel safe, and I am sympathetic to people who are experiencing these situations. The police are doing incredible work.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's a no.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We've heard you loud and clear.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, I want to ask you about the national standard and guidelines for poultry. At budget estimates in October, you said that you had written to supermarkets about the confirmation of their commitment—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt. There is a lot of tut-tutting and complaining and whingeing in the corner, from people who are trying to plan their move to Canberra. I'd like to hear the question if I could.

The CHAIR: Order! Thank you. I'll ref.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: All the dry gullies are over there.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So petty to get personal. It's demeaning for you.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I am assuming that I get your time, now that you're taking mine.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Good luck with your Senate campaign, Mrs Taylor.

The CHAIR: Order! Ms Hurst has the call. She deserves to be heard in silence.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, I want to ask you about the national standards and guidelines for poultry. At budget estimates in October, you said you'd written to supermarkets to get confirmation about their commitment to stock only free-range eggs by 2025. Obviously, only about 50 per cent of caged eggs in Australia are supplied through supermarkets. The majority of caged eggs are actually supplied wholesale directly to food manufacturers and food services such as restaurants and cafes. Moving away from supermarkets, what are your intentions around taking action around the wholesale of caged eggs?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've indicated publicly, we're committed to implementing the national standards. I have written to the major supermarkets in relation to seeking confirmation about their plans, which have been in the past publicly stated, to move to stocking free-range egg products in supermarkets by 2025. I'll continue that engagement with supermarkets. More broadly, as I said, I'm engaging with industry as broadly as I can in order to work with people about getting to the point of meeting the standards that we have committed to.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Have you worked directly with wholesale food manufacturers, food services as well, or just the supermarkets?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've formally written to the supermarkets. I've engaged also directly with egg producers—farmers—including visiting some of their operations to see what requirements need to be put into place so that we can work with them on managing the transition. I know there are a number of food suppliers, big companies who do use these products. I am happy to engage directly with making sure that people are moving towards the standards, which we are committed to.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What will happen if facilities in New South Wales do not upgrade and remove battery cage facilities by the deadline of 2036? Will they be shut down? How will that work in practice?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No. We are working with industry to meet these standards. There isn't a hard deadline, for a whole number of reasons, probably all of which I've outlined in the public domain. We want to work with egg producers to make the transition in a way that works to keep them in business but also doesn't impact the price of food broadly and for eggs in the supermarket, particularly as people are experiencing a cost-of-living crisis at the moment. I want to make sure that we're getting the process right. That's why there isn't a hard deadline. I'd encourage people to move to meet the standards earlier than that if that's something that's possible.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, sorry, I've only got a few seconds left. Do you have any concerns about the fact that—if there's no hard deadline, how can a Labor government ensure the transition of this, particularly given, for example, the former agriculture Minister, Adam Marshall, had actually written that New South Wales won't be transitioning? He actually put that in writing with his signature. If there's a change of government and there's no legislation or regulation in place, like every other State in Australia, how can you be sure and certain that those transitions will take place or that the industry will actually follow your lead on this, to transition out of the use of battery cages?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't ruled out any mechanism that might need to be used, but what I'm doing at this point in time is working with industry to make that transition. That is something that was done by the previous Government and a former Minister. That is not my view. We are committed to supporting the standards. Again, at first instance, it's important to work with people in order to make sure that these transitions can be made in a way that doesn't have other implications for both businesses and food prices. That's what I'm doing at the moment. If we need to move in other ways in the future, I will consider that, but for the moment I am comfortable engaging with the industry.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: When you say "working with industry", there is no financial assistance for them to transition, is there, as has been proposed elsewhere?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is something that has been talked about in the public domain and across the industry for a very long time. People are well aware of the standards that need to be met and that we are committed to meeting those standards. So I am working with industry to make sure that they do that. But it has been discussed with industry for a very long time, and people need to be planning their businesses based on decisions that get them up to speed at the appropriate time.

The CHAIR: I look to the Government for any questions.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, I've been very happy with the answers. They've been very comprehensive. We thank the Minister.

The CHAIR: I indicate, from the Committee's perspective, Minister, that we do not require Mr Chaudhary to waste more of his leave time and holiday time. We are happy to direct questions to the acting CEO, Mr Dickson, so we will pick that up when we return after lunch at two o'clock. We will let the Minister go, and we will continue with departmental witnesses at 2.00 p.m. Thank you.

(The Minister withdrew.)

(Anshul Chaudhary withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back to this afternoon's session. I will now go to the Opposition for questions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: My question is to Ms Fox. Have you postponed the non-executive staff restructure within your agency or any of the business units that fall under your agency?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have any finalised plans on any non-executive restructures. We have some plans that are in development as we work through our budgetary situation, but we haven't postponed anything that I'm particularly aware of.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How advanced are the preliminary plans that you have? How long have you been working on those for?

REBECCA FOX: We are always assessing our mix of resources and capabilities to make sure we've got the right people in place to do what's required of us at any point of time. We run what I would call a fairly agile workforce. Certainly Mr Wheaton is doing some work in that regard in his team, which we need to do to make sure that we can meet the budget going forward.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it fair to say that you have plans that are not implemented but that are in development for the restructure of the non-executive workforce within the Department of Regional NSW and the Department of Primary Industries?

REBECCA FOX: I don't think "restructure" is the right word, and I'm trying to be as helpful as I can here. Restructure is a word that has particular meaning from a human resources perspective. What we need to do is align. We've done most of our executive alignment, particularly in Mr Bolton's area and Mr Wheaton's area. We've aligned executives and teams to make sure that we can deliver the programs that are required, and we now need to make sure that we can meet the budget going forward, certainly with non-executive staff. Many of those non-executive staff, particularly in those areas, are not ongoing staff. So there are programs that come off and they were employed for particular periods of time or they're casuals—those kinds of arrangements.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do the plans that you're discussing form part of the structural review—or functional review, I should say?

REBECCA FOX: I don't think they're directly related to the structural review. We need to put all of the pieces together, as you would expect. We're running 5,500 people and a \$3.5 billion budget, so we need to put all

of the pieces together. The functional review is one thing that we've taken into account. That has given us a good opportunity to look at our business. We did a lot of consultation. We've also consulted across government. We've done it with the Premier's Department. It's one of the things we take into account when we determine how we should be structured. I think I mentioned this morning that I'm also very conscious that our organisational structures and our functions need to be clear. I think that's the best way to operate. They need to be clear for stakeholders and they need to be clear for our staff as well.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Are there any plans in development, or have there been any plans put aside or briefings or workings within your broader agency, to merge business units or merge different divisions underneath the Department of Regional NSW together or the functionality of multiple different agencies into one?

REBECCA FOX: Not that I can think of. I think we are fairly well structured. It's very clear. We work under four New South Wales outcomes, and most of the changes that we needed to make have already been done.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Are there any plans to merge any positions from the Department of Primary Industries and their functionality into the Department of Regional NSW?

REBECCA FOX: Not that I'm aware of in the frontline services. One of the things that we will need to do is to make sure that some of our back-end corporate functions—for example, our communications and media functions—are set up to make sure that we are working in the most efficient and effective way. It's particularly important in emergency situations. I say this regularly to the staff: I don't believe in centralised corporate functions and I don't really believe in completely decentralised corporate functions. I've operated in government with both of those. We need to have some sort of hybrid model, and I think it's more a documentation of roles and responsibilities than particular changes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Earlier in the Minister's session, Ms Fox, you mentioned or confirmed that the director general's position is a band 3.

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can you confirm what is a deputy director general? Which band are they in?

REBECCA FOX: Senior executive band 2. The standard naming convention across the State Government is executive director at that level.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to the Government's position and election commitment, which is, across all agencies, around a 15 per cent reduction in senior executive positions, would deputy director generals under the current structure be subject to that reduction in those positions?

REBECCA FOX: All senior executive roles from band 1 to band 4 are subject to that election commitment, yes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have you had any plans in development phase at all or any briefings or workings within your agency to reduce the amount of deputy director generals or band 2 positions within your agency?

REBECCA FOX: They have all been implemented or are in the process of being implemented—the ones that we have considered so far. But we will have a period of time—I don't yet know what that period of time is—to implement that election commitment.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: A 15 per cent reduction—obviously, you would know, Secretary. Across your agencies and business units, you would know what the overall reduction would need to be, correct?

REBECCA FOX: No, I don't yet know that.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It is not defined that it is a 15 per cent reduction across your agencies?

REBECCA FOX: It's 15 per cent across the public sector, but the Public Service Commission is currently working through what that looks like for each agency, is my understanding.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The commission hasn't advised what reduction your agency needs to be?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To date, how much reduction, as a percentage, has there been—or in the number of positions?

REBECCA FOX: So far, we have reduced overall by 19 positions. Some of those have been machinery of government changes. For example, the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation moved out of our department, and it depends which period of time you are looking at. I think we have actually fully implemented seven this financial year, and others are in the process.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How many have been sacked as a total though? You say 19 to date.

REBECCA FOX: I don't know whether they've all been terminated. Some people may have moved on and they haven't been replaced, for example. We're using natural attrition. We're using mobility. So some people might have moved from one role into another role, but we are, overall—and, depending on which time period, I can pull it up for you now. I can give you the exact number. I think it's seven complete for this financial year—if I can find it, if somebody can help me. I can take it on notice and come back to you if you give me a time period. I think we answered some of those questions from the last estimates, on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It would be in the current financial year.

REBECCA FOX: The current financial year—okay, no problem.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to that, if you could detail whether they were natural attrition, machinery of government or whether they were sacked.

REBECCA FOX: Yes, sure.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to the current structure—and I have your organisational chart in front of me—do you envisage that you can run your agencies with fewer people than what is the current organisational structure?

REBECCA FOX: Are you looking at an executive organisational structure?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes.

REBECCA FOX: Yes, I think we can often do things more efficiently and effectively, and I will be required to contribute to the election commitment, whatever that number looks like.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That means, Ms Fox, that some of the people that are sitting behind you and beside you won't be here in the future?

REBECCA FOX: Ultimately—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I am not talking about personalities; I am talking about their roles.

REBECCA FOX: Yes, I understand that. It is ultimately a decision for government. I've got employer obligations as secretary. I also need to meet the budget that I'm given at any point in time, and I'm committed to doing that. We do that in the best way that we possibly can. We ensure that there's procedural fairness, and we work very collaboratively with our executive teams to make sure we can deliver the services.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The point I would raise—and having a lot of those individuals here today who have been in those roles for some time—is that the Department of Primary Industries' greatest strength is its people. I suspect that, as a percentage of your budget within DPI—or now Mr Sloan's budget—a huge portion would be staffing costs. That is because agriculture is about expertise, it's about people and it's about field operations and being on the ground. The reality is that you've just admitted, Ms Fox, that you will have a reduction in deputy director general roles.

REBECCA FOX: No, that's not correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You just said that some of the people—I put it to you a moment ago that some of those roles may not be here in the future.

REBECCA FOX: The Department of Primary Industries is around one-third of the whole department, so it may be that when we start to do that analysis and we work through it, there are no reductions required.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But you can't definitively rule out right now, can you, that there will be no cuts to deputy director roles within DPI?

REBECCA FOX: We will work through that with the team, and we will make sure that we are delivering the services that are required to us in the most efficient and effective way.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You can't rule that out though, Ms Fox?

REBECCA FOX: I can't rule anything out at this point in time, and I don't think any secretary in any public service entity would be able to rule anything like that out at this point in time.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Moving on, what are the current staffing levels, or has there been any reduction in staffing levels, within the Department of Regional NSW offices, specifically Dubbo, Armidale, Coffs Harbour and Queanbeyan, since evidence given at the October estimates period?

REBECCA FOX: I don't know that I've done the numbers since October. We use a census date that the Public Service Commission gives us for most of our numbers. For example, I can go through those for hubs in June 2022 in the four hubs where there was a commitment to have 100 people in each hub. We're at 546 in June 2023. We were at 639 people in those hubs.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to travel budgets—and I might pose this to Mr Sloan—the former director general, giving evidence in the October estimates, was asked by myself about the 25 per cent reduction in the travel budget for DPI. How are you managing your statutory requirements as an agency—an important agency—with some of the fire ant outbreaks and the ongoing management of varroa mite? How are you managing those outbreaks, the response to those outbreaks and also your statutory requirements, with a budget that has been cut by 25 per cent?

SEAN SLOAN: Thanks for the question. I think that was answered by Mr Hansen at a recent hearing.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It was in October, so it has been a few months since.

SEAN SLOAN: Nothing has changed since the answers that were given then. All of the frontline services and statutory responsibilities, all of those responsibilities are being fulfilled. We do have a travel budget savings target, like other agencies. So far, we're on track to meet those targets.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's a shame he's not here to clarify, isn't it?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes. Has there needed to be, since October last year, a reduction in the Department of Primary Industries' participation in educational programs, field days and local agricultural shows because of the travel budget reduction?

SEAN SLOAN: Not to my knowledge. I'm happy to take that on notice and have a closer look at that, but not to my knowledge.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have there been any events that the Department of Primary Industries has had to decline participation in due to the reduction in the travel budget?

SEAN SLOAN: There may well have been because, obviously, with reduced travel for non-essential activities, we would be making decisions about not attending things that were not considered to be essential activities.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Could I ask you to take it on notice, if you could, to provide a list of events that the Department of Primary Industries has had to decline participation in due to that decision and managing your travel budget?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to take that on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The other thing that I would like to clarify, whether you can do it in front of the Committee now or on notice, is can you define what the Department of Primary Industries would deem as "essential travel" with the new travel budget?

SEAN SLOAN: I will certainly have a go at answering it now, but any of our legislative obligations that need to be fulfilled, particularly in relation to high-priority work, like biosecurity response work, any of our legislated fish stock assessment work, any of the work that involves field work to deliver on our legislative responsibilities—we have compliance officers across Fisheries, Hunting, Forestry, Food Authority and Biosecurity. All of those frontline roles and services would be deemed as important and critical. As a quick answer to your question, I think they're the types of things that would be deemed as necessary and critical roles.

REBECCA FOX: And, Mr Farraway, we certainly report to Treasury at a department level on those savings targets, so we monitor them. Although each department is tracking them and we certainly have a focus on making sure we are coding expenses to the right categories, we have some leeway between our teams as we work out how that works across the whole department.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can I just confirm there have been no cancelled site meetings because of a reduced travel budget? There have been no previously organised site visits that have required to be cancelled because of reduced travel budgets? Anecdotally I have heard that there are numerous times where staff are unable to travel and the reason they cite is that there is no travel budget or they have been asked to reduce their travel.

REBECCA FOX: We have done a few things to make sure that we can meet those election commitment savings. We put in place a project team that has looked at all of those categories and has developed, with all the business units in the department, activities and things that we can do to improve our travel budget and the collection of data to make sure that we can meet the savings categories—before not travelling. Making sure that we're expensing things to the right code, so it actually is as travel rather than a set-up of a venue or something like that, by way of example; we're trying to book travel at the right time to get the right price—those sorts of things. We have had a very significant focus on doing that to make sure that it is not actually affecting travel. We make those decisions on travel not always based just on price but on whether somebody actually needs to go, whether we need three people instead of two people—those kinds of things.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am just going to redirect because you would be aware that where there are incremental increases in the price of, for example, fuel, vehicles, mechanical items, tyres et cetera, where there is a reduction in your budget, the reduction in travel may not be commensurate with the percentage reduction, so you might reduce your budget by 20 per cent and your travel might fall 40 per cent because of the increasing costs of fuel et cetera, and required input costs. Has that conversation happened between the department and the Minister to say, "Minister, that reduction is having a detrimental effect on the services we're providing on the ground"? Because the anecdotal feedback to us is that services are not happening because people are unable to travel.

SEAN SLOAN: I can provide some figures if it helps to answer the question. This year, as of end of January, our travel spend was \$5.8 million. At the same time last year it was \$7.2 million. This year there has been a saving so far of \$1.4 million and we're on track to achieve the target we had for savings. Referring back to my previous explanation of the types of things that we are doing, there would be things that we have pulled out of that we would have deemed as non-essential or non-critical activities, but that is obviously expected if we're going to be saving money on the travel budget.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Sloan, have there been any reductions in the activities of the 20-odd research stations that DPI currently administers across the State?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, we've got 28, I think, research stations across the State. Every year the research activities at those stations changes depending on what projects we've had on. One of the things that we are looking at, in terms of trying to meet overall budget savings, is to get more focused on what research we do.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Sloan, what is the reduction in activities across the research stations between the 2022-23 financial year and the current financial year?

SEAN SLOAN: I think I'll take that on notice, that question, to give you the correct answer. I do have some information on the types of projects, the numbers of projects and the investments that we've got this year, but to compare that to last year I'd need to take that on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I appreciate that; that's fine.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Dr Filmer, at the last estimates hearing we discussed some initial work being done in relation to the \$2.5 million in grants funding that has been committed to assist research animals to be rehomed. Are you able to provide us with an update on when we can expect to see the funding delivered?

KIM FILMER: Yes, I can give you an update on that. We've been doing a fair bit of work on that project since I last spoke to you. As you know, there have been some legislative changes around how grants are administered, which does make it a little bit more onerous than it used to be. We've been working with Mr Wheaton's team, actually—I think it is—to make sure that all the checks and balances are in place behind the scenes for that project. It's progressing well. We've got some of the guidelines in draft form at the moment, which is good. I can give you some time lines here. We're expecting that we should have the application forms, the frequently asked questions et cetera finalised by March or April this year, and the applications will be open in the fourth quarter. Then we should be in a position, we think—they'll have to be open for six to eight weeks. That's one of the rules, I think, now with the grants. It's a little bit longer than it may have been in the past, and so we'd be hoping that the funds will be distributed in the first quarter of 2024-25, so in that July to September period.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You've previously said the aim was to get the grants program going this financial year. In regard to that time line, when will things first kick off?

KIM FILMER: As I said, we're still pushing to try—and we might pull it off—to get it by the end of this financial year. But, realistically, the information being given by the experts that are in this space is that it's more than likely going to be in the first quarter of the next financial year.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I know you said last time that you'd undertaken a scientific literature review to understand where we should target that money in the space. Has that review concluded?

KIM FILMER: Yes, it has.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What was the outcome of that review?

KIM FILMER: What we've discovered during that process is that, if you want to increase the rate of rehoming animals, there are two factors. One is having rehoming services available. I guess that's the obvious place that you would think that you'd fund in that situation. But the other thing that we've also unearthed in that literature review is that animals that are in research that might need to be rehomed have a much better chance and will be able to be rehomed more quickly and efficiently if they're more suitable for rehoming when that time comes for them. We've identified that if some of the things that might slow down the rehoming process for a research animal are addressed during that research period—so if the research establishments, for example, can implement some of the socialisation or training and things like that throughout the time when the animals are in research—then at the end of their research, that makes them more easily rehomed because they're more suitable at that point in time.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Was there an identified concern around the number of rehoming services available?

KIM FILMER: No.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In regard to the housing and care standards of the animals to make sure that they're more easily able to be rehomed, rather than having to go through an expensive rehabilitation process, is that something you're considering funding as well as part of that grant, or is it more of an educational piece?

KIM FILMER: I think the educational piece is the bit that gives you the best bang for buck in the long term, because if you can get research establishments changing their standard operating procedures, for example—changing the way they do things—you get a long-term benefit from the changes that they implement. You're not just changing something in the short term; you're getting the longer term educational benefit of that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Will any of the money be going to research institutions for their role in rehoming those animals, or will the money only go to those rehoming services?

KIM FILMER: No, I think because of the factors we've just discussed and because of the fact that there are these two elements to this, we're hoping that research establishments will be interested in spending some money, if they get a grant, to upgrade their SOPs in terms of the way they prepare animals for the next stage of their life.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The last time we spoke, you said that the main thrust of the grant money would still be going to the rehoming organisations that are actually taking in those animals and trying to find them homes. Is that still the case?

KIM FILMER: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is there any kind of percentage around the division between money that would go to rescue organisations or research institutions?

KIM FILMER: We haven't settled that number, but the majority of the money would go to the rehoming organisations.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Has any money currently been spent?

KIM FILMER: No.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: No? Not on the literature review or anything like that?

KIM FILMER: No.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm trying to understand why the DPI would be looking at giving grant money to research institutions when they are already required to provide certain welfare standards to animals under the Act and the code, and under the guidelines for rehoming animals. I would have thought that it would be more about educating and enforcing those obligations, rather than giving money to institutions that are already well funded and resourced, and making sure that the money is actually going to those rehoming organisations that don't get any funding.

KIM FILMER: I think it is not straight to the research establishment. They can use that, for example, on veterinary behavioural specialists. It would be then outsourcing that sort of input into their organisations, and I guess that's a resource that they may not necessarily have within their research institution at the moment.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Will there be an upper limit on how much of that grant could potentially go to research institutions rather than the rehoming organisations?

KIM FILMER: As I said, the majority of the money, we envisage, will go to the rehoming organisations. I haven't got the exact breakdown of that, but most of it will go that way. And then, within those two buckets, I guess, of money, we would set an upper and lower limit so that you don't end up giving all of it to one. You try and spread it out to a number of organisations so that you get maximum benefit.

REBECCA FOX: Ms Hurst, I might be able to help there too. The new grants administration guidelines will require us to work through what that grant looks like based on evidence, and that's what the team will be working through now, particularly with some of our grants expertise, to make sure that we are doing that in an appropriate manner. We have to use evidence to underpin grant guidelines and the approach that we take in any regard. I would expect that all of the issues that you're raising would be taken into account as we develop a grants program.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Dr Filmer, when you said you don't have the exact breakdown of those two buckets, do you mean you don't have that with you now, or that those exact breakdowns don't exist yet because we're not sort of at that stage?

KIM FILMER: We've started some preliminary discussions about it, but it hasn't been set.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: It's not solid?

KIM FILMER: No, I can't give that to you yet.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: That's fine. Thank you. I wanted to ask as well about exhibited animals. In answers to questions on notice from the last estimates hearing, the DPI advised that in the past 12 months there have only been 11 exhibited animal audits. Given there are 96 exhibited animal facilities in New South Wales, I am wondering why the number of audits is so low. Is this a resourcing issue, or is that fairly standard for the department?

KIM FILMER: I can give you the compliance activities—audits, did you say?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, exhibited animal audits.

KIM FILMER: The numbers that I've got here for 2022-23 are that there were six audits and 73 inspections of exhibited animal facilities.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: At the last budget estimates, when I asked, I was told that in that 12-month period leading up to it, there were 11 audits. Is that a fairly standard number of audits that would occur, given that there are 96 exhibited animals facilities?

JOHN TRACEY: We do take a risk-based compliance approach across all our compliance activity so that we do focus on the highest priority for both audits and investigations, and we do target it in that way. There has been overall pressure in terms of the extent of work across DPI for compliance activity, so we have had to prioritise work. For us, it is about making sure that we've covered and focused on the animal welfare and those exhibitors that are highest priority, and then we work our way through that from there.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have some Forestry Corp questions. Whoever thinks they're the relevant person to answer, please feel free—

The CHAIR: For your benefit, Ms Higginson, we dismissed Mr Chaudhary.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I understand he was somewhere in India, perhaps, having some time off. Mr Dickson, I understand that you're possibly acting. Is that correct?

ROSS DICKSON: That's correct.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Please put these questions to who thinks they can answer best. Is the Forestry Corporation, as you understand it, obliged to respond to written complaints from residents of New South Wales?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes, and we do. We respond to a whole range of complaints, but the ones that we are particularly focused on are those that are potentially bringing the corporation's reputation into disrespect. But fire hazards is also a very big area that we deal with.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I note in your compliance policy it states that there is a responsibility to act at the highest ethical standard. Is that something that you're aware of?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes. I'm the company secretary to the board and I hold the board to that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How does logging of known and recorded habitat for threatened species that are facing extinction fall in the definition of the highest ethical standards?

ROSS DICKSON: The board is operating under enabling legislation and our Act actually allows the Forestry Corporation to operate in the forest in a sustainable manner. We have all the checks and balances in place to justify and verify that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Does the Forestry Corporation require that employees engage honestly with New South Wales residents?

ROSS DICKSON: Absolutely. We have a code of conduct.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What's the protocol for Forestry Corporation employees who witness a crime?

ROSS DICKSON: I would start out by saying that our staff are not trained in the whole area of crime. If you're referring to an incident that our staff should have acted in, that was inappropriate. Our staff are not trained to deal with altercation.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Does the Forestry Corporation accept responsibility for the actions taken by contractors?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes, we do.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Has the Forestry Corporation made any effort to redress the victims of the assault that took place on the Mid North Coast?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes. As you're aware, it has been a police matter. It has then been a court matter, which we don't comment on. We now are at the stage where we are dealing with the contractor principal. We have provided and reminded them of our code of conduct and our expectations as a contractor. We are continuing to work with that contractor. I will just provide a little bit more background there. The contractor is a very long-term contractor of the corporation—some 27 years. We have not had any code of conduct issues with that contractor. We are working with that contractor, I would add, right now, to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what our expectations are.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is the Forestry Corporation doing anything to provide any form of redress to the victims of the assault that those contractors were found guilty of committing?

ROSS DICKSON: I'm sorry, I don't quite—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The victims of the assault. Is the Forestry Corporation doing anything to redress that matter?

ROSS DICKSON: No.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think you should consider doing something for the victims of the assault?

ROSS DICKSON: I would emphasise that we have a relationship with the contractor principal, and that is their business.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The Forestry Corporation takes responsibility for contractors and crimes committed by contractors in the public forest estate, but you're not considering the victim in that at all?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order: We need to be a little bit careful, in that it seems to be inviting the expression of a legal opinion about obligation. It's a call for the Chair, but I think the witness is being invited to exercise some judgement about a legal opinion about obligations that may or may not be the case with respect to some form of compensation for the—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order: I'm not asking that at all. I'm just asking if they're going to do anything by way of any form of redress. It's nothing legal; it's just humanitarian principles.

The CHAIR: On that basis, I'll allow the question. But I advise caution, Mr Dickson, in straying into comments in that area.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Given the Forestry Corporation has a policy of operating to the highest ethical standards, should you consider whether to take into account the victims of the assault that was perpetrated by contractors of the public Forestry Corporation?

ROSS DICKSON: That's a court matter. I will take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. I did ask the Minister this, and I think she said that she would take it on notice, but if I could just put it to you: Are you aware of any wood being provided by the Forestry Corporation to sawmills without wood supply agreements?

ROSS DICKSON: We supply wood under a variety of processes. We have contracts, we have firewood permits and we also have wood that is not under contract.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What volume of wood has gone to mills without a wood supply agreement?

ROSS DICKSON: I don't have that number with me. I'll take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In doing so, could you please provide a detailed breakdown on that wood by quota—small quota, salvage, pulp and firewood?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What's the current log price for hardwood plantation pulp logs?

ROSS DICKSON: For pulp logs?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes.

ROSS DICKSON: I don't have that number with me at the moment, but we would not be harvesting much pulpwood out of the native forests.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What is the minimum or shortest allowable amount of time between logging in a State forest?

ROSS DICKSON: Do you mean the return cycle?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes.

ROSS DICKSON: We generally operate on a 30- to 40-year return cycle.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you have a shortest?

ROSS DICKSON: No.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Has the Forestry Corporation or DPI conducted any work to investigate the amount of carbon in standing native forests on public land?

REBECCA FOX: I might ask Mr McPherson to answer that question.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Hello, Mr McPherson.

DAVID McPHERSON: Good afternoon. Thanks for the question. Yes, we have done significant work looking at the carbon stocks in native forests and also where those stocks exist right through the supply chain, including into landfill.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are those estimates available?

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes, they are.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Where might I find those?

DAVID McPHERSON: I can provide those to the Committee.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much. Has the Forestry Corporation undertaken any assessment of the impact on wood supply as a result of the proposed changes to the CIFOA in relation to the greater glider retention tree rates?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes, we have. We frequently run our wood supply models that predict the sustainability of the forest. Whilst we were working with the regulator around the new protocol, we were very conscious about the impact on wood supply.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can you provide any data or detail around that assessment?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes, we can. We also provide broad, high-level data as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That was just in relation to the assessment of how the proposed EPA changes would impact on the wood supply.

ROSS DICKSON: We have to maintain the balance between the wood supply obligations of the State and also sustainability and conservation outcomes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I understand. Can the Forestry Corporation provide a spreadsheet of the volume or metres of logs removed since August 2019 by compartment, product and diameter at breast height? Is that something you can—

ROSS DICKSON: Can I take that on notice?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. What is the total area of koala hubs that have been subject to harvest plans and logging operations since March 2023?

ROSS DICKSON: We are obviously working with the Department of environment around the koala hubs and we are putting in measures to ensure that we are not impacting on the potential koala national park, but in terms of the actual data, I don't have that with me.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is that something you can provide?

ROSS DICKSON: I can take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you, and also what areas of regional koala significance—the same, if I could, please. Mr Sloan, or Ms Fox, what is the warming scenario that the Government is currently using to assess climate impacts on agriculture and regional communities?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have that information. If Mr Sloan doesn't have it, we'll take it on notice.

SEAN SLOAN: Just to clarify, are you speaking about the seasonal outlook for conditions for agriculture?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, including scenarios—are you looking at 1.5 or are you looking at 2—and what you're doing regionally.

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, okay. I'll take that on notice and provide you with some details on that.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: A question to Ms Fox: Will you be sacking any other DPI staff as a result of the draft functional review report recommendations?

REBECCA FOX: I have no plans to make any terminations in relation to the functional review. The functional review has not yet been considered by government and until it is considered by government I won't be taking any action, and I don't expect terminations to result from that functional review.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Was the termination of Mr Hansen not related to the functional review?

REBECCA FOX: The functional review was one of the inputs that I took into account when I decided to terminate Mr Hansen. It was only one of a number of inputs that I took into account. My overall—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, I think you have just contradicted yourself. You said quite clearly a moment ago that there would be no terminations of staff from the functional review and it is something that has not been considered by government, but we have discussed it here in evidence today, even with the Minister, that you have terminated the most senior public servant at the Department of Primary Industries, so I believe you've just contradicted yourself.

REBECCA FOX: I'm not aware that I have. The functional review and the work that we've done on the functional review is to make sure that we are best placed to deliver the outcomes of government that we're operating efficiently and effectively and aligned with the Government's priorities. I have employment obligations as the secretary, and I also have another set of obligations and responsibilities. The first one, and probably one that is relevant at the moment because of the tight fiscal environment in which we operate, is that we also operate to our budget, and to do that I determined that we needed to make a change in the leadership role of DPI, so that Mr Sloan and I can work on the current forward estimate, and in fact DPI has had a pressured budget for a long period of time.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, I believe you've contradicted yourself again based on evidence you gave this morning. You confirmed that Mr Hansen, as the former director general, was a band 3—correct?

REBECCA FOX: Correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You have confirmed in evidence today that you plan to appoint a full-time director general beyond the acting role of Mr Sloan. Is that correct?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: And you confirmed that that would be band 3. You also, in evidence this morning, confirmed that there is no cost-saving measure of terminating and changing the director general, so I don't understand why you are now linking the termination of the director general to a cost-saving measure.

REBECCA FOX: I'm not linking the termination—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You just did, Ms Fox.

REBECCA FOX: — of one person to a cost-saving measure. I think we need to be very clear here about a decision that I have made about one person in my leadership team and the issues for the department that we face in a very tight fiscal environment, and the need to address an ongoing deficit, particularly in DPI's budget, that we cannot cover with other parts of the department, which we have done in other years, particularly because of the tight fiscal environment that all public sector entities find themselves in at the moment. I think we're potentially conflating a decision—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, just to redirect, based on your answer—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order: Lineball about whether it was redirect or not. I think the answer by Ms Fox had not been completed and was moving towards, perhaps, a completion—I don't know. But I think the witness is allowed to complete the answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I was taking part of Ms Fox's evidence to redirect to further—and Ms Fox did have plenty of time to answer. Don't waste our time, or we'll call these people back, Greg.

The CHAIR: I won't uphold the point of order—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sorry?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Don't waste our time, or we will call people back.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Don't threaten about bringing back. If I can't take a point of order—I'll keep doing it if you like.

The CHAIR: Order! I'm ruling. I'm not upholding the point of order.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, how does replacing the director general fit in with any cost-saving strategy?

REBECCA FOX: My view overall, taking into account all of the things that I need to take into account—the functional review is one input—is that I needed new leadership in the Department of Primary Industries in order to make the necessary changes, to make sure that we have a business and a public service that is fit for purpose, that we have a sustainable operating model, which means partly we meet our budget and we continue to deliver improved and excellent service to all of our regional communities, and that was the decision that I made.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can you confirm that, in such tight budgetary conditions as enforced on your agencies by government, which is a whole-of-government decision, which—we've clearly found that to be the case. The net impact to your budget would be an actual cost increase, in changing the director general, correct?

REBECCA FOX: I have a \$3.5 billion budget, and I have a number of executives: 181, I think, is the total number across the department at the moment. Changing one role doesn't affect the outcomes and the overall budget position of the department significantly. We need to make sure that we are operating in a sustainable, fit-for-purpose way in that—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you for that answer, Ms Fox. Can you confirm that, in sacking the former director general and looking to appoint a new director general in the same pay scale, same budget, with the same responsibility, same authority and same tasks, as we discussed earlier, the net effect of doing that is an actual cost to your budget, isn't it?

REBECCA FOX: There will be some cost to the budget. In comparison with the overall budget that I am required to meet and deliver, it is a very, very small percentage, and it's not something that is a significant factor in those decisions that I'm required to make.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, why couldn't you work with Mr Hansen?

REBECCA FOX: I'm not prepared to answer questions in relation to working with Mr Hansen. I have worked with Mr Hansen for a long period of time. Mr Hansen's contribution to Primary Industries is acknowledged. I made a decision, based on a whole range of inputs, that I needed new leadership in DPI,

particularly to enable that business to be set up to deliver what is required in the budget that it has. And, at the moment, we have a deficit in that part of the department. That needs to be addressed, and that was the decision that I made.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: What fundamental changes do you believe is needed—to DPI—to bring about those cost-saving strategies and measures that you just outlined?

REBECCA FOX: That is something that I will work with the new leadership in DPI—and Mr Sloan and I have started working on—with the whole of the team. The way that I like to work and generally work is on a very collaborative process. I expect the 2,000-plus staff members in DPI, who have not missed a beat and have been doing outstanding work, to contribute in that. We will work out how we continue to do and deliver the services that we're required to deliver in the most efficient and effective way. I believe in an environment of continuous improvement. My expectation is that all of my leadership team work collaboratively and run not only their own divisions but right across government, and we will work together to make sure all of us are committed to regional New South Wales, and we will do that in the best way.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Ms Fox. Under the functional review process—and I note, in looking up a bit of history, that the Department of Primary Industries, once the department of ag, have had functional reviews in the past. This is not something new. It is just about when that trigger is pulled. I accept that. As part of the process of a functional review of such a critical government agency in this State, who reviews your role and position?

REBECCA FOX: I am appointed—the same as every secretary in the public service—through the Premier's Department.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is your role under review as part of the criteria of the functional review?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have any roles under review as part of the functional review. The functional review doesn't focus on individual roles. It focuses primarily on what we do well, what we can improve on, and we did a lot of consultation with our staff and with stakeholders. We used inputs, for example, our employees matter survey. Also, I take input from people like our independent Chair of our Audit and Risk Committee and various other people, and we need to make those decisions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, you and I and this Committee have been discussing this for a while now. Is it a fair assumption to make that the former director general would not implement the severe, heavy and deep cuts that you requested him to do?

REBECCA FOX: I haven't requested he make any severe, deep or heavy cuts.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's an assumption I'm making based on your evidence today, Ms Fox?

REBECCA FOX: What I have said is, we need to build a sustainable model for the whole department, including the Department of Primary Industries, which currently has a budget deficit and has had for some time. I am very confident that we can work with Treasury and that we will ensure that we have the best Department of Primary Industries that we can possibly have.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How can you have the best of the Department of Primary Industries if you cut the guts out of it?

REBECCA FOX: There is no plan to cut the guts out of the Department of Primary Industries.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I think the people of regional New South Wales will disagree with you, Secretary. Moving on, how many staff are based in the Orange office?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have the number in front of me. I am happy to take it on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Has there been a reduction or increase on the total number of people working for DPI in the past 12 months and also the Department of Regional NSW?

REBECCA FOX: The figures that I have are the ones that are certified or done at a censor date by the Public Service Commission. I don't have those for DPI, but I can give them to you for the department. So this includes all of the departments, including our affiliated entities.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You have only got it as a whole number and not broken down?

REBECCA FOX: Yes. I don't have it broken—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you be able to take it on notice as broken down per business unit or agency?

REBECCA FOX: Sure. We will do that at the times that they are verified, and the Public Service Commission released last week its State of the NSW Public Sector Report, so that information is also publicly available in that report.

SEAN SLOAN: I can assist the secretary with one part of that question, which is, how many staff do we have in the Orange office? It's approximately 400.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is that less than it was 12 months ago, Mr Sloan?

SEAN SLOAN: I don't believe so, Mr Farraway, but we can—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it less than was there 18 months ago, or are you able to take that on notice—basically, over the last 18 months?

SEAN SLOAN: We can take that on notice. I don't believe there's been any significant change, but we can take that on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Sloan, in Orange, the new Ian Armstrong Building that was opened by the former Coalition Government a few years ago, is a leased building by government, isn't it? Will DPI lease two floors or one?

SEAN SLOAN: That's correct. It is a leased building.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it one or two floors—that DPI?

SEAN SLOAN: It would have to be one or two at least.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How long is the lease?

REBECCA FOX: All of those arrangements are done on our behalf by Property NSW.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you be able to take it on notice?

REBECCA FOX: We could you find that information, yes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to taking that on notice, Ms Fox and Mr Sloan, I would like to know how many floors you lease in the building, to confirm how many staff work out of the Orange office now and compared to the last 12 and 18 months, but also how many staff work out of that building that are under the Department of Regional NSW as well? How many positions are based out of that Orange office, if possible? Moving on, Ms Fox, with regard to the Department of Regional NSW and grants, can you advise how many new grants or grant programs were announced this financial year and administered by the Department of Regional NSW?

REBECCA FOX: I think Mr Wheaton might have that information. The numbers are about the same. We had 77 grants—I am going to say, from memory—and 78 in the last 12 months, but some of those come off. The programs change but the overall number is about the same.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you be able take the 77 or 78 grants on notice and come back to the Committee and split them up per local government area?

JONATHAN WHEATON: Most of those programs will be across regional New South Wales and some of them will cross all of New South Wales if they're a recovery grant, as an example. We certainly have the information here that we had 76 active grant programs across the whole of the Department of Regional NSW in January 2023, then we were managing 77 active programs in December 2023. As Ms Fox had said, some of those programs were discontinued in that time and then we would've started a suite of new ones.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So how many grant programs were currently underway in January 2022? Do you have that information?

JONATHAN WHEATON: January 2022?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes.

JONATHAN WHEATON: No, I only have it for January 2023.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Mr Wheaton, are you able to advise the Committee on notice how many—obviously you've, in evidence, told us how many grant programs for January 2023 and December 2023, correct?

JONATHAN WHEATON: Correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's the programs but can you break it down? How many grants are part of those programs, by local government area, and can you compare that back for the previous 12 months—the same criteria?

JONATHAN WHEATON: You're talking about active grants that have been issued across those—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Grants that were issued and administered by the Department of Regional NSW. So we are talking about Stronger Country Communities Fund. We are talking about Resources for Regions—anything that was administered by the department.

JONATHAN WHEATON: Sure. Just to clarify as well that that 76 that were active in January 2023—that is across our whole department. That covers off the Rural Assistance Authority grants. It would cover off any grants that are managed by LLS and other areas, and then including the growth fund programs that you're talking about. We certainly will be able to collate all of that data.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Mr Wheaton, I do appreciate that. Mr Sloan, with regard to the 28 research stations—you may be able to provide this but it's quite a long answer so if you need to take it on notice, I'm more than happy. Can you supply the Committee with a listing of the staffing levels across the 28 research stations in the current financial year versus the previous financial year? I accept they may change for those two years depending on the programs that they were rolling out.

SEAN SLOAN: I can certainly give you a number of staff that we have currently at those sites. To give you a comparison to last year, I would have to take that on notice. I do have some numbers I can provide you now if that's—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'd like it per research station so maybe it's better if you do take them on notice because there are 28 research stations. I don't know if you want to be spelling them all out—maybe a bit later in the day if we've got time, but happy for you to take it on notice and maybe come back to the Committee.

SEAN SLOAN: I've got some information on them as of now but to compare them to previous years, I'd need to take that on notice.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's fine—more than happy with that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Secretary, I just wanted to come back to you. Obviously it's a really big job that you do—it's one of the biggest departments. Obviously your job is to do what the Government requests you guys to do, which makes your jobs really hard and really great, I can imagine. I know that as well. Secretary, would I be correct in saying that it is absolutely your role to implement the Government's agenda?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Secretary, if you were placed in a position where you knew that you were directed to pursue an agenda—and let's say, for example, that is to restructure and change something like the Department of Primary Industries—and you had a senior staff member within that department who was not willing to do that, it would be your job to make sure that that person was moved on. Is that correct?

REBECCA FOX: No, there's a conflation of some issues there, Mrs Taylor. My job is very clear in the legislation in relation to my employer responsibilities. Staffing at any level is my responsibility so I can't be directed by a Minister in that regard. What a government can do is ask me to consider, "Am I appropriately set up to deliver the Government's agenda?"—all of those things, which I do and I'm required to do anyway. I think that's a different question from—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Therefore, to redirect, Secretary, if you were given instructions as to what needs to be done and there was a person within your staff that you knew was not on board with any of that agenda, it would be your responsibility to make sure they were no longer in that role anymore.

REBECCA FOX: That's not correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Then how is there any other explanation for what has happened here?

REBECCA FOX: Ms Taylor, section 41 allows senior executives—and we all know—to be terminated at any point in time, for any or no reason.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, Secretary. I do understand that, and I really respect your answer and I respect your role immensely. But I just put to you, Secretary, that we have fleshed this out during the day and it has become increasingly obvious what has happened here.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Because you've talked about budgets, you've talked about—

The CHAIR: Point—

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm getting to my question.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

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

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: There is a clear aspersion being placed on a third party here. There is a clear implication that is being put that Mr Hansen, who was a public servant, would not do his job. I think that is unfounded. More than that, it is unfair in circumstances where the secretary has repeatedly said that she will not go into the reasons. It is very unfair to cast that imputation on him.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: To the point of order—just in the light of the clicking clock—there is no standing order that says that I cannot be questioning in the line of questioning that I am, so I'd like to continue to do so. And if not, point out the standing order.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It's not in order at all under the standing orders to cast aspersions on third parties, as I understand it.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm not casting aspersions.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You are. You're saying that he wouldn't do his job. You are directly suggesting that, and there's no basis for it. It is really unfair to Mr Hansen, I would suggest, to have all of this—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No right of reply.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes. It is so procedurally unfair.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Well, he shouldn't have been sacked.

The CHAIR: I will seek some advice from the secretariat before I rule on that point of order. I will continue with my line of questioning, and then I will throw to another crossbencher and I will seek advice before I come back with a ruling on that. Through you, Ms Secretary, I might direct some questions to Mr Sloan or Mr Turnell around this line fishing ban of groper. Mr Sloan, the Minister skirted around my question around whether she would actually provide the advice that she sought or received from the department on this issue. Can you answer some questions regarding this advice to ban line fishing of groper? Who actually within the department provided that advice? Where did it come from?

SEAN SLOAN: Thank you, Chair. The advice that goes to the Minister on matters from the department always comes through the director general and through the head of Fisheries. On this matter, it was myself and Mr Turnell. Obviously, there are other people involved in formulating that advice. The Minister had—

The CHAIR: Who else was involved in formulating that advice? I don't need specific names, but titles or positions or sources of information.

SEAN SLOAN: For example, we have—

The CHAIR: I'm happy for you to take the full details on notice, if that's easier.

SEAN SLOAN: I am happy to answer it at a broad level and see if that is satisfactory, Chair. We've got research staff, and we've got Fisheries management staff. We've got communications staff. Usually, when there's a decision that needs to be communicated but also involves whatever scientific and biological information we have, it involves those staff as well. In this case, it would have involved research staff and management staff as well as communications staff.

The CHAIR: We heard this morning that there was no scientific basis, or no stock assessment. I imagine a majority of it has come from a communications point of view: "How do we sell this message to the community?"

SEAN SLOAN: To help shed some light on that, Chair, I would like to provide some information, if you've got the time for me to do so—just to provide some of those details. First of all, I mentioned earlier today that in 2021-22, the last recreational survey that we did, there were 387 groper estimated to be caught by recreational fishers.

The CHAIR: Less than one a day.

SEAN SLOAN: Actually, most of those get returned, so there were 164 estimated to be retained. That's evidence that it is not a key target species. It is a species that does get caught, but it is not a key target species.

The CHAIR: It also indicates we're not having a great impact on any stocks. Isn't that right?

SEAN SLOAN: That would be a fair assumption. There is no take for this species, which is an eastern blue groper, in Victoria and Tasmania, and the species that exists in South Australia and Western Australia is actually a western blue groper. It looks the same, but it is a separate stock.

The CHAIR: Different life span as well.

SEAN SLOAN: We do baited remote underwater video surveys, and we've done those at somewhere between 350 and 500 sites inside marine park sanctuary zones and outside marine park sanctuary zones. There's also an underwater visual census that's undertaken by the Reef Life Survey, and that's been going since 1996. Those two survey methods have shown that the numbers of blue groper are relatively stable and unchanged over that time. What both of those lines of evidence do show is that groper is actually not a highly prevalent species in those ecosystems. Māori wrasse and crimson-banded wrasse are actually more prevalent, so it is possible that some divers that are seeing them are confusing those species. But that's just to say that the numbers of groper on these reefs that are being surveyed have not been increasing. To one of the comments earlier that they were in numbers that were causing problems for other species, the diet the groper have is largely invertebrates. They eat urchins; they eat lobster; they eat crabs, abalone.

The CHAIR: It's more about their territorial nature in pushing the other fish out, rather than eating the same fish that snapper—

SEAN SLOAN: Correct.

The CHAIR: I want to get to some other parts of that advice. Did the environment Minister or her department provide any input into that decision directly to you or directly to the Minister, to your knowledge?

SEAN SLOAN: No, certainly not to Fisheries staff and, to my knowledge, not to anybody else. The advice was requested by the Minister on this particular option, and other options were also—

The CHAIR: So she put the option to you, "Should I ban line fishing of the blue groper?" It wasn't an open-ended "Tell me what are some potential management strategies around managing this issue"; it was "Do you think we should ban line finishing of groper?" Was that the actual request?

SEAN SLOAN: The Minister wanted advice on that option, and advice was provided on a whole series of options. One of the important things to pull out there is there were also calls publicly for blanket closures, which would have involved banning of fishing by all methods in areas for all species. When you look at the number of groper that are being taken, which is 164, estimated, in 2021-22, to take an option where you stop the capture of one species—and really importantly, I think, as the Minister pointed out, to consult with recreational fishers about how then that is taken forward in the future—it's an option that now gives the opportunity for recreational fishers to be able to have input into what the future looks like.

The CHAIR: What other management strategies did you provide the Minister with, other than what she proposed for you to explore? What were the other management strategies that you provided the Minister? I'm happy for you to take it on notice if you can't recall.

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, I don't recall specifically, so I'm happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Sure. Did that advice that you gave the Minister come with a recommendation as to what was the department's preferred management strategy, or did you leave that in the hands of the Minister to decide?

SEAN SLOAN: I don't recall off the top of my head, Chair, so I'm happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Can I go to the issue of trust-funded projects and where we're at? My understanding is there's supposed to be a meeting in March of the trust fund committee. Do we have a date for the next committee meeting to look at the trust fund projects?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, by that meeting, do you mean the Recreational Fishing Advisory Council?

The CHAIR: I'm more talking more about the Recreational Fishing Trust committees.

SEAN SLOAN: That's the Recreational Fishing Advisory Council, and there's an expenditure committee as well. I don't have the dates off the top of my head. I'm happy to take that on notice, unless Mr Turnell has that.

PETER TURNELL: No.

SEAN SLOAN: No, so I'll take that on notice. There are multiple meetings each year that cover that.

The CHAIR: Do you have a list of projects, either one-year projects or three-year projects, that are currently up for review or renewal? If you do, on notice, can you provide details as to what they are?

SEAN SLOAN: Certainly, Chair. I don't have them at my fingertips, but I'm happy to take it on notice.

The CHAIR: I believe the Recreational Fishing Alliance has sought clarification from your office regarding the funding of the peak bodies and just getting some clarification of what that funding will look like. I believe there was some commentary around \$900,000 over three years to establish this new peak body. Have we had any clarification as to whether that is the true and accurate figure? Or is it more or less?

SEAN SLOAN: My understanding is, first of all, there is a package of election commitments around fishing and \$4.9 million was allocated to that package of commitments, and the establishment of peak bodies for the commercial sector and the recreational sector was part of that package. The other commitments were around increasing the participation by women in recreational fishing, enhancing access by people with disability, implementing the Trout Cod Action Plan, implementing recommendations on cultural fishing—so there is a raft of commitments.

The \$4.9 million needs to cover all of those and I think the indication that was provided to both the commercial and the recreational sectors that are working with the department on setting up those peak bodies—so we've got processes running for both the commercial and the recreational sectors—was that the starting point was that there would be somewhere in the order of around 350K per year each year for three years, and that is to establish those groups. From there, those groups that are working with the department could make suggestions or offer views on whether that's sufficient or not, but it has been put to those groups in that form.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have a few rapid-fire questions. Dr Filmer, you may know that the Australian Veterinary Association recently released its new rodeo policy. I am interested in knowing if the department has been doing anything in response.

KIM FILMER: I'm aware of that. I've read that—I've got a summary of that here—but at the moment, as you know, the election commitment the Government has made in terms of the animal welfare framework includes reviewing POCTAA. And under the POCTA Act there is the POCTA Regulation and, under the regulation or within the regulation, there are various standards, guidelines and codes—so we're not working on that at the moment.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I am sure you are as frustrated as I am, but while we are so delayed on updating POCTAA, there are a bunch of codes of practice under that that also have not been updated for a very long time. Are you confirming that there are no plans to update the rodeo code of practice either until we have new legislation in place? Is that the plan?

KIM FILMER: I can confirm we're not working on that at the moment, but you will know that the current rodeo code sits within the regulation of POCTAA and there is a commitment to look at the POCTA Act and the POCTA Regulation this year.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Presumably that is the same with the pound and shelter code of practice?

KIM FILMER: That's correct.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: It is some 30 years since it was last updated. When we went through this process with the previous Government and we had an inquiry into their proposed reworking of POCTAA, we had an understanding at that time that there would be some period of time between introducing new legislation and then seeing regulations and codes of practice. On the current trajectory for updating that legislation, when would we expect, do you think, new versions of these codes of practice?

KIM FILMER: I can't commit to that time; that's a decision for government. But the Government has committed to doing the POCTAA review this year, which is the Act and the regulation.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But not the codes of practice, which would then, presumably, be next year's work?

KIM FILMER: They cascade down. So if you think about it logically, it's best to get the Act and the regulation in place first.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: In the meantime, are you aware of whether or not rodeo events are being attended by RSPCA NSW? Have there been any penalties applied or inspections done on rodeo events?

KIM FILMER: Yes. I have some figures on that here. I've got some figures on complaints that have been made about rodeos that have been given to the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League. For 2022-23, there was actually none to the RSPCA and none to the Animal Welfare League. If you go back a year to 2021-22, there

was one to the RSPCA and zero to the Animal Welfare League. There have been routine inspections carried out by the enforcement agencies. The Animal Welfare League has not undertaken any, but the RSPCA did one in 2022-23 and seven in 2021-22. I have got prosecutions and PINs information here. For 2022-23, the Animal Welfare League had zero, and the RSPCA had two in 2022-23 and zero in 2021-22. That's prosecutions, PINs and official warnings.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I apologise for not knowing the answer myself, but is there anything that the department can do in terms of instructing or encouraging these agencies to go out more often and have a look, given the recent concerns, and growing concerns, around rodeos? Is that within the Minister's discretion?

KIM FILMER: I undertake regular interactions with both of the enforcement agencies. If we get information that there's a rising risk in a particular area, we certainly liaise with both the Animal Welfare League and the RSPCA. We do have formal quarterly meetings with them, but I talk to the chief inspectors of those agencies very regularly. If there's anything that seems to be increasing—if there's a lot of interest, if we're getting correspondence or if there's any indication that there is something changing or that something needs a higher focus—we certainly do have those conversations with the enforcement agencies.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I think it's more about a new awareness. There has been video footage of animal cruelty at those events. That is what sparked the AVA's new policy. In that context, will you be discussing with the RSPCA and the AWL about having a more proactive response to regulating rodeos?

KIM FILMER: I think you need to go back a step. If people are taking footage or you've seen things that indicate that there's cruelty or possible cruelty offences occurring, I am encouraging you, or anybody who has that information, to go to the enforcement agencies and make a formal complaint so that it can be investigated.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: It is public. I will ensure that it's sent directly to you. Maybe that is the easiest way. I will hand over to my colleague.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you. I have a quick question about the marine estate management strategy. Would that be you, Mr Sloan, or Mr Turnell?

REBECCA FOX: Mr Sloan.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Mr Sloan, there's four years left, apparently, in that strategy—2018 to 2028. Where is that up to? Where has it gone?

SEAN SLOAN: The strategy is obviously a broad set of projects where we work between DPI Fisheries, the environment agency, transport—there's a whole raft.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: There was \$18 million allocated to it a couple of years ago. What has happened to that?

SEAN SLOAN: It's shared across the relevant agencies. I can, on notice, pull up some information to provide you with how many projects are underway. Essentially, there's a strategy that identifies—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What I might do, then, is get you to give that to me on notice in terms of that \$18 million. That would be very useful. Certain people are telling me that it seems that the funds have just disappeared and not been—

SEAN SLOAN: That's absolutely not true, Ms Faehrmann. There's nine program areas, and all of them have active projects that are underway.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I wanted to turn to the issue of shark nets. I understand there was a briefing to the environment Minister, dated 25 August 2023. Within this brief it says that DPI initially offered coastal councils the option to opt out of shark nets being deployed in their LGA in lieu of alternative bather protection technologies and that they had to respond to this by, I think, 18 August. What happened to that in terms of the councils being given the option of opting out?

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Faehrmann, I need to check this, but I think what you are referring to was a survey of the views that councils had on the use of not just shark nets but other shark management and mitigation technology. That was a survey of the views of councils that was brought back to government. I believe that's what you're referring to.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Were you involved closely, Mr Sloan, in terms of your recollection of it?

SEAN SLOAN: As the head of DPI fisheries, sharks and shark management is one of the responsibilities that I had in that role, and I would have been involved in one way or another in putting forward that process to our Minister.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Was DPI involved in discussions with the Environment and Heritage group about shark nets at that time, or the management program?

SEAN SLOAN: We always work with the environment agency on these matters.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What were they telling you?

SEAN SLOAN: I simply can't recall, Ms Faehrmann, in terms of casting my mind back to that time, but we are always working with them on the shark program, generally.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Had you seen information or documentation that the environment Minister was supportive of a staged approach to removing the shark nets?

SEAN SLOAN: I don't recall, sorry, and I would need to take that on notice and see if there was any information that came to DPI on that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: At this stage your evidence is that councils weren't provided with any indication or any opportunity to opt out of shark nets before the Minister said they would be going back into the waters on 21 August—that wasn't the understanding of councils?

SEAN SLOAN: Not that I recall, Ms Faehrmann, but I am happy for you to provide some information to me that I can examine and provide a more detailed response to you, if that is helpful.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might just make my ruling on the previous point of order. I refer members to some guidance from the *Budget Estimates Guide 2023-2024* where it says:

In the past, witnesses have raised objections to answering questions or providing documents on a number of grounds ...

One of those grounds is actually:

- the disclosure of information required by the question would be prejudicial to the privacy or rights of others

That is also mirrored in the procedural fairness guide, item No.11, "Evidence that may seriously damage the reputation of a third party". It states:

Where a committee anticipates that evidence about to be given may seriously damage the reputation of a person or body, the committee may consider hearing the evidence in private (*in camera*).

Unfortunately, in estimates we do not have that facility to do so. Because we are in estimates, I do have to uphold the point of order and say it did sound like the question may be out of order. I would advise the honourable member to tread carefully in asking questions of a similar nature.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I am going to Forestry now. We were told that the EPA had backflipped on a decision agreed between them and the Forestry Corporation on 2 February 2024 to end the rolling shutdowns on the South Coast by increasing habitat protections for greater gliders. When were you told that?

ROSS DICKSON: We work with the EPA on a daily basis. We are certainly in contact with the office of the EPA on a daily basis, so we would have been advised very much at that moment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: On 2 February you were advised?

ROSS DICKSON: That was a Friday?

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes, I think so. I can look that up—Friday 2 February 2024. What evidence was presented to you that justified an unprecedented shutdown of Forestry operations in Tallaganda and Flat Rock State forests?

ROSS DICKSON: I'm sorry, what was your question again, please?

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Sorry, I'll repeat it. What evidence was presented to you that justified an unprecedented shutdown of Forestry operations in Tallaganda and Flat Rock State forests?

ROSS DICKSON: We were advised of some concerns around the pre-survey information, pre-harvest. So we constructively worked with the EPA to more fully understand their concerns. We also undertook work to increase our tree surveys, and we sought advice from the EPA whilst we were doing that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's the evidence, for the record, that you're saying you received.

ROSS DICKSON: There was an allegation that we weren't doing surveys, which, in fact, we were doing.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I could be completely wrong, so correct me, but you just said that there was an allegation that you weren't doing surveys and you were. Was that the evidence that was presented to you to justify the shutdown?

ROSS DICKSON: That's when we undertook a voluntary standdown. We want to work with the regulator. We want to assist the regulator.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Understood.

ROSS DICKSON: We took the voluntary step to stand down to more fully understand the matter.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Sorry, because it's not my area—I'm just going here. So you took a voluntary decision to shut down what was going on?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order: The questioning is going to a matter that is currently a legal matter. There's a prosecution on foot. I'm concerned about the territory that the Committee might be treading into at the moment.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You're a renegade.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I just wish I'd done a law degree. You two keep pulling out this stuff. I've got parliamentary privilege.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Chair, I was enjoying the fruit outside.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Breaching a sub judice principle.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Adverse reflections.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I never mentioned a name. You did.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's currently a criminal prosecution investigation.

The CHAIR: I'm satisfied that the witness will be able to sidestep any of those concerns raised by Ms Higginson. I note that there is significant public commentary about the reasons behind the stop-work orders and the legitimacy of the accusation of a dead greater glider and the cause of death. It has now been ruled conclusively that it wasn't caused by Forestry. So I'm satisfied that the witness will be able to sidestep any concerns.

ROSS DICKSON: Mr Chair, could I correct the record? I misled the member. It was a stop-work order, not a voluntary standdown.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm not trying to be tricky. I've just got some questions. I'm very happy to be ruled out of order—I will never say that again, Mr Lawrence, so go for your life. That's fine.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: We will. Don't worry.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I was directing my comments to Mr Lawrence, Mr Donnelly. I'll continue with that. Do you believe the action that was taken by the EPA to shut down operations in Tallaganda and Flat Rock was commensurate with the evidence provided, to justify such extreme measures?

ROSS DICKSON: We don't comment on that. We work with what the regulator's concerns are, and we attempt to address those concerns in an objective way.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: This might be a little—Mr Lawrence might like to prick up his ears. Do you have any concerns about the level of influence that environmental groups who oppose native forestry have over the EPA?

ROSS DICKSON: That's not for me to comment on. We continue to work with the regulator. We continue to meet our wood supply agreements and abide by the legislation.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Do you think that environmental activists were a factor in the initial shutdown orders being put in place and also the backflip by the EPA on the agreement they reached with the Forestry Corporation on 2 February?

ROSS DICKSON: As I say, we work objectively with the regulator. The regulator articulates what their concerns are, and we work with them on a very amicable basis to address the concerns and, on a risk-based approach, put in mitigations that satisfy the regulator.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Mr McPherson, did you have anything further to add?

DAVID McPHERSON: There is nothing I can add.

The CHAIR: That perfectly takes us to 3.30 p.m. We'll now break for afternoon tea and we'll be back at 3.45 p.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: We will return to the Opposition for the remainder of their 15 minutes of questions.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I'm going back to Forestry. I'm going back to you, Mr Dickson and Mr McPherson. In a media release on 9 February, the EPA stated:

We have been consulting with stakeholders and considering their feedback to ensure we find the most appropriate way to address concerns while achieving long-term protections for this endangered species.

That would indicate some level of pressure from activists, wouldn't it?

ROSS DICKSON: That would be a question for the EPA.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's a matter for the EPA; that's what you're saying.

ROSS DICKSON: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Have you seen the proposed assessment area for the Great Koala National Park?

ROSS DICKSON: We are assisting the Government committee that is undertaking that investigation.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Okay, so you have seen the proposed assessment.

ROSS DICKSON: We're working with the committee. It's a difficult time at the moment to really establish entirely what the park looks like, but we're comfortable with the current situation in terms of working and providing advice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Mr Dickson, I'm really not trying to be difficult, but my question is: Have you seen the proposed assessment area for the Great Koala National Park?

ROSS DICKSON: I haven't seen it.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Are you aware of how the decision was made to set out boundaries of that assessment area?

ROSS DICKSON: No, I'm not aware of that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Secretary, can I repeat the question to you, please? Have you seen the proposed assessment area for the Great Koala National Park?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, I participated in a meeting, and I believe the area was on a map at the first meeting that I went to.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: How was the decision made to set out the boundaries of that assessment area?

REBECCA FOX: I don't know the answer to that question, but Mr McPherson may know. Otherwise it would need to be directed to the Environment team, unless you've got some more information.

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I apologise, I'll just come back to you because you said you've seen it but Mr McPherson said he hasn't seen it.

DAVID McPHERSON: No, sorry, I have seen it.

REBECCA FOX: Mr Dickson.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Sorry, that is my mistake. I apologise, Mr Dickson. Mr McPherson, please feel that if I am asking about Forestry, you can come in. I'll repeat the question to you: Have you seen the proposed assessment area for the Great Koala National Park?

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes, I have.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: How was the decision made to set out the boundaries of that assessment area?

DAVID McPHERSON: That decision was made in consultation with the Minister for the Environment. The National Parks have presented a proposed assessment area to the steering committee, and then a decision was taken that that was the area that was going to be considered for assessment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So the decision for the area that was to be considered for assessment was made by Minister Sharpe?

DAVID McPHERSON: Not entirely.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: What does that mean, Mr McPherson?

DAVID McPHERSON: National Parks put forward a proposed assessment area based on the election commitment that was given, and they indicated this was the area that they were proposing to assess as part of the process and that Minister Sharpe had indicated that was the area that was to be considered.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: So Minister Sharpe had said what she wanted that to be, based on the election commitment. Was there any extension of that area beyond what was considered in the original map as part of the election promise? I realise this is difficult and I realise you just have to answer the question, so I completely respect that. But I've got a job to do too, Mr McPherson.

DAVID McPHERSON: No, I appreciate that. I'm not aware whether there were changes from the area previously stated, as claimed.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Secretary, may I then redirect that question to you as well. Is the original area that now the committee has agreed to, that was presented by Minister Sharpe—has that changed?

REBECCA FOX: I'm not aware of any change. Certainly, I have only seen one area that hasn't been changed since I've been involved. But I think that question would be best directed to the environment team.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Understood, and it will be. But, obviously, it's everybody. So that's what we have to ask. How was that decision made, to set out the boundaries of that assessment area?

DAVID McPHERSON: As I stated before, it was based on a map provided by National Parks. It was presented to the steering committee as representing the election commitment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Based on the maps that you have seen for the assessment—you've seen them, Mr McPherson, and the secretary has seen them.

DAVID McPHERSON: Correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Just to clarify that for *Hansard*. Based on the maps you have seen for the assessment area, do you believe that you—not you personally but collectively—are on track to meet the conditions of that election commitment?

DAVID McPHERSON: I couldn't say at this point. All I can say is that there's an assessment of an area of 176,000 hectares that's going to be undertaken. They have established the three advisory committees that were committed to, and they're also undertaking the social and economic impact assessment.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Mr McPherson, the election commitment of establishing the Great Koala National Park was—my understanding, and correct me if I'm wrong—between Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour. And that provisional area, I understand—and I could be wrong—now extends well beyond Coffs, into the north. Is that correct?

DAVID McPHERSON: The maps I've seen show it extending north of Coffs Harbour.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: To be really clear, Secretary, have you also seen the map that states that now the Great Koala National Park will extend north of Coffs Harbour?

REBECCA FOX: I have only seen one map, which was part of a steering committee meeting. I don't recall the detail, but we could certainly provide on notice the map that was presented to the steering committee. I'm pretty sure Mr McPherson and I attended that meeting together, so we would've seen the same map at that point in time.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I have to get the clarity on this. Were you both at the same meeting where you saw this map? But your recollection is not as detailed, Ms Fox? And that is not meant to be offensive in any way whatsoever.

REBECCA FOX: I can picture it. I can picture the map in my mind. I just don't know where Coffs Harbour was on that map, but we could certainly provide on notice the map that was presented to us. That

was the first map that I'd seen as part of that whole-of-government steering committee. Mr McPherson is likely to have been involved earlier.

DAVID McPHERSON: That's correct.

REBECCA FOX: But I think his evidence is we've only seen one map.

DAVID McPHERSON: Correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you very much, Mr McPherson, too, and I look forward to receiving that map that was shown, on notice, so that we can establish what's going on here, because it sounds like it's a little bit different. These are further forestry questions. So you're very lucky; you've got me a bit longer. Why has there been a delay in commencing the statutory review of the coastal integrated forestry operations approvals that were made in 2018?

DAVID McPHERSON: There hasn't been a delay in implementing that. We've had some discussions with the EPA around the scope of that review and the timing of that review. The requirement to do the review is between November last year and to be completed by November this year. So there's been no delay at this point.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: More discussions with EPA.

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Have you been given an indication as to who will conduct that review?

DAVID McPHERSON: Not yet. That's part of the discussions as to how we'll go about it. We're scoping up that work right now.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Mr McPherson, there's been discussions, which is great. But we don't even know—we're discussing who's going to discuss the review? When will we discuss that and decide so that we know who's conducting that review?

DAVID McPHERSON: That's part of what we're working out at the moment. We're determining the scope of it, the timing, the available budget. A whole range of factors come into how we might go about doing that work.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You may not have an answer to this. What is the time line for you to actually appoint the person. I would think that you've got to appoint the person before you can get the wheels moving. It's due in November, as you said. What's the time line to appoint who's going to do it?

DAVID McPHERSON: We don't necessarily have to appoint anyone to do it. It may be that we're able to use the Natural Resource Commission or our own experts to do that review. That's part of what we're working out at the moment—the best way to go about this in the most cost-effective way.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: But is it that it's about cost effectiveness? Isn't a review meant to be a review and that should be having someone external to do that? How can you have someone—

DAVID McPHERSON: The cost of that is always a factor that we need to take into account.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I see. Is it the intention that it will be done internally, Mr McPherson?

DAVID McPHERSON: We haven't landed that yet. That's what I was indicating. We're working through the best way of going about that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Who makes that final decision, Mr McPherson?

DAVID McPHERSON: We'll make it in concert with the EPA.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: With the EPA again?

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We don't know when the review is going to begin we but know it needs to be done by November?

DAVID McPHERSON: Correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We don't know who's going to do the review but we know the review is going to be done by November?

DAVID McPHERSON: Correct.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Do you believe that a statutory review would be the appropriate mechanism to review and implement major protocol variations to the CIFOA?

DAVID McPHERSON: The legislation sets out that the EPA can make changes to those protocols. It's entirely a matter for them as to whether they use that mechanism.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Why were major changes made to the CIFOA when a strategy review of that instrument was due to begin?

DAVID McPHERSON: You'd have to ask the EPA that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: If urgent changes are required to the CIFOA, as the EPA evidently believes there are, why has that review not started as a matter of priority?

DAVID McPHERSON: As I explained, we've been working through what the scope of that review will look like. What factors come into it in terms of whether we need to progress urgent changes before that or not, that really is a matter for the EPA to decide. They're aware that the review is going to happen and we've been involved in those discussions. That's all I can really offer.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We can all just hope it gets a wriggle on, Mr McPherson?

DAVID McPHERSON: We're confident we'll get it done.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That's really good news. What is the current trade deficit in forest and wood products for Australia?

DAVID McPHERSON: I'd have to take that on notice. I can come back to you.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Can you take that on notice?

DAVID McPHERSON: Sure.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You might want to take this one too. How much have imports of hardwood projects from Brazil to Australia increased by in the last few months?

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes, I'll definitely have to take that on notice.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Would you know—and it's absolutely fair enough if you don't—if there has been a steady increase in that, just as a ballpark?

DAVID McPHERSON: No, I couldn't tell you. I've got some information on timber exports but not imports.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: The information that I have, Mr McPherson, is that we haven't seen a percentage change like this from any other country in the last decade. It's a 260 per cent increase in 12 months, according to the ABS data. Does that sound like it is right out of the ballpark for you? Are you surprised by that? Are you not surprised by that?

DAVID McPHERSON: No, I'm not surprised.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: It's pretty concerning what they do to the orangutans in Brazil. What is the driver behind the rapid increase in imported hardwood—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I don't think they have orangutans in South America.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Oh well, whatever they have. Obviously there's a massive thing and we do it really well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We'll all start caring about the animals now.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We all care. Anyway, I'm not engaging with you. We actually do quite like each other sometimes. What is the driver behind the rapid increase in imported hardwood products from Brazil, Mr McPherson or Mr Dickson?

DAVID McPHERSON: I couldn't say offhand what that driver is.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: You couldn't?

DAVID McPHERSON: No.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Do you want to give it a whirl?

DAVID McPHERSON: It could be related to currency rates—all sorts of factors could come into why people import more.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Do you think it could be related and attributed to the end of native forestry in Victoria, and it's a supply and demand issue?

DAVID McPHERSON: I couldn't say, as I said.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Mr Dickson? This is your specialty area, is it not?

ROSS DICKSON: No, it's not.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Right.

ROSS DICKSON: I couldn't answer that question.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Could you maybe both take that question on notice for me?

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: That is really significant—a 260 per cent increase in importing hardwood.

DAVID McPHERSON: Yes. That's probably a question you could put to the Commonwealth, who have a closer eye on import and export.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I know, but I can't; I need to put it to you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We've got only a short period of time left. Ms Fox, I want to ask about the Regional Development Trust Fund. With that fund, the board has now been appointed, correct?

REBECCA FOX: Correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How many people are on the board?

REBECCA FOX: I attended the board meeting recently. Somebody might be able to help me out. I could probably name them off the top of my head but I haven't got the number in front of me. It's six or seven. I'm an ex-officio member on that board.

JONATHAN WHEATON: There are seven.

REBECCA FOX: Seven. Thank you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: This is an interim board appointed by the Minister, correct?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: How long is that board in place for?

REBECCA FOX: For 12 months from the terms of appointment, which were made at the end of December.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Those individuals that are on that interim trust fund board—are they going to be invited at the end with the opportunity to reapply?

REBECCA FOX: My understanding is that the process will be completely open and that anybody would be able to make an application, so it would be up to individual members as to whether or not they wanted to express an interest.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: To confirm, the \$350 million that is set aside as part of the trust fund—that's over a four-year period, correct?

REBECCA FOX: That's correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it fair to say—what's that, an average of \$87.5 million per year? Is it going to be divvied up as a yearly staged application process?

REBECCA FOX: There's a profile in the budget for that fund, so that the one this year is a smaller amount, I think, because we didn't start—we had a delayed budget, so it is not an even profile over the four years.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When will the first round of applications open?

REBECCA FOX: We are expecting them to open in the next few months.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you find it concerning—because I do—that in looking at some of the people that have been appointed by the Minister, there is no representation for the Central West of New South Wales?

REBECCA FOX: I come from Condobolin, and I'm on the board.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes, but you are an ex-officio position, Ms Fox.

REBECCA FOX: The board members have been appointed based on merit. They're not representative of particular locations. They've been appointed in accordance with the skills that are required. It's a skills-based board, effectively, and the regulation sets out the skills. So it's expertise in things like regional development, Aboriginal business development—those kinds of skills, rather than being representative of a particular location.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'll have to come back, because my time is up.

The CHAIR: I might just stick with forestry for a brief minute. Mr Dickson, the industry has put concerns to me about the CIFOA and protocols and what the EPA has been amending, particularly around the fact that they believe some of the potential changes that are being proposed by the EPA actually extend beyond the protocols. Have you received any of those concerns from the industry, and have you got any advice as to whether some of those changes that the EPA has wanted to make actually do extend beyond its capabilities in terms of modifying protocols?

ROSS DICKSON: No. We obviously keep very close to the industry. The industry often does consult with us around those protocol changes, particularly in terms of impact on timber supply. I haven't been made aware of any overreach in terms of the EPA.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I go to the koala summit announced by the environment Minister. Has anyone from your organisation or the department been invited to attend that koala summit?

ROSS DICKSON: Mr Chair, we deal with the operational matters of the corporation, and the policy-related matters are dealt through the department.

The CHAIR: Mr McPherson, has anyone been invited?

DAVID McPHERSON: I'd have to take that on notice. I know that there is a regular annual koala summit, often held in Port Macquarie.

The CHAIR: Just for clarity, so you can get the right information, this is the one set down for Taronga Zoo on 22 March, and it talks about bringing together key knowledge holders from across New South Wales. I'm just wondering whether perhaps maybe Dr Brad Law or someone else that has been doing work within your department in this space has been invited to be one of those key knowledge holders?

DAVID McPHERSON: We will come back to you by the end of today, if we can.

STEVE ORR: Mr Banasiak, we have been invited and we will be attending.

The CHAIR: You have been invited and you will be attending?

STEVE ORR: LLS will be attending.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

ROSS DICKSON: Chair, Forestry Corp has been invited.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Mr Sloan, can I get an update on where we are at with the Recreational Fishing Trust audit? At the last estimates I pressed the Minister and she came back with that she will still have more to say on the matter. Have we actually appointed somebody, or put it out to tender to actually appoint someone to do that audit?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, Chair. O'Connor Marsden, an independent audit firm, was appointed to do the audit and my understanding is that they have completed an audit. Whether they have finalised their report and provided it yet, I'm not 100 per cent sure, but it is certainly very close.

The CHAIR: There's an audit and there's an audit. What type of audit was it? Was it an audit in the forensic sense, was it a cursory glance or was it like what the Auditor-General does traditionally with your trust fund reports? What were the parameters and terms around the audit?

SEAN SLOAN: It was a comprehensive audit and there were terms of reference that were drafted and those terms of reference as draft were sent out to a group of recreational fishing group stakeholders to provide comments on, and the Minister sought that feedback and then finalised the terms of reference.

The CHAIR: On notice, are you able to provide a copy of the final terms of reference as they were approved by the Minister?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might just ask some clarifying questions based on answers on notice. I might direct to you, Mr Orr, questions around aerial culling, the pig coordinator and all the funding around that space. I asked last time, on the \$13 million, for a breakdown of expenditure and you kindly provided a table that broke down control and monitoring, extension activities and labour to deliver the program. I want to get some more detail. You talked about how aerial shooting is part of the control and monitoring piece, which is forecast to take up around \$8.4 million of that \$13 million. How much of that 8.4 is put aside for aerial culling or earmarked for aerial culling, as opposed to the other control methods?

STEVE ORR: I'll probably take that on notice unless Mr Kelly can possibly answer that question, Mr Banasiak. To date we've spent around 3.1 in total and I think, of the 46 aerial programs which have been planned, we have conducted 16. In terms of your specific question about the eight and is that all to go to aerial, my understanding is that is the case, unless you have a different view, Mr Kelly?

ROB KELLY: We'll take it on notice and get a breakdown.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Of those aerial culling operations, are they all being done by private contract, or a mix?

STEVE ORR: No, they are done by LLS. We obviously contract the aircraft, but they are done under the FAAST protocols.

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide on notice the makes and models of the helicopters that are being used as part of those aerial culls?

STEVE ORR: Yes, we can, Mr Banasiak. There is a standard which we need to adhere to for safety reasons, but we can provide that on notice.

The CHAIR: Do you have an hourly operational rate for the flight time?

STEVE ORR: I'll take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Are these operations being undertaken during the day, night or both?

STEVE ORR: I'll take that on notice—sorry, day.

The CHAIR: Are the helicopters fitted with GPS tracking and video recorders?

STEVE ORR: Certainly GPS. I'm not sure about video.

The CHAIR: Specifically for the taking of pigs, can you provide particulars about the firearm and ammunition being used on these pigs?

STEVE ORR: Yes. We've certainly got a standard in terms of the firearms which are used.

The CHAIR: I think it's FN SCARS, yes.

STEVE ORR: Yes, SCARS and Benellis, but we can provide that on notice.

The CHAIR: What is the operational altitude that the pilots fly at while undertaking the shooting operations?

STEVE ORR: That is quite a specific question. I will take it on notice.

The CHAIR: What is the team's operational procedure if a feral pig, or actually any animal, is inadvertently pursued onto a neighbouring private property where they do not have permission to fly over and shoot?

STEVE ORR: Mr Kelly, do you want to comment on that?

The CHAIR: Particularly if the animal is shot and wounded, and then runs.

STEVE ORR: Yes.

The CHAIR: My concern is who is responsible for notifying landholders, who is responsible for cleaning up—all that sort of stuff.

STEVE ORR: Yes, and just for clarity on the process, the activity is conducted with the consent of the landholder and the landholder actually determines the animals which are targeted. That is done, obviously, prior

to the operation. Specifically to your question, which, as I understand it, is what happens if an animal is injured and goes onto a neighbouring property, Mr Kelly, have you got any comment on that or do you want to take it on notice?

ROB KELLY: We'll take that on notice.

DAVID McPHERSON: Mr Chair, in response to your question, our Nick Milham and Dr Brad Law have both been invited to the koala summit.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Mr Sloan, in the last minute or so, can I go to trout stocking? Are you aware of the recent resignation of the Monaro Acclimatisation Society president, Mr Steve Samuels? Are you aware that he resigned, and, in that resignation, he cited the decision to change where trout was stocked in certain areas in the Monaro area, the lack of consultation around that process and, essentially, almost the blindsiding of that process by the department? Are you aware of that resignation letter that was circulating quite heavily around social media?

SEAN SLOAN: I was aware that Steve Samuels had stepped down, but I wasn't aware of that particular issue related to his resignation. But I am aware of the fact that there have been issues discussed around the potential impacts of trout stocking on some of the native species, particularly small-bodied native species. My understanding is that stocking is still occurring for trout; they have just been relocated in those water streams to nearby locations where they would have less impact.

The CHAIR: Are you aware that there is a school of thought that some of that fear of their impact on some of these native species is unfounded, given that the trout and some of these species, particularly the galaxias species, have coexisted for decades without any noticeable impact? Can you point to any studies that would provide clarity as to what this perceived threat and impact is? Obviously, we know there's redfin and carp. We know they're quite impactful on these species. But there's a school of thought out there that trout aren't as detrimental, given that they've coexisted. Can you, on notice, point to any studies?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to pull out any reports that we can to enlighten the Committee on that subject. Can I just say that we support a trout fishery, and we also support the work that we need to do to protect our native small-bodied species as well. They can both coexist, I agree.

The CHAIR: It's pleasing to hear you say that, given the contribution that trout fishing makes to the economy of that area.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: We love trout fishing. We throw them back, Emma.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I wanted to continue my conversation with Dr Tracey regarding exhibited animals. As I said, one of the questions on notice from the previous budget estimates said that there'd been 11 facilities audited in the 12 months prior to that estimates hearing. Do you know if those audits were announced or unannounced?

JOHN TRACEY: I'm not aware. Kim, can you—

KIM FILMER: Those audits are mostly announced.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can I get you to take it on notice to see if they were all announced?

KIM FILMER: Yes, I can take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Does the DPI conduct an audit in response to every complaint it receives about a facility or is it the case that some complaints may not necessarily be followed up with an audit or inspection by the department?

KIM FILMER: All complaints are followed up.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is there a time line that that needs to be done by?

KIM FILMER: I don't know that there's a number but, like any complaints system, there's usually a risk base to it. If it's a complaint about something that's urgent, it would get prioritised, as opposed to something that was less important or more trivial, which mightn't be prioritised as quickly. I don't think there's a number that I can give you for that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I've got some questions that I suspect might need to be taken on notice because they're quite specific. In the same 12-month period of the 11 audits, how many complaints were received in that period? How many of those were audited? How many audits took place that had no complaint prior and were just part of a general auditing process? Can you take those on notice? If there's information you've got, I'm happy to—

JOHN TRACEY: Yes, we can take that on notice.

KIM FILMER: Just to clarify the period of time, are you talking about within the last financial year or since the end of the last financial year?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: No, in the questions on notice that I received from the last estimates hearing, I was advised that in the last 12 months there had been 11 audits—so whatever that period was from those questions on notice from the October estimates hearings, and noting that there were 11 audits in that time period.

KIM FILMER: I've got the data here for 2022-23 and then for the 2023-24 period, if you like, so I can give those to you. For 2022-23, as I said earlier, the audits were six, the inspections were 73 and the complaints were 12.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: With that in mind, does this mean that no audits occurred due to a general auditing process—it only occurred when there was a complaint made?

JOHN TRACEY: I think we'd have to take that on notice.

KIM FILMER: I think we'd better take that on notice. I think we might get ourselves confused otherwise.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Dr Tracey, you talked before about having to prioritise the work, and it was based on a risk-based compliance approach. Can you give me a bit more information about that? Is that specifically in regard to the audit of exhibited animals, or is that the DPI being stretched for resources in regard to other spaces where things needed to be prioritised?

JOHN TRACEY: We have a compliance team that does a lot of work across a range of areas, so there is prioritisation that needs to happen about that. There's also a focus on risk. There is a big priority around animal welfare and around exhibitors. Within that area, we need to prioritise what are going to be the higher risk ones that we need to address, and where can we do a lighter touch or lower frequency audit while still maintaining high standards of animal welfare. That's the kind of approach that we do but, yes, that applies right across what we do in biosecurity, food safety and animal welfare.

REBECCA FOX: I think, Ms Hurst, that would be consistent with any compliance regime that we run in any area—that we use a risk-based approach—and certainly we would ensure that we've got the right resources based on the level of risk that we're assessing and adjust that over time.

JOHN TRACEY: Yes, and that's good practice too because it means that you can scale up activity—compliance effort—when we really need to do that or when risks are increasing.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: With that idea of the risks, obviously if there's a complaint and it's quite an urgent complaint, I can understand why that would be flagged as a higher risk. But are other factors involved in that as well in regard to the species of animals or the numbers of animals, or is it mostly based around complaints, previous concerns, PINs and things like that?

JOHN TRACEY: Complaints are one factor, but we do look at if there's a history of noncompliance with one particular business that we need to focus in on. It's about putting your compliance effort where you get the best return. Rather than doing the standard audit of everyone in a standard frequency, you're actually able to adjust that according to—those that are always compliant may get a reduced requirement to go back and follow up and investigate, and for those that have some compliance concerns, we'll work with those businesses to get them up to speed and then the frequency in those areas may increase. It's about prioritising the effort for the outcome.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: With that in mind, does that mean that if a facility is flagged as fairly low risk, there's a potential that they could never be audited?

JOHN TRACEY: No, as part of the program, we do need to keep track of all businesses. It just means that they're audited less frequently.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Could I get from you the maximum number of years that could potentially go by without any audit at any facility that's a low-risk facility? I'm happy for you to take that on notice.

JOHN TRACEY: I can take that on notice for you, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Are exhibited animal facilities inspected or audited when they're first licensed?

JOHN TRACEY: I believe so, yes. They need to meet the standards, so yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So that's all checked. At the last estimates I asked about wildlife trafficking and how the DPI ensures exhibited animal facilities are not taking animals illegally from the wild. The answer to the question on notice stated that there are systems in place for authority holders to report on animal holdings to the department and that verification of reported data can be undertaken during the routine inspection schedule. But if there are some that aren't obviously being inspected yearly and that are going for much longer periods without inspections, how do we verify that data? It sounds like it could be quite easy for somebody to potentially have illegally caught animals, and the DPI might not be aware of that for a period of time.

JOHN TRACEY: There are good systems in place there, but I might ask if Dr Filmer can add anything extra.

KIM FILMER: A little bit. The exhibited animal authority holders must maintain animal records over the course of the licensing period, so the department does have data on hand. Getting back to the risk-based auditing system, you can use that and the intelligence around that in terms of, if there could be a higher risk, then that's something that you would want to audit more frequently. So there are processes in place, and if the numbers changed then that might be an indication that something's going on and that could trigger an audit.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But that potentially could be many years. If it was a facility that potentially isn't being inspected every year, it could be a long time before anything could be checked. I understand that you say that there are records kept, but, obviously, to back up that those records are accurate would require an inspection.

KIM FILMER: Not necessarily, because the facilities need to keep the department informed of their numbers, so the records maintain the traceability of the numbers, and it is through births, deaths and transfers.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: There would only be a pick-up that that was incorrect if somebody went and inspected the records compared to the animals that are at the facility. Is relying on somebody to tell the truth, who is potentially—if they're illegally catching wild animals, I think that you could be safe to assume that they are probably not going to be completely honest in their reporting numbers.

KIM FILMER: That certainly is a possibility. If you want more detail on that, we can provide that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. On one of the questions on notice, you said that two facilities were given an E rating in the last 12 months. On notice, can you please advise which two facilities these were and also the reasons why they were given an E rating, unless you've got that to hand?

KIM FILMER: Is that from the last budget estimates session?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes.

KIM FILMER: I'll have take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the last estimates hearing I also asked about the new DPI's requirement around exhibiting animal facilities having an approved breeding plan, and I was told that, as part of the question on notice, a justifiable purpose for breeding an animal under the licence condition would include things like a species for conservation purposes. Central Coast Zoo has been breeding animals like meerkats, black swans and brushtail possums, none of which are threatened or endangered. I wonder why that breeding has been allowed to occur and what justifiable purposes were provided that satisfied the department.

KIM FILMER: We don't have that detail. We'll need to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: I will throw back to the Opposition.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Mr Chair. My first question is to Mr Sloan. You may need to take this on notice, but you are aware of renewable energy zones throughout regional New South Wales?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: My question is, how often is DPI approached by either the IPC, planning department or Local Government to ask for your input on developments and the rating of agricultural land or the significance or output of agricultural areas where these large-scale industrial developments are proposed?

SEAN SLOAN: I would have to take it on notice to see how often we are engaged on those issues. I don't have that sort of information to hand, so I can take that on notice and provide that information. The area of land-use conflict, particularly around renewable energy, is one of the areas that has been flagged for future work

by the Agriculture Commissioner, so I expect that issue will get taken up at some level through that role when it's established.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can I specifically raise a recent example, which is a solar development at Glanmire, on the outskirts of Bathurst, where—in the IPC's finding, they had approached DPI and asked for their opinion or input to the challenge, that where that development was placed was in some of the best cropping area within that local government area. On notice, would you be able to provide any further information just around that inquiry and the reasoning behind DPI's position that it took when approached?

REBECCA FOX: Can I just jump in, Mr Farraway. Ms Lorimer-Ward's come all the way from Orange today. I suspect she may know the answer—maybe not to that one but certainly the way DPI's involved in the renewable energy zones.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Happy if Ms Lorimer-Ward has got something. That's good.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I can't answer that one specifically, but we do get invited to comment on all developments, and things that we take into consideration as to whether the development is proposed on by physically strategic agricultural land. And, if that's the case, then we always try and work with the developer to minimise the impact on agriculture: Can they modify the development? Can they look at coexistence? We also work with them about biosecurity plans for those sites so that, during the construction, we don't have issues around weeds, pests.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Lorimer-Ward, has there been an uplift in inquiries or approaches to DPI due to just the significant increase of developments across the State?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, there has been. There's been a significant uplift, and we are involved in providing comment on not only developments that are inside the five regional renewable energy zones but also developments that occur outside of those.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: On notice, if possible, would you be able to come back to the Committee and advise how many approaches or how many inquiries the department's had in the '23 and '24 calendar years?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: We can.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you. Moving on, I'll start with you, direct this to you, Ms Fox, but Mr Wheaton may know more about this. It's in relation to a media release that the New South Wales Government put out, between Minister Moriarty and the Premier, and it's regarding the now \$60 million Orange sports stadium and precinct. I'd like to know a little bit more about why the New South Wales Government have gotten involved and why the Minister and Premier have completely flipped the rollout of that project?

REBECCA FOX: You go, Mr Wheaton.

JONATHAN WHEATON: No, you can start.

REBECCA FOX: The department is the funding source, or running the grant program that funds that project. My understanding is that there were some concerns about that project, particularly in regard to budget and whether or not the project could be built for the amount of money that had been funded—and we have a funding agreement—and that that is why, certainly, the department was involved in a health check on that project. Mr Wheaton can probably give you much more information if you've got any specific questions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's all right. I'll continue with the questions. Who is responsible for the delivery of that project? Is it Orange City Council or the Department of Regional NSW?

JONATHAN WHEATON: The role that we have played in that project hasn't changed. Much like the thousands of other projects that we manage under a funding deed, the funding deed for that project is with Orange City Council. They have engaged NSW Public Works to be the project manager. There is a suite of projects around the State that we have a project control group that is established that has the proponent and Public Works, our teams on the ground and other key stakeholders to support the delivery of those projects. I'm not sure of the number, but there would be 30 or 40 of those PCGs established around the State, and there is one that has been set up since the inception or the allocation of funding or, certainly, the additional allocation of funding following the original \$25 million commitment to—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Just to pull up there, Mr Wheaton, and just to confirm original commitment by then Premier Berejiklian was \$25 million?

JONATHAN WHEATON: Correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: There was a new or additional commitment, prior to the State election, that was funded through the Department of Regional NSW, for \$34 million? Correct?

JONATHAN WHEATON: Correct.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Bringing it up to \$59.5 million. Is the cost to deliver that project now over that \$59.5 million?

JONATHAN WHEATON: The costings and the detailed design work are still being finalised by council. We are working closely with them to ensure that they are able to deliver the scope of the project that has been committed to under the funding deed, within the funding envelope that has been committed to the project. I think the media release you refer to does make it clear that, with the State Government commitment to the project of the \$59 million, the expectation is that any funding required above that amount to deliver the scope would be a matter for council to resolve.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The New South Wales Government have made it very clear, in what you're saying, Mr Wheaton—that the direction from the Minister and Premier is that that's it. That's the bucket of money. It needs to be delivered within that scope. Who made the decision? Because this article says, "Premier reveals shock switch for Orange's \$60 million sports precinct. New South Wales Premier Chris Minns has confirmed a change to the rollout of the precinct." Was it the Government's decision? Because obviously they are the financier. It's taxpayers' money. It's a grant. Was it the Government's decision to switch the development and the rollout, or was it council?

JONATHAN WHEATON: No. Council, in working with our team and in consultation with the local member, has been looking at ways in which that project might be delivered in a staged, sequenced way. There have been, through the project control group, various different options that have been considered about how that project could be delivered. I think that the media release sets out that the works that will get underway initially will be for the eight multipurpose fields and associated car park lighting for that part, followed by the rectangular playing field and the stadium, with the final stage to be the athletics component.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it more cost effective to build a stadium than it is an athletics precinct and tracks?

JONATHAN WHEATON: I'm not quite sure.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But the Government, under the department you're in, Mr Wheaton, has flipped the rollout of this, so one could only assume that it is more cost effective to deliver a stadium.

JONATHAN WHEATON: I don't understand what you're saying about "flipped the rollout".

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's very, very clear: "Premier reveals shock switch for Orange's \$60 million sports precinct. In a statement released on Friday morning, the Premier's office revealed the rectangular sporting stadium will be built before the athletics track on the Huntley Road side of the precinct. As late as November 2023, the time line for the project still included the athletics track being built before the main stadium, which is on the Forest Road side of the Bloomfield site." I live in this region. I announced a lot of this. I know this project well. The clear intent from council and the Department of Regional NSW has always been that the athletics infrastructure and outfields would be built first and that the stadium would be built in the third and final stage.

JONATHAN WHEATON: We would have to take on notice the exact project plan that has been in place to deliver the full complex but, like I said, we have undertaken close work with council as part of the project control group to ensure that the full complex and the scope that has been agreed to be delivered by council can be delivered within the budget. The sequencing of how that has rolled out—we know that the tender should have been issued by council for those works around the multipurpose playing fields in the middle and that council are still finalising the design work for the final components.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: With regard to your department—and, Ms Fox, if you have anything to add, that's fine—there is criticism here of former governments and really, to be frank, Ms Fox, your agency that it's five years to deliver this project. What were the concerns coming from Orange council about the delays? They have openly said in the media that there was obviously a health check and there was an infrastructure review but, fundamentally, what were the concerns that were raised from that council with the department about the rollout?

JONATHAN WHEATON: I'm not quite sure that the health check was that there were concerns from council. I think that there were concerns through the project control group that there were cost pressures on that project and delivery pressures that needed to be worked through. The health check looked at a number of different

aspects of the project, including the project governance and the role of the project control group as part of that. Council are the proponent of this project. All the way through our work with them, we have required—naturally, with such a large investment—that certain thresholds of evidence and due diligence are made. Originally, when the commitment that you mentioned was made by the former Premier, there wasn't even a site selected for the project. Albeit that it has been around the five years to deliver it, the project itself, at that scale, wasn't particularly well developed at the time that there was a commitment of funds made. We have worked through, as a partnership with council, since that time to move forward. The other thing I would say in terms of the sequencing of the infrastructure, and what you referred to as the flip on it, is that then the community—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Well, it's what has been reported.

JONATHAN WHEATON: Yes, I accept that. The community feedback, and especially through the local member, has been that the priority for the community, on the basis of the engagement, has been the delivery of the rectangular field over the athletics track.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I go back to the first part of your evidence in that answer, Mr Wheaton, and if you wish to add anything, Ms Fox, that's fine. In the event that the stadium is built and they have exhausted the total of \$59.5 million that has been allocated to the project by the New South Wales Government—committed under the former Coalition Government but now being honoured by this Government, which is a rarity—once they run out of those funds, that's it.

REBECCA FOX: That's the arrangement under the current—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So any additional funding would need to be borne by council.

REBECCA FOX: That's the arrangement under the current funding deed, and I would probably add that this is not the only infrastructure project in New South Wales at the moment that is under cost pressure. We see that in many of our State Government and State Government-funded projects.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Mr Wheaton and Ms Fox. Ms Fox, you may be able to help with this question. I posed to the Minister this morning an MOU with NSW Wine. Some of the Department of Regional NSW's best work has been delivered under that department, which established a concierge service assisting and supporting businesses and industries in the regions to sell their product and to sell this State, from the regions to global markets. Are you aware of a potential MOU with that industry group?

REBECCA FOX: I was aware. I've had a discussion this week with the team about that MOU, and I think Ms Lorimer-Ward, if she's still sitting there, might be able to tell us where that's up to.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: My understanding is that the Minister did write to other portfolio Ministers regarding the MOU and the items that were allocated to that portfolio. I haven't seen the correspondence in reply to that, but I do know the commitments that our branch makes to that industry.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Do you remember how long ago the wine industry in New South Wales approached DPI, agencies or the Department of Regional NSW for support in this space?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I don't have the exact dates, but I have attended a meeting with the wine industry with the Minister's office.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm happy for either person to answer the question, but have there been any draft policies or ideas worked up internally in the Department of Regional NSW—maybe with the assistance of DPI—to work up a similar proposal to what South Australia is deploying around a \$2 million commitment to industry and also a delegation to go to China, working with the Commonwealth to promote New South Wales wines and content?

REBECCA FOX: I'm not aware of that kind of proposal. I don't know whether—

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, I haven't been privy to anything like that.

REBECCA FOX: There is some work certainly going on at the moment between our industry attraction team that doesn't sit in DPI and the Department of Enterprise, Investment and Trade at the moment as to what those kinds of approaches look like, but not in relation to that specific issue.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Ms Lorimer-Ward, did you just say correctly that there has been a meeting between Wine NSW, DPI and the Minister's office?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: At that meeting, was the MOU discussed?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is there still a concierge service within the Department of Regional NSW for either businesses or industry groups to triage them, assist them and point them in the right direction within government for that type of support?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, there is. Nothing has changed in that regard.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is there any funding available to Wine NSW, let's say, to assist them right now to develop a strategy with the New South Wales Government to sell New South Wales wine to probably the largest export market, which will open shortly?

REBECCA FOX: The short answer to that is that I'm not aware of any particular funding source at the moment, but we do have the \$350 million sitting in the regional development trust. We're currently working through with the advisory council on an investment strategy. In that regard there will be different streams and that certainly is probably the biggest opportunity for those kinds of businesses to work with us at the moment.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I just want to go back to Ms Lorimer-Ward, if possible. With regard to the previous topic we were talking about, and taking it on notice, I think I asked for two calendar years. I actually need four calendar years.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: In terms of inquiries?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes, with the renewable projects regarding agricultural land and whether it's IPC or local government—just the total number of approaches, and maybe based on LGA or area, that would be really—

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes. We'll see what we can provide. I do have total numbers but they're not restricted to renewable energy for last financial year.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Okay. Moving on while I still have a little bit of time. Mr Sloan, with regard to the Federal Government's biosecurity levy, have stakeholder groups like NSW Farmers, the farmers' federation, the work DPI do—Ms Lorimer-Ward may know about this as well, but my understanding is there's a lot of misunderstanding out there about this levy and that on 1 July it's coming into effect. Has DPI received feedback from farming groups and farmers in general about that levy and how it will be managed with the Commonwealth?

SEAN SLOAN: Having stepped into the role now just for a short number of weeks, I have actually had a couple of meetings with NSW Farmers' Association, and I know that it is one of those issues that is of concern to farmers. I haven't got anything formal more than that to say about it at this point, Mr Farraway. I don't know if Ms Lorimer-Ward has any detail on that.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I've only seen public commentary; I haven't been asked to comment from a policy perspective.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is it fair to say that DPI have not been asked for a policy position on that levy—to support or not support that—in your dialogue with counterparts, with the Commonwealth?

SEAN SLOAN: Not to my knowledge, Mr Farraway.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you be happy to take it on notice, obviously understanding that you're in an acting role and only for a short period of time.

JOHN TRACEY: I might just add to that. There has been a conversation at the National Biosecurity Committee on the levy. It was broad in terms of policy and more of an update from the Commonwealth about where they were at.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: A question for Ms Fox while I'm running out of time. It's regarding the Regional Development Act 2004 review. Who is handling that process within the department?

REBECCA FOX: We have a project team put together. That team is being run out of Mr Wheaton's area. We have a director that's running that project team and a range of staff working on it—a cross-department team.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Has it been raised with you, in particular from local regional communities and local government, that when you look at the matters that should be included in the Act regional communities that have to bear the brunt of mining activity and/or renewable energy, or especially industrial size and scale proposals, should be compensated, should be looked after and should be invested in and that should be included in the Act?

REBECCA FOX: We've certainly heard feedback along those lines and I think the submissions period has just closed, or is about to close, and we have well more than 200 submissions. So we've heard it verbally and I would expect that issue to be raised in written submissions as well.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, I just want to draw your attention to some questions that were asked by fishermen around ICOLLS, in particular, Swan Lake. Your department did respond but did take up to 12 months to answer those questions. Can you explain why there was such a delay in answering those questions? I am assuming you know which questions I'm referring to?

SEAN SLOAN: I do understand which questions you're referring to, Chair. I think there's been constant back-and-forth communication with the person that's been asking those questions and we have written multiple times to provide information and offer opportunities for meetings and, to my knowledge, there's been quite a bit of information exchanged. Quite often when we get lots of detailed questions on a particular topic, we do offer meetings to try and work through those issues just to get to the heart of those matters.

The CHAIR: I accept that. Can I go to some of the answers that were provided? I will read the question out, and then I'll read the answer and seek some clarification. One of the questions was: Does Fisheries have details of the species and population of an ICOLL such as Swan Lake and, if so, what are they? Your answer was that stock assessments are on a statewide basis and not at an individual estuary level. Accepting that, another question was put as to what could be the reason why the recreational catch is so poor in Swan Lake. The answer back was that the recreational fishing catch is not poor in Swan Lake. But in the next question, it acknowledges that there was a fish kill of approximately 100,000 fish in that lake. Surely 100,000 fish dying in that lake, whatever the cause, would have a significant impact on recreational and commercial fishing activities. Would you not agree?

SEAN SLOAN: I would have to agree.

The CHAIR: I'm just struggling to correlate the second answer with the third answer around the fish kill. How was that answer derived in terms of the recreational fishing catch not being poor in Swan Lake?

SEAN SLOAN: To be honest, Chair, I'm not across that level of detail.

The CHAIR: Is Mr Turnell possibly—

SEAN SLOAN: Mr Turnell may be able to shed some light on that situation. One thing I would say, just as a general comment, ICOLLS particularly—but all of those estuarine environments—do have variability from one year to the next and over a decade or periods. It's not surprising—

The CHAIR: My concern is that, because it's an ICOLL and it's not always open to the ocean, you have reduced spawning potentially and reduced recruitment potentially, because it's not always open. When you have a significant fish kill, I'm concerned that it would have a significant impact on recreational and commercial fishing. Mr Turnell, do you have any—

PETER TURNELL: The catch of prawns actually increased significantly after that fish kill—so not the summer just gone but in the previous summer.

The CHAIR: Is that because of feeding on dead fish?

PETER TURNELL: It could've been. It was one of the reasons. But it could've also meant a whole range of environmental conditions. But the catch does vary. I'm very familiar with Swan Lake, so—

The CHAIR: What about bream?

PETER TURNELL: Coming back.

The CHAIR: Coming back.

PETER TURNELL: I'm very familiar with Swan Lake.

The CHAIR: Have you got any data points? Not that I'm doubting, but do you have any data points to back up the—

PETER TURNELL: Anecdotal.

The CHAIR: Is that just from what the recreational fishing—

PETER TURNELL: Local knowledge.

The CHAIR: I'm just doing a bit of mop-up here. Mr Orr, last time in estimates I asked a question around the cat D issue and the process in terms of the Firearms Registry, requesting information of you about whether someone is part of an authorised campaign or not. You came back and said that LLS has received

10 requests since 27 September 2023 from the Firearms Registry to confirm whether a category D applicant is part of an authorised campaign. I'm not seeking specifics of names of people that you didn't acknowledge were or were not but, out of that 10, how many did you confirm were part of an authorised campaign? Are you able to provide that?

STEVE ORR: I think the total is now 14, and I think the number is seven.

The CHAIR: So there was 14?

STEVE ORR: I think the total is now 14, and I think the number is seven.

The CHAIR: And you confirmed that there was seven?

STEVE ORR: Correct.

The CHAIR: Did you want to take that on notice to clarify?

STEVE ORR: I'll confirm, but that's my understanding. Mr Banasiak, can I respond to some of the issues you raised before in terms of helicopters?

The CHAIR: Yes.

STEVE ORR: I will try to deal with this swiftly. The helicopters are typically the Squirrel B3 or the Bell Jet Ranger. They must be turbine aircraft. The hourly rate for the Jet Ranger is \$1,900 to \$2,000 and the Squirrel is \$2,100 to \$3,000. The operation is during daylight hours. GPS tracking—there is no video. The firearms are FN SCAR-H and Benelli M4. You asked about the flight: It cannot be above 500 feet. The procedure if an animal is shot or injured, the priority is the welfare. We would go over onto the neighbouring property and euthanise the animal, and then we'd also inform the property owner that has happened. Generally, in the planning, we try to stay away from boundaries.

The CHAIR: How does that sit with CASA requirements?

STEVE ORR: CASA?

The CHAIR: Yes, as in the people that govern people flying around in planes and helicopters. How does that procedure, where you just fly over someone's property you don't have permission to fly over and dispatch the animal—

STEVE ORR: No, we don't have permission to shoot on so it's a shooting issue. The owner hasn't provided permission to shoot but if we've got a welfare issue with an animal, that takes priority and then we notify the landowner.

The CHAIR: So that gives you the exemption to fly over a person's property at that altitude?

STEVE ORR: That's our priority—the welfare of the animal—and then we notify. I don't think this happens very often, and as I said before—

The CHAIR: No, but I know it's been happening in other States.

STEVE ORR: Yes.

The CHAIR: There's been raised concerns around how that intersects with CASA requirements at flying at a certain height over someone's property you don't have actually permission to fly over at that height because you're not actually conducting an operation on that property.

STEVE ORR: I'll confirm on notice, Mr Banasiak, but that's information I understand—

The CHAIR: It is a bit of a complex legal scenario.

STEVE ORR: You can understand the priority in terms of the welfare issue.

The CHAIR: Yes, 100 per cent. I am just concerned how you navigate that.

SEAN SLOAN: Mr Banasiak, you asked me a question previously, too, about proper penalty notices.

The CHAIR: Yes.

SEAN SLOAN: There have been 95 penalty infringement notices issued that relate to groper over the last five years and there have been six prosecutions.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Mr Sloan, while we've got you, just another question that has come to my knowledge. On your Facebook page four hours ago, there was a post regarding fishing on ferry wharfs and it lists out a set of rules. There is one rule that's causing some concern for fishermen: A maximum of six people can

fish at any wharf at any one time. Is that a rule insisted upon by Fisheries or is that a rule insisted upon by Transport for NSW and Maritime? It's a rule that I personally haven't heard of before and a lot of fishermen are feeling perplexed by that rule.

SEAN SLOAN: I might see if Mr Turnell can shed any light on that one for us but what I can say is we obviously don't own the wharfs. They're owned by Transport. We do have issues from time to time about fishers' activities and interactions with ferries and other users. There's an education program and a compliance program that we have in place to make sure that we can maintain access to fishers on those wharfs.

The CHAIR: Can you take on notice whether this is a Fisheries rule or—Mr Turnell, you're shaking your head. Can I take it, for Hansard, that it is not a Fisheries rule? Is it a Transport requirement?

PETER TURNELL: It's the first I've heard of it so I doubt it's one of ours.

The CHAIR: How do you think this sits with the most recent \$78 million Kamay ferry wharf, which is now being touted as this great fishery, or access for fishermen, and potentially only six people can use it? Does that sound like an efficient expenditure of money for fishing access?

SEAN SLOAN: Let us take it on notice, Chair, and we'll provide you with some clarity on that one.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That's probably going to do me.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Higginson is allowing me to ask one question as a follow-up. It's to Ms Lorimer-Ward. Just to confirm, regarding the NSW Wine MOU and the meeting that the department was included in, there are two dates in the Minister's disclosure, one being 27 June and the other 26 April. Did the department attend both those meetings with the industry group?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'll have to take it on notice but we do tend to attend most meetings with the industry groups.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: And the MOU was discussed at those meetings with the department officials?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: At least at one of those.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Are you able to supply any minutes from the department from that meeting to the Committee?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: We don't tend to have minutes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Any notes or anything that was discussed at the meeting that you're able to supply the Committee?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'll have to check but there are meeting briefs prepared in advance of meetings. I'll have to find out.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Dickson, I was made aware in the break earlier that another altercation has happened between a member of the community and Forestry Corporation staff members. It relates to an area near Clouds Creek State Forest where the Forestry Corporation allegedly was today placing a gate on private property and seeking to exclude a person from their own private property. An altercation has taken place and it appears that another assault may have taken place. Does this concern you?

ROSS DICKSON: Firstly, this is the first I've been advised of the altercation and, as an acting CEO in budget estimates, it is of extreme concern. My concern is for the wellbeing and the safety of all parties involved and I'll be seeking an early briefing on this matter the moment I get out of this room. I assume the New South Wales police have been involved?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: They have.

ROSS DICKSON: It will be a police matter, but I'm deeply concerned, and I have to put on record that we don't condone altercations either within the workplace or outside the workplace.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Dickson, I just put to you now that I saw a short piece of video footage and it is really, really concerning. Will you take on notice and report back to this Committee what steps you take, what you say in explanation of conduct of employees of the State on somebody's private property and how this could happen?

ROSS DICKSON: I certainly will. I have to say, Ms Higginson, I am sitting here feeling deeply concerned and will be seeking an urgent briefing on what has supposedly happened. I do have some comfort that the New South Wales police are involved.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: My understanding of how this may have come about or the circumstances leading up to this is that somehow a practice of Forestry Corporation in preparation of logging operations will place gates that prevent people—members of the community—from accessing their homes, requiring them to contact the Forestry Corporation for permission to go through those gates. Do you think that is a satisfactory process in this day and age?

ROSS DICKSON: Safety is the number one value of the organisation and number one value of mine. When we're undertaking forestry operations—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But locking people out from accessing their homes?

ROSS DICKSON: I think that we do have procedures in place with these gates that we notify the people that the gate is going to be put in place and we also invite them to make contact with us so that we can work with them for, quite often, permission to use a State forest road, which is not a publicly declared road. There are a couple of criteria we have, which are safety controls that they acknowledge that they won't enter our harvesting or our work operations, and that they will use the access to go to their property in the most expedient way. We obviously welcome people to use our roads and we work with the public and our stakeholders, but from time to time, for safety reasons, we do have to put controls in place. They aren't onerous controls. If the stakeholder is unable to understand the control, we are more than willing to explain what the procedure is.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: With no disrespect intended, can I just pick you up there? When you say "our roads", you mean our roads? They belong to all of us.

ROSS DICKSON: Absolutely. Can I clarify that? They are actually State forest declared roads. They are not publicly declared roads. Whilst the public has full access to those roads, they are actually tracks of declared State forest.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Which are public forests—

ROSS DICKSON: Absolutely.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —and are managed for and on behalf of the public and belong to the public.

ROSS DICKSON: They belong to the State of New South Wales.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I ask some questions that are a bit more specific and may need to be taken on notice. Since August 2019, how many greater glider den trees have been identified by Forestry Corporation during general operations and specifically during broad area habitat surveys? In particular, how many hectares of high-density greater glider habitat have been logged during that time? How many hectares of low-density greater glider habitat have been logged in that time? Is that something you would take on notice?

ROSS DICKSON: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And then, again, since 1 January 2019, in broad area habitat searches, how many of the following have been identified and in which State forests: southern greater glider den trees, yellow-bellied glider den trees, squirrel glider dens, spotted-tail quoll dens, brush-tailed phascogales dens, glossy black cockatoo nests, barking owl nests, masked owl nests and sooty owl nests. Are they all things you would take on notice?

ROSS DICKSON: I would have to take it on notice. I can tell you sheep breeds, but I can't tell you those breeds.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sure. How many hectares of public forest have been subject to broad area habitat searches since the CIFOA came into effect? In particular, I've got a couple of forests. For Myrtle State Forest in the north, how many hectares in that forest have been subject to broad area habitat searches? How many koala records, including koala scats, have been made, and what management action is required in response to those records? How many records were made of other threatened species? How many of each species? How many dens or nests for each of the threatened species? I don't know who this is directed to. What steps, if any, have been taken in relation to community radio following—Ms Fox, I think it's under your remit. What steps has the Government taken in this budget period to address the recommendation in the 2022 flood inquiry response, specifically about more investment into community radio?

REBECCA FOX: I would have to take that on notice. I'm not sure that's our responsibility, but I'll come back to you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think it is.

REBECCA FOX: I'm assuming it sits with the Reconstruction Authority, but I'll come back to you and give you an answer.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think it came out of that.

JONATHAN WHEATON: I think that the Government Radio Network is actually managed by New South Wales telco.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much.

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Higginson, you asked a question earlier about future climate scenarios.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I did. I was going to come back to you—1.5, two? What are we doing?

SEAN SLOAN: I might ask Mr McPherson to come and give you some information on that one.

DAVID McPHERSON: I think the project you were referring to is the Climate Change Research Strategy that the Department of Primary Industries has been undertaking. It's a \$29 million project over nearly five years now. Part of that project has been looking at a range of our top commodities and their vulnerability to future climate change scenarios. Scenarios we have been modelling are the representative concentration pathways of 4.5, which is as if we would meet our emissions targets, and 8.5, which is we would exceed those targets.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: On agricultural chemicals, what work, if any, is underway to work with the APVMA to review regulations relating to agchems? I'm aware that it's EPA, but is there any work happening from your side?

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Higginson, are you referring to any particular area of business or any response work, in particular, or just generally speaking?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Generally. Given the EPA has got a proactive program around chemical use and looking at the range of chems that are used for agriculture and the fact there is broad community knowledge now that some of the chemicals we are using are banned in other countries, is there anything coming from DPI or elsewhere within your sections to review and work with the APVMA?

SEAN SLOAN: I might just see if—

JOHN TRACEY: I can answer that. We do have staff that work in with APVMA on reviews, and they happen all the time in terms of permits issued and advice on permits. As far as I know, there is no comprehensive reviews that DPI has been involved in.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just so I can understand, is your involvement when the APVMA is reviewing something and then you will be asked to engage in that? There is nothing coming proactively from your end of things to the APVMA?

JOHN TRACEY: Yes, that's right. We have that technical expertise and some of that experience within DPI that offers advice on those various permits.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I've got two really quick ones in five seconds. Are you aware of the Richmond River study by SCU that identified the 174 pesticides in the Richmond River? Are you aware of that study?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I am aware of that study.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you doing anything to look at that? Particularly, one of the things that, I understand, was mentioned was about the loss of chemical use data in the floods. Are we looking at that to try and rectify that going into the future—a register, something?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: There are a number of issues around that, some that we're working with other parts of the agency on, but particularly about understanding what floodplain agriculture looks like going forward, and the need for storing of chemicals, those risks of contamination. But, in an ongoing way, we've been doing work through the Marine Estate Management Strategy, on a project we call Clean Coastal Catchments, which is about trying to build those buffers between agriculture and those industries. Also, we've got a lot of work where we partner with industry, looking at integrated pest management strategies: How do we actually decrease the use of pesticides within these farming systems? That's been really successful work about how we work with the ecology within those production systems more effectively to reduce pesticide use.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How do people get involved? Sorry, I know my time is well and truly up.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Dr Tracey, if we could continue. We were talking about the justifiable purposes around breeding and that some of the justifiable purposes were around conservation. Do you anticipate that that type of breeding that we were talking about, of non-threatened or endangered species, might be required

to cease under the DPI's new requirements on having an approved breeding plan, which justifies the breeding of these animals?

KIM FILMER: I think we better take it on notice.

JOHN TRACEY: We'll take it on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: At the last estimates, we had just found out that Daniel Brighton's court case had concluded. Are you able to provide an update on what steps the department has taken since his conviction was finalised, noting the restrictions placed on him as someone convicted of serious animal cruelty?

JOHN TRACEY: Yes. As you're aware, with that amendment, it is an offence. Where a person is convicted of a serious animal cruelty offence, they cannot care for or work with animals. So we took immediate action in terms of Mr Brighton. He no longer holds an authority under the Exhibited Animals Protection Act and is no longer a person approved to exhibit animals there. There are some further investigations that we're undertaking, and so it would be inappropriate for us to talk about that here. But be assured that we are serious about that amendment, and we want to make sure that we put everything in place that we can.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Is he still involved at an administrative level?

JOHN TRACEY: Yes, he is.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What checks are being undertaken to ensure he isn't still working with those animals, particularly given he's still involved with the animal facilities at an administrative level?

JOHN TRACEY: We do undertake some investigations with that particular premises. We do follow up and check in terms of both administration as well as active inspections.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. You said that there were some further investigations taking place, which you can't talk about. Do you have any idea about when that might conclude?

JOHN TRACEY: They've just commenced. So it's going to take a little while.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. I've got some questions for Ms Fox in regards to the varroa mite response. I know that the former director general, Scott Hansen, had admitted publicly that there should've been more focus on ensuring traceability of hives in New South Wales prior to the varroa mite outbreak. I'm wondering what's being done to implement that traceability moving forward.

REBECCA FOX: I might hand over to Dr Tracey on that issue.

JOHN TRACEY: It is a priority. Traceability is an important part of all of the things that we do in biosecurity. That speed in which we can trace and track is a critical component. We do have now a transitional management plan that's been worked up with industry that has a big focus on education. It is about industry ownership and support for industry going forward as they transition. That could include some additional work around some of the traceability work for varroa going forward.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: As you say, the new control order has come into effect just recently. What are the key changes that are being made under this new management strategy? How long do you expect that new control order to be in place? Is this something that will expire in 12 months or do you expect that a new order will be in place fairly soon?

JOHN TRACEY: The last changes to the control order were really trying to reduce—be much less onerous for beekeepers, allowing movements across New South Wales but had ongoing requirements for beekeepers moving out of the management zone to the suppression zone. That's that high risk zone that we're worried about. There's a priority there about slowing the spread of varroa mite. There are some requirements to test hives prior to movement and to fill out movement conditions. In terms of the less onerous, queen bees are allowed to move and it's much more along the line of a transition plan for varroa mite.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Ms Fox, can you advise: When will the process open for applications for the new director general role?

REBECCA FOX: I don't have a date yet. I need to work with the Public Service Commission on that process and there'll be a mobility process that all those roles are required to undertake, but I don't have a firm time at this point.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Was Mr Hansen given an opportunity to be put on the public sector mobility list?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, he was.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Has the department undertaken any work in relation to spray drift in the Narromine-Trangie area?

REBECCA FOX: I think we might take that on notice, given it's the end of the day.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If so, has there been any work beyond education campaigns? Has the department been in contact with the EPA in relation to spray drift? Has the department approached any organic agriculturalist about the impact that the spray drift may be having on their products? Are you happy to take that on notice?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I can answer that. We have attended a meeting with producers from the Narromine-Trangie region about spray drift with EPA and we participated in a discussion with them. As you mentioned, we've done a lot of work around education and training in that area.

STEVE ORR: Ms Higginson, we've also done some work with the EPA on the spray drift question and we'll come back to you on exactly what that's been.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much. Just going back to something I mentioned earlier about blast and rice and the Northern Rivers, would somebody please take on notice and provide a response to the Committee about what is the history of knowledge the Government has in relation to blast in the Northern Rivers, please?

REBECCA FOX: Yes, we can do that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And then, is it possible to get an update on what is happening with section 21AA and cultural fishing within the department?

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Higginson, that was one of the election commitments of the Government to implement a regulation for cultural fishing. There's been work through advisory councils to prepare a draft regulation and that's awaiting Government consideration. If that proceeds along the pathway that is expected, then at some point that will come out for a community consultation process.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That a new regulation that you're referring to? Is that updated and your work is done and you've passed that on? Is that where we're up to?

SEAN SLOAN: It would be a new regulation for cultural fishing.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just going back to what happened in the Northern Rivers during the flood and all of that, as I understand, data lost that farmers held in terms of the chemical use that they had, is it something that the department is considering keeping a database about—something that farmers and agriculturalists can feed into for better systems of understanding?

REBECCA FOX: It's an interesting question. We'll take it on notice.

The CHAIR: That concludes questions from the Opposition and crossbench. I'm looking at the Government now.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I have got one, Chair. Mr Wheaton, there was a line of questioning from my colleague the Hon. Sam Faraway about a development in Orange—a not insignificant but major development. Throughout the course of questioning, my colleague was using the word "flipping". I lost count of how many times he used the word "flipping". I think it might've been a colloquial use of the word; I'm not sure. But I was concerned at the end that he, in fact, put the issue of flipping to you and you said, "Yes." You may not recall that and you may want to check the *Hansard*. If you do recall it now and you'd like to do so, would you like to confirm that you either agree or don't agree with the proposition put to you? Or would you like to take it on notice?

JONATHAN WHEATON: Sure. I can clarify. I took the inference as being that Mr Faraway was talking about the flipping of the project delivery and how that was happening, and the arrangement between council and the department. That has stayed the same in terms of the governance structure under the deed. But the sequencing is what I'm referencing, and I would agree that has then flipped, like you have said—that the original plan of how that project had been sequenced had been in a certain manner, and then the rectangle field would be delivered in the project sequencing before the athletics facility. I am absolutely comfortable that those arrangements with council and the way they're delivering the project has changed from what we had originally planned for the project.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's fine. As long as that's—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's the way I put it. For the record, the *Central Western Daily* on 17 February says, "Premier reveals shock switch for Orange's \$60 million sports precinct rollout." It's your own Government's media release, just for context.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It's the issue of flipping and which flipping we're talking about. I appreciate you being able to clarify.

JONATHAN WHEATON: I appreciate the opportunity. Through the Chair, just some additional information from the morning session. Mrs Taylor had asked about the Yaegl Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation and a grant that they had received under the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery fund. I can confirm that the department staff have worked with the organisation since July 2013 to obtain the information required to make the milestone payment.

REBECCA FOX: 2023 or 2013? You said 2013.

JONATHAN WHEATON: Sorry, 2023—to get the required information to make the milestone payment under the grant. I am advised that the funding deed variation has now been approved to facilitate the next payment, which should be approved and paid in a swift manner. With regards to withholding payments under the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery fund, the long story short with this program is that it's about a half-a-billion-dollar package worth of funding that was set up to assist economic, environment and social recovery following the fires in that cruel summer of 2019-20. Many of those projects are delivered by community organisations under the disaster recovery principles that are set by the Commonwealth. Community-led recovery is very important. Many projects around the State, not exclusively to that program, are having significant delivery challenges. We don't withhold milestone payments unless there is clear evidence that deliverables haven't been done.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: If you could still provide that in writing as to when that was reconciled—

JONATHAN WHEATON: For the Yaegl Aboriginal corporation?

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr Wheaton.

JONATHAN WHEATON: Can do.

The CHAIR: That's a great segue into everyone's favourite segment, which is "turning in your homework early", if there is any other homework that wants to be turned in early, saving you time. I'll go to Mr Dickson and then Mr Sloan. Ms Lorimer-Ward has her hand up as well.

ROSS DICKSON: Ms Higginson asked me about the return cycle in our native forest harvesting and whether there was a minimum. I indicated that there isn't. There actually is a minimum, and we have published that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What is it?

ROSS DICKSON: I don't know.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'll find it.

ROSS DICKSON: It is published.

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Hurst asked a question about the dolphin enclosure and the serving of alcohol. I'm advised that the animals are under constant supervision and behavioural indicators are continually monitored. All dolphins can self-exclude themselves from the lagoon pool, where they interact with the public, to a sanctuary area. While events held at the establishment are permitted to serve alcohol to guests, there's no alcohol consumption allowed by guests while they interact with the animals. Guests participating in dolphin experiences are monitored continually by three dedicated RSA staff members and one animal welfare staff member. The function areas are also under continuous CCTV monitoring, and no alcohol is consumed while guests swim with the dolphins.

The legislation does not explicitly prohibit the consumption of alcohol on exhibited animal establishments. However, the standards for exhibiting dolphins provide additional protection for safety and welfare, and I'm advised these standards are being met. These dolphin interactions by function groups have been assessed by the Zoo and Aquarium Association, the ZAA. The liquor licensing laws are enforced by Liquor and Gaming NSW, and they would most likely be the most appropriate agency to raise any concerns about failing to meet those requirements of the liquor licence.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But obviously not for animal welfare concerns.

SEAN SLOAN: If it's specific about the serving of alcohol, it's Liquor and Gaming NSW.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I was just going to answer the question about the last four years in terms of renewable energy developments that have been referred and responded to by DPI. For 2021 it's 45, for 2022 it was 88, for 2023 it was 109 and for 2024 it's 20 so far, to date.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: On notice, are you able to define them by region?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: We can, yes.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, also on that question about the limits on wharves, that rule or law is a Transport for NSW law, and it's the Ports and Maritime Administration Act 1995.

REBECCA FOX: Chair, I've got one more issue that wasn't raised that I expected to be raised today, which was our appearance online at the last hearing. I wanted to make sure that we placed on record our apologies to the Committee for any difficulty or offence that that caused.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: Thank you, we appreciate that.

The CHAIR: That's much appreciated.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The only thing I just wanted to say very quickly if I could, Mr Chair, with indulgence, is that many of us live in regional New South Wales. We've interacted with the agencies that you all represent, and the overwhelming majority of you are very good public servants. I quite enjoy this Committee. Whilst we have a job to do—it's a bit different these days—there's still a very high level of respect from the Opposition and, I'm sure, the crossbench for the work you do.

The CHAIR: On that positive note, we'll conclude before we descend into more hostilities. You have taken some questions on notice. You will be contacted by the secretariat about what they were and the time frames to get them back to us. Thank you very much for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.