

THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART, ON WEDNESDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2009

INQUIRY INTO THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF FOX ERADICATION PROGRAMS IN TASMANIA

Mr KIM EVANS, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, PARKS, WATER AND ENVIRONMENT; **Mr ALAN JOHNSTON**, MANAGER, FOX ERADICATION BRANCH; **Mr NICK MOONEY**, WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST; **Mr JOHN WHITTINGTON**, DEPUTY SECRETARY AND **Ms PENNY WELLS**, GENERAL MANAGER, RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Wilkinson) - Thank you for coming along.

Mr EVANS - Quite a bit has happened since we last gave evidence and we can update you on a few of those developments but I am sure that they will come up through the course of the discussion. There has been a field trip and it went very well. We have had the announcement about the Australian Government funding and we are working through how we are going to manage that at the moment.

Mr KONS - Have they decided not to stimulate you any further?

Mr EVANS - In the short term they have said that they will not stimulate us any further. The Premier wrote to the Prime Minister, and Minister Llewellyn wrote to Minister Garrett. On 7 September, Minister Llewellyn received a response from Minister Garrett. It is fair to say that we did not get a lot of joy out of that letter and that he was not prepared to review the funding, but he did open the door to a follow-up from the State in light of the Landcare review. So Minister Llewellyn is planning to go back to Minister Garrett in light of that review with a new approach to the question of funding, so we will be following that up. The minister is obviously going to pursue that fairly aggressively but at the moment we have confirmation of funding at a reduced level from last year.

CHAIR - How much is that reduction?

Mr EVANS - We had funds available in 2008-09 of \$2.53 million from the Commonwealth and we have had funding of \$1 million confirmed for the current financial year, so it is \$1.53 million or about 25 per cent of the overall funds available to the program.

CHAIR - What will that mean as far as the program is concerned?

Mr EVANS - We are working through that at the moment but we are going to have to scale back and set priorities. In terms of implementing the Landcare review, we are not going to be able to implement that at the speed we would have with the increased level of funding.

Mr JOHNSTON - We cannot walk away from the fact that it will have an impact if we convert it to staff numbers. During the last year - and obviously the numbers vary during the year - we had around 55 people. When we finish our current planning and work out our budgets and so forth we will probably have something in the low 40s, so roughly a 20 per cent reduction in staff numbers. So quite clearly it does have an impact but, as Kim said, at the moment we are in the middle of planning how we would implement the recommendations in the New Zealand review. Part of doing that, and it would probably have been part of our planning anyway, is looking at more efficient ways of doing things. So we will hopefully be finding some ways where the impact is not as great as the total funding impact would necessarily make it look, but we also cannot walk away from the fact that ultimately it will mean that we cannot deliver the plans that we want to put in place to implement that review at the rate that is talked about in that review. For instance, they talk about being able to bait the full area that is considered to be prime habitat over something like five years. I am guessing we will not be able to do it in five years and it will extend beyond that, assuming funding does not change from what has been suggested for this current financial year.

Mr DEAN - I quote from a statement made by Penny Wong on 20 August 2009 so you might be able to put this into context for me. This was from a question asked by Christine Milne in relation to the funding. Penny Wong said, 'The Government accepts the importance of controlling foxes in Tasmania. I am advised that it is not correct that the Australian Government has reduced its funding to Fox Free Tasmania. I am advised that in 2008-09 we provided \$980 000 and in 2009-10 a slight increase to \$1 million has been offered', and it goes on a lot more after that. They are saying that they have not decreased the funding at all, so what is the answer?

Mr EVANS - There is some background to this. John Whittington has been closely involved in dealing with the Commonwealth over the last two years and knows the history of the funding situation.

Mr WHITTINGTON - I will start by saying that this would be the seventh tranche of payments to the fox program since 2002, so you have to look at the funding profile over the seven tranches rather than individual amounts.

What Minister Wong said is technically correct but you need to note these things to put them into context. In 2007-08, the Australian Government provided a total of \$3.41 million to the program over two stages - known as stage 4 and additional funding for stage 4. Stage 4 commenced in April 2007, which was \$1.84 million, while the additional funding came in October 2007 of \$1.6 million. Because of the late confirmation of the second tranche of payment in that year, and building the program up from a very low level to a high level, we ended up carrying forward \$1.55 million into 2008-09. The Australian Government approved the carryover of those funds. So, in effect, the funding of the Commonwealth that was available to the program and was spent by the program in 2008-09 was the \$0.98 million alluded to by Minister Wong. Also the carry forward of \$1.55 million gives the \$2.53 million that was requested. So while technically correct, in practice there was \$2.53 million resulting from the \$3.4 million in the previous year of which \$1.55 million was carried forward - with the full knowledge and approval of the Commonwealth.

We can put that in writing so that you have the figures and the dates.

Mr DEAN - I think Hansard picked it up, but if it is not explained clearly there, I will seek it in writing -

CHAIR - As I understand it, a certain amount was offered for the 2007-08 period. The first part of that wasn't picked up until April. The next part wasn't picked up until the next financial year, and therefore that was carried forward as far as Tasmania was concerned, in relation to saying the sum was \$3.4 million. But the Commonwealth are saying, 'No, it was \$1.1 million - or whatever the figure was - but they would say that the previous money was offered the year before, even though it wasn't taken up until the following year. Is that the position?

Mr WHITTINGTON - In summary, yes. It is the difference of when the money was promised and when it was spent - that is what it comes down to.

Mr JOHNSTON - The other thing worth mentioning, just to complete the story, is that in that 2008-09 year we did spend the full \$2.53 million of the Commonwealth money so there was no carryover into this current financial year.

Ms WELLS - And this was with the full knowledge of the Commonwealth along the way so it wasn't as if we had kept back the money and they weren't aware of it.

CHAIR - Alan, you were talking about the lack of funding and how you were going to deal with that.

Mr JOHNSTON - I guess that probably in a roundabout way takes us back to the recommendations of the New Zealand review, and I believe you have seen those recommendations. I suppose the key recommendations are around the way we approach our baiting and monitoring programs. I am getting a little bit away from the question, but I think it leads on to it. As you know, we had a program that was based on baiting activities, monitoring and detecting activities and their recommendation is to continue with that but to refocus the priority of how we do that. What we are in the process of doing now is developing a couple of plans: one is a plan of how you would implement the baiting strategy that they have recommended and another for how you would implement the post-baiting monitoring strategy that they have recommended. In the process of doing that of course we need to do so with the knowledge we now have of what our resourcing will be. It is perhaps a little early to answer the question in full as to what the implications are because we have not completed that planning process. We are doing that planning, based on our current knowledge of what our resourcing will be.

Mr KONS - As far as current resourcing is concerned, is it curbing programs? Will you have enough money there to cover your staff in a holding sort of pattern until you get the result, or do you start looking at reducing your staff numbers?

Mr JOHNSTON - The money we have for this financial year is that reduction that has been talked about - of roughly \$1.5 million, so quite clearly we have to do things now to ensure that we manage that in the current financial year. There are some changes in staff numbers going on at the moment and the fallout of that will be when the dust settles a bit and we have some staff who complete contracts. Then we will go through a recruitment process where we will move from something like 55 staff last year to somewhere in the

low 40s in another three months or thereabouts. In between times we are in the interim period.

Mr HIDDING - What sort of staff have you ended up with so far in that process of getting them from other parts of the agency or the State Service?

Mr JOHNSTON - I think last time we said that we were going to recruit 11 staff. Through the State Service vacancy control program we ended up with two staff and we have just completed an external recruitment process for the other nine. So we have got back to filling those 11 positions through those two processes.

Mr HIDDING - What do you have in total now?

Mr JOHNSTON - I can't tell you the exact number.

Mr HIDDING - Are you in a low place?

Mr JOHNSTON - Well, I cannot answer your question as to exactly how many we have today but I will try answering it another way. At the end of September we have 20 people completing contracts, but during September we also have those nine people coming on that I have just mentioned. At the end of September when all those movements take place we will have about 36 staff. Taking on board that we will probably be able to eventually fund in the low 40s, sometime after September we will probably be able to recruit another half dozen or so.

Mr HIDDING - I haven't had a chance to look at the New Zealand thing in detail, but if you implement some of their recommendations, are you going to end up with the right staff for that? You seem to be hiring at the moment, right in the middle of some sort of review of your operations.

Mr JOHNSTON - I don't think that is a real issue. By and large this strategy that they have put in needs more or less the same skills of staff - in terms of field staff - but if you read it you will see that they have recommended that we explore the option of getting some scent-tracking dogs. A couple of positions that we have not had in the past that we would need to have to implement this would be dog-handlers for scent-tracking dogs.

Mr HIDDING - It might be appropriate to ask you in three paragraphs what you think this recommends you change to. I have had two reads of the short version, and both times I see it differently. How do you read this?

Mr JOHNSTON - I think the simple answer is that basically they are saying that we should adopt this precautionary approach. By that they mean that we should assume that there are foxes everywhere in what we define as a prime fox habitat.

Mr HIDDING - So far.

Mr JOHNSTON - We have defined what we believe is a reasonable -

Mr HIDDING - We declare the foxes are there.

Mr JOHNSTON - Yes. We don't therefore spend time trying to locate them within an area; we actually assume they are there and we endeavour to bait all that area. We then follow that up with monitoring and detection work after we have baited to see whether we can pick up any evidence of survivors following that work. If there are survivors, we take some actions to try to dispose of them; if we cannot locate any survivors, we keep moving forward.

Mr HIDDING - What does that mean?

Mr JOHNSTON - Our baiting continues to the next area. It becomes a rolling front.

Mr HIDDING - Until there is no evidence. You stay in an area until there is no evidence?

Mr JOHNSTON - No, not quite. You bait an area and then you continue to move forward and continue baiting, but behind that baiting, you would do some monitoring - assuming you found nothing - at a level which gave you sufficient confidence to say, 'We don't believe there are any foxes in this area.'

If, however, you do that monitoring and you do detect something, you then have to come back and do some targeted work in that area again.

Mr WHITTINGTON - It's almost as if you are running two teams - one baiting on the front and one monitoring behind in some sort of mop-up role.

Mr HIDDING - Having declared that there were foxes there, you then wouldn't have to waste your time trying to prove things, would you?

Mr JOHNSTON - They make the point strongly somewhere in that document that they believe we have spent far too much time and diverted too many of our resources to doing exactly what you are saying - trying to convince people that there are foxes here. We shouldn't be doing that; we should be devoting those resources to the eradication effort.

CHAIR - Good. A member of the committee was stating things that were very close to that. As a result of the pressure on you, you have to justify your existence.

Mr HIDDING - It's a terrible waste of money.

Mr DEAN - You are always going to be questioned on what you are doing. That is reasonable because you are spending lots of public money. What's wrong with that?

Mr EVANS - It's about having a balance in terms of your effort.

Mr DEAN - On the New Zealand Landcare report, I could have sat in my office and done that report. They did not have to go out anywhere to do it. They could have got all the information off the Internet, from the Fox Eradication Program and so on to do that report. They did not go out and independently speak to people in the field and so on.

Mr HIDDING - Were they not on the ground?

CHAIR - Did they come over here?

Mr JOHNSTON - Two of them spent a week in Tasmania. They spoke to a range of people, the majority admittedly from within our branch, but they did speak to other people in the community as well.

Mr DEAN - Nothing in the report suggests they did. They spoke to the Fox Eradication Program personnel and accessed a lot of reports and so on, but they do not say that they went out and spoke to other people.

Mr MOONEY - One of our major critics was offered the chance to speak to them but he knocked it back - David Obendorf.

Mr HIDDING - He did not want to speak to them?

Mr MOONEY - That is as I understand it.

Mr DEAN - I will take that further because I don't think that is right. The New Zealand Landcare group has undertaken and completed this report. Is it a member of the IA - invasive animals - CRC of which Professor Peacock is CEO or are they totally independent of the IACRC? Is the New Zealand Landcare group totally independent of Professor Peacock's group?

Mr JOHNSTON - You should probably talk to him about the exact connection. My understanding is that they are totally separate organisations, but Landcare Research New Zealand is a member of the CRC. As to what that means in terms of funding and so on, you would have to talk to him. I am not aware of it.

MS FORREST - Is Tasmania also part of that group?

Mr JOHNSTON - Yes, and a whole range of other universities, departments and so on.

Just on the New Zealand Landcare review team, a decision was made a couple of years ago that early this year we would get an external review of this program. We consulted with members of our management committee and technical advisory panel - and you have seen the list of members. We sought their advice as to who would be appropriate. The overwhelming feedback from those people was that Landcare Research New Zealand had the experience and expertise to do an appropriate review of our program.

Mr DEAN - Was it completed for \$40 000?

Mr JOHNSTON - Yes.

CHAIR - So you believe they were the best people you could have got at the time?

Mr JOHNSTON - Yes, certainly based on the advice we received about people with expertise in the area.

CHAIR - Who else could have done it?

Mr JOHNSTON - The only other group suggested was a university group from the USA. The point is that not many organisations have extensive experience in eradication programs and reviewing them, or have the range of professional staff for input into a program like this. While two people came to Tasmania, of course they drew on the expertise of other people in their organisation.

CHAIR - In relation to volunteers, how many are there and would more be required as a result of the decrease in paid salary hours?

Mr JOHNSTON - We have used volunteers as part of the scats survey. It has not been enormously successful in getting large numbers involved. There is a range of reasons for that, such as finding people who can give a reasonable amount of their time to be away at remote places. Last year we had about 10 people for varying periods, from a few days to a few weeks.

One of the things we need to do better is accessing that pool of volunteers to enable us to do some of those things. At this point I do not have answers as to how we can do it better but we recognise that we need to find better ways of making it attractive to volunteers to do that type of work for us.

Mr WHITTINGTON - Whilst we are very grateful for volunteer effort it comes at quite a cost in managing OH&S for volunteers. There are certain tasks that are not well suited to volunteers for all sorts of reasons - like training and competency required. It is a difficult balancing act to find attractive tasks for volunteers but not to spend more money managing the volunteers that it would cost to implement the program itself. That is the bind we find ourselves in.

Mr HIDDING - But the right kind of volunteers, such as a landowner and his staff, have particular skills on a certain property. This bring us to another matter - access to properties. Are you considering reviewing your operations in light of this?

Ms WELLS - The management committee of the program commissioned the report. The committee received a draft of that report and provided comments, and a final report from the Landcare research team has now been provided to us. We have since been considering it. The committee had a meeting with the Landcare research team at which they presented that report to the committee. Following that presentation, the committee considered the report collectively - which includes the Australian and Tasmanian government representatives. The committee has accepted the report pretty much in its entirety and has asked the program to consider plans to implement the key recommendations in the report. That is what the branch is doing at the moment.

Mr HIDDING - You are not horrified by the report?

Ms WELLS - The management committee considered that the report had a fair approach and it welcomed the recommendations. The recommendations did not radically change the direction of the program; it essentially built on the tools of the program and acknowledged that there are always ways that you can use those tools better and use the resources more efficiently.

Mr HIDDING - Thank you. I understand now the status of that and from our point of view there is a likelihood that you are going down this path. Given that, there is a statement in here that that path cannot be trodden without there being access to properties. Is there no mechanism that we could currently use to apply a current head of power, or do we need a brand new one?

Mr EVANS - We would need to strengthen our statutory powers to do that. When we were here last you asked us to frame some recommendations from our perspective that this committee might like to consider. One of those was that we look at steps to strengthen statutory powers and I think the direction that we would need to take to implement the Landcare review recommendations using the precautionary approach would require us to move in that direction.

Mr KONS - It would be better to have legislated powers of access rather than a random agreement with the TFGA and those organisations?

Mr EVANS - Having said that, my understanding is - and Alan can correct me if I am wrong - that the level of cooperation from landowners has been very high.

Mr KONS - But you need that next level.

Mr DEAN - This is the issue I raised the last time you appeared - that of access to properties. You said there were only a very small number that wouldn't allow you access. Our New Zealand mates have written a bit on that and they really are saying that if you were serious about it, you would have that right to access any property as you needed the access. Do you now have a strong position on that matter, in the light of New Zealand's strong position?

Mr EVANS - Yes, and I go back to my point that we had framed that as a recommendation to this committee prior to getting that report, so that is consistent with our view.

Mr KONS - What time frame would you have for legislative support for undertaking this process?

Mr EVANS - That would depend on the Government, but we would want to do that as quickly as we could.

Mr HIDDING - If our report recommended that -

Mr DEAN - There are a couple of other matters that came out of this report. They are very strong on the fact that you now need to go one step further. They say here that you are concentrating on the finding of scats. However, you don't seem to want to take that any further. What they are saying is that you now need to train dogs to get out there and sniff out the foxes, find out where they are and find where the dens are so that you can kill them. Is that a position that you have considered previously, or will you now consider that? What is your intention in relation to that recommendation of the report?

Mr JOHNSTON - We have dabbled in that area - we have tried scent dogs in the past with limited success. No doubt as a result of this recommendation and because we were reaching the point ourselves of realising that that was the next step we needed to take,

this has really reinforced our thinking rather than being something that has totally come from left field. When I said we are doing the baiting and planning for monitoring, we are also developing a plan for introducing scent dogs into the program as well.

Mr DEAN - That is an important point. The other point I want to make is that they refer to the scats, saying that a fox will drop seven to eight scats a day. They raise the issue that all the scats found to date have been identified as having come from individual foxes, not two or three scats having come from the same fox. Do you find that an interesting point?

Mr JOHNSTON - Just to make it perfectly clear, the gene work has only been successful on 10 of the scats, so it is only for this group that scientists are able to say to us that those 10 scats are from separate individuals. So we are not in a position to say that all 42 were from separate animals - we can only say that with 10 of them.

Mr MOONEY - There were two options there. One is that our detection probabilities in researching the scats are actually lower than we suspect they are and the chances of finding scats are very low. Most of these scats were found some kilometres apart. In the normal fox population it would be no surprise that they are from different foxes.

The other option is that the foxes are doing something they don't normally do - that is, they are moving around a lot more than they do in a normal population. The scientists are not stating, but they are implying that with a population that has neighbours there is restricted movement. Our foxes usually don't have foxes as neighbours and therefore they might be doing something quite different. This has been suggested not only by the New Zealanders but also by all sorts of sensible people inside and outside the department for years. We don't know. There are two ways of looking at this, and indeed I suspect it could be both those options put together - that we are not very good at finding scats and the animals, without neighbours, are quite likely to be doing something different than they would if they had neighbours.

Ms FORREST - On that point, you made reference earlier to the scent dogs - are we talking about a dog that sniffs out the scent of a fox rather than the scats alone?

Mr JOHNSTON - They are separate issues. The dogs that we have now are trained simply to detect the scats; the new type of dog that has been suggested is a dog that would actually track the scent of a fox.

Ms FORREST - We don't have any of those dogs currently, do we?

Mr JOHNSTON - No, we don't.

Mr DEAN - The next question I have is that the research here demonstrates that the number of reported fox sightings continues to impress; the table in this report says that in 2006 there were 21.8 sightings per month. In 2009 it went up to 27 sightings per month. What do you make of that when you are out there baiting and you have all these other things in place to control these foxes - I think you are saying that you don't know whether your baiting program is successful or not. Do we have more foxes? If you were successful, one would expect that the fox sightings would be decreasing, but they are increasing. What do you make of that?

Mr MOONEY - One obvious option is that we are only baiting in a small area where foxes occur. So we are only affecting a minority of the fox population. If the precautionary presumption is right - that is, that we do have foxes widespread and more or less in most ideal habitats - we certainly have not made it anywhere near most ideal habitats, so it may be -

Mr DEAN - Why wouldn't you bait near all the ideal habitats?

Mr MOONEY - Because we don't have enough resources to cover all that area - it is a huge area.

Mr JOHNSTON - If you look at a map you will see the extent of it.

Mr MOONEY - It is about a quarter of the State.

That is one option. The other option is that as more and more people get familiar with the program they tend to be more helpful and ring up. There is a social side to sighting reports, be they of foxes or anything else, that is not necessarily connected to reality. That is problem with eyewitness reports of any sort. There is a glass ceiling on how useful they are. The third option is, as you were implying, Mr Dean, that fox numbers are increasing.

Mr DEAN - I am not implying that. I am questioning your view. Do you believe that the numbers of foxes are increasing?

Mr JOHNSTON - I think all we can say is that there is no evidence to tell us that they are. With those numbers you are quoting, there are so many variables that can influence them. They are interesting to look at but to draw a conclusion from them is not sensible. We did a public meeting in Cygnet about two weeks ago. Subsequent to that meeting we have had a heap of calls from that area, so it could be as simple as that - more publicity and activity in the area, which simply encourages more responses.

Mr MOONEY - Having said that, we would be much happier if the numbers were going the other way.

Mr JOHNSTON - Yes. We look at them as interesting numbers but we do not believe you can draw conclusions from them.

Mr MOONEY - But they are not comfortable numbers.

CHAIR - As a result of those numbers, you would have more reason to be concerned that the eradication program is not working and that you need to do something more to continue the eradication program as opposed the control program.

Mr MOONEY - The New Zealanders make some very simple and well-put points, and they are not all comfortable for us. One of them is that the history of eradication programs clearly shows that the longer they go on, the greater the chance of failure. Sooner or later the foxes get lucky. That is what you are observing and we understand that quite clearly.

Mr JOHNSTON - Talking about numbers, here is another interesting set of numbers, but what conclusions do you draw? Last calendar year we had 26 positive scats, but so far this year we have had seven. Again, we do not want to draw any specific conclusions from that, but you could take some comfort that information from our scat collection is not blowing the whole thing out of the water.

Mr MOONEY - As long as the effort going in is comparable. That is one positive thing about considering eyewitness accounts. You hope that the effort is comparable between years - much the same population, people circulating and so on. However, the interest does change nonetheless.

Mr DEAN - I noted some criticism of your reaction times - and this inquiry is about the effectiveness and efficiency of the group. They say that from the time you find a scat or strong evidence of the existence of a fox, the fox eradication program is very 'sluggish' in responding, getting out there and baiting the area and so on. Is that accurate? If so, what can you do with the current staff and funding to do something about it?

Mr JOHNSTON - There is a degree of fairness in that assessment. On occasion we have not reacted as quickly as we could. There are also some extenuating circumstances that make the numbers not quite as clear as they appear. We always have that delay between the scat collection and our receiving a result. That delay is sometimes out of our control. In some cases we have not been able to react because of the location of scats - because they are in Burnie and surrounding areas. There would appear not to have been a reaction on our part but that might not be the case. It might be, and in many cases is, that we have not baited in the immediate surrounds of that scat because we can't, but we have baited in adjacent areas and perhaps they did not pick that up. The third reason is resources. Sometimes we have people working in one area and we have had to make a decision about whether we withdraw people from that area in order to respond in another area or do we keep going. Sometimes we have made the decision to keep going where we are rather than react to the scat result elsewhere.

I am not trying to avoid the comment; there is a degree of truth in it, but it is not as clear as they suggest in that document.

Mr WHITTINGTON - It is also part of the program design. Decisions were made as to where we would get the most bang for bucks in baiting. They are planned six to 12 months ahead to get landowner consent, organise baiting teams and mobilise staff to that part of the State. The program was designed to put considerable effort into targeted areas for baiting. The question becomes: how much you divert that planning to a reactive program? The Landcare people have looked at our strategies and have said that an alternative strategy is the precautionary approach, which is that you do not react because you are not out searching. You start with the presumption that foxes are everywhere and you have a rolling line of baiting across the State. So they have looked at the program design, have commented on its consequences, which can be sluggish response times to baiting areas, in order to redesign the program on that basis.

Mr DEAN - How much in the last three years has the Fox Eradication Program expended on purchase of baits. In 2006-07 the allocation for baits alone for one financial year was over \$1 million. Is that accurate? How much have you spent on purchasing baits?

Mr HIDDING - Is that not enough, or too much?

Mr DEAN - I want to find out, and how many baits you have purchased all up. It seems a huge amount of money to spend on baits.

Mr JOHNSTON - I thought I had the number here but I haven't. In 2007-08, we laid 46 000 baits and they cost roughly \$1 each. In 2008-09 we laid 27 000 baits, so the figure is in the \$30-50 000 range rather than the number suggested.

Mr DEAN - Are you able to provide me with the answer for 2006-07, where it has been suggested that expenditure on baits was in excess of \$1 million

Mr JOHNSTON - I can get that information for you.

Mr HIDDING - Did you lay or buy a million baits?

Mr JOHNSTON - I am very confident that it would not be anything of that order. It might have been somewhat higher than these figures but nothing of that sort.

Mr MOONEY - I believe several times there has been an effort to assess the cost of laying a bait and retrieving it. That might add up to something more like that because that includes vehicles, wages and so on, but that figure seems an awful long way from anything I have ever seen.

CHAIR - It is still like trying to find a needle in a haystack. We have vast and heavily forested areas, 47 per cent of the State is covered in forest, and scats are hard to detect to the untrained eye. I was going for a walk on Saturday morning at Webb Dock and to hear that there are vast numbers of foxes in the area amazed me, so I don't envy your task.

Mr DEAN - What does the Fox Eradication Program pay out to these people on these committees that are currently a part of the whole program?

Mr EVANS - The advisory committee?

Mr DEAN - Yes.

Mr EVANS - The chair of our technical advisory panel is paid a fee of \$10 000, and most of the others get nothing, but some get travel and accommodation. There are no sitting fees involved, other than for the chair.

Mr DEAN - So the chair gets \$10 000 plus expenses?

Mr EVANS - Yes. Well, expenses as in travel and accommodation. They usually come to the State three or four times a year.

Mr DEAN - So the others don't get a sitting fee or anything like that?

Mr EVANS - No.

Mr DEAN - Are you aware of the recently published paper in wildlife research and the comparison of different methods of detecting foxes at low densities, and also whether or not those recently published results have informed the Fox Eradication Program in their field activities? Have you taken notice of that report or used it in any way to change the way in which you do your field activities?

Mr MOONEY - If I could answer that - I am a co-author of that paper, so I am familiar with it. We actually initiated that paper. It was based on the issue up at Arthursleigh in New South Wales, where we designed an experiment and had a Masters student undertake it, where we marked some foxes to make what we called 'virtual rare foxes' and see what sort of effort it took to try to find those individuals. I have a copy of the original thesis here. At super low densities, where you are just looking for a particular fox in that circumstance, it is clear that a chance observation was the most reliable method, which is more a comment on how difficult it is to find very rare animals. In fact, the ability to photograph an animal was barely useful, but it was still the most useful compared to a scent station where you were trying to provoke an animal into leaving a scat. In trying to apply that to what we are doing here - the usefulness of cameras is recognised but it is not magic; it still needs an application and detection probability applied.

Catch-22 comes in here: I am sceptical of many eyewitness accounts, but that is still a legitimate way to record rare animals. Clearly the one advantage of the scat deposition is that a fox can leave scats in lots of places, but obviously a camera has a very limited range and you cannot have cameras placed everywhere a fox might leave a scat - if that makes sense. That is the logic that follows about us focusing a lot on scats. It is a very useful bit of work, and unfortunately the sample size, when we got to very rare foxes, was such that it wasn't terribly useful to publish. That work was carried out in 2003-04 and we watched it with great interest, hoping for some unusually positive answers, but unfortunately there was nothing absolutely outstanding. We are in touch with the principal author pretty regularly to see whether she has any other ideas.

Mr DEAN - My other question is about another document you have provided us with - I want to know what it meant to you and whether, I guess, it had any information in it that was helpful or inaccurate. I refer to a document provided by David Obendorf, which contained a number of assumptions in relation to foxes in Tasmania. I think that he went into a lot of scientific detail in relation to the foxes.

Mr JOHNSTON - That goes back to before my time in the program.

Mr DEAN - I wasn't quite sure when it was, but I thought it had been provided to you with a number of findings and statements and I wondered whether that had been used as part of your activities and processes, or whether it was an inaccurate document.

Mr MOONEY - I can recall a document that meets that description, but I cannot remember the date - it was some time ago. Quite a few of the suggestions that David Obendorf makes are useful, but some of them aren't. We try to keep a clear head and trawl all of them, along with the other advice that we get. We cherry-pick to try to get the sensible stuff that has a good rationale behind it.

CHAIR - Did David Obendorf work on the program before? Has he a history in relation to the program?

Mr MOONEY - Only what you are familiar with. David Obendorf was a vet in the very early days - up to a decade or so ago - and was very active. Had he still been with the department, presumably he would have been right in the middle of it.

Mr DEAN - They still call on him for a few activities. I know we are up against it timewise - I had about another 40 questions to ask -

Mr HIDDING - It is not going to happen, I can tell you!

Mr DEAN - I know that.

Mr HIDDING - Why don't you put them on notice?

Mr DEAN - I might have to do that. How much funding has then IACRC received, either directly or from the department or from any other Commonwealth source, earmarked specifically for the Tasmanian Fox Eradication Program?

Mr JOHNSTON - They have received none from us. We have received funding from them.

Mr DEAN - Right. So no funding goes to them that is earmarked for the Fox Eradication Program.

Chair, I do have a lot of other questions, but I can see there is a time problem. I am happy to put those in documentary form -

CHAIR - Yes, it would seem to me that if there are about 40 questions, it might be best if there is no objection to them being in written form.

Mr EVANS - We are happy to take questions on notice.

Mr JOHNSTON - And clearly, some of the information we do not have with us today.

CHAIR - It is always a bit hard when you are up the other end of the State at the end of a telephone. Did you have any questions that you wanted to ask, Ruth?

Ms FORREST - Not specifically. It has been a bit hard to hear the questions.

CHAIR - We are doing the best we can. Any other questions or any other issues that you want to raise?

Mr HIDDING - We were talking earlier about the landholder aspect and we are to receive some advice on the draft recommendations on that. Have we had any discussions with the TFGA on how they might move forward in a positive way in, say, partnership arrangements with property owners? It seems to me that you might have a whole bunch of sceptics, but I was at a meeting down in the Midlands where a couple of very senior, crusty old farmers who listened to some of the stuff basically stood up and said, 'Get over it. They are here and we ought to go after them.' Those two guys alone represent a hell of a lot of acres in Tasmania, and if you get those sorts of property owners saying to their staff and their families, 'Listen, for public policy purposes let us accept that they are here,

and let us declare this a fox-free farm. Let us enter into some partnership to do whatever it takes.'

Mr JOHNSTON - We haven't quite got it in the way you have described. Clearly we have kept in contact with TFGA and briefed them about our program. We have also from time to time discussed this potential problem of not being able to get onto properties, but I think, as we have pointed out previously when we have been here, it hasn't really reared its head to the point where it is a fatal flaw for us at the moment. However, it is in our mind that it could potentially be so, and we need to explore more proactive ways of addressing the matter. The TFGA is aware of the problem and, as an organisation, I think they are supportive. But I guess we now have to look at taking it beyond that.

Mr MOONEY - It would be fair to say that we have never been able to cover that much ground that we haven't had somewhere else to go if we couldn't go to a particular property and still use all our resources, so to speak. If we were covering all the ground that the New Zealanders would like us to cover, then probably those properties would become more outstanding.

Mr DEAN - A couple of questions on the latest situation in the Huon. Is it right to say that prior to this you hadn't had many sightings down in that area?

Mr JOHNSTON - Again you have caught me on the hop a bit in terms of not having exactly that information. We have had a regular flow of sightings but at the same time I wouldn't say we have ever considered it to be a high reported sighting area. There has been a regular number in the general area, but nothing exceptional.

Mr DEAN - Is that an indication now that you really have foxes pretty well right around the State - I guess with the exception of right down in the south-east and south-west? Is it a matter of concern?

Mr JOHNSTON - We have to admit that we are rather concerned about that particular one because it was so far outside any other hard evidence we have had. Certainly in that sense it is of concern to us. It doesn't really answer your question as to whether we have foxes all over the State; we still only have evidence from this spot, this spot and that spot. We do not have a density of them all over the State, but we cannot walk away from the fact that that particular find is of concern to us.

Mr DEAN - And are you baiting heavily down there at present?

Mr JOHNSTON - There is a baiting program under way this week.

Mr DEAN - Are there sightings coming back from that area?

Mr JOHNSTON - As I said before, following that public meeting we had there, we received a lot of phone calls from people - usually referring to sightings in the past rather than at the time.

CHAIR - If there are no further questions, I thank the witnesses. Their attendance is much appreciated.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.