



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. Gavin Pearce MP

Tuesday 18 November 2025

MEMBERS

Mr Rob Fairs (Chair)
Mr Dean Winter (Deputy Chair)
Mr Vica Bayley
Prof George Razay

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Mr Di Falco
Ms Finlay
Mr Garland
Mr George
Ms Dow
Ms Badger
Ms Butler
Mr Bayley

IN ATTENDANCE

HON. GAVIN PEARCE MP

Minister for Primary Industries and Water, Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

Primary Industries and Water portfolio

Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania

Jason Jacobi

Secretary

Mandy Clarke

A/Deputy Secretary, Primary Industries and Water

David Midson

General Manager (Marine)

Justin Helmich

A/General Manager (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Louise Wilson

Deputy Secretary Environment, Heritage and Land

Jo Crisp

General Manager (Environment)

Lyn Albert

Director, Policy, Projects and Regulatory Services

Kris Carlyon

Section Head, Wildlife Health and Marine

John Adams

Acting Director, AgroGrowth

Deirdre Wilson

A/Chief Operations Officer

Adrian Pearce

Manager (Finance)

Inland Fisheries Services

Ryan Wilkinson

Director (Inland Fisheries)

Veterans' Affairs portfolio

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Shane Gregory
Associate Secretary

Melanie Brown
Director Executive and Government Services (Acting)

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CHAIR - The time being 3.38 p.m., the scrutiny of the Primary Industries and Water portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table, names and positions for the benefit of Hansard.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee. It's great to be with you all. I have on my right Jason Jacobi, the secretary of NRE, and to his right is Mandy Clarke, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Primary Industries and Water.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. The time scheduled for the Estimates of the Minister for Primary Industries and Water is 3.5 hours. We will take a short break for afternoon tea at 5.00 p.m. Would the minister like to make a short opening statement?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. Our primary industries sector plays a vital role in driving Tasmania and its economy forward and supporting our rural and regional communities. We're on target to grow our farmgate value of of agriculture to \$10 billion by 2050. It was \$2.46 billion at last count, growing by 5 per cent on the year previous. To maintain momentum, we are developing a new long-term agricultural strategy. This will focus on boosting productivity and unlocking opportunities across freight, agritourism, education, infrastructure and workforce development.

This Budget includes \$2.25 million to continue delivering the government's Tasmanian Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan which will allow further actions to sustainably manage wild fallow deer populations. As part of this commitment we are reviewing the state's deer management policies in order to make it simpler and easier to manage deer populations across the state. The review aims to reduce red tape, streamline permits and create a system that is clear, consistent and effective. I am pleased to announce that public consultation is now open for the 2025 Deer Management Plan Policy Review until 5 January 2026.

The 2025 review focuses on two key components. The first is streamlining zone 1 permits to reduce administration for landholders and make permits consistent across all zones statewide. Second, we are continuing to make zone 3 a complete eradication zone, removing deer from conservation areas, wilderness regions and periurban environments where they become a present risk. The review also supports our recreational hunting community by working to increase the numbers of crown land reserves available for hunting through the annual male deer ballot and antlerless deer booking system.

Importantly, a number of appropriate sites have already been identified and consultation is underway with interested parties. This review is key to effective deer management populations and is delivering on our election commitments to streamline zone 1 permits and progress work to unlock more public land for recreational hunting.

The Budget also includes an additional \$1.5 million over a two-year period for agricultural research and development funds, which is on top of core funding of around \$5 million per annum for the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture. The Tasmanian government continues to invest in industry-relevant agricultural research to address emerging opportunities and the issues that are likely to have direct impact on the productivity of Tasmanian agriculture. For example, the potato mop-top virus research program will be delivered over the next 18 months.

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We've also invested \$440,000 to support the ongoing rollout of the Rural Water Use Strategy. The strategy will ensure that we have good freshwater management information, complementing other key projects like developing water security strategies for King and Flinders islands.

The Budget also continues to deliver on key programs that support Tasmanian agricultural and rural communities, including the Strategic Industry Partnership Program and the Forum of Rural Stakeholders.

Biosecurity Tasmania works with government, industry and community to respond to keep Tasmania free from diseases and pathogens. This includes our success in keeping out a lot of the invasive pests that have plagued our mainland neighbours such as the Varroa mite and Queensland fruit fly. We're also continuing to prepare for pathogenic avian influenza, which is important work underway and includes projects for cat and dog welfare, weeds, traceability, invasive species and rabbit management.

Biosecurity Tasmania is also working collaboratively to respond to the salmon mortality events. We know that the primary cause of salmon mortality was the endemic bacterium *Piscirickettsia salmonis* and mortality events of this kind are not unexpected during summer months when warmer waters and other environmental stressors can exacerbate fish health issues.

While these events can occur independently, it is uncommon to see several in close succession, which is why NRE Tasmania and the EPA have released the Reflections and Learnings - 2025 Salmon Mortality Event report that outlines post-event reflections, learnings and actions that have been gathered through multiagency operational debrief processes. This leads into maintaining our waterways for commercial and recreational fishing, which remains a focus of our government.

The Budget also includes ongoing funding of \$375,000 per annum for the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies to continue its important work and world-class research in core fisheries. This will ensure that we maintain sustainable and productive fisheries for all sectors for all Tasmanians. The Tasmanian government has released the Tasmanian Fisheries White Paper, which lays out the pathway to modernise the state's fisheries management framework, focusing on best-practice management to sustainably manage our important fish stocks.

We have invested in jetties and pontoons around the state through the Better Fishing Grants program, with \$760,000 in funding delivered under the program as part of a \$3 million government funding commitment to our saltwater angling community. This has seen improvements from King Island to Kingsborough.

Finally, the Budget also includes \$40,000 as a contribution to a new fisheries digitisation road map to lay out the pathway for improved digitisation in management of our commercial fisheries. The Budget extends for another year a commitment of \$110,000 to biotoxin testing in Tasmania through the ShellMAP program to offset testing costs paid by the fishing and shellfish aquaculture industries to an amount equivalent to the value received from the testing to recreational fishers.

That concludes my opening statement. I am open to any questions.

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Ms FINLAY - Minister, thanks for the overview and the work that you've done so far in the sector. No doubt the session today is going to be hijacked by a whole lot of commentary around fisheries, but as you've outlined in your introduction, there's a lot of other important things that are happening in Tasmania. I hope you're strong enough to be up for it and provide clarity in those conversations today.

I want to start with land-based agriculture and irrigation. You talk about wanting to increase the farmgate value by 2050 and to do that we've got to support our farmers. Two particular schemes are of interest to me. The first is the Tamar scheme. This scheme has been held up being delivered by the inability of your government to activate the industrial water and to recognise the importance of industrial water at Bell Bay and the value that provides to farmers on the way through. Can you tell me specifically what you're doing to ensure the farmers of the Tamar Valley are supported by the water due to your advocacy on industrial water? We can't wait for a proponent, we need the water to come through. What are you specifically doing to support that scheme get up?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for the question. It is an important scheme. In fact, I visited there a couple of weeks ago and talked to some of the irrigators up there. We had a meeting directly after that visit with Tasmanian Irrigation (TI) and other interested parties that were part of that project. It's aimed to deliver that water to the Tamar Valley to increase the agricultural produce and thresholds within that region, but it does, as you rightly point out, depend heavily on that commercial component. The issue TI have with this is -

Ms FINLAY - I'm not asking about TI's concerns, minister, I'm asking what specifically you're doing for the government to underwrite that water to Bell Bay?

Mr PEARCE - Okay, I'll go back to what I was saying. In discussions with TI, they have exhausted their advertising and their take-up of that water. Basically, they can't get enough water sold to stand up the business model and make that viable.

Ms FINLAY - I understand that, minister. I spent days taking the legislation through the parliament to make sure there was an instrument for you to allow industrial water to be added to the scheme so it's viable. What I want to know is, given that there are no active proponents seeking to buy water, what is the government doing - with the way we manage road infrastructure, the way we manage everything else - to prepare for the future? What are you, as minister for Agriculture, doing to support a decision by government to get the industrial water happening so the farmers can get their water on the way through?

Mr PEARCE - We understand that project is underpinned by that commerciality part of that equation. To that end, the viability of that happening is unsure. What we have done - that's the question you're asking, or I've written, and we've progressed this through ReCFIT for federal assistance, maybe in the energy space. We could look at providing that injection from maybe the clean energy fund, something around hydrogen production or whatever the case may be. If there was a project that would offset the viability of that great scheme, then we should look to the feds and that system they have.

Ms FINLAY - Do you know how much is required by the state to actually secure the industrial tranche of the scheme so that the farmers can get the water? What's the government looking for in terms of how much it would need to secure water to the industrial sites?

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Mr PEARCE - I can take that on notice and give you that exact number.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you

Mr PEARCE - Next week, you'll have TI in for scrutiny and they'll be able to have that number at their fingertips.

Ms FINLAY - I understand TI's position. What it actually needs now is intervention by government to make a proactive decision about the Bell Bay water without a proponent, so the farmers can get their water.

Mr PEARCE - It's also going to need that federal injection from funds that already exist. If we can utilise those funds -

Ms FINLAY - What did you ask the federals for?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please let the minister answer. I've given you a lot of leeway.

Ms FINLAY - He's doing a good job, Chair. I'm just wondering what the specific ask has been to the feds.

Mr PEARCE - The specific ask for the feds, through ReCFIT, is that we look at the clean energy scheme, or some other funding arrangement that they have, providing that surety for the amount.

Ms FINLAY - Have you asked for an amount?

Mr PEARCE - We're finding out what they've got and what is available first, and what the statutes of that deed would look like. ReCFIT have already commenced that process and they're working in conjunction with TI to come up with viable federal options.

Dr WOODRUFF - Minister, in the past 18 months, have you, as an individual, been subject to, or party to, any Supreme Court matters? It's not a trick question, just in case you're wondering.

Mr PEARCE - No.

Dr WOODRUFF - In the past 18 months, have you as an individual incurred any legal costs that have been covered by taxpayer dollars?

Mr PEARCE - No.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you.

Prof RAZAY - The current dam safety framework places significant inspection compliance costs on dam owners and our farmers, with inspections by suitably qualified practitioners estimated at \$10,000 to \$15,000. That compliance rate, according to this year's figures, suggest that 74 per cent of high-risk dam owners were not compliant at the time. Does this level of non-compliance indicate a failure of our current regulatory regime, and what consideration has the government given to alleviate the compliance costs for our farmers?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. Dam safety is important to our industry, as it is to all Tasmanians. Through our dam safety program, NRE Tasmania is proactively supporting owners of high-risk dams to meet their dam safety monitoring and reporting obligations. This is important to mitigate the risks of potential dam failure impacting life and property. Dam safety is prescribed in the *Water Management Act 1999* and the Water Management (Safety of Dams) Regulations 2015. The act and regulations have been developed based on the national best practice ANCOLD guidelines.

I'm aware that some private dam owners have raised concerns, as you rightly point out, and they have to me also, around the costs of meeting their dam safety obligations. A review of Tasmania's dam safety regulations is currently underway. That is ongoing. Farmer and public feedback will be invited through this process.

Tasmania's existing dam safety regulations are due to expire on 15 December this year, so it is proposed that they are remade, with minor administrative changes, for one year, while a more comprehensive review and that feedback process takes place. This review is to be undertaken by NRE Tasmania and will consider the national best practice, as well as ensuring that our reporting obligations do not pose undue burden on dam owners, particularly land owners with smaller and older dams that haven't given any trouble in the past. Extending the existing regulations will also allow time for public consultation and to give that feedback to-and-fro with our agricultural sector. Does that clear up your question?

Prof RAZAY - Thank you very much.

Mr GEORGE - I regret that Ms Finlay, the Member for Bass, considers any questions about salmon as being hijacked. I care as much about the waterways as she does.

Ms FINLAY - I'm not intending to hijack the conversation.

Mr GEORGE - I'd like to refer to an excellent maiden speech by the minister in which he refers to Jamie Oliver, a beef producer who produces the very best beef in the country. They do it from the very ethical perspective of never, ever - meaning no antibiotics, ever. He goes on to say:

I think he's on the right track, I think understands Tasmanian agriculture and he wants to unlock that. Our agricultural sector could learn a lot from that.

You also say, minister, that

It tells me that nature and agribusiness can coincide, they can work together as long as we get the balance right, as long as we get the science right, as long as we look after the environment, as long as we look after our animals, et cetera.

So how on earth can you justify the early, major usage of antibiotics to keep diseased animals alive in our waterways? So much so that the nearby lobster fishing industry, our iconic crayfish, actually has to be closed down to take account of it. How do you justify that?

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Ms FINLAY - How do you justify using our rock lobster fishers in your political debate?

CHAIR - Order, order. The minister has the call.

Mr GEORGE - I don't. I'm just using the facts.

CHAIR - Order. Minister.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks, Chair. Thanks for listening to my maiden speech, I appreciate that you remembered so much of it. It means a lot to me, and so does agriculture, and so do my animals. In fact, I don't think there's a farmer out there - doesn't matter what you're farming - who doesn't care very deeply for their animals. They are front and foremost in everything we do in our farming operation.

I mentioned the GAP program, the Global Animal Partnership, which Greenham runs. I'm a member. I must disclose I'm a Greenham supplier of Angus beef cattle into Greenham, and we are under the Global Animal Partnership, which is the highest animal husbandry threshold that Greenham has. It's an internationally recognised scheme.

As part of that scheme, as you rightly point out, we have a NEVER EVER program, so we don't administer antibiotics or antimicrobials unless we absolutely have to. There are times when we have to. When that animal is sick, it needs medication. When that animal needs an antimicrobial to get over the particular infestation of that disease, then we administer. What happens is a red tag goes in the animal's left ear, and it is excluded from the herd and from the program until such time as it can be completely free from that antimicrobial.

It's not that we never, ever use it, it's that we never, ever put that into the system unless it is listed, documented and very carefully monitored. I stand by the fact that if an animal is sick and needs medication, then it should be given it by an appropriately qualified veterinarian. I don't think there's too many people in this state, in this country, that would disagree with my sentiment. Sick animals need looking after.

Mr GEORGE - So can I just follow that up by asking -

CHAIR - Sorry, Mr George, only one question.

Mr GEORGE - That's a follow-up.

CHAIR - Yeah, no. Don't worry, we'll move around. Mr Ferguson.

Mr FERGUSON - Congratulations on your appointment, minister. I also congratulate you on your first speech. It was stunning. I want to ask you about the deer management policy review, which you referenced in your opening statement. This is a real issue, as you know, around the state, whether you're an agricultural producer, a hunter or commercial producer, but I also want to bring into the conversation the periurban problem as well. It's a real issue in different parts of my electorate of Bass. It's also been discussed in the House, thanks to the honourable member for Lyons, Mr Di Falco. Minister, will you outline how you're working to support both recreational hunters and landowners, including those periurban communities, through that balanced approach to deer management?

Mr PEARCE - I thank the member for Bass for his question. The wild fallow deer issue is a significant one, not just for the agricultural sector, not just for land management, but also, as you rightly point out, for our periurban areas. These things are in the suburbs. It's only a matter of time before one goes through the windscreen of a car and kills somebody, so it's absolutely crucial. Populations have expanded well beyond the traditional ranges, leading to increased agricultural losses, damage to forestry, impacts on biodiversity and risks to public safety. Stakeholders, including farmers, hunters and foresters, conservationists and the wider community hold differing views about this, and I'm sure we'll hear about them, but this highlights the need for clear, evidence-based and very coordinated policy settings. We've considered all of that.

The Tasmanian Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan and associated Wild Fallow Deer Implementation Strategy is the Tasmanian government's blueprint for managing deer in the state. Since the release of the implementation strategy in September 2022, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment has been progressing a suite of actions and projects to achieve initiatives outlined within the strategy. We've made strong progress on implementing the plan but, as we all know, more needs to be done.

The Budget includes \$2.25 million to continue delivering the government's Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan which will allow further actions to sustainably manage wild fallow deer populations and keep them down. As part of this, we are reviewing the state's deer management policies to make things simpler and easier, reduce that red tape, which is one of our principles of government. The review aims to reduce red tape to streamline permits and create a system that is clear, consistent and effective. As I said today, I'm pleased to announce that public consultation. That will be good news, and I've already discussed that with stakeholders and they are right behind this. I'd also like to recognise the support from Mr Di Falco and the information transfer that we've had over the months.

We're going to open that deer management policy review until 5 January 2026. The 2025 review focuses on two components. The first is streamlining zone 1 permits to reduce administration for landholders and to make permits consistent across all zones statewide. Secondly, we're continuing to make zone 3 a complete eradication zone for farmers. Removing deer from conservation areas is important, and I know the Greens would welcome this, as well as peri-urban environments where risks are present.

The discussion paper also invites feedback on policy reform required to deliver on those commitments and to ensure that Tasmanian deer management systems remain effective, fair and sustainable. Each measure aims to balance efficiency, environmental protection and animal welfare and the social and economic benefits of deer as a managed game species.

The review supports the government's broader commitment to reduce red tape and to streamline regulation, improve efficiencies and to ensure that natural resource management policies are balanced and practical outcomes are achieved. Importantly, these are proposals only. All feedback will inform the final position and I encourage all stakeholders and interested persons to have feedback in this process. We need to ensure that Tasmania continues to demonstrate leadership in practical and collaborative deer management.

The review also supports our recreational hunters - and I know Mr Di Falco also welcomes this - with an increase in the number of crown reserves available for hunting through the annual Male Deer Ballot and Antlerless Deer Booking System. Importantly, a number of

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appropriate sites have already been identified and consultation is already underway with interested parties.

This review is key to effective management of our deer population and is delivering on our election commitments to streamline zone 1 permits and to progress work to unlock more public land for public hunting. I've got a list of the of the the actual areas if you'd like.

CHAIR - No, that's okay, minister, we'll keep moving.

Ms FINLAY - You could table that and I'd be happy. Are you going to table that? That's not a question, Chair.

CHAIR - Does that count as a question?

Ms FINLAY - Just thinking of the time, Chair. While they're deciding if they can table that or not, in line with my theme of irrigation, the other matter that's important to me is the commitments that have been made year on year, season on season, from TI around encouraging community management of schemes. There's been a lot said publicly about it. Again, we spent a lot of time in the parliament changing the instruments so that that could happen.

There's scheme managers in Winnaleah, a community in the north-east who have expressed publicly and been very active in attempting to secure their own community management of their scheme. They've been promised now for two seasons that they would have community management ready and they've missed it again this irrigating season. I just want to understand what role you're playing in an attempt to take seriously commitments for community management schemes.

Mr PEARCE - In the first week I was in this job the Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme Limited (WISL) came up and I explored what had been done previously and we talked about future steps. In 2023 we passed amendments to our water management legislation enabling Tasmanian irrigators to delegate certain powers and function to irrigator groups.

Ms FINLAY - What specifically are you doing to help them achieve community management?

Mr PEARCE - I'm getting to that.

Ms FINLAY - I know that information. Between you and me -

Mr PEARCE - You don't want this information, you want different information?

Ms FINLAY - What you're telling me is we spent hours in the parliament creating that legislation. What I'd like to know is since you've been minister, have you met with them, for instance, and are you aware of the barriers of them achieving community management? What are you doing to ensure there is a credible public conversation between yourself as minister and TI achieving community management schemes? It feels like a lot has been said but not much done.

Mr PEARCE - Okay. We have set up a meeting with the WISL. We have spoken to several stakeholders in that region. I have discussed this at length.

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Ms FINLAY - Irrigating members of the WISL?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please let the minister finish the answer.

Mr PEARCE - I have discussed this at length with TI and other water management authority experts. This is complex and goes back decades. There are historical rights, if you like, to water, and it is very emotive. TI is doing a number of studies at the moment around this particular scheme at Winnaleah. They're also looking at the downstream rates, new uptakes and a number of other issues that will affect that outcome, and that work is ongoing.

Ms FINLAY - You mentioned you met with stakeholders in the area. Have you met with irrigating members of the scheme?

Mr PEARCE - I've met with one of them.

Ms FINLAY - With one - and you've got a meeting coming up with the scheme?

Mr PEARCE - With the scheme, yes.

Ms FINLAY - With the scheme leader or just members of the scheme?

Mr PEARCE - That was arranged through TI, through Mr Sylvester. I've asked him to arrange that for me. When I have that, I'm happy to let you know.

Ms FINLAY - As you would understand, people make preparations for their irrigating seasons and they were promised last season and this season that there would be agreements around how they would have their community management. I sat at the Estimates table last time and there were assurances that by the end of the financial year there would be an outcome so they would have certainty. That's challenging for them.

Mr PEARCE - There's a lot in this one. Hopefully we can get TI at the GBE hearings next week to shed some light on the progress of that. I'm happy to mention that. In fact, I'll take it -

Ms FINLAY - I think it's got to be a team effort between -

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, sorry, but you've had plenty of questions.

Ms FINLAY - You're chairing, I'm just asking questions until you ask me to stop.

Dr WOODRUFF - The overuse of antibiotics in Chile has led to Chilean salmon agriculture having one of the highest rates of antibiotic consumption per tonne of harvested fish in the world. Do you understand that this is the pathway you're sending Tasmania down, given that your department seems to have decided to use Chile as a model for learnings for the Tasmanian salmon industry in the information that was presented in the Reflections and Learnings report?

Mr PEARCE - You mention Chile, and there are good and bad news stories that have come out of that region. We need to learn, if we're going to apply a continual improvement model in Tasmania, we need to learn the bad stories as well as the good. We need to put all

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available information that we can get from all over the globe, from all countries and all methods of fish farming, in order to build best practice. That's what the salmon study is all about, is to gather that information. I look forward to that study getting underway and a lead being appointed, so they can go about their business of gathering world's best practice, learning from the mistakes that have been made and making Tasmanian aquaculture the very best in the world. That's what this is all about.

It's all very well and good to mention a particular country, but there are good and bad lessons to be learned from all of them. That's what I'm about.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. Last year, minister Eric Abetz roundly condemned the federal Labor government for allowing Australia to import farmed salmon from Chile, and he said:

Federal Labor's decision to allow the importation of this product demonstrates an alarming disregard for the disease risks associated with foreign fish and potential impact on local jobs.

Senator Jonathon Duniam said he was shocked at the decision to green-light imports from a country with 'a long catalogue of environmental and human rights abuses in its salmon industry.'

Last year, government members, Liberal members were describing the Chilean salmon industry as a biosecurity risk for Australia with a record of environmental and human rights problems. Now you're seeing that Chile is a model that we should be learning from in Tasmania. How can you justify that, minister? What do you say about the comments that minister Eric Abetz and Senator Duniam said just last year?

Mr PEARCE - If I could refer, first of all, to my previous answer in relation to Chilean salmon imports. The salmon industry has grown, through innovation, hard work and effective regulation, and is the largest animal industry and the largest single seafood commodity sector in Australia, both by production and volume. I would like to point out, in relation to that, you mentioned those comments from federal parliamentarians.

Dr WOODRUFF - And minister Eric Abetz.

Mr PEARCE - I must reiterate - and behind me are some dedicated staff from Biosecurity Tasmania - we maintain biosecurity measures that underpin our economy. Trade matters are something for particularly those people that you mentioned - a federal decision. The introduction and the spread and emergence of infectious pathogens in the Tasmanian waterways is an issue that we need to consider here also.

I'm advised that there are a range of known diseases that have been associated with Chilean salmon that have the potential to severely impact the salmon industry, should they find their way to Tasmanian waters. We have reports also that samples of imported Chilean product on the mainland are not compliant with the Australian Food and Safety packaging requirements also. If this proves to be the case, it demonstrates that the Australian Government is not only opening the door to unacceptable levels of biosecurity risk, but also exposes Australian consumers to unnecessary food safety risks.

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Dr WOODRUFF - What about the environmental records that Senator Duniam pointed to? They're clearly extreme and outrageous. The Chilean industry has, unfortunately, an infamous record worldwide about their environmental impacts from the way they're operating.

Mr PEARCE - And me, as the agricultural minister in Tasmania, is not the person to sign off on exports and imports.

Dr WOODRUFF - I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that you've brought the Chilean companies here to tell us their learnings for best practice that you are going to use as a model for Tasmania. That's what's in here in your reflections and learning - a model for Tasmania about how to improve, and they've got an appalling environmental record. How do you square that?

Mr PEARCE - You mention environmental record.

Dr WOODRUFF - That's what Jonathan Duniam said, and he is correct.

Mr PEARCE - With respect, I would politely have you address that with the minister for EPA, for the environment, Ms Ogilvie. She looks after the environment.

Dr WOODRUFF - You're not concerned at all about that, in your portfolio?

CHAIR - Dr Woodruff, please. Thank you.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, both RSPCA and Biosecurity Tasmania have officers authorised under the *Animal Welfare Act* to inspect properties where allegations of animal cruelty have been made. During the last financial year, RSPCA officers seized 447 animals or had them surrendered to them as a result of inspection. They also laid 56 charges of animal cruelty in the same year.

Honourable Minister, to provide a comparison, how many animals were rescued, and charges laid, by government officers authorised under the *Animal Welfare Act*?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. It's an important question. In relation to Biosecurity Tasmania (BT) - and I've already mentioned the great staff that are behind me and the great work they do; we're very proud of our BT team - we act on a complaint quickly and appropriately through established channels. The priority is always to ensure the immediate animal welfare concerns are addressed, followed by compliance investigations where an offence is suspected.

Both BT and the RSPCA in Tasmania have formal arrangements in place for responding to, and investigating, allegations. Importantly, the RSPCA is the first point of contact for animal welfare complaints in Tasmania, and the government continues to work in conjunction with the RSPCA.

In relation to your particular question about numbers, I'd like to invite Justin Helmich from BT, and he can answer those exactly.

Mr HELMICH - Through you, minister. In terms of the exact numbers, I might need to do some more work on that, but I think I can speak broadly in relation to the work done by

Biosecurity animal welfare inspectors. Biosecurity Tasmania animal welfare inspectors broadly cover livestock issues, rather than domestic animals. In terms of the number of investigations undertaken, there are multiple investigations going on at any point in time and indeed, there are quite a number of referrals from the RSPCA to Biosecurity Tasmania related to livestock. The RSPCA is the first port of call for all welfare reports. They then get divided up between the RSPCA to Biosecurity Tasmania, and we follow up all matters related to those.

In terms of the number of animals that have been seized, I can't think of any animals that have been seized by Biosecurity Tasmania in that time. Because we're dealing with livestock, we're talking about large numbers of animals. When we're going through a process of investigation or incident management, we'll go to a property and identify if there are any specific issues that need to be addressed at that point in time. In addressing those issues, we may issue animal welfare instructions, so we'll provide instructions to the landowner to undertake specific actions to ameliorate any animal welfare issues that exist at that point in time, then we'll follow up.

If there are issues that occur from that, we may well proceed to a broader investigation and potentially action through the court. It may involve, in some circumstances, animals needing to be euthanased and those types of things. In terms of the seizure of animals, we don't seize cows and things as a general rule, but we will deal with those things through the use of animal welfare instructions.

Mr GARLAND - Minister, your government announced within the first 100 days of this new government that you would finalise a new invasive species action plan to tackle invasive species, including feral cats and rabbits. What has happened to that plan?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. You're right, management of invasive species is complex, and it's a shared responsibility between governments and landowners.

The Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania takes a strategic approach to invasive species, focusing on areas where control can be most effective, protecting high conservation-value assets, such as our World Heritage Area parks and reserves.

This government is also developing a new action plan to tackle invasive species including feral cats and rabbits. The overarching strategy will provide direction to our various species-specific plans that take a tailored approach to that specific pest or disease. This includes deer, rabbits, and cats, as you rightly point out, as well as weeds such as foxglove and gorse.

The good news is, we've recently obtained a \$400,000 Australian Heritage Grant for the protection of Australian Wilderness Heritage Areas through the Management of Invasive Species project. This project will deliver integrated and adaptive management to mitigate current incursions and limit further spread of pests and plants. The key activities that will come from that project and that part of the plan is to

- Monitor and detect deer presence and assess impacts;
- Influence and develop adaptive and integrated on-ground control operations;

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- Identify feral cat distribution in targeted locations that supports integrated and innovative control operations; and
- Deliver targeted on-ground weed control in locations with high conservation value and visitor use.

What have we done? Well, the department has established a whole-of-agency project to develop this invasive species plan. We recognise the relevance across multiple areas of the department. The project is governed by a steering committee that includes the deputy secretary, Primary Industries and Water, and the Chief Operations Officer with a responsibility for managing the strategic project. The project sought input from internal businesses, including Biosecurity Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service, the environment, agriculture, water and marine resources. The secretary also wrote to external stakeholders for their input into that plan.

The action plan is currently being drafted based on feedback received - and this was extensive - with a consultative draft expected by the end of this month. A draft action plan will then be presented at a roundtable discussion with external stakeholders that is planned for December this year, where we'll seek further feedback.

Does that answer your question?

Mr GARLAND - That answers my question.

Mr FERGUSON - With the release of the discussion paper for the new agricultural strategy, I will ask you about that. I believe you were appointed minister in time to launch that, with its 10 focus areas. I know consultation closed only a few days ago, so I'll be interested in your feedback to the committee about where you see it going from here. How will the development of that new strategy by our government assist our producers to achieve the 2050 target you referred to in your opening statement? I invite your expectations around an action plan.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for the question. I'm excited about the new agricultural strategy. I really am. Stakeholders are becoming excited about having a stake in their future and having suggestions into the future of Tasmanian agriculture. They really are, and I mean that genuinely. Agriculture is the backbone of the Tasmanian economy, and I want to keep it that way. It puts food on tables here and around the world, provides thousands of jobs and supports our rural and regional communities. This government has a strong record in supporting our agricultural sector, and we're committed to working with our farmers, industry and other stakeholders to ensure that this continues to grow and to thrive.

It's important for us to reach that AgriVision 2050 target to increase the annual farm gate value of agriculture to \$10 billion by 2050. The collective achievements of farmers, agribusinesses, industry groups, researchers, rural communities and government has allowed us to remain on track to reach that goal, with the industry valued at \$2.46 billion in the 2022-23 period.

This is despite some pretty big headwinds and challenges when we come to international commodity markets, but we need to make sure that this growth continues. We have world wars

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going on all over the world and that is also having an impact into the way that international commodity market has been turned upside down.

This is why in October this year I released a discussion paper, *Developing a New Tasmanian Egg Strategy*, seeking feedback on the key policy priorities for a new long-term strategy. I did that at Landfall Angus on the Tamar and they were excited about having input into that plan.

Mr FERGUSON - Best electorate in Australia.

Mr PEARCE - Some would say the best electorate in - anyway, while the sector remains confident with strong investment intentions, we need to collectively ensure that we have the right settings in order to grow. The development of a new long-term strategy comes after the release of the Competitiveness of Tasmanian Agriculture White Paper in 2020, which sets the Tasmanian government's overall approach and policy commitments to supporting industry growth in agriculture. Now, a lot has been achieved in the last five years. We've seen expansion and augmentation of TI schemes and this is delivering high surety water, the highest surety in the country.

Ms FINLAY - But not at Landfall.

CHAIR - The minister has the call.

Mr PEARCE - Our comprehensive Rural Water Use Strategy has also a range of science, environmental monitoring, planning, policy and community engagement projects that together will ensure our freshwater resources can continue to underpin our communities, our agriculture and environmental uses well into the future.

Now since 1920, our government has invested over \$34 million in world-class agricultural research, development and extension through the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) and we are very proud of them.

This is in order to drive growth and productivity and to encourage innovation and investment in the sector. Industry partners have, over the same period contributed over \$66 million into TIA's research. It's incredible, demonstrating the sector's appetite for innovation and continuous improvement.

Dr WOODRUFF - Chair, I note such a long answer to a Dorothy Dix question in a very short time period.

Mr PEARCE - I'm excited.

CHAIR - Again, Dr Woodruff. as I've said -

Mr PEARCE - I'm excited. It's our ag strategy, Dr Woodruff. More importantly, Tasmania's partnership with the Australian Government - bless them - and industry stakeholders through the TAS Farm Innovation Hub at TIA, is leading farm extension efforts and assisting farmers to be more climate and drought resilient.

Ms FINLAY - He didn't read his last page.

Mr PEARCE - I got the hint.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, this might come across as a Dorothy Dixier, however, I'm actually really keen to understand the answer to this. In order for our farmers to achieve that increased farmgate value, we need to look after them. Rural Alive & Well (RAW) does an incredible job, but so does Safe Farming Tasmania. There has been a lot of concern about where Safe Farming has been housed, a lot of concern about the resourcing to Safe Farming in terms of - up until recently, we had one person trying to do it all on his own, which for him was unsafe. I'd like to understand what your commitment is to where Safe Farming is likely to end up and how it will be resourced, so the people supporting our farmers feel safe in terms of the load that they're bearing, so they can do their job to support our farmers.

Mr PEARCE - You raise a very interesting point. The other day I was at Sprent, at a community hall, and they had a film night on called *Just a Farmer*. I spoke of it in parliament. I'd like to point out that every 10 days an Australian farmer takes their own life. It's a very serious matter. Our agencies, such as the one you've just mentioned and others; RAW, for instance, continue to do important work. The Department of Justice leads that program, so those questions are best answered by them. What I want to do is to reiterate the importance of, particularly RAW

Ms FINLAY - Could we put that on notice?

Mr PEARCE - It's a different minister.

Ms FINLAY - Can I ask a follow up question to that? RAW being emotional wellbeing, and I hear and feel the statistics about suicide; however, Safe Farming is more about how to farm safely in terms of exposure to chemicals and vehicles. It's the action of farming safely. Obviously, RAW plays a different role in that.

The problem with Safe Farming has been that it's in Justice, and so to some farmers, it can come across - there's been some inappropriate branding of Safe Farming, making it sound more like a regulator and a person that will come in and wave a big stick if you do something wrong, whereas Safe Farming actually want to develop relationships and build trust with farmers to help them make sure that they are farming safely. They have wanted to come out from under justice, and to be housed and managed and engaged in a way that they can develop strong relationships and help farmers farm safely. As Minister for Agriculture, I'd like to understand what role you've had in determining where they might end up so that they can do their best work.

Mr PEARCE - We want their best work and they are important. This is actually an initiative of our Premier; a great initiative. I'll take it, given your feedback today, to have discussions with him on the points that you raised

Ms FINLAY - 'Him' being the Safe Farming person or the Premier?

Mr PEARCE - 'Him' being the Premier.

Ms FINLAY - Right. Could you talk to the Safe Farming guys to find out how they can best do their work to support farmers?

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Mr PEARCE - I'll undertake that also.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. That would be the best outcome because people doing it on their own is not great given the load and the role that they have. There was a resource where we had two people delivering the Safe Farming program in Tasmania, and they had independent branding, they weren't wearing WorkSafe colours. It was a great program. I think they would love to get back to that place where they can develop genuine relationships and trust with farmers to do good work. I think where they're housed, how they're managed and how they present themselves is really important.

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to have a talk with Stu about that.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Dr WOODRUFF - Minister, I'd like some details if you could table them or provide them or put them on notice, whatever is required, about the antibiotics that have been used by salmon farming companies in the past three years. Can you tell me the type of antibiotics and the quantities used in freshwater, smolt and marine operations; by facility, by lease, by region, and the total for the state as a whole?

Mr PEARCE - Can I firstly bring the acting Chief Veterinary Officer to describe her actions in relation to what you're talking about?

Dr WOODRUFF - I have a very short amount of time to ask questions. We are very limited in scope. I appreciate that, and I'd be very happy to have a private briefing with the chief. At the moment, because I know the Chair wants to move us on, I would really appreciate if we could get those questions -

Mr PEARCE - I'll take that on notice and we'll get you that information.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. My second question is: what has been the total live biomass of salmon produced over the past three years, and what are the projections if you have them for the next three years, for the state as a whole and by regions? To be clear, I would like it to include all the categories of biomass; so that's fish for human consumption, and any fish that's been diverted for rendering or in silage or disposal. We're looking not just at the head-on gutted, which is what goes to market, but all of those other categories of biomass.

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to take that on notice for you, Dr Woodruff.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Minister.

Mr Di FALCO - Honourable minister, how much funding is allocated for inland fisheries, and has there been any increase over the last few years? Do you think that funding is achieving the right outcomes?

Mr PEARCE - Good question, and anything to do with inland fisheries, there's one expert in Tasmania and that's Ryan Wilkinson, the Director of Inland Fisheries - and legend, aren't you, Brian?

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Mr WILKINSON - I don't know about that. Thank you minister, through you. Sorry, could you repeat the question just so I'm clear on it?

Mr Di FALCO - No worries. How much funding is allocated for inland fisheries? Has there been any increase over the last few years? And, do you think that funding is achieving the right outcomes?

Mr WILKINSON - Thank you for the question, and through you minister. The funding allocation - so we have numerous revenue streams that we use to operate the Inland Fisheries service. A significant component of that is the administered payment that we receive through the department, which is the government component. That's outlined in the budget chapter, under the grants component that you'll see there, and that includes the administrative payment, the policy commitments that the government's committed to over the last couple of years.

In recent times we've received annual indexation for the amount of money that we received from the government. There was a period - the exact dates escape me now - when no indexation was applied, but that was worked through at the time. There is indexation applied now and I'm happy to say in this Budget we did get some additional funding for this year and for next year and that's providing a little bit of operational support for us. We've had some challenging conditions in the fisheries in recent times.

If I look at the challenging conditions, some of them are chronic, some of them are more acute. The acute ones that we've had recently have been in relation to very dry conditions. The last two years have been two of the driest years on record, which impacts the fishery, impacts the performance of the fishery and the satisfaction of anglers, and we've lost some licence sales as a consequence of that. I should say is a big, probably about 30-40 per cent of our budget comes from that licence component, so that hurts us when we lose that. The government has provided some extra funding to help with that and that's providing a little bit of a buffer for us over the next couple of years while we, hopefully, recover from the dry conditions and also recover from the impacts of the cormorants that we've seen on the fisheries.

As to the part of your question about whether we're having a meaningful impact. I'm very proud of the work that the IFS does. I think it's not well known that we manage the recreational trout fishery, but we also have some pretty extensive programs around native fish management, pest fish management, and there's a whole heap of assets and infrastructure out in the field that we manage as well. I think we do the very best job that we can with the money that we have available to us.

Mr GEORGE - I don't want to disappoint anyone, but my question is on behalf of my friends and constituents in the Huon Valley, many of whom have been in touch with me because they are deeply concerned that the wonderful tradition of roadside vegetable stalls is to be subjected to regulations and annual licence fees of up to \$700. Most of them believe that this has been driven by the supermarkets, trying to stamp out a great Tasmanian tradition, although it's usually the supermarkets from which contaminated fresh food and leafy greens are found.

I've reached the three-quarter century mark, despite frequenting roadside stalls all my life and never been sick. Minister, will you guarantee that this great tradition in Tasmania generally will not be stamped out and assure my constituents that you will never impose licence fees on them?

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Mr PEARCE - The fact that you've reached 75, you said, is pure luck -

Mr GEORGE - Careful management.

Mr PEARCE - because right now there are cases and, in recent times, I think, in the last two years, there have been 10 deaths through salmonella outbreaks from consuming such plants and produce. It is a serious matter. The people that produce, the small producers, they do that in a very ethical basis. They would be beside themselves if they knew that inadvertently they were making someone ill, sick, or even worse.

The new production standards for berries, melons and leafy greens is a national standard. It's in fact across Australia and New Zealand. What we've done is consult for input into the ramifications of that particular standard being applied to our small producers, to ensure that they are producing something that is safe to consume.

What we've done is consult. That is being conflated, for one reason or another, and people are becoming exercised over that.

We've also looked at a tiered system whereby smaller producers, when it comes to paying a regulatory fee, would pay a fee commensurate to the amount of produce that they produce. It can't just be a blanket thing. These new rules aim to align Tasmania with the national rules, and we need to adhere to them, and the rising food-borne illness outbreaks such as the recent recall of alfalfa sprouts, did you read that?

Mr GEORGE - In the supermarket.

Mr PEARCE - Yes, in the supermarkets -

Mr GEORGE - Commercially produced.

Mr PEARCE - Due to potential salmonella contamination. I'm well aware and we've heard from small growers that are concerned that will be burdened as you as you rightly point out, by paying the same fees as those larger producers. We've heard that loud and clear. I've heard that loud and clear, but we need a Tasmanian-specific provision. What we want is people to have their say and their input because it's so diverse. Everyone has a different scenario, a different set of circumstances. So, please get on to nre.tas.gov.au and please pass this on to all your constituents so they can have their say and have their input because we want a tiered system that will apply appropriately and commensurately to the size of their operation.

It is important that we maintain food safety. You mentioned my maiden speech, later on in that speech I talked about the fact that whenever someone picks a piece of Tasmanian produce up then I want them to be assured that that is the best produce they can possibly get anywhere in the world. I want to give that assurance. So, those small producers want the same thing. That website is available for them to have that say and if they can't do that, then ring me, have your say, I am encouraging people to be forthcoming with their particular concerns.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you, minister, to your previous answer to my question on the agricultural strategy. One of the big factors towards achieving our farmgate value goal by 2050 is growth in the industry arising out of greater availability to natural assets like water. We've heard about the Tamar Scheme earlier today. I know you support that, and so do I.

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I ask for an overview on irrigation going forward, specifically noting the delay from the federal government's participation in the greater south-east scheme. We all expected it to be in -

Member interjecting.

Mr FERGUSON - That is incorrect and they should be offended if that got on the record. Everybody, including Mr Mitchell, the federal member at the time, expected it to be in the federal budget in May of last year, but it wasn't, and it was a later announcement in, I think, November.

How is the relationship between the agency and the Australian Government? Can it be improved so that we can see success on the pipeline of schemes that TI have done a very professional job of putting up competent business cases for.

Mr PEARCE - Yes, and one of the reasons we are renowned throughout the land for having the very best and most efficient irrigation schemes is because of the surety. It's because of the faith that our irrigators have in that water coming out of that hydrant when it's supposed to. Most of our schemes are Surety 1, so 98 per cent plus, so it is important. Irrigation is key. Some members would say it's liquid gold.

Unknown - Don't go there. You're doing very well.

Unknown - Liquid gold is very hot.

Mr PEARCE - Our government is continuing to deliver the nation-leading irrigation schemes and that surety through transforming our farmland and creating jobs in regional areas. It also unlocks capital because as soon as you put water on a farm it at least doubles in value, so that's all capital that farmer then has.

During 2024-25, over 93,000 megalitres of highly reliable irrigation water was made available to producers. This was a 6.9 per cent decrease on the last year, however the 2024-25 Tasmanian irrigation record delivery of 100,593 megalitres was 34 per cent higher than the average delivery in the six years from 2017-18. This water means that thousands of farmers across the state are able to increase rotations, boost yields, diversify in the new enterprises and these might include grapes or wine grapes or berries or high value crops, cherries.

Tasmanian Irrigation has developed 16 new irrigation schemes since 2011-12 in partnership with Tasmanian and Australian governments and, of course, our irrigators.

Now, we are progressing to Tranche 3. This year's State Budget includes \$130 million to continue to deliver nation-leading irrigation projects right across the state. Construction is well advanced on the Northern Midlands. I was there the other day and it's looking really schmick. If you get a chance, go and have a look. This will deliver 25,500 megalitres of water to nearly 9000 hectares - incredible - from summer 2026. I've visited the buffer Dam last week as well as seeing the construction team and talking to them. They're proud of their project and rightly so, they should be. There are some great outcomes there.

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This year the federal approval was secured for the Sassafras Wesley-Vale augmentation project. A preliminary business case study has been prepared for the Tamar Irrigation Scheme, and I support the scheme. I want to reiterate that.

Early work is underway on the Greater South East Irrigation Scheme. In combination, these new projects will deliver more than 78,000 megalitres of irrigation water to over 600 irrigators. It's incredible. We're the jewel in the crown when it comes to irrigation, and this is directly creating more investment, more jobs and more surety. Irrigation takes away risk. It mitigates risk. And that's what we want to do for our farmers, is mitigate that risk and give them that surety.

Ms FINLAY - Talking about risk and about increasing farm gate value, whatever we can do to add value to our produce on island is good for our producers but also good for our local economies. There's been some concern expressed in conversations that I had recently at the Flinders Island Show but also I know from previous trips to King Island about the shipping between the islands and viability of operators, reliability of operators and a current conversation about operators maybe looking to push livestock north and not actually land them in Tassie where we can process them here and have those jobs. You would appreciate the importance of keeping viable our mainland Tasmania on island processes. What's your role in the red meat processing strategy and commitment to a priority of keeping value-add in Tasmania, given those concerns. There's a risk there.

Mr PEARCE - I'm certainly passionate about it and all of my input goes to State Growth who are responsible for that particular facet. It's a vital link. We have approximately 98,600 head of cattle on King Island and most of them come in through Stanley. It is vital that that shipping route is maintained and it's efficient. Recently in the last few days, I had discussions with minister Vincent about these matters, but that is a matter for State Growth in terms of this process.

Ms FINLAY - It might be a matter of State Growth in terms of the infrastructure of the shipping part of it. In terms of making sure that we've got the infrastructure here to keep processing livestock, and I know that you've got intimate knowledge of what happens at King Island, but on Flinders Island, similar but different - I've had expressed to me concern by some producers that if they're forced to start sending their livestock north, not necessarily great for the livestock, but it's not great for our processors here. If we lost JBS or Greenham, one or the other, the whole system would fail, which is not good for us. So I think that is an issue for you, Minister. I'm wondering whether you've met with producers on Flinders Island about this and if not, if I could encourage you to do that.

Mr PEARCE - I've certainly talked to our growers on Flinders at length around this issue and as well as the operator that operates the *Matthew Flinders* on a regular basis. What I can talk about is, is more historically our processes -

Ms FINLAY - I'm not keen on history, I'm keen on future. I'm keen, I suppose, on making sure that our producers are supported in what they want to have happen with their livestock and that I can be confident of your involvement in the process -

Mr PEARCE - 100 per cent, yes.

PUBLIC

Ms FINLAY - to ensure that we have not only maintained the current level of processing, but the other part of my question was about being able to increase red meat processing. I know TasFarmers have raised more vegetable processing in Tasmania. How we can actually make sure that we can do more here to add value not only to our primary industries, but also to our regional communities.

Mr PEARCE - Only last week or the week before I was at Tasmanian Quality Meats (TQM) talking about this very matter. I've spoken with JBS and I've spoken with Peter Greenham only in the last week. Greenham, for instance, are putting in a new chopper line into Smithton. What that means is process cattle, our larger cattle, old cows, bulls that won't normally fit in a production line, they're spending three and a half million on this thing. That will produce a lot of hamburger mince and those lower value items, but still important for producers to be able to clear that from their operation cycle.

We talked about the work that TQM and Mr Oliver does there with veal, with his lamb. As well as that, out of our Burnie port, last year there was in excess of 800,000 fat lambs that go to the Coles/Woolworths job on the mainland. It's not just that those animals that are processed here, it's the access to the mainland as well. I'm certainly acutely aware of it. I push it every day of my life and I hear from producers every day of my life.

Ms FINLAY - Right. Could I understand the conversations that you're having with the operator of the *Matthew Flinders*, how that's going?

Mr PEARCE - It's going well.

Dr WOODRUFF - Minister, the government has committed to limiting salmon production to 40,000 tonnes in Storm Bay and that's come from negotiations between the Secretary of NRE and the CEOs of the three salmon companies. There is an enormous biomass difference between whole fish and head-on-gutted or hog. Is that 40,000 tonne figure for whole fish or head-on-gutted?

Mr PEARCE - That's an excellent question, Dr Woodruff. I might refer that to the secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, could you please just table for me the reference to that? Were you taking directly from the [inaudible] report or -

Dr WOODRUFF - Sorry?

Mr JACOBI - What's the document that you're referring to?

Dr WOODRUFF - The negotiations that are in the public domain, they've been discussed before, between the secretary of NRE and the CEOs of the three salmon companies, is that the government has committed to limiting salmon production in Storm Bay to 40,000 tonnes. I can find it for you later if you want. I don't have them at hand

Mr JACOBI - So you're not referring to as - that's a previous secretary who committed to that?

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Dr WOODRUFF - The previous secretary committed to that, yes. Not you, secretary. There's a big biomass difference between whole fish swimming around in the water and head-on-gutted. What is that 40,000 tonnes referring to?

Mr JACOBI - Thank you. Through you, minister, we'll take that on notice.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. Minister, the Greens have received heavily redacted documents under right to information (RTI) that were produced by NRE relating to salmon farming in further offshore areas. One document was a report titled 'Offshore Aquaculture Tasmania Background Scoping Paper' and the other was some title slides for briefings that were provided to the Deputy Secretary and the EPA on a Storm Bay and south-east Tasmania offshore aquaculture planning project. My question is which pens in the Storm Bay and south-east region were identified as being suitable to be moved further offshore? What are the industry incentives that were mentioned in the document to encourage that to happen? Can you table that background scoping paper and tell us what the status of that project is?

Mr PEARCE - I appreciate the question. I will refer that to the secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, Minister. That was a scoping project. There is nothing more to provide or to table, and there were no pens identified as part of that scoping project to move offshore.

Dr WOODRUFF - Can you table the background scoping paper?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. The background scoping papers as I understand have already been actively disclosed on our disclosure log through the RTI process.

Mr PEARCE - Subject to RTI and then made a commitment to pause and there's nothing on there.

Dr WOODRUFF - There was nothing on there. It was heavily redacted. There was no information. Can we get the information about what the department was considering about whether to go further offshore and whether there were industry incentives and what further offshore would look like and all of those matters which are pretty important?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I would be happy to go back to our RTI delegate and discuss with them what the reasons were for not disclosing that information to see whether anything more can be provided.

Dr WOODRUFF - Okay. Can you tell us why you're not progressing to go with that move to go offshore?

CHAIR - Dr Woodruff, you've had plenty of scope. Prof Razay.

Mr PEARCE - Chair, might I table that document before I forget about it, from the member for Bass.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable Minister, TasWater has set an ambitious goal to recycle 100 per cent of treated effluent by 2050, in line with Tasmania's sustainability commitment. What initiatives are in place to support accelerating this reuse goal and how is the state helping

to drive the progress? Will there be incentives for industries or councils to use recycled water and are entering targets like 50 per cent to a free use by 2030, being set to ensure that 2050 goal is on track?

Mr PEARCE - What you're talking about there probably needs to be referred to the Treasurer. However, what I will say is we were talking about the Tamar scheme. That's one of the options that we're looking at as well. We're exploring taking the blinkers off. We're looking at every possibility that we can possibly put into that. But it is important that that water is recycled. It is important that we utilise that. When we use recycled water means that frees up clear fresh water for higher value uses. It is a priority. It is good for our environment. We have to remember that when we're using that, then we're also monitoring it and applying a degree of supervision rather than just let it run into the environment.

We are all for that. It's something that we're behind. It's something that we should integrate into future projects. It's something that will save dollars eventually. If we start using that, then eventually we can bring the price, the cost down. You raise a very good point, and that holistic strategic management of wastewater is incredibly important.

Mr GARLAND - Biosecurity. This past year has been a very challenging year for biosecurity, to put it politely. We've seen several outbreaks of exotic pests and diseases which have damaged some of our most important resource industries and we have H5N1 on our doorstep. Why is the budget for biosecurity being slashed by 25 per cent over forward Estimates in this budget?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for your question. On the surface it does look dire when you see a lower number. However, there are certain projects that are finished in that reporting time which has affected that. I'm going to hand over to the secretary, and he'll detail the exact projects that I'm talking about.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. In the Biosecurity and Product Integrity Output Group 3.1, there is a decline, and I will just make sure that we're talking the right figures. So, we go over in the 2024-25 Budget from \$40.874 million to the 2025-26 Budget \$35.782 million, to the 2026-27 Budget \$33.059 million - I'm assuming this correlates with the figures that you have, Mr Garland - and finally to a figure of \$31.234 million in 2028-29.

If you'd like, I can go through each year and what the decrease relates to, if that is helpful?

Mr GARLAND - Yes, that would be good.

Mr JACOBI - Okay. So, the decrease in 2025-26 mainly reflects the funding profile of the sheep and goat eID implementation - so that's the sheep and goat electronic identification - \$3.24 million; and the Weeds Action Program, \$1.05 million. These are significant government previous commitments that are tailing off, and each year we see a completion of a phase or part of that project which then results in it not appearing in the subsequent year's budget.

The decrease in 2026-27 reflects the completion of the sheep and goat eID implementation, \$2.44 million; and the Weeds Action Plan, \$840,000, partially offset by the provision for the 2027 pay period. This is not particularly relevant, but in 2026-27 we have the unusual circumstance of an additional pay period which actually reflects in the budget.

PUBLIC

The decrease in 2027-28 reflects the completion of the 2024-25 key deliverable of additional biosecurity officers, \$400,000, and reverting back to the regular 26-week pay period. That's partially offset by the impact of indexation.

Finally, the decrease in 2028-29 reflects the completion of initiatives including RSPCA support of \$800,000, and the strengthening of biosecurity to keep Tasmania disease-free, \$750,000, partially offset by the impact of indexation.

CHAIR - We'll now take a short break. As time taken for breaks must be made-up, I encourage members to be as quick as possible.

The committee suspended from 5.00 p.m. to 5.09 p.m.

Mr FERGUSON - I find the agribusiness insights very helpful. The more recent report outlines strong performance, as well as a number of challenges, including the dry conditions across ag industries. It also touches on trade issues, which have been extremely topical, and some good news since that was published.

Can you update the committee on how you see Tasmania's agribusiness sector tracking in light of that report, the dry conditions, and what the weather forecasting might be hinting at as to the coming warmer season.

In response to all of that, what can you and the portfolio be doing to support agriculture businesses in Tasmania to grow and to be resilient?

Mr PEARCE - Excellent question. Really good question. The Agribusiness Insights Report 2024-25 has a very clear message: despite a year mixed with often difficult seasonal conditions, Tasmania's agricultural sector remains strong, remains resilient, and it remains full of opportunity.

Tasmanian Irrigation delivered over 93,000 megalitres of high-surety water, and construction is well underway on major Tranche 3 schemes, which I've already pointed out. That includes 25-and-a-half megalitres at Northern Midlands, the Sassafras Wesley-Vale Augmentation, with the Greater South East scheme on track for future delivery.

These projects ensure long-term water surety, an essential for our farm businesses. We've got to remember that farmers are business owners first. If they don't have a solid business model, then they're not farming. They're going broke.

This report also highlights the significant process in our wine grape growers, who achieve record-breaking yields. They were up 37 per cent, positioning Tasmania to expand in this new export market.

Dairy production, which I'm extremely proud of, remains extremely robust. Tasmania maintained its share of the national milk pool and is attracting strong investment, particularly in high productivity dairy regions like Braddon and the east coast.

Fruit growers reported good quality and strong export performance, especially in cherries and those Asian markets, particularly with our cherries - they can't get enough of them.

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Field crops, particularly winter cereals. Our poppies, poppies are up this year, and there's a particular breed of poppy that we're now growing, and they're taking orders to plant for, that augments weight-loss drugs when they're administered to humans. Field crops are completely strong, and that is consistent with other markets.

Despite biosecurity challenges such as the detection of mop-top virus that we're all aware of, the sector has responded quickly and efficiently and effectively. I can't state highly enough the feedback, and the faith that I have developed, and our farmers have developed, for Biosecurity Tasmania. The feedback has been incredibly positive, and I want to thank and acknowledge to this committee the great work that Biosecurity Tasmania has done, is doing, and will continue to do, I'm sure

Importantly, the report you mentioned highlights rising confidence across agribusiness, reinforced by record productivity levels, continued property investment, and positive commodity market expectations. Tasmania is now the most productive agricultural state in the nation, with a 20,960 productivity advantage over its mainland states and territories per worker - almost 21,000.

Our government is actively supporting this momentum under the agricultural competitiveness for 2050 White Paper, and we're delivering smarter regulation, better skills, stronger industry partners and better advice. This includes practical reforms to property licensing, progress on small-scale meat processing pathways, and major investment in agricultural training, which is absolutely vital for growing the next generation of farmers. Also, the new Centre for Excellence for Shearing and Wool Handling agricultural education and training partnership, which I was fortunate enough to open recently.

We are also ensuring producers are ready for a challenging climate through our Drought Future Fund. More than 200 farm businesses have now completed formal resilience plans, and this is important.

Regional drought plans, developed with over 1000 community members, are now being implemented statewide, and I'm glad to see the feedback I have from Flinders Island and from King Island is very positive regarding those plans.

Our investment in the zero net demonstration farm at Forthside is positioning Tasmania at the frontier of low-emissions agriculture, and that will play a big part in opening certain markets in future market development.

Finally, despite global trade uncertainty, this report shows that strong opportunities still lie ahead, including access to China for sheep meat, renewed EU trade negotiations, and expanded export programs for Tasmanian business.

In short, Tasmanian agriculture is resilient, innovative and future-focused. We're early adopters of R&D, of the best cutting-edge science. I believe we underestimate just how far advanced our farmers are with taking up new technologies and new farming methodologies.

CHAIR - Minister, can I ask you to wrap up?

Mr PEARCE - I'm excited, Chair. I'm excited.

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CHAIR - I realise that, but you have been going for over five minutes.

Mr PEARCE - I'm excited about agriculture. I will close by saying that these steps, and the future of Tasmanian agriculture, is bright, confidence is high. We have a big future in front of us. All we have to do is look after those vital elements of what I have just talked about, ensure that they are focused on the right direction, and they have the tools and the levers they need to get about their business.

Ms FINLAY - I'm glad the minister's excited, and that can be put to good use, because we need to support our farmers. That requires a strong and well-resourced department. I want to go into the department and the people, and how well looked-after they are.

I want to open this conversation by asking about results, in particular around biosecurity. There's been a lot mentioned today about biosecurity. Not that long ago there was a survey, a cultural workforce survey, done. In Energy, they tabled the results, and I want you to outline, given the results of the internal cultural survey, what concerns you most, and what conversations you're having with the secretary to support the people who are expressing their concerns.

Mr JACOBI - Ms Finlay, can you reference exactly which year and what the name of the survey was you're referring to?

Ms FINLAY - When was the last survey done of employees in Biosecurity that would allow them to express their concerns about workforce culture?

Mr JACOBI - We do a State Service survey every couple of years.

Ms FINLAY - The most recent one? I am, of course, keen if you have done one more recently, just to understand Biosecurity.

Mr JACOBI - I'm not aware of any particular survey that's been done for Biosecurity per se, but we certainly do a whole-of-State Service survey, and the department collectively - my department - we've had one of the highest responses on record to that survey.

Ms FINLAY - That can be good and bad.

Mr JACOBI - Yes, and if you give me a minute, I can find some information to talk to you about that.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Mr JACOBI - NRE staff actively participated in the Tasmanian State Service Employee Survey, with a participation rate of 68 per cent, which is an increase of six percentage points from the previous year - taking a point that that can be positive and negative. We saw a real improvement in the staff engagement score, especially in our large operational divisions, with PWS increasing from 60 per cent to 64 per cent and Biosecurity Tasmania increasing from 61 per cent to 65 per cent. So, the staff are more engaged in the survey process than they were previously.

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The survey highlighted our people have a really strong connection to our purpose, and you would've read our strategic plan, and they understand how and what they do every day and how that contributes to our strategic plan. Our people told us that a positive team environment is the top reason they like to work for Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) Tasmania -

Ms FINLAY - Do you have specifics on Biosecurity?

Mr JACOBI - I don't know that I have specifics here on hand, but if you'd let me just finish, I might be able to touch on some of those.

Ms FINLAY - I'm particularly interested in Biosecurity.

Mr JACOBI - Just bear with me one minute. I will have to take that on notice. Can I ask Ms Finlay specifically - so that we can manage the amount of interrogation into the survey that we need to do - what specifically -

Ms FINLAY - I'm particularly interested in the reporting results from Biosecurity around workplace culture.

Mr JACOBI - All right, okay. We'll see what we can see, what we can provide. Happy to take that on notice.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - Can I just close on that as well with that particular part of the question? Chair, through you. I have visited and had a lot of contact, in the relatively short time that I've been the minister, and I can say without exception that the people that I have spoken to from Biosecurity are extremely competent, proud and positive people.

Ms FINLAY - Sure. Not questioning that.

Mr PEARCE - I was at the X-ray device at the airport on my way home on Friday and I walked away from there that impressed with these young people. They had a real job to do. They knew what their job was, their interactions with the public, with those passengers coming off, absolutely second-to-none. I want to reflect that, that question is not indicative of the impression that I have had as minister from our great people in Biosecurity.

Ms FINLAY - Across the department, my question is not a reflection on the people. My question is around the support provided to great people to do a good job. The same question was asked in Parks and Wildlife Service the other day and I know that across the whole department, when people love what they do, but there's a pressure in terms of how much they're required to do, perhaps because of the reduction in numbers in their team or the pressure of resources and ability to deliver, it puts them under pressure. That, unfortunately, I have consistently heard across time and particularly in a lead up to an estimates scrutiny that there are concerns around workforce culture, particularly in Biosecurity, but across NRE and I think that's unfortunate because of the great people who work there.

As an example, if I could ask, with the efficiency dividends that are being asked across the department, what impact will that have on the numbers of people working in areas like

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Biosecurity? Have you made an effort to request that, for instance, Biosecurity be shielded from those efficiency dividends?

Mr PEARCE - The department and the secretary and I were only discussing efficiency dividends recently, so if you wouldn't mind -

Ms FINLAY - What I don't want is just the 1.7, 1.7, 3.4' conversation. What I'm keen to know is: is there anything in the department that's been shielded, particularly with Biosecurity? Where is that likely that the efficiency dividend will hit in terms of primary industries specifically?

CHAIR - Okay. Well, we've established what your question is. We'll move on.

Ms FINLAY - I can't just ask a question without an answer.

CHAIR - The minister -

Ms FINLAY - No, they were taking a pause to reply.

CHAIR - They did answer it.

Ms FINLAY - No, he hasn't answered at all.

Mr PEARCE - We're happy to answer that. Yeah, of course we are.

Ms FINLAY - But he hasn't started. I'd love to receive an answer. Sorry, I think there was a misunderstanding there. I've written a question.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay you've had about 10 questions in one - it's up to the minister if he wants to answer that.

Ms FINLAY - They're happy - they're about to answer.

CHAIR - I realise that.

Mr PEARCE - Okay, thanks secretary. Now, it's an important point and I feel strongly and I meant what I said about those great people and it is important to us. With your congruence, we will answer the question.

Mr JACOBI -. Through you, minister. I won't go over the budget efficiency dividend again, but I will talk to the fact that I don't quarantine positions or discriminate between what is frontline and back of house. There are positions which are critically important to servicing the needs of Tasmanians and Biosecurity positions, particularly those that are at our border, at our airports that are inspecting and talking to people and educating them about the biosecurity practices, the officers that are responsible for responding to incursions or outbreaks and dealing with those matters, absolutely the most - probably some of the most important positions we have in the whole department. But I hate to say that for one division as opposed to another because across the whole department, all of the work that our staff do is critically important.

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I would like to say and have it on record that also there are people who are working on programs like sheep and goat eID program, which is a key long-term biosecurity protection initiative, but they are policy people. Often, they are referred to, and I think it's wrong, but they are referred to as not frontline. They're referred to as back of house; that gives the impression that somehow they are less important than the frontliners. I don't like at any point in time to discriminate between one and the other.

I think I have responded to you in the Parks question, which was quite similar. We have set up an establishment management review committee, which has all of my deputy secretaries. We are looking very closely at each and every position that becomes vacant for whatever reason. It might be a resignation. It might be a person who's applied for another job in another department and won it and therefore their position is vacant. And we are considering each of those positions on a case by case basis, on the basis of merit. I think that is really important because it enables us to look at - what is the program that person was delivering? How much time can we actually afford for it to be vacant? Does it need to be filled immediately and if so, who in the department is able and willing and skilled to do that? We are making those decisions on a daily basis.

Ms BADGER - Thank you, Chair. Minister, I've just got the parcels of land here in front of us that have been touted or are currently going through the RAA process to be opened up to recreational deer hunting. Those being - The Alma Tier Conservation Area, the Eastern Tiers Conservation Area, Apslawn Regional Reserve, Hardings Falls Regional Reserve, Swan River Regional Reserve, Cygnet Regional Reserve, Avoca Regional Reserve, the FPPF Land extensions to Castle Quarry Regional Reserve, Royal George Regional Reserve, Snow Regional Reserve, Fisher Tier Conservation Area, Midday Hill Conservation Area, River Hill Conservation Area, Blackjack Hill Regional Reserve, and Remarkable Rock Conservation Area.

Some of these areas are incredibly biodiverse. They're home to endangered and threatened species. In particular, the Eastern Tiers Conservation Area is frequently home to breeding swift parrots. You have FPPF land in there. This is area that should be properly protected, certainly not being opened up to recreational deer hunting.

Minister, can you outline what time of the year these reasonably active recreational areas - there is a lot of tourism attractions in these areas - are going to be opened up and how that's going to be managed? What evidence you've actually based this on? Because there isn't any that suggests the recreational approach is successful anywhere else in this country nor New Zealand. It's just a cheap funding measure to use volunteers.

Mr PEARCE - I recognise your concern and appreciate your question on this. What I will say is that those conservation areas are incredibly biodiverse, as you rightly point out, and that is why we can't afford to have concentrations of wild fallow deer in them. That is why they need to be removed from that environment to allow the ecosystem to survive as it is intended, as nature intended.

When it comes to the management and the negotiations, the consult that we have already detailed is underway at the moment. I'm going to hand over in a minute to the secretary to go through that. I will say that if a deer population - if an epicentre and we're seeing them spread out. The aerial deer survey was very clear in the increase in the numbers, but also the split of the epicentres and the concentration of those animals. They are getting into national parks. We

should be protecting our national parks. We, as a government, are very proud that we've got national parks and we don't want deer invading those national parks and messing with the ecosystem.

I will hand over to the secretary now to detail more about the consult process on those particular areas.

Ms BADGER - Just in the interest of time as well, if it's just going to be on the RAA process, I think there's enough on record of how this works and we could move on to the next question, because it has been half an hour and I note that this is probably the longest hearing with answers that we've had and we have quite a few to get through. It's a huge portfolio area.

Mr JACOBI - I can keep it short. Ms Badger, thank you for the question. I absolutely recognise that there are values in each of those reserves. It's important to note that none of the reserves tabled are national parks. They are a lower order protected area tenure. They are a protected area tenure where the schedule and objectives in the act allow for that type of activity for the removal of pest animals. It's also important to note, as you rightly pointed out, that there is a range of stakeholders, both adjoining landowners, but also lessees and possibly also licensees, tourism licensees and recreational organisations that might use those areas.

Without going into the detail of that, the whole purpose of the RAA process and the consultation will be to understand who are the users, when are they using it, what are the opportunities for recreational hunting to occur in those reserves, how can it be done in protection of the values, so it doesn't compromise those values but achieve an outcome whereby it is just another tool that we can use to help remove deer? Because, we know that those parcels contain deer and we know that those parcels have values. Therefore, they have been identified as a first cut for us to add to the list of potentially balloted reserves. The timing of when they're made available, the buffers that are established, all of those conditions will be critical to deal with through the REA and consultation process.

Ms BADGER - Okay, thank you for that. I note that they're not national parks because Tasmania hasn't had a new national park in a very long time, but these are touted as the next ones. That should be some of them on the list. You talk about how important it is to protect these areas. Absolutely nobody is disputing that, minister. It's about doing it the right way with evidence backing, and I note you didn't answer that part of my question.

You spoke earlier in the Estimates hearing about the \$400,000 through the Australian Heritage Grant that was awarded for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area biosecurity. How are you going to do more with less money? The last time you had one of those grants was \$440,000 and that was specifically for deer. Now you have \$400,000 - which is less - to do deer, cats, foxglove, and everything else. Yes, we should be protecting these areas, but let's get the money and investment to do it because we know that the recreational shooting approach doesn't work. How are you going to do more with less?

Mr PEARCE - For that, who have we got from - Jason? I will pass to the secretary on that.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you, through you, minister. The funding that we achieve from the Commonwealth Government in support of the funding that we have in the Tasmanian government is critically important to delivering on those initiatives. The invasive species action

plan, which we talked about earlier, is a key commitment and deliverable announced by government recently, will help us to triage and identify the most important priorities, so we are all clear across both government but also NRM and we are collectively using all of our resources to target the most invasive species and using the best technology available to do that.

Ms BADGER - Through you minister, just for clarification though -

CHAIR - Sorry, next time, next rotation. Prof Razay.

Prof RAZAY - Minister, Tasmanian farmers commonly rely on public liability insurance to manage operational risks. If a high-risk dam fails and has not been inspected in accordance with the Tasmanian *Water Management Act 1999*, and the *Water Management Regulation 2019*, there appears to be a risk that the insurer may deny liability. Has the government assessed the risk that noncompliance with dam safety obligations may invalidate public liability insurance coverage for high-risk dam owners? If so, does this represent an unintended consequence of the current regulatory regime, whereby the measure intended to reduce risk may instead compromise farmers' key risk mitigation tool?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. High-risk dams are those dams that have the potential to cause harm or danger to persons or property in the event of a dam failure. You're right, risk mitigation and insurance is a particular issue, not only for a normal farming operation, but particularly when you have irrigation equipment involved. One example of that is - try to insure a pivot irrigator now and see what the premium looks like. It's incredible. In fact, some farmers are only insuring one span.

Insurance is an important issue for our farmers and it's certainly front - this is probably an opening for me to talk about other insurance plans that we have for the ag sector - but these dams also include, in some cases, hydro dams, for hydro generation, town water supply; mining dams, which are also at risk from seismic movement from explosives and the like, heavy machinery; and private farm dams. Under the *Water Management Act 1999*, section 15G[There is no 15G in that act, and no direct mention of 'dam owners'], 'dam owners have a duty to maintain and operate dams safely, to not cause material or serious environmental harm or endanger any persons or property.' Those [Inaudible] guidelines will assist in lowering premiums because we know that farmers need to comply with those guidelines, which effectively removes some of the risk or mitigates some of the insurance underwriting risk for the insurer.

While it seems on the surface that these are a pain in the proverbial, what it effectively can do is assure the insurer that that particular farming operation complies with the safety requirements for the dam under the act and that in itself is probably going to put downward pressure on premiums.

Mr GARLAND - I'd like to talk about marine resources. Although this sector is extremely important to Tasmania's economy, according to the Community and Public Sector Union, marine resources has the lowest staffing levels in the country. I understand there is a restructure plan for marine resources, with staffing further reduced and specialist teams being remade as generalists. I've seen marine resources hollowed out over the years. I've seen the lack of reform to the *Living Marine Resources Management Act*. There are also concerns in the community about the inadequate level of regulatory compliance-checking going on with the salmon industry.

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Minister, can you talk about the restructuring plans and how they will impact on the ability of this research to regulate the marine resources industry and whether this will, ultimately, result in worse outcomes for fish stocks and our marine environment as we face ever greater challenges from climate change and competition for resources? And, according to the budget papers, there is a projected 30 per cent reduction in revenue over the forward Estimates for the marine resources division. Why is this?

Mr PEARCE - I'm going to throw to - restructure is probably under your remit, if you wouldn't mind -

Mr JACOBI - Thank you, through you, minister. There are a couple of questions in there. I might deal with the Budget one first if that's okay and then come to the restructure.

Revenue from appropriation, again, I'll just refer to the figures. We have \$13.595 million in 2024-25, decreasing in 2028-29 to \$8.297 million. The decrease in the 2025-26 Budget is due to the completion of the Blue Economy CRC initiative, that was \$500,000 - that was the offshore agriculture activity. The funding profile for initiatives including the recreational sea fishing in local communities, \$750,000; and the flathead recovery program, \$500,000. Again, these are initiatives that are falling, or finishing or being completed over time. Bearing in mind this is an interim budget. This doesn't discount what government may choose to make a decision on a policy initiative at a later stage. The decrease in 2026-27 is mostly due to the completion of the abalone industry reinvestment fund of \$1.22 million, the salmon plan \$200,000, and the wild fisheries action plan, \$400,000. The decrease in 2027-28 is due to the completion of the better fishing fund initiative, \$500,000; and the decrease in 2028-29 is primarily due to the completion of the additional funds to the Sustainable Marine Research Collaboration Agreement (SMRCA), \$500,000.

I note that in the Budget there's an increase to our collaborative partnership with the SMRCA, which is important to a lot of the work that marine resources does. I acknowledge that maintaining a capable, skilled and well-resourced marine resources team is fundamental to all the work that we have across the industry and all the industry sectors.

In terms of the marine resources restructuring, I'm pleased you asked this question because it's important just to clarify the work that Dr David Midson is doing with his team. I commend him and the deputy secretary, Mandy Clarke, on the initiative to look closely at the marine resources team to make sure that we are creating a workforce that has better capability and a less siloed approach to industry sectors because, typically, people in compliance have been targeted at specific industry sectors, whereas there is an opportunity for them to broaden their skills and experience and apply that more widely.

The proposed changes to the structure of the Marine Resources Strategic Business Unit were communicated to staff and to the CPSU on 9 July 2025. The outcomes of the proposed structure were to ensure a responsive structure that is appropriately aligned to the function and to meet the NRE strategic priorities. If you go to our strategic plan, we clearly outline what our key priorities are for our marine environment to provide a clearer focus and functional alignment of branch responsibilities within the business unit to enhance the structure and reporting arrangements for business services functions within marine resources, including enhanced career progression pathways, which is what I spoke to before, to support the business unit to efficiently achieve short and medium-term priorities and work streams that contribute to long-term objectives and to provide a clearer understanding of roles.

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A part of this restructure has been merging engagement functions into a single team. We've had separate engagement functions and we're now pulling them all together into a single team to provide a whole-of-marine-environment engagement function and this will deliver more efficient and coordinated engagement activities, particularly with the recreational fishing community.

As part of this restructure, marine resources have released an engagement and consultation policy and are developing an engagement operational plan to ensure the department is providing meaningful engagement across the state. The marine resources staff routinely travel across the state to meet with community and industry, including recreational fishers and those interested in our fishing stocks.

The proposed changes were open to consultation and feedback for a period of eight weeks. There was a high volume of feedback received and it's been carefully considered. Following the consultation, we'll take that feedback and we'll update the structure on the basis of the feedback they received and that will be circulated to all staff and the CPSU for their information. Does that answer your question about the restructure?

Mr GARLAND - More or less, yes.

Mr JACOBI - If there's anything more specific, I can ask David to come to the table.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, to you and your team, I'd like to ask a two-part question on Inland Fisheries Service (IFS) please. The wild trout fishery is obviously such an important part of the Tasmanian way of life for thousands - tens of thousands of our people - and plenty of interstate and international visitors. The first part of the question is around control of pest species that have an impact on that fishery and the long term success of it; but the greater part of the question is around cormorants. I get feedback from fly fishers in particular, but trout fishers generally, around their belief - that I have checked with a number of people and it is a common belief - that cormorants are a problem and they're thieving way too many of a wild trout that ought to be part of the fishery.

I'd invite substantial comment around the department and your belief around the need to control cormorants, if it's the case, if you and the department share the view of the people I've been speaking with, that the cormorants are in 'plague proportions.'

Mr PEARCE - I agree with you, and we've recognised that; that's the feedback that we get also. Once we start looking into that and looking into the science behind that, then I am told that that is cyclic, i.e. this has happened many times in the past. There are a number of environmental reasons and ecological reasons that caused that effect. If I could just deal with some of the other invasive species and then I think we'll probably refer to Ryan to deal with the cormorant issue, because he's all over this.

There's also a carp management plan that you'd be aware of and that has been front and centre for us. Through that carp management plan we've now successfully achieved a functional eradication of carp from Tasmania, something we're very proud of. A lot of hard work has gone into that. It's a significant environmental achievement as well as looking after other species as well. Carp are historically confined to Lake Crescent and Sorell, large systems with wetlands of state, national and international significance, and home to the endemic Golden galaxias. Over three decades, IFS have worked tirelessly to contain carp while maintaining

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water flows downstream for communities and agriculture. In total, 7797 carp were removed from Lake Crescent and 41,504 from Lake Sorrell. That's a lot of carp.

The success reflects the dedication of the carp management team and over \$15 million from both the Tasmanian and Australian Governments. You mention also performance and - I'm going to throw - because it is a significant issue, particularly this year. Ryan, would you tell us what you're doing - your team on -

Mr WILKINSON - Yeah, thank you minister, and through you. The cormorant issue has been a really challenging one for the IFS. We've certainly received a lot of feedback from stakeholders around the impact that the birds have had.

As the minister alluded to, they are a cyclical issue. We've got evidence of increases in cormorant numbers dating back to the 1950's, the 1970's, the 1990s. Probably the most recent significant one was in around 2010-2011. Important to remember that they are native species, so they're protected under the nature conservation legislation.

We've really focused our response, if you will, around engaging with the angling community about the cyclical nature of the birds, the impact that they have. I think last financial year we attended around 54 angling events and club events. Many of those conversations were around cormorants. We've also had close engagement with Anglers Alliance Tasmania and their members. I spent a lot of time talking to trout guides and lodgers and their members, who obviously have skin in the game because they're running businesses based on the recreational fisheries. We've been talking about it a lot.

We also had three recreational freshwater fishing forums back in September. Again, cormorants were a key feature of those presentations and we published some work on our website. We put a fact sheet up in October 2024 and that's been widely referenced in terms of, I guess, us trying to explain the historical context of what we're seeing and what we might likely to see over the coming years as the fishery recovers.

We've also done a lot of work in terms of assessing trout populations, what we call fisheries performance assessments. Part of that was we actually looked at 16 rivers sites earlier this year with backpack electrofishing just to look at the trout numbers that were in those systems and we were comparing those to some of the historical records we have.

On the back of that we've actually increased our stocking program. We've had about 115 per cent increase in stocking this year.

Mr FERGUSON - So, you're feeding the cormorants?

Mr WILKINSON - Well, we've stocked with juvenile fish which will kick start some of those heavily impacted rivers over the next couple of years and help them recover. It's also worth noting that the reports we're getting back from anglers this year - we're certainly seeing it ourselves that the cormorant numbers are not at the same level as they were late-2023 into 2024 and early this year.

We're remaining cautiously optimistic that we're through on the back end of the cycle. When you look at some of the reports coming from anglers this year, there's certainly a bit more positivity around the fishery and the fish that are being caught are probably better

condition than they were last year because there's more space and food available, so there's a bit of an upside to cormorant numbers as well.

Mr FERGUSON - I hope we can keep a watching brief on that.

Ms FINLAY - I'm glad that there has been agreement to table the outcomes of the workforce culture survey from Biosecurity. I've had similar concerns raised to Mr Garland about the marine restructure. I don't think the part of his question was answered in terms of the relevant ratio of the number of people we have servicing our fisheries management in Tasmania compared to other states given the size of our fisheries in Tasmania.

There's a specific question around some of the small teams and the people that are being left to manage and deliver services versus what historically the team size would have been. For instance, the marine resources monitoring team - I note that in the budget you said there's no longer the \$500,000 in there for the sand flathead management. The way to make a budget look good, take something out that's going to go back in again later, like the abalone development.

At the moment the marine resources monitoring team has, as I understand it, about one person, it used to be a team of eight. They, for instance, would historically be responsible for monitoring the flathead program. There's industry concern that because that team isn't fully complemented, things aren't being monitored, data isn't being inputted, fisheries aren't being managed to the best of their ability. It's obviously critical and important for Tasmania. Can you talk to me about the reduction in numbers in the marine resources monitoring team?

Mr PEARCE - I'd love to and, in fact, the subject matter experts probably are our General Manager (Marine), David Midson.

Mr MIDSON - Through you, minister. It is true that Tasmania has the largest fisheries and aquaculture sector in Australia, and we are very efficient in the management of that, particularly within marine resources. I would also point out that we have a very productive partnership with the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS). In many other fisheries agencies, the science component of that is included in the government department, and we have a relationship which means a lot of that funding gets leveraged. We also have Tasmanian Police that do a lot of the compliance work, so again, in other fisheries organisations, compliance is very much in-house.

In relation to the monitoring team specifically, it is true that historically there was a much larger number of staff in Compliance over decades. At the moment, there was a short-term period where there was a limited number of staff in that team, and we recruited very quickly, so I can report that it is more than one staff member at the moment. I'd have to get back to you on the specific numbers, but we also did -

Ms FINLAY - Are you happy to take that on notice?

Mr MIDSON - That would be a matter for the minister.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you, minister.

Mr MIDSON - I would also say that we are using other staff to augment that team, so fisheries managers also support monitoring activities, and we're not seeing any problem with

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the data that's required for fisheries management or compliance activities getting entered in in a timely fashion. I would also say that over the last few years, there have been efforts to digitise some of those processes, and that is improving the efficiency in that team.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. This won't be in your area, but they had similar reports in the seed service lab in terms of the number of people that are being required to deliver a really critical role. Again, on paper, the number in that team should be something like six or seven people. At the moment it's looking like it's a small few, one or two. These sorts of shortfalls in teams are causing workload management pressures. Are you able to speak to that? There are lots of examples across the entire department where there are challenges.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you, minister, and I thank the member for the question. You have identified two particular areas where we are experiencing some shortfall in staff, and the Seedlab is one.

I acknowledge that we have had some real challenges through staff being sick, being away from work, and not being in the positions, which has resulted in a short-term reliance on a few people. That was brought to my attention, I think, close to four or five months ago. We sought to actively address that by putting the Seedlab under a different supervisory team model, which I think has provided some temporary support, and we're actively considering how we can address that temporary problem. The positions are still substantively held by an employee, but they're not in the workplace, so we can only backfill them for a certain period of time.

I won't go into the specifics of each individual position, but I understand that there might be some uncertainty about when the people will come back. Therefore, it's not a position that we can just immediately advertise. If you want to talk in more detail I can ask Justin Helmich, General Manager of operations - but you have identified a problem, I'm well aware of it, and we're doing whatever we can to address that.

Ms FINLAY - I suppose the concern is, when these things are raised right across the department - they were two specific examples I could use, but there's been others raised. For instance, sand flathead became depleted because of a lack of focus on the science and the data and what it was telling us over time. So, the pressures on the fisheries, the pressures on farming, are elevated when there are teams that aren't fully resourced.

The key finding out of the reflections and learnings around the salmon mortality event is around the time it takes to corral an understanding of who's a lead person, who needs to communicate, what actions need to be done, and those sorts of challenges with delays create voids for other things to occur. So, it would concern me if the department wasn't fully resourced, then we continue to have these sorts of poor performances where there aren't key leads identified, or key communications done in a solid way.

Can I ask you, minister, specifically in terms of the resourcing and the support from the department in a whole range - and I've tried to demonstrate Biosecurity, Seedlab, Fisheries, it's actually across the whole department - are you concerned that it leads to a lack of responsiveness, a lack of clarity around capacity to respond, and a lack of certainty communicated to the community in very critical events?

Mr PEARCE - Your concern is noted, however, what I will reiterate is the operational effectiveness and mission-readiness that this department possesses and demonstrates every

single day. The issue that we have is the long-term stressors that are placed onto certain individuals. Running a department, and a department like this of 1500-odd people, there are times when we do have human resource issues in certain parts, the same as any business. Talk to any farmer in the state and they will tell you that getting people for their farming operations is difficult.

Ms FINLAY - Our farmers are relying on this department, though, being fully resourced.

Mr PEARCE - A hundred per cent, and if you'd just listen to me, I'll tell you that they farm around it. They still achieve their outputs, and their mission is always completed. However, from time to time there are fluctuations and human resource shortfalls in particular regions. We've got to manage that, just like anyone else. We're just lucky that we have some of the best human beings anywhere in the country doing the jobs that they're doing at the moment, but running a big department with such a diverse mission range is incredibly difficult. My hat goes off to the secretary and all those managers throughout that department that manage that shortfall from time to time.

Ms BADGER - Minister, I understand you're currently working on the 2024-2029 cat management plan. There's nothing new in this budget to deal with the serious issue of cats, notwithstanding the new centre in the north was from the last budget. One tool that you have is the Felixers that are being rolled out. There are some concerns about the accuracy of the Felixers not just getting cats but possibly also affecting Tasmanian devils. Can you please present us with the data on the accuracy of the Felixers, if there have been devils or other native animals impacted, how many there are, and how you're actually going to get on top of the cat issue?

Mr PEARCE - The feral cat issue is something that troubles me, and it has from day-one. If I could eradicate all of them tomorrow, then I would. The particular program that you're talking about is -

A member - All of the unregistered ones.

Ms BADGER - Except the pets, maybe?

Mr PEARCE - I said feral.

Ms HADDAD - Sure. Thank you, minister.

Mr PEARCE - I'm not a feral cat lover. Anyway, the program that you're talking about is a robotic system that sprays 1080 at the animal. We don't want to see unintended consequences with that, and you rightly point out the devil population that exists and has to coexist in that environment. It's not just devils, it's quolls and possums and all other sorts of things that we don't want as 'casualties of war', pardon the pun. These are being trialled.

I can throw it to the secretary in a moment with the extent of those, but we don't want to release something that goes rogue and kills something that it shouldn't. We're very proud of the work that we've done in wildlife management services around, you know, the devil sustainment and population increases, so we're very trepidatious about it and we want to make sure. I'll just throw to the secretary.

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Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, you rightly point out that Felixers devices, are fundamental to getting on top of cats, particularly in remote areas. The artificial intelligence in those devices is improving every day. Every time we get a detection, the artificial intelligence is refining its knowledge and understanding and detection of a cat compared to a Tasmanian devil or a wombat. Every day it's getting better.

I believe it's important to note, though, that in the collaborative projects that we're doing with NRM, like Bruny Island and our offshore islands, the Felixer devices are currently only permitted for use on Tasmanian offshore islands where there are no non-target species that could be mistaken for a cat, such as Tasmanian devils, spotted-tail quolls and wombats. Until the artificial intelligence is so good that there is no room for error, we're only assigning it for use in offshore islands where we are confident there can't be any non-target species.

Ms BADGER - To clarify, we're just after the data on how they're going.

Mr JACOBI - I do not have the data on target species versus non-target species, but we could endeavour to try and collect the information on numbers of cats on offshore islands. There's a fair body of work involved to do that. I'm curious to know the purpose, or the intent, of knowing that.

Ms BADGER - To see how that is improving over time, as you point out, as they're being used, to gain an understanding of how that's come along. I assume that data does exist.

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to accept on face value the premise and the genuine nature of your question. If it will suffice, we'll deliver an operational report of a summary of what we have at hand.

Ms BADGER - Sure.

Mr PEARCE - Are you happy with that, Chair?

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms BADGER - A summary would be lovely, thank you. My second question was on rabbits. Minister, I appreciate it was before your time, but last term we tabled a petition on behalf of people in Mole Creek, which was signed by people right around Tasmania, who are dealing with the rabbit issue. In particular, it addressed the damage that the warrens are doing to community sports fields and the structural integrity of many farming properties, as well as community assets.

There have been issues in the past with the reliance on the single laboratory in the nation to get the calicivirus. When Tasmania did get the calicivirus, can you confirm whether that was ineffective because it was rolled out at the wrong time or in the wrong conditions, and whether or not, given the lab shortage in the past, there will be a calicivirus in the coming year or two?

Mr PEARCE - Rabbits are notoriously difficult to manage, and seasonal conditions affect calicivirus, as you rightly point out. The most effective and cost-efficient way of controlling rabbits occurs when there's an integrated pest management control measure applied. This involves multiple methods, such as baiting, warren-ripping, surface harbour removal, exclusion fencing and fumigation.

NRE provides advice and support about wild rabbits to landowners, including the use of approved poisons such as pindone and the release of calicivirus where conditions are suitable.

You rightly point out the calicivirus was probably not as effective as it could have been. However, releasing the calicivirus at the wrong time can infect rabbits less than 12 weeks old, which are naturally immune to the calicivirus. It's not a well-known fact, but it's true. This risks that animal building an immunity within rabbit populations, so you have a rabbit population which is immune from calicivirus, and which is breeding, aided by the Darwinian effect, to make the calicivirus less effective.

Biosecurity Tasmania released calicivirus at over 400 individual properties between February and June this year, and the calicivirus release worked well in some areas and not so well in others, as you've already pointed out. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the immediate rabbit population exposed to calicivirus at release sites died, but the virus did not spread to the surrounding populations, as we would have hoped. I'm advised that there is a range of factors that might impact the effectiveness of calicivirus as a control option, including the level of immunity within the rabbit population reducing the efficacy of the release and the department is now reviewing the effectiveness of the roll out so that we can learn lessons for next year. It's important.

A new Invasive Species Action Plan is also being developed to tackle invasive species, including those feral cats and more rabbits. It's also important to remember that the calicivirus is just one of the tools, as I said before, in controlling rabbits. It's not a silver bullet and it must be used in conjunction with other control measures.

Successful rabbit control also depends on a large degree of cooperation between landowners. If we can get a series of landowners to work together on rabbit control and invasive species control, then it's easier to control the entire population.

Ms BADGER - I know you're very passionate about this minister, but can I just draw you to the question which were the conditions this year. To clarify, it wasn't as successful because the conditions weren't ideal this year and you have secured some for the coming season, if you like.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Ms BADGER - Yes to both. Thank you.

Mr GEORGE - Minister, here's a question which I'd like to ask you that I put to the Premier who told me that it was a good question and that he knew that the Minister for Primary Industries would have some information on this. I will put it as carefully as I can because there are no supplementaries.

Mr PEARCE - I'm hanging on, by the sound of this -

Mr GEORGE - I'd like a detailed answer, please. What measures and what discussions did the government have or did you have to notify and discuss with other marine industries other than the salmon farms before the introduction of florfenicol? Which includes: did you speak to the rock lobster industry representatives? Did you speak to the abalone industry representatives? Did you speak to oyster farm representatives? Did you speak to wild fishers representatives? And did you speak to any other representatives? And if so, would you provide

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details please and any specific correspondence you had with them before the introduction of florfenicol and notifying them of potential impacts on their industries and on their fishing?

Mr PEARCE - If I could echo the Premier's words, this is a reasonable question. That commercial consultation process did take place, in fact, Mr Midson was involved in that. So I'll let him detail the extent of that.

Mr MIDSON - Firstly, it's important to point out that the approval for the use of florfenicol was with the APVMA and there was a public consultation process for that approval. That's not specifically my area, but others may be able to provide more detail on that. Once that approval came through and we were notified of the use of florfenicol at particular sites we engaged, as we do regularly with certified bodies. Under the *Living Marine Resources Act* there are certified representative bodies for fishing organisations, and we engage with them on fishing management measures. That includes the rock lobster fishery, scale fish fishery, aquaculture and others. We engage with them to develop and implement management measures. Both the management measures that you are talking about we have engaged with the relevant certified bodies to determine what is the best approach going forward.

I would note that with the current short precautionary closure of the rock lobster fishery, it is supported by rock lobster fishers.

Mr GEORGE - Could you provide the correspondence with those individual industries?

Mr MIDSON - I'm not comfortable to provide my correspondence with certified -

Mr PEARCE - Nor should you have to. The manager of marine services has given you an answer, Mr George, and I would substantiate the validity of that.

The other issue that Mr Midson raised was the decision to approve the conditional release of florfenicol for use in southern Tasmania was approved by a federal independent statute authority, the APVMA. It is not influenced by him, by me, or by anyone else within the state, nor is it influenced by the federal government. It is an independent statute authority and they are very serious about their role. The conditional permit is available publicly, and you can read that, and I'm sure that you have.

The other issue that is involved here, with the premise of your question, is the difference between the cautionary advice that was given by the Chief Medical Officer, Mr Veitch, a cautionary advice, and the issue that affects - you mentioned the rock lobster industry, specifically what they're being affected by is the export licence agreement with certain export markets, for instance China, which have incredibly strict guidelines for certain conditions around that particular commodity. It is not specific to salmon or any seafood. It's like it in the beef industry. It's like it with our dairy heifers that we send to China. At one stage they stipulated the proportionality of black and white patches on a Friesian heifer. That's how fussy they were.

That's where the difference comes, and the conflation of the difference between an export condition and a chief medical officer's cautionary advice, which at the bottom of which said that there is no evidence of harm to humans from eating or consuming or being around or ingesting any form of florfenicol.

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Mr GEORGE - It's an antibiotic. Everybody knows one of the world's great health problems is antibiotic resistance.

Mr PEARCE - The health advice issued by the Chief Medical Officer stands. That's public. If you've got any questions for him, that should be directed through the Minister for Health. What I will say, the point I want to make is that consultation did take place. Mr Midson's word should be taken on value, and I certainly wouldn't like to see that questioned. Secondly, the delineation between the APVMA and its statute, I don't think we value that enough. I think that needs to be reinforced. I need to also make the point that health advice is a caution, and also the difference between a health advice, a cautionary advice and the export criteria is two different succinct matters. The end.

Mr FERGUSON - That was a great answer and I thank you for it. That has made it so clear, and I hope that we can get that into the public media as well. I want to ask you a question about red tape, please. Red tape reduction to its most responsible level is important to me, it's important, I'm sure, to you as well. I have a three-part question.

As we start to see the poppies maturing this season, could you inform us what you're doing in relation to red tape reduction and appropriate level of regulation for poppy growers? Could you also update the committee on the government's work with these? The third, and I suppose where I really hope to take you, is would you inform the committee and me about your appetite for further red tape reduction, noting that it was one of the ten focus areas in the Agriculture strategy that we discussed earlier?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for your question. As a farmer myself, one of my biggest frustrations is red tape. I'm not just saying that; it drives farmers insane. What we have to remember is that a typical farming operation is probably a mum and dad's business, a sole trader or a partnership. If mum or dad has to take their eyes off the business and the operation to do red or green tape, then that means that 50 per cent of that business has stopped being effective, so it is important to me.

In relation to poppies, the Tasmanian poppy industry has had a farm gate value of approximately between \$30 million and \$50 million in recent years, and it relies on its reputation as a safe, well-regulated and reliable place to grow poppies. Our opium poppies are amongst the best in the world. In fact, the area approved for growing poppies increased from 4499 hectares in 2024-25 and a further 859 hectares to a total of 13,395 hectares in 2025-26. It's incredible. That's in response to increased market demand.

One of the key conditions on growing an alkaloid poppy was that before planting the licensee must have a valid notice to grow, approved by the Poppy Advisory and the Control Board for every specific paddock or section of their farm that is to be sown, including the exact location, hectares and the poppy type, the opioid type.

In 2024, Poppy Growers Tasmania and processing companies identified practical challenges relating to the notice to grow part of the crop and the preplanning approval process and this issue was the need for greater flexibility in the paddock location, as practical changes often required in response to paddock variations, for agronomic reasons such as paddocks being too wet or you know, difficulties with ploughing et cetera. As a result, these changes, in January 2025 the Poppy Advisory Control Board approved amendments to the Poppy Growers Licence. Notice to Grow process now requires that the property where poppies are to be grown

is approved, rather than needing to identify every specific paddock, paddock by paddock. The exact location of the final paddock zone is now reported within 21 days of sowing and these paddocks are then subject to routine inspections by our departmental regulated crop field officers to ensure that they meet improved fencing and security requirements. For example, to identify any potential crop interferences.

As a result of our red tape reduction focus we've actually streamlined that preplanning process and made it easier for growers to operate more efficiently. We've also given them peace of mind that that flexibility exists because it does their head in worrying about going through the approval process when all you're trying to do is plant your poppies because time is short. So, I don't think we value the reduction of red tape enough and it frustrates me every election, it doesn't matter what colour the party, but everyone bangs on about red tape reduction. Well, there's a difference between banging on about it in an election campaign and actually doing it. Our farmers and our agricultural sector need it .

Ms FINLAY - Speaking about the 11 years that you've been in government and haven't been able to reduce red tape, it is sort of a segway into my next question, which is: often the government are flat footed or on the back foot, slow to act and slow to make decisions. In fact, the report from the learnings from the recent event says that there's a lack of communication and event coordination by government, initial role confusion, delayed critical decision making. There's a really strong call that it was believed that government failed to provide authoritative reassurance of key concerns.

I want to, off the back of that feedback, just ask for clarification, through you, minister, to Mr Midson. Did Mr Midson say in his answer to Mr George that they made contact with industry after they were notified which leases florfenicol was being used in?

Mr PEARCE - Just while Mr Midson is on his way up. You've got to realise that Mr Midson didn't have a lot of time up his sleeve. This was an emergency approval from the APVMA and that was issued very quickly. He had to get his skates on pretty quickly and do some pretty quick engagement.

Ms FINLAY - My question again being: did Mr Midson engage in consultation with industry after he was notified which pen florfenicol had been used in?

Mr PEARCE - Let's ask Mr Midson.

Mr MIDSON - Through you, minister. Yes, so when we engage with industry on specific management measures, we actually take recommendations to them. In relation to the specific management measures around fisheries, we did that after we had notification. There are a number of reasons for that. We had some general engagement with certified body CEOs prior to the notification but in terms of specific engagement on management measures that only happened after. The reason for that is that there are a number of factors that go into commercial fisheries management. Commercial fisheries are managed at often a very fine temporal and spatial scale, so the exact impacts will vary over relatively short periods of time, particularly in some of our fisheries like Commercial Dive.

Ms FINLAY - This question is to you, minister. The department and the government, have known about the industry's intention or hope to use florfenicol since February earlier this year. Things like trade barriers are well known. They don't just come up once a pen is notified.

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Since February, the department - I know that you haven't been here since February - but since February there's been an opportunity to engage proactively with our recreational fishers in terms of them being able to have early access to information to be able to help and engage with their fishers. Why would it be that commercial fishers were only engaged with after the pens advice was issued? We had fishers last Friday night who, after dinner, when pots had been set, were advised that there was a closure, when the government had access to this information since February.

Mr PEARCE - I'm going to refer to Mr Midson again on this, but again, I'll reiterate that this was an emergency approval under the APVMA process -

Ms FINLAY - February, May, June, July, August, September, October. I think the department needs to do -

Mr PEARCE - Are you listening? Do you want to answer your own question?

CHAIR - Order.

Mr PEARCE - As I was saying, the other thing that everything needs to be cognisant of is this is a conditional permit, and there are a number of conditions. We've talked about this with Mr George. That permit was issued with a number of conditions attached to it.

Ms FINLAY - I am not talking about the permit; I'm talking about communication, where the government clearly lacks in your communication with commercial fishers.

Mr PEARCE - One day we might want to administer some new drug, and we do not have crystal balls around everything that is going to, or might, or might not occur in the future. What Mr Midson and the department were dealing with was an emergency conditional approval with a number of conditions attached to it that needed to be strictly adhered to, and he dealt with it, and engaged with industry, as he rightly pointed out. Secretary, do you have anything to add? I'm getting frustrated.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I thank the member for the question. I do not accept for one second that the department was flat-footed in this respect. We were dealing with, and working 24/7 around the clock with industry to respond to the mortality events that were occurring across the months of January, February, March and April; conversations that were being held with industry and with representatives from Chile who were experts in the field that came to Tasmania to talk about their experiences with the use of florfenicol.

Those conversations with my veterinary team were very - let's call them premature. There was not even any real contemplation, as I understand it, about the need to use florfenicol until I was alerted to that in mid or late July. It wasn't until July that we were in conversations with industry, that there was a real desire to start using florfenicol. That is when my department immediately responded. What are the issues around that? Where is it going to be used? How is it going to be used? How often is it going to be used? What are the permits that are required from the APVMA to enable industry to use that? Because we want industry to have the tools at its disposal to properly mitigate a future mortality event. We also, as a department, and we take this very seriously, we have a responsibility to the environment, particularly our marine environment, and we have a responsibility to the people of Tasmania who use those waters, including our recreational fishers.

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At the time that we became aware that industry was very keen to more urgently consider the use of florfenicol, all of these issues came to the fore, and we worked pretty hard in collaboration with industry. I again commend David's team for the work that he has done to make sure that the right approvals were in place. We did not know what the outcome or the decision of the APVMA was going to be until they actually issued the permit. We didn't know what conditions were going to be imposed upon that permit. It's not until you know what the conditions are of an emergency permit that you can actually understand how it will be applied. The permit has been published and I encourage you to go and look at the permit and the permit conditions, if you haven't already, but it makes it very clear that the conditions of that permit use are quite limited and quite strict and that there is research and monitoring that has to be conducted and provided to the APVMA before they will consider any further permit, whether it's an emergency permit or a minor-use permit.

Ms FINLAY - I appreciate the response but, minister, I'm speaking about communications, particularly with our commercial fishers. You talk often about your military structures and things and it's the language you use on how to manage missions and things that you've said here at the table. In no other system or environment, when you're making a decision, would you wait until after to engage with our commercial fishers. When florfenicol - and I'm interested that you say that it's July because my understanding is that there were engagements and conversations around the hopeful use of florfenicol much earlier this year - but to not have engagement and to have our rock lobster fishers out there on a Friday, going to set pots, then having that area closed because it was only after a lease had been identified as using it that you would have that conversation with them. Can't you accept, minister, that's way too late in the game?

Mr PEARCE - No, I do not accept that it was way too late in the game. The lease that you're talking about is, as the industry body identified to me this morning, a very minor part of the harvest area.

Ms FINLAY - That's lucky for you, isn't it? What if it wasn't?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay -

Ms FINLAY - My point is timing of communication is critical.

Mr PEARCE - What if the Earth stopped going around this way and started going the opposite way? What if aliens took us over? Goodness me.

Ms FINLAY - Can you accept that the timing of communication and your responsibility to take the lead on communications is critical?

CHAIR - Order. Ms Finlay, please. Let the minister answer the question.

Ms FINLAY - The question is about communication and engagement.

Mr PEARCE - You rightly point out those are two very important topics. I think there's something in that for all of us.

Ms FINLAY - Yes, our wild-catch fishers need you to step up -

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, enough.

Ms BADGER - Minister, the 2024 State of the Environment Report was pretty clear on the state of Tasmania's rivers, particularly the need for greater monitoring of river health, downstream wetland health as well.

In 2001, prior to Basslink coming on board, there was a series of quite intense studies done into what the change in release for hydro-powered generation of water would mean for various rivers' health. That was an incredibly pivotal study. It found the conditions of the meromictic lakes and how they had deteriorated significantly, among other things. Those flow studies under the projected Marinus release rates haven't been done, but the decision on Marinus has been made. When are we going to have the river flow and the environmental flow reports for all the affected rivers under Marinus? I note that we've asked Hydro and they didn't have it, so I'm coming to your department.

Mr PEARCE - You rightly point out that this is a Hydro issue, however, I'm going to genuinely try to answer as much as I can. Bear in mind I don't have numbers that Hydro would normally have.

Ms BADGER - Sure.

Mr PEARCE - The stream flow, water quality, and groundwater data collected by NRE Tas is publicly available on the NRE Tas Water Information web portal, as is stream flow data from Tasmanian Irrigation. Hydro has some selected Tasmanian sites but not all, but there are some there.

NRE Tas also publishes river health monitoring results for 53 long-term river health monitoring sites via the NRE Water Information Tasmanian web portal. River health monitoring focuses on macroinvertebrates, riverbed sentiment, algae, riparian habitat indicators. It looks at things like - in spring 2024 sampling surveys for river health monitoring were processed and analysed and the 2025 autumn sampling survey has been completed. That's up on the site - the portal that I talked about.

As part of the Tasmanian government's rural water use strategy - this is a different system now, known as the Drivers of Change project - has undertaken monthly water-quality sampling for nutrients, physiochemical and bacteria at 50 sites across the state. Detailed water health investigations have been undertaken in the Leven, Pipers, Ringarooma and Mountain River catchments and this project is improving our science and understanding of the likely causes of any changes in waterway health. It's really helpful as we build a holistic strategic picture. That's about where I'm at and the extent of it.

Ms BADGER - Can I take from your answer that you're not currently actively in partnership with Hydro to monitor affected river health under what would be projected flows, not current monitoring - the projected flows.

Mr PEARCE - We certainly work collaboratively with Hydro.

Ms BADGER - Yes, but you're not doing any work on environmental flows under Marinus specifically?

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Mr PEARCE - No.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. Next question. Minister, in 2019, the department completed a review of trends in river health in Tasmania. It's a review that's been much discussed by the Greens in parliament ever since because it showed a significant and disconcerting decline in river health across many locations, as the State of the Environment Report also articulated.

Since the release of this report, which I note was through an RTI, the Greens have been questioning what legislative, regulatory and policy reforms the government would undertake to reverse the trend of declining river health. In a briefing earlier this year I was told that many of these important matters would be considered under a paper that would be called the Strategic Directions for Healthy Waterways, which was due this year, but since then the delivery timeline for that paper has been delayed to 2027. I was wondering why the delay around that paper. Who made the decision? Whether funding was part of it?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. It's important question. The subject matter expert we have in the room, his name's Bryce Graham. What this bloke doesn't know about our waterways, isn't worth knowing. Thanks, Bryce.

Mr GRAHAM - Good evening, everybody. I'm Bryce Graham. I'm acting Director of Water Management. Your question regarding the strategic directions on waterway health, that's specifically your question, why it's been delayed, is that correct?

Ms BADGER - Yes.

Mr GRAHAM - Thank you. It's a policy project under the Healthy Waterway suite of projects under the rural water use strategy. It will set up the road map of roles and responsibilities for river health and water quality management and monitoring. It will also identify gaps and seek to improve governance arrangements.

The project is yet to commence, with scoping of this project to commence in the first half of 2026. We've had a lot of projects on, Ms Badger. We are getting around to it. It is listed in the 2025-27 Rural Water Use implementation plan released on 16 November and it's listed to commence in 2025-26 and be completed in 2026-27.

This project will rely on the outcomes of some of the other waterway health rural water use strategy projects being developed, including the Drivers of Change, as mentioned by the minister, and waterway health projects currently underway and due for completion by June 2026. That's what I have about that.

Ms BADGER - Yes, absolutely. Just the other aspect of that question, and sorry, I think we might have been a bit distracting while asking it. It was just around the funding, and I know it because it's under the Rural Water Use strategy. There was ongoing funding of around \$200,000 - off the top of my head in previous budgets - and in this one there's \$440,000, but it's just for this year, not in the forward Estimates. I just wanted to clear up that it's reliant on the results of other studies, as you say, and that funding or a lack thereof, is not impinging on the release of this report.

Mr GRAHAM - Not that I'm aware of, no. That \$440,000 that was in the Budget for this year is for implementation and advancement of the water information management system.

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Also looking at the collaborative statewide water quality monitoring program. That's what that funding is going to.

Through you, minister. May I also talk about the Hydro management, you talked about in your previous question. Each year Hydro provides us with their environmental plan for the year and we engage with Hydro every quarter on their environmental monitoring and what they do and they provide us with inputs and the like. To date I haven't seen the latest one, sorry, I have seen the one for - I have to get the year right - 2024-25 I have. I'm not sure about 2025-26, I'd have to check on that. I'd have to see what the projects are in there for that, but I cannot tell you whether there is anything in Marinus on there until I check that number.

Ms BADGER - Can we take that on notice just through you, minister, is that alright? Take what you might have on projected Marinus?

Mr PEARCE - Yeah

Ms BADGER - Thank you.

Mr GARLAND - You've known for quite a while that you were going to use florfenicol in the marine environment. You know that our export markets, the buyers of our fish, some of them, will not tolerate any residue whatsoever in the fish that you're talking about. You've known that the cray season was opening last Friday night. Why were the crayfishermen allowed to go spend thousands of dollars on diesel and bait, and go out, set their pots, to then be told to go pull the pots back out of the water? That is totally unacceptable. You had prior knowledge of all of this; our cray fishermen are struggling.

For a bigger point of view, why should we as a community have to put up with residue in our water, whether you're a surfer, a fisherman or just somebody that cares about our marine environment? This salmon industry is taking precedence over our waterways, over our health. If you look back at the history of it, you had a mussel farmer that was shut down back in 2017. They couldn't prove it, but it was what was coming down from the salmon farms. You had a small-mesh sector, 25 years relocating seals onto our fishery, you shut us down and now you've shut down a few crayfishermen, potentially risking our export market.

Minister, when is this industry going to pull its head in and be managed and regulated properly? All the evidence is stating that it's not viable to do it in our waterway. Our waters are warming all the year. We had 16,000 tonnes of dead fish last year and I'm horrified at what's going to come this year. All the evidence is stating that you shouldn't be there or if you are to destock. You're not even willing to make them destock to reduce the nutrient load going into the water.

This is totally unacceptable. We are an island state and our whole culture is in and on that water. I was at a meeting on Sunday down at the Tasman Peninsula that hall was filled. When are you going to respect the wishes and regulate this industry so it can have a bright future? Because the way it's going, it's shooting itself in the foot at every turn. That'll go, and in the process, look what's happening: residue in our wild fish and we're possibly risking that market.

CHAIR - The minister has the call.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks Chair. I understand the emotion, to a degree -

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Mr GARLAND - You should understand it fully because if it happened on your farm, you'd be screaming blue bloody murder. This is totally unacceptable.

CHAIR - Mr Garland, please.

Mr GARLAND - Sorry, Chair. I apologise.

CHAIR - Let the minister answer the question please.

Mr PEARCE - When it comes to regulation that you mentioned, it is the most heavily regulated industry that exists within my portfolio. When it comes to the particular instance you have around that one harvest block for southern rock lobster, then we've dealt with that in previous answers. When it comes to the emergency and fairly short notice approval by an independent federal body of an off-label therapeutic, then we've dealt with that in previous answers.

When it comes to the frustration that you share and the feedback that you get, and I get feedback as well, I'm being fair dinkum here, that feedback needs to be captured. This study that we've instigated - it is absolutely vital that everybody who can and should have an input into that study, needs to make representation to it. It is the only way that we can gather the information, the science, the data, the subject knowledge experts from around the state. We have some of the best and most extensive subject matter experts anywhere in the world living right here in Tasmania. This study is the opportunity for them to have their study and it's the opportunity for us to pick their brains.

What I would encourage is that we turn our emotion into providing feedback into that study, because we want a long-term, viable industry that is going to be sustainable not only for those industry providers, but also the communities that they operate near, as well as the state more generally - and our environment, and that's what I want.

Mr GARLAND - And what we want is to be able to swim in our water and not have residues in our fish and not lose our export markets. Are you going to compensate these cray fishermen? They've lost their income now, and they've spent thousands. Are you going to compensate these cray fishermen for their losses? Also, you really don't understand the concern within our fishing industry with the effect this salmon industry is having. The tail is wagging the dog, it has been for a long time, and if you're not careful, minister, we won't have a salmon industry - it's as simple as that. You'll probably take down our wild fisheries with it as well. It's way overdue.

I'm sorry about my emotion, but there's one thing I do care about, and that is my marine environment. It feeds me, it sustains me, it entertains me, and it does for a lot of Tasmanians. The Aboriginal community, they're first and foremost in their mind. The government needs to get off its arse and regulate this industry properly. They're controlling the narrative.

Ms FINLAY - It's not a regulation issue; it's a communication issue.

CHAIR - Mr Garland, I realise you're a very passionate man on this issue, but if you can -

Mr GEORGE - It is factually based.

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Mr GARLAND - I'm not making it up, Rob.

CHAIR - I'm not disputing. I am just asking for language to be -

Ms FINLAY - It's actually not factual. We don't know that the residue -

Mr GARLAND - Janie, you've been backing this industry to the hilt ever since I've been in this parliament.

CHAIR - Order.

Ms FINLAY - I'm here backing in the commercial fishers.

CHAIR - Order.

Mr GARLAND - Well, the salmon industry has affected it.

Ms FINLAY - It hasn't. We don't know that like that.

CHAIR - Mr Garland, Ms Finlay, please.

Mr GEORGE - You know it has.

Ms FINLAY - We don't, that's why it's closed, Mr George.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please.

Ms FINLAY - If they had science -

Mr GARLAND - Oh, come on.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please. I don't know how many times I have to say it. If I say 'order', I want order. Please. I am Chair. Listen to me. Don't ignore me. Thank you. Mr Di Falco.

Mr Di FALCO - Honourable minister, what is the government doing within this Budget to support workforce shortages in agriculture, aquaculture and forestry?

Mr PEARCE - You raise a good point. I mentioned it earlier, about shortfalls in human resources within our agricultural sector. We mentioned Marinus - someone mentioned Marinus earlier. Once that starts coming out of the ground and starts becoming a project, we start seeing - What I'm concerned about is many local jobs will gravitate towards large projects like Marinus and the like. If you're a dairy farmer at Togari trying to get someone to put teat cups on cows is going to be very difficult.

I talked to Peter Greenham & Sons at one of their abattoirs in Smithton. For him, trying to get human beings to work in his abattoir is nigh on impossible, so he turns to our great Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. I know it's a federal government responsibility, but that is something that's available to our agricultural sector here. Many, particularly in things like stone fruits - things like berries, cherries and the like, use the PALM scheme a lot, as does our abattoir sector.

There's a great story up on the north west coast of a girl called Belle Binder, who's started a labour hire business based around agriculture. She calls it Left Field. It's probably a good example for particularly the agricultural sector, because she's getting young people that weren't necessarily engaged with agriculture, bringing them all together, working them up as a team, training them and then putting them on farms seasonally to pick and to manage farms. It's a brilliant system. I'm trying, as ag minister, to highlight those great stories of people that are getting off their backsides and starting these projects. I'm trying to highlight the fact that we need those PALM schemes where Pacific Islanders come and help with our seasonal agricultural produce, because when our produce needs to come off, it needs to come off quickly, otherwise it'll spoil. It gets back to that freshness, quality and provenance that we have within our agricultural sector in Tasmania.

Human resources is going to have a bigger impact as we move forward, even given the fact that we've got things like drones and automated harvesting equipment and like, we still need humans.

The other thing that I'm concerned about, while I'm on a roll, is the commercialisation of our agricultural sector. The fact that we have larger farms, farms put together and pulled together, where we have large companies basically running an agricultural business, without necessarily thinking about the focus they should have on training our next generation of farmers and farm managers. Give them an open-ended progression pathway where they can progress from being a farm worker through to a farm manager and one day run their own farm. Also, they could branch out and do agronomy or something. I want that progression for our young people in agriculture, because agriculture is a great career. Once you get involved in agriculture, you never leave it, unless you go into politics.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your work as the Chair. Minister, this may be my last opportunity to ask you a question during this session. I just want to commend you. You're a new minister and you are excelling. I'm proud to call you a colleague and thank you for your work. I'm just so impressed with your team - the departmental team and your advisers - first rate. Thank you for your passion.

I just want to get a two-part question. First, I would hope for a short answer, which is on the red tape piece that I asked you about earlier, if you'd just indicate that you have a forward-looking sense of wanting to continue to deregulate wherever you can.

The substantial part of my question is to ask you on drought and drought resilience. We all know that it's seasonal and cyclical so that you can't predict it. I wonder if you would speak to that point - what role you intend to take as minister to support our farming community to be as resilient and prepared for drought, or even just drier conditions or difficult seasons, so that we're all in the best possible position going forward.

Mr PEARCE - Firstly on the red tape, I think I've gotten across today how seriously I take that, and it isn't simply a slogan for me. That is a given.

When it comes to drought, I was up to my elbows in the drought most recently that involved King Island and also Flinders and much of the north-west, as it did other parts of the state, but particularly King Island. The issues that we had on King Island were due to its isolation. It's 63 nautical miles in the middle of Bass Strait. We had almost 100,000 cattle on there. Those cattle had to come off live. We didn't necessarily have the infrastructure in

shipping to get those animals off, we didn't have the infrastructure to get feedstocks into the island.

King Island never goes into drought - it's not something that happens. All of a sudden farmers were outside of their normal regime. They were under stress. We talk about resilience, and it's almost as if some farmers take that as a pat on the head, but it's not. It's building that knowledge base and exposing farmers to other options they have that they don't necessarily deal with every day. That's important. I want to thank all those that were involved in that, particularly the islands package - it was great.

I would like to highlight some of the specific assistance that we provided in the 2024 drought:

- We had \$1.5 million in the Bass Strait Islands Water Resilience program, an initiative that supported long-term climate resilience on King and Flinders Islands;
- \$680,000 was allocated in the 2024-25 year, with the final \$820,000 in 2025-26. This initiative includes the King and Flinders farm water scheme;
- On-farm Emergency Water Infrastructure Rebate Scheme, which opened on 18 July 2024 and received 101 applicants. That's incredible. \$818 has been allocated to 99 applicants as of the end of June 2025;
- The Bass Strait Island Water Security Strategies project, which will access existing surface and groundwater resources on Bass Strait islands, is underway now and is scheduled for completion by 2027;
- \$250,000 was allocated to TasFarmers to appoint two drought resilience coordinators for King Island, Flinders Island and mainland Tasmania. This comprised \$150,000 from the Tasmanian government and \$100,000 from TAS Farm Innovation Hub. Targeted extension activities through the hub will continue to December 2025 and support recovery, because they're still recovering from that;
- A sum of \$200,000 was allocated during the 2024-25 period to Rural Alive and Well, and we'll contract more mental health outreach to our farmers. As I said before, every 10 days a farmer takes their own life in Australia and any measure that we can do to prevent just one is worth it;
- To support future resilience, a joint investment between the Australian federal government and Future Drought Fund is also preparing farmers and rural communities to be more resilient to a changing climate, managing risks such as drought;

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- A \$4.7 million Farm Business Resilience Program is providing subsidised coaching and tools and assists farmers in preparing their - I've talked about a farm as a businessperson before they're a farmer, and that's important also. That's what that covers;
- Community stakeholders and governments have been working together over the past two years to prepare community-led drought resilience plans. Everyone needs a plan, and particularly our islands that are now critically exposed. Three plans have been developed in southern, northern and north-west regions of Tasmania; and
- Finally, a \$1.3 million joint grants program will soon help communities and organisations kick-start priority actions to support regional drought and climate resilience and goals, detailed in their plans. As I said, we will continue to support our farmers to transition through climate variability.

Ms FINLAY - There's no doubt that the use of florfenicol has been an active conversation, I'm sure, for you, minister, for the department, across our parliament, in the community, in industry. So people's awareness of this issue should be deep and immediate in their callback.

You've referred to the reason why communication hasn't happened with our commercial fishers until after notification was used on which pens it was going into, because it was an emergency and short notice. You, and the secretary, suggested that the government wasn't aware of industry's intention to use florfenicol until July. Do you maintain that position, minister? It's been half an hour since we had this conversation at the table. I know that it's not true, so I'm hoping that someone has an update on information around the understanding of when industry intended and first created that.

Mr PEARCE - I have nothing to add. Have you, secretary?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister -

Ms FINLAY - So, you still maintain that you only found out in July, minister? I'd like the minister answer this question. Minister, are you saying that the government only found out about industry use of florfenicol in July?

Mr PEARCE - The timeline is very clear on when we received the approval from the APVMA.

Ms FINLAY - That is not the question. When did we first understand that industry had an intention, and were having conversations with government, about their hope to use florfenicol?

Mr PEARCE - Secretary, are you able to dig up the date on the exact -

Ms FINLAY - It won't be July, minister.

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Mr JACOBI - I can answer this question, through you, minister. I can put my hand on my heart and assure you that the first time I heard about the use of florfenicol by the industry was in the middle to late July via a phone call. But I want to -

Ms FINLAY - Minister, can I ask a question?

CHAIR - Order.

Mr FERGUSON - This is so discourteous to our witnesses.

CHAIR - Order.

Ms FINLAY - Chair, if I can clarify my question, please. I'm not asking for personal knowledge, I'm asking for the government, and I'm asking when the government first found out from industry about their intention to use florfenicol. Could I please have an answer to that question?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, the minister has been trying to answer that, but you keep interjecting.

Ms FINLAY - No, the secretary said he personally didn't know. I'm asking about the government. The government isn't a person.

Mr FERGUSON - This is so disrespectful to our witnesses, honestly. What you're doing is so unprofessional.

Ms FINLAY - It's actually disrespectful to the community.

CHAIR - Order.

Mr PEARCE - Chair, could I have the call?

CHAIR - Yes, you have the call.

Mr PEARCE - It is one thing to interfere and interject when I'm speaking. It's another when a government official who is an employee has to put up with this rubbish. I think it's inappropriate and I'd like to put on the record that I objected to it. I objected strongly and I believe that the secretary should be able to deliver his answer free of interjections.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, can I ask to clarify the question? I'd like an answer to the question. When did the government first find out that industry presented an intention to use florfenicol?

Mr PEARCE - Is that the end of your question?

Ms FINLAY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - If you'd like to add anything?

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Mr JACOBI - Through you Minister. There have been officer to industry level discussions around the benefits of the florfenicol for many months. I think recall since January, industry was engaged with my vets in my department around what other countries were doing with florfenicol. Now those discussions were early, and I think I said this before, they were premature discussions around the potential benefits of florfenicol. Everybody knew at the time that it was not approved for use in Australian waters. It had never been used in salmon in Australian waters, those discussions were very preliminary.

As I said to you before, it was first raised with me in July and at that point in time I immediately had a conversation with Dr Veitch, and I also raised the immediate concerns, which were obvious, that industry and the government needed to have a very clear strategy about how this would be delivered, where it would be delivered, how often and what were the impacts of delivering that in the marine environment.

We did not have enough information to be absolutely confident that without monitoring we would better understand how that particular antibiotic would apply and its efficacy in this environment.

Ms FINLAY - So it's clear that the government was aware of conversations with industry from perhaps January, but at least I know from February in terms of the industry's use. Although Mr Garland has left, it's galling that with a year's worth of information around the potential use of florfenicol in the waters that rock lobster fishers would go to work on Friday to set pots and then have an area closed because it was only after florfenicol was used in a pen that you would engage a conversation with industry. Do you not see that that is - and I did use the word flat footed, I said you're on the back foot - could you see where there are opportunities to improve engagement and communication with our other commercial sectors in Tasmania to ensure that something like that doesn't happen again?

Mr PEARCE - The answers to these questions have all been answered. I'm not going to restate them. Every single answer or question that you have posed has been answered in some way completely -

Ms FINLAY - Only after multiple questions to get clarification.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please let the minister finish.

Mr PEARCE - Exactly, these questions have been answered. We remain steadfast in the answers that we've already provided.

Ms FINLAY - Only when pushed did you actually say that you had earlier access. What I want to know is with the study that's happening now -

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please.

Mr PEARCE - No, Chair. It doesn't work like that.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please, we're moving.

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Ms BADGER - Just my final two rapid fire questions to finish us off possibly. Minister, what level RAA is the public land going to be going through to be opened up to recreational shooting?

What additional resources have been allocated to foxglove since it's been a declared species?

Mr PEARCE - Bear with me on that. Foxglove is not something that comes up everyday, but it's a terrible thing. In fact, it's poisonous. Weed management is a shared responsibility that requires collaboration between different levels of government. At stage 3 - Weed Action Fund, commenced in September 2025 with projects covering priority weeds and specific regions of the state. It builds on the over \$6 million investment that we've had on tackling weeds in the state between 2019 and 2025 through the Weeds Action Fund stages 1 and 2. We are committed to working with farmers and councils and community organisations and the like.

Ms BADGER - Thanks minister. In the interest of time, I kept my questions short. They're pretty simple. I'm just wondering if I can grab that RAA?

CHAIR - Ms Badger.

Ms BADGER - We've got to ten past. Continue on. I love hearing about foxglove. Keep going.

CHAIR - Is my microphone working? I'm just checking because I talk but no one's listening. I was about to say, we go through until 7.16 p.m.. I'm trying to help you. Please continue, minister.

Ms BADGER - Possibly not for 17 minutes though.

Mr PEARCE - I do realise the importance of foxglove eradication because as I said, it's an invasive weed and it can be poisonous at certain times of its life cycle.

Foxglove, the *digitalis* species, in fact, was declared a pest under the *Biosecurity Act 2019* on 19 February 2025. This declaration prohibits the sale of non-sterile Foxglove species and applies the regulation and management of Foxglove designated areas and includes Tasmanian wilderness, which you'd be interested in, and World Heritage areas, which I know is important. Requirements for the control and management of foxglove in designated areas is detailed in the Foxglove Biosecurity Program. A key objective is to eradicate that weed from the environment. Biosecurity Tasmania officers, through the provision of advice, will support landowners and managers to develop their own plans to remove that and eradicate it. Do you want me to continue?

Ms BADGER - If it's the answer to the question, which is what additional resources are there? For example, there was one biosecurity officer for the TWWHA before - is that still the current employment numbers? And just on the RAA.

Mr PEARCE - Weed Action Fund will assist in that. The Weed Action Fund aims to deliver long term strategic outcomes by tackling such serious weeds that you've mentioned.

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Funding for the Weed Action Fund, it commenced in 2018-19 with \$5 million over 5 years. It was followed by an additional \$1.4 million over 2 years on the 2023-24 Budget. Funding is delivered through grants to landowners, organisations and other key stakeholders involved in weed management. In kind contribution from landowners to date total \$4.8 million. Its incredible people want to get behind as a community and eradicate these weeds from the environment.

Stage 3 of that Weed Action Fund is being delivered by NRE Tasmania and we're working closely with them. It consists of six major projects covering specific regions and weed species across Tasmania, including the north-west and western Tasmania priority weeds, the Furneaux Group, Invasive Perennial Grasses in northern and western Tasmania, Invasive Grasses in southern and eastern Tasmania and as you asked before Foxglove Education and Awareness and Emerging Priority Weed Threats. There are currently 86 authorised weed officers who have attended specific weed compliance training under the *Biosecurity Act* in Tasmania across the state and local government organisations. Biosecurity Tasmania have 24, other states have 8 and local government has 54. It just answers your question about personnel.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. The RAA level for the public land?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, Minister. Just to clarify your other question, there are four biosecurity officers in the department dedicated to the TWWHA and at this point in time, whilst we're still undertaking an analysis of the parcels for deer, it looks likely to be level 2 RAAs.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. Before we move on to Mr George, would you like to tidy up something with the salmon study?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, thank you. This is a clarification from a previous answer. The terms of reference require:

'The study lead to develop a community engagement strategy as an early deliverable, this strategy may incorporate public submissions if the study lead determines that they would add value to the process and finally, the government is committed to ensure meaningful engagement with the Tasmanian community throughout the study, both with those who have concerns about the salmon industry and those whose livelihoods depend on it'.

End of clarification. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. Sorry, Mr George, Prof Razay, then I'll come to you.

Prof RAZAY - I listened carefully to our really passionate debate on the salmon industry and I'd like to clarify a few points here. First, because I feel Tasmanians are really concerned after listening to this debate. First, I would like to say that the sale of food from diseased animal is illegal under the *Food Act 2003*, but Tasmanians are clearly concerned about eating infected salmon.

In addition to that, antibiotic used in salmon are important also in treating human infection, so when our food contains traces of antibiotics, the microbes in our body develop antibiotic resistant which mean it will affect our ability to fight infection. So, what the concern

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of the community now? Can we guarantee or ensure that the salmon on sale is free of the disease and the antibiotic?

Now I will follow the Chief Medical Advisor to be cautious and I try to be pragmatic, so I am the one who has been promoting salmon say two to three times a week because that's the best thing for our brain health, so I am now also cautious. Well, while we are waiting for all our investigation, so I'm saying, well, just once a week perhaps until we clarify things and this is our concern, the whole Tasmanian community.

Mr PEARCE - I thank you for your concern and I recognise that you come from a position of science, in fact, I think we should Secretary, can we call the Chief of Government Vet Deborah McSweyn? The acting chief government vet. She's had a lot to do, subject matter expert on antimicrobial. Thanks, Deb, welcome.

Ms McSWEYN - Thank you. Hello, could you please repeat your question?

Prof RAZAY - Well, basically I'm repeating the concern of the Tasmanian, can you ensure that salmon on sale is free of disease and antibiotics?

Ms McSWEYN - Through you, minister. Yes, so the AVPMA sets withholding periods for that salmon and the salmon companies and the treating veterinarian must abide by those. If for any reason they think the water temperatures, because fish are very particular with their antibiotics, they'll extend their withholding periods. Prior to harvest, the salmon companies will also batch test through another laboratory to make sure that they have reached those marks, if they haven't, the fish will not be harvested for human consumption.

These residues are also monitored by DAF before they go into export markets as well. Importantly, florfenicol is not used in humans, which is why it is deemed safe to use in many production animals such as pigs and cattle as well.

Prof RAZAY - I think all I would say we have to be cautious. Thank you.

Mr GEORGE - Thank you, Chair. Minister, salmon, could you tell me what preparations the department is taking to deal with what is a very likely outbreak of mass mortalities this summer? Are plans in place for disposal of morts, which they weren't last summer? Are plans in place to prevent fish flesh and fats washing up on our beaches, and what plans are being made for commercial and recreational fishers if more open-net diseased pens are declared in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, Long Bay or other areas? Will you consider ordering the destocking of salmon farms if the use of antibiotics spreads widely? In other words, what exact efforts, actions and plans are being put in place to deal with a very likely event this summer?

Mr PEARCE - Some of your questions relate to EPA matters, but I will endeavour to answer or have someone answer the stuff that is within our remit. Secretary, in terms of preparedness from the department, would you outline to the committee the preparations that we've already undertaken?

Mr JACOBI - Thank you. Through you, minister, there may be some questions that I'll defer to the CVO. If Deb could come to the table ready, that would be helpful. I thank Mr George for the question. The recommendations directly from the Reflections and Learning report, there were several recommendations - probably the most significant was around the

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development of heatwave response plan, which we have prepared and published. I'm not sure if you're aware of that.

Mr GEORGE - I've seen it, I've read it.

Mr JACOBI - That document spells out a whole range of different measures that we will take and adopt in the event of a mortality event, because it would be very similar to a heatwave response plan. Probably one of the most significant things in that heatwave response plan is that it sets out how to improve communication, particularly between industry and government, so we get a much more streamlined communication and response, and better communication with the public, more timely communication with the public about what is actually happening and what's going on. That was one of the key things that we all took away from the last event.

The other thing that I think is worth mentioning is that I am in discussions with industry about what improvements we can make to mortality reporting. It's important that we do have better visibility over those issues, and it's important that industry feel comfortable and we find a way in which information can be shared that reflects the commercial sensitivities of each of the individual companies. It also gives government, both the independent EPA and my department, greater visibility over what's occurring and where, because that is important intelligence so that we can all be proactive rather than reactive.

The other thing I think is important to mention, the minister talked before about the incredible work that's being done by the vaccine research staff that I have based up in Mount Pleasant. They have already developed a what's called PRC test, which ensures much faster response times for the identification of *P. salmonis*. That is a significant improvement on where we were six months ago. They are also actively working on a new version of the TURKOVAC-plus vaccine, which will give much greater efficacy and comfort and certainty to industry about the life of vaccination.

As you know, industry are also taking a significant number of measures themselves. They have deployed jellyfish booms around their pens, they are actively vaccinating salmon that are going into the water to give them greater certainty around timeframes. Probably one of the key things that I'll probably refer to Deb about, is some of the matters in relation to the use of an antibiotic such as florfenicol, which appears to be, on every level, the most effective way to deal with the animal welfare issues that could emerge if there was a future mortality event. We are very aware and alert to the animal welfare implications of this. Industry does have to have all the tools at its disposal to properly deal with and prevent another outbreak.

In terms of land-spreading and the disposal of morts, that is really a matter that should be referred to the independent EPA, that output group. I'd encourage you to raise that question with Catherine Murdoch, the director. I can talk very briefly; my understanding is that she and her team are actively working with the industry to ensure that they have greater capability to dispose of morts both through ensilage and land spreading as an agricultural fertiliser, but also through their rendering facilities. Some of the companies have very advanced high capability to render morts. These are fish that are not sold on the market, they're used for other byproducts. The EPA is actively working in that space.

You had a question I think - which if you could remind me or - will refer to the acting Chief Veterinary Officer in relation to, I think it was the efficacy of antibiotics.

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Mr GEORGE - I did ask, apart from the preparations for mass mortality, what plans are being made for commercial and recreational fishers if more open-net disease pens need to be treated in places like the Channel and Long Bay, which are very vulnerable areas?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. There is a protocol that has been formulated for monitoring between the independent EPA and the industry. That environmental monitoring protocol is going to be absolutely crucial to informing and helping us to understand whether florfenicol achieves the outcomes that everybody says it does.

That monitoring is already underway both by industry and by the independent EPA. My department, through the Analytical Services Tasmania, is processing the results from those surveys. Once we have that data and we have a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of florfenicol both in the water column and in benthic species, we will be able to provide that information to the Director of Public Health and he will be able to fully consider any advice that he provides to the community going forward.

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired. The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. We'll keep the changeover as tight as possible. Please stop the broadcast.

The Committee suspended from 7.16 p.m. to 7.24 p.m.

CHAIR - The time now being 7.24 p.m., the portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table, names and positions please for the benefit of Hansard.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair, and thank you and good day to all the committee. Next to me I have Shane Gregory who is the Associate Secretary and will be remaining with me for the duration of these Estimates. Do you want me to launch straight into making statement, Chair?

CHAIR - Yes if you'd like to make a short statement. That would be appropriate.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, committee today more than 17,500 veterans and ex-service personnel call our state home. Their service and their sacrifice are recognised, honoured and must never be forgotten.

Our state has an extraordinary legacy of service. In fact, out of our 101 Victoria Cross recipients, 15 of them have come from Tasmania. It is higher than any state or territory per capita in the country. We are demonstrating our commitment by delivering on a priority recommendation of the royal commission for veterans' affairs and employment through our veterans' employment strategy 2023-27.

The Tasmanian government delivers practical, targeted support to our veterans through: the Tasmanian veterans' employment strategy, which is designed to support veterans to explore roles within State Service; the veterans' wellbeing voucher program that encourages healthy and connected lifestyles with our veterans; and active engagement with veterans' reference groups to ensure that our policies are informed by lived experience. Our government supports RSL Tasmania as the peak body to represent and to advocate on behalf of our veteran community.

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The final report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide was released on 9 September 2024, a landmark moment in advancing veteran wellbeing and something that is very near to my heart. This report made 122 recommendations for meaningful reform, including the establishment of new structures to better support veterans and, importantly, to support their families.

We acknowledge the important role of our state government in advocating to the federal government regarding the provision of appropriate supports and initiatives to ensure that our veterans are supported with meaningful, tailored and adequately funded programs. As a veteran, I know that our government recognises the important role that our veterans play in our community and I am proud that we are delivering an increase in funding for our veterans in Tasmania this year. I'm happy to take any questions.

Ms BUTLER - Minister, I've been going through some of the election commitments made in the 2025 election by your government and I can see that there is funding to continue the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize and I understand that that is a very valuable experience and it's a trip that students and teachers go on. How much of the funding goes towards the Frank MacDonald prize?

Mr PEARCE - The 2026-27 Budget, \$185,000; 2027-28 \$189,000; and 2028-29, \$194,000.

Ms BUTLER - I've had representation from veterans on the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize and they completely respect the intent of the prize, but allegedly - I don't have it in writing - but allegedly RSL Tasmania were advised that there used to be a veteran that would go on that particular trip and kind of mentor students and get that kind of whole experience, but apparently they've been cut from that trip now, the veterans. So, if Veterans Services is about what's in the best interest of veterans and looking after veteran wellbeing, would this not be better funded through Department of Education because it's school children who are attending with teachers, but veterans aren't attending anymore, so can I question whether or not that's a good use of a veteran allocation because that's come to me through veterans.

Mr PEARCE - I genuinely hear and it's not something that I haven't thought about myself, and I mean that.

The role for me for the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize and that trip is the investment in our next generation and instilling our military history that I talk so passionately about into that next generation through lived experience. The rationale behind having the - there was also a polly who used to go.

Ms BUTLER - I've never been so I can ask the question.

Mr PEARCE - Some might say that the Chair has been on a recent trip. In fact, it was one of his suggestions from his post activity report that he would rather forego that than to let an extra child go, and that is my paradigm also. It was an opinion shared broadly across all those who have been involved and all those who have certainly been involved in the program anyway.

Ms BUTLER - I believe the original intent of that course and that program was very much for mentorship and to provide students with the understanding of that history, but now

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that veterans have been excluded from that trip themselves and so the makeup of that particular program has changed, wouldn't it be better if that funding came out of the Department of Education, if it's about school children and teachers? I understand that it's an educational experience, but I'm not sure why it has to come out of the veteran allocation anymore just because they're visiting a veteran site. If you use that same premise with, say, language studies or if you use that same premise, it's just because they're visiting a place that is significant for veterans, but veterans aren't involved in that anymore.

Mr PEARCE - Can I correct you slightly? We are involved. In fact, the meeting that happens - there's some work between RSL and the veteran community and those students before and after they leave. I attended the last presentation and announcement of those young kids as they stood there and were announced. They were that proud about this. The fact that this was an authentic military-backed - it might only come from the veteran community in government - but to them it was ridgy-didge, and it is. If you've ever stood on the Western Front, it's an incredible experience that will change those young people's lives.

Ms BUTLER - This advice has been given to me from veterans who don't think that this is a good use of veteran wellbeing funds and even though they have complete respect for the program and the intent of the program, would it not be better off coming out of the Department of Education if it's teachers and students who are travelling over with that funding but not veterans?

Mr PEARCE - I certainly hear that.

Ms BUTLER - I believe that's a valid argument coming from veterans. I believe we should try and respect that.

Mr PEARCE - To counter that, I also hear from an overwhelming number of veterans who would go the other way, who would rather have - in fact, that's why we serve. We don't serve for our own benefit. We serve for others. The reason a lot of these people serve, the reason most of them want those young people to go is the very reason they joined the army in the first place.

Ms BUTLER - It is nearly \$200,000 of funding a year that's coming out of the veteran services funding and it's a very small pool. There's really not much spare money at all, then you compare that to the Department of Education that has a much larger pool of funding. I can understand where veterans are coming from because it's their understanding that that should go towards veteran wellbeing.

Mr PEARCE - Again, respectfully, I would say that there are many other veterans who would counter that argument. The veteran community is, certainly, from my perspective as I have heard, overwhelmingly for the decisions that we've taken.

Ms BUTLER - Okay. Thank you.

Mr BAYLEY - Before I launch into my question, I echo the sentiment. It was a question I was going to ask as well. I've heard that and I guess just urge the government about thinking about it and possibly addressing it. There is a win-win here which is making sure that topping up the veterans budget accordingly to make sure that - and explaining that while that prize is funded out of the veterans budget, you know, it's offset by this additional funding that's going

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to veteran services - is a possible win-win there. Because I hear you, there would be others thinking it, but it's one of the few things I've heard as well.

Apart from the Cenotaph, and I have to ask you again, minister, because you know veterans and the RSL that I've spoken to are appalled and still ashamed to think that the government is pushing ahead with this proposition. The RSL has been on the record for numerous years now since this proposal was mooted, raising their concerns and feeling as if they were fed absolute platitudes around their concerns. That, not to worry, these will be concerns, this will be designed away. This is fine.

Of course, we now have the Planning Commission's report which is absolutely unequivocal. It has now accepted that the values of the Cenotaph will be significantly impacted by the construction of the stadium. That will have an impact on the reverential ambience and other values of the site to the point where the RSL again wrote to Upper House members last week to restate their opposition.

I acknowledge I've asked you this question in parliament and I acknowledge your answer, but I do have to ask again why the government feels as if it doesn't have other options to pursue such that it is willing to sacrifice the values of something that I think in just about any other circumstance would be honoured. In just about any other circumstance, the values of the Cenotaph and the views of the RSL would be respected. But for some reason the, the potency of the AFL and them dictating this particular site, and a stadium of a particular size, and with a roof means that this site has to be sacrificed.

I think that is a crying shame and I'll put it to you again that you know, veterans and the RSL are smarting about this and they're really looking at the Legislative Council for their integrity to vote the stadium down.

Mr PEARCE - I appreciate your position and I appreciate the positions of many veterans and in fact many members of the RSL. However, there are many others that differ from that position. I was very genuine when I answered your question in parliament Question Time the other day to the degree of importance that sport has on all military members. It's a part of their daily routine, it's a training tool, it's how we encourage, it's how we put them under physical stress in a lot of cases, and it's how we put them under physical stress in a team environment. It becomes part of their DNA and they love sport.

Every morning at 0730 is PT. More than often it involves a team game, even at the end of an arduous activity. Every Thursday afternoon is what we call sporties, you go and get to play your designated sport. In my case it was rugby and that's where my neck went. The point I make very seriously -

Ms BUTLER - Union or league?

Mr PEARCE - Union, sorry. Anyway, what my point is, it's absolutely - we live and breathe - particularly team sports in the military. The other thing is, I think, if you got the Army together, the Army, Navy and Air Force and asked them who would object to that. I think you'd be surprised at the numbers and they would be overwhelmingly positive.

I want to remember our veterans. I want to remember those that have stood in defence of our country, not just one day a year, but every year. I want them to do that - and I want that to be intrinsic to them. I don't want to - the worst thing - and I'm not knocking events, Anzac Day

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and Armistice Day, but that is one special day of the year. I want this thought to be in people's minds of our veterans, sacrifice and the service that they had for their country every day. If that means every time that they go to something like a sporting event, then the reason that they go there is because of the sacrifice that has gone before them. I don't think there's too many diggers. I'm certainly an old digger myself that I would love for people to see that Cenotaph as they walk into or exit from a great sporting event and know that the reason why you've got you today is because someone gave their tomorrow. I think that's my sentiment.

Mr BAYLEY - I think that's part of the problem, isn't it? They're not going to do that. They're not going to walk into that stadium.

Mr PEARCE - I think they could.

Mr BAYLEY - Well, they're not. The Planning Commission is unequivocal, and in fact it has the exact opposite of the sentiment you're expressing, where every day someone can think about and celebrate veterans. You know, every day, not just on Remembrance Day or ANZAC Day, but every day, the values of the Cenotaph are going to be diminished. That's the point. That's the finding of the Planning Commission. Part of their recommendation is that every day, every single day, that site as a place of remembrance will be diminished by the stadium.

I guess I ask, it must sit uncomfortably with you as minister? I understand as a federal member, you signed a letter opposing the stadium at some point. I don't know what the question is at this point because you've made your position really clear. You're happy to see those values impacted by the stadium and happy to, I guess, dismiss the concerns of the RSL.

I put again to you that I hope it sits uncomfortably with you, minister, because veterans and the RSL have again, unequivocally confirmed their opposition to the stadium, at their Congress this year and in writing to Legislative councillors.

Mr PEARCE - Some have.

Prof RAZAY - Following the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans Suicide and the subsequent closure of the Defence and Veteran Legal Service at Tasmania Legal Aid in September 2024, Tasmanians, defence personnel and veterans currently have no access to a free specialised legal service to help them fight for their entitlement, compensation and rehabilitation.

Given that the DVA compensation claim can be complex, can the honourable Minister advise if any funding has been allocated to establishing free legal services and support for defence personnel and veterans? Have steps have been taken in conjunction with the Department of Justice and the federal government to ensure that Tasmanian defence personnel and veterans continue to have access to a free, ongoing specialised legal and support services?

Mr PEARCE - That probably will sit with the Attorney, I'm sorry. I would say that it would have to sit with the Attorney-General, and I don't know whether he's up. I'm not sure of the schedule.

CHAIR - He's already been minister.

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Mr PEARCE - To answer your question, I'm happy to refer that question on to him and personally get back to you.

Prof RAZAY - Yes, thank you.

Mr PEARCE - I'm not passing the buck.

Prof RAZAY - Do you have personal views about it or supporting them?

Mr PEARCE - Notwithstanding, this is not my remit. A lot of our veterans' hubs will cover this support to our veterans. Legal advice is something that is shied away from. More often than not medical advice, psychology help, OT type work. Everyone's throwing that at our veterans but often we have to get our veterans on the right track. The divorce rates, separation rates within the veteran's community are higher than average. From my time, how many diggers I've had to sit down and council financially to get them back on track because if you didn't get them on track financially their whole life just slipped away, and I couldn't bear to see that happen.

So yes, it is an important issue. It is an important service that needs to be wrapped around our veterans. It isn't my remit as Minister for Veterans' Affairs, but I certainly support the fact that service needs to be provided.

Mr GEORGE - Thank you, Chair. I didn't really mean to ask a question. I understand the minister's passion. I've seen young men at war and Australians at war in various different conflict zones, and recognise that it's very hard for them to come back and talk to their officers, their wives, their children, about what they've experienced and so on.

I rather reluctantly raise the stadium, I'm afraid, with you. I'm just curious to know, because it may be that your loyalty to the government is what drives you. What I'd like to know is, have you resolved in any way at all, amicably and in your discussions with the RSL, about your stand and the government's position on the stadium and its impact on the Cenotaph?

Mr PEARCE - I appreciate your question. There are certain members of the RSL - and I'll agree with your point you raised earlier - that are just vehemently against it. There are many others that are the opposite. The good thing about it - you get half-a-dozen veterans in the one room, they'll never have the same opinion, I can tell you.

Mr GEORGE - It's like lawyers, I know.

Mr BAYLEY - They have a representative body, though.

Mr PEARCE - They have a representative body, and you know as well as I do that it depends on who is in that representative body will depend on the level of representation. I could guarantee you, and I meant what I said before when I said that if you put the entire army, lined them up and said, righto, who's for a stadium and who's not? I'll tell you what, there'd be more for than against.

Mr GEORGE - We're talking about veterans here. I haven't met one who supports it, in all honesty.

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Mr PEARCE - Having said that, I think the design could be done in such a way that it highlights the view, having that in your periphery as you walk in, I think would be a positive. Or it would be for me, and I mean that - that's not just a position statement. I actually mean it.

Everyday life - and like I said, the reason why I'm able to go into here is because some digger has done their life in protecting our country. I think about that a lot. I know many others do as well when it comes to democracy and valuing and cherishing our democratic rights.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you, minister. Congratulations on your appointment. You're an absolute natural fit and I congratulate you on that. I wish you well in the portfolio. I know you'll do well by our state and in particular our veterans, and I think we all will agree on that.

Minister, I want to start on the Royal Commission into Veteran Suicide. It's a matter of record that you played a significant role in that, but my purpose of the question is to focus on the recommendations and Tasmania's role in responding to those. Would you comment on that? Would you give the committee a sense of where our government and its participation is? Noting, of course, that it is primarily a federal government responsibility to repatriate and care for our veterans, but state governments and territory governments have a role as well, and no-one should shirk from that. I know you don't, I don't, but how is Tasmania delivering its part in those recommendations?

Mr PEARCE - Yep, and those 122 recommendations of the Royal Commission are very similar to other federally funded - I mean we've got Health, we've got NDIS and a number of others - that that stop short of plugging directly into communities where it's needed. It's that - at the coalface, at the dashboard level - is where I believe I've got a role and my department's got a role to play. It's the loose ends and ensuring that that community aspect is maintained, because that's not something that the federal government or the DVA or the minister would have eyes on.

The other thing that I'm really big on is veterans' families. That, again, isn't probably as focused on as much as what it is in Canberra. I believe the veteran and their family play a really important, integral role in the transformation from the big army, navy or air force into their new community and their new role. So, that's where I believe that we can help - in giving them a purpose, you know? We come from a high-tempo, very important, very serious role - literally life and death. We go from that to civilian employment, and often veterans will lose their sense of purpose in life. I think re-acquainting them to a new sense of purpose is what a job does often, and I believe that with our veterans employment program that we've set up, and I want to do more with, I believe that is probably a mechanism, the catalyst for us to ensure that they make that transition a little easier.

The report that you described, the Royal Commission, is important to me. Those 122 recommendations are framed basically around five priority areas, which include: the prevention of harm; to intervene early; to improve communication, coordination and collaboration; to build capability and capacity. That gets back to that sense of pride and purpose again; and to strengthen oversight and accountability. The Veterans' Ministerial Council has agreed to work collaboratively to improve services in Tasmania and supports the veteran community. We've identified a number of work areas for action. Some of these areas include initiatives in health, in aged care, in mental health, employment and wellbeing. All of these things probably can be influenced by me and my team.

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A key element for this collaboration is recommendation 88 of the final report, which supports the establishment of a national partnership between state and territory governments. That's exactly the reason that I gave earlier into plugging those services into the community, into the family, at the coalface.

Working together, this will be key to making a difference in the lives of veterans, and as I said, the veteran's family, because they've got issues too. Those kids need to know also why mum or dad feels the way that they do.

Our Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program: that's a program we've got that promotes recreation and wellbeing. From July 2025 it was expanded to support widows and partners of veterans and eligible defence-issued cards.

I've mentioned the employment strategy and how important that is. There are also, in the community, veterans reference groups that help ensure that veterans' voices are heard by government, by people that can make a difference.

There is also enhancement around mental health services, and involving veterans initiatives there and streamlining that.

The Royal Commission is important. There is a role for state government. I believe there's a lot more to do and I want to do it.

Ms BUTLER - Just looking at the Liberal election commitments for the 2025 campaign, and it's good that you're talking about veteran families, because I can see that there is an allocation of \$240,000 for Hobart and Launceston Legacy as an election pledge. It's written in your Liberal election pledge, and it's still on the website. I checked it this morning.

I've spoken to Launceston Legacy and I've spoken to Hobart Legacy, and they have no idea what that's about. They certainly haven't received \$240,000 and they had no conversations either with any parties, but they're more than happy to receive \$240,000. As you know, with Legacy that will be put to very good use. Will you honour that election commitment? It's in the election policy, but both Hobart and Launceston Legacy know nothing about it.

Mr GREGORY - Through the minister. We have provided funding of \$20,000 a year each to Hobart and Launceston Legacy for a number of years. That was increased to \$30,000 a year this Budget, so the \$240,000 is \$60,000 over the four years of the forward Estimates.

Ms BUTLER - It reads as \$240,000 for Hobart and Launceston Legacy. You usually give them \$20,000 a year anyway. That's been increased by another \$10,000. That still doesn't add up.

Mr GREGORY - No, it's \$30,000 each per year, so \$60,000 over four years. So, that is \$240,000.

Ms BUTLER - So there is no allocation \$240,000? It reads as a one-off payment.

Mr GREGORY - No, it's not a one-off payment of \$240,000. It's \$60,000 a year, shared between them, for four years.

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Ms BUTLER - Okay. They were quite excited about the prospect of being given payments of \$240,000 but they hadn't heard anything about it. They are always looking out for additional funding.

Mr GREGORY - It's a great organisation.

Ms BUTLER - They actually have a fair bit of time for you too, minister. They actually said they've met with you recently and they have a fair bit of time for you as well. That was good feedback from Legacy.

Mr PEARCE - That's good feedback, thank you.

A MEMBER - I thought we'd get a longer answer from you on that one.

Ms BUTLER - I was really hoping that you'd say, you know what, we will honour \$240,000 as a one-off. That would have been fantastic for Legacy.

I would like to ask you a question. It is related to veterans, even though it's a wellbeing program which is rolled out from another government department other than veterans, but it is to do with veterans. I'll just read what it is. It's about the program:

The trial Ticket to Wellbeing program is a Tasmanian government initiative designed to reduce the cost of sport and active recreational membership and/or registration for eligible older people. Ticket to Wellbeing provides two \$100 vouchers towards the cost of sport and active recreation membership and/or registration for older people aged 65 older who were listed on Services Australia Healthcare or Pensioner Concession card.

It talks about the key objective being just participation in sport and active recreation. Under the criteria it says who is eligible for a voucher. Applicants must be: living in Tasmania; aged 65 years and over at the time of application; be listed on a valid Services Australia Healthcare or Pensioner Concession card. Then it states: 'Commonwealth Seniors Health card and Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) card are not included'.

I think it's excluding - I've got the stats here, and actually, that government stat wasn't correct anyway, so there's 19.2 per cent aged over 65 here in Tasmania and 3.6 per cent of those figures are excluded by the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card and DVA card not included. Why are veterans excluded from that, minister? I think it'd be a really good thing for you to champion with, I think it's Communities.

Mr PEARCE - Can I table that?

Ms BUTLER - That's fine.

CHAIR - No, you can't table it. It's not your document, so you can't table it. You're welcome to look at it.

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to look at it. Having said that - and I'm not defending anyone's position - veterans have a national card that would include those discounts as well. To that,

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we've got some other discounts, concessions that we've made in the state government around that, including council rates concession, annual electricity concession, energy bill relief, heating allowance, medical cooling or heating concession, vehicle registration, SeaLink Bruny Island, *Spirit of Tasmania*, Bass Strait Islands travel, taxi subsidy program 50 or 60 per cent - there must be an incremental for concession cards for DVA concession card holders - and a DVA, TPI and EDA pensioner for totally and permanently incapacitated pensioners are entitled to travel free on state transport.

In education, there's Adult Education courses that are given a concession, student assistance to buy glasses for low income families who may need them, also tuition fees through TasTAFE. It is extensive and I want to build on that.

Ms BUTLER - If I can go back to the previous question I asked whilst I'm in this round. I've just heard from Legacy Tasmania and they've never been advised that there was an increase of \$10,000 per annum. That's both legacy Hobart and Launceston. They were never advised that there was an increase in funding from the \$20,000 to \$30,000. If that's the case, that's really good news to them because they were not aware of that. Would you be happy to get in contact with Legacy and advise them that there is an increase in their funding?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, 100 per cent. They should have been advised but if not, I will. Thank you.

Ms BUTLER - It is good news for them.

Mr GREGORY - Minister, until the budget passes.

Ms BUTLER - Usually, you'd be trying to sell the good story, right? Isn't that what you guys do?

Ms BUTLER - There are lot of letters flying around with 'we're going to'. That is great news. They will be really pleased with that. They're not aware that there's an increase of funding per annum: \$10,000 for Hobart and \$10,000 for Launceston, so that's really good news. I thought I had better clarify that. I know I cut off his question.

Mr GREGORY - Minister, on the issue of the Ticket to Play program, the Veteran Wellbeing Voucher program, which is exclusively for veterans, veterans' spouses and partners and widows, that is the equivalent of the program you're talking about. There's \$100,000 per annum up to two \$100 vouchers for veterans and their widows and that gives them access to, I believe at the moment, over 170 different clubs and activity providers, and it's a very simple program. We've had over 800 vouchers issued this year, \$80,000-worth of vouchers have been issued this year. We've done a lot of work to really improve the take up of the program. We've made it very easy to get the vouchers. You can now go into a Service Tasmania shopfront and get a voucher and go and join the bowls club, go and do an archery program, take up horse riding. There is a whole range of things.

Ms BUTLER - Are you monitoring that, for effectiveness to make sure that it is being used and people are taking up those vouchers and there's a performance kind of appraisal on the effectiveness of those vouchers?

Mr GREGORY - The effectiveness is reach. The program aims to provide funding to enable veterans and their families to engage in activities because physical activities contribute

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to positive mental health and the way the program works is a veteran will go into Service Tasmania, get a voucher, they can then take that to the provider and that goes towards the cost and the provider redeems that through Service Tasmania, so by that mechanism we know they're being used. We had some slow take up in previous years, but this year we've really pushed it, and the key in really increasing the take up of the program was to make it much simpler. You used to have to send an e-mail in and do an application, whereas now a veteran can go into a Service Tasmania shop, present their DVA card and they can walk out with a voucher and become involved in an activity straightaway.

Mr PEARCE - One of our staff, Karelle Logan, I want to acknowledge her and get her on the *Hansard* as being a driver of this particular program and she has increased the uptake of it.

Ms BUTLER - She's very effective, isn't she? She's very professional.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. What she's done for veterans is very genuine. I would like that on the record, thank you, Chair.

Mr BAYLEY - Aside from the Cenotaph, a place that I find incredibly poignant when it comes to remembering veterans, is the very modest War Memorial on Cape Barren Island.

Mr PEARCE - I have not been there.

Mr BAYLEY - It's very poignant because at least half a dozen or so names of old fellows who died, Aboriginal soldiers in the Great War, who, if you think about it in context of the time, were not even recognised as citizens and yet they were volunteering and heading off to war to fight for, effectively, the colonial forces that had conquered their country.

Aunty Wendal Pitchford is a Palawa elder who has campaigned long and hard for recognition, not necessarily of Aboriginal veterans who fought in the conventional wars, but Aboriginal veterans from the Black War, the original war here on this country of Lutruwita. She, in 2022, managed to get the RSL to support her and some of her people marching in the Anzac Day parade and she has run a campaign for a long time to try to get formal recognition of the Black War through a memorial.

I want to put to your perspective and the government's perspective around this and whether it's something that you'd be willing to try to understand more of, to meet with Palawa elders, to understand their commitment to some of their old fellas who fought and died on this country, for this country, and whether you'd be willing as Minister for Veterans' Affairs to help champion this. I acknowledge it crosses over to another minister's portfolio, but we're talking about veterans here, veterans, you know of this country and on this country.

Mr PEARCE - You raise a very valid point. Actually, there's a splash of Indigenous in my family, so it means a lot to me. And then a lot of the old families from the north-west, it's like that. Also, as a young digger was trained by the aunties in tracking and survival in the Northern Territory. They keep you alive. That's literally saved my life with some of the stuff that I've been through with them.

So, it is important and I value the significance that our indigenous folk have had in serving the nation and you rightly point out that they weren't able to vote, but some of them

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gave their life, you know? I'm very proud to say that, honestly, during my 20 - almost 21 years of service, I never saw a lick of racism. In fact, you were judged by what's inside you, not what's on the outside.

So that's where I come to this argument from, in terms of recognising a particular Indigenous war or not. I'm not going to get into that, but I don't care where people come from, what colour their skin or you know, anything else for that matter. If they've served our country, they're Australian through and through and we are all equals, we were all brother and sisters in arms. So that's my position. I'd love an invite. I mean that.

Mr BAYLEY - Look, I guess the context is slightly different. I hear you saying though, the Aboriginal people who have served their country, I guess, from their perspective, those people they're talking about, the old people they're talking about absolutely did serve their country. It was a very different country, it was the country as opposed to the nation.

I could ask for your commitment today to engage your mind and some time in this. It would be, you know - and give them the opportunity to - it's their pitch to make to you at the end of the day. If we could facilitate that, that would be very welcome and appreciated.

Mr PEARCE - By all means.

Mr BAYLEY - Thank you.

Prof RAZAY - The RSL Tasmania Veterans' Acute Housing Program which provides transitional accommodation for veterans for up to two years with the assistance of Homes Tasmania has attracted state funding of \$1.8 million and matched by the Commonwealth. What progress has been made under the Veterans' Acute Housing Program to deliver additional homes to meet the needs of veterans and their families experiencing or at risk of homelessness? Do we have data on the number of veterans in need of crisis accommodation?

Mr PEARCE - It's an excellent question, and this is an important program. Veterans are supported through this program, the housing program. At the election we committed to partner with RSL Tasmania to build additional crisis and transitional housing for veterans right across the state - \$1.8 million as you rightly pointed out matching the Commonwealth \$1.8 million commitment under the Veteran's Acute Housing Program. Now, this will provide RSL with \$3.6 million and I've already spoken with RSL about their plans to get cracking with this housing project. The new homes will be delivered under RSL Tasmania's Veteran's Acute Housing Program, which provides transitional accommodation for veterans for up to two years. The paradigm behind the two year limit is to ensure that that the veterans are not becoming dependent on, almost, a welfare source, but to get them back on their feet and back into work and employment.

Finally, the Tasmanian government is committed to delivering a practical and meaningful package for support for veterans and ex-serving personnel aimed at achieving measurable improvements over their lives through wellness programs to keep them out of medical care. Very fit when they're going through, but the rigours of military life mean that later on - and I'm feeling it myself - knees, ankles, hearing, back, all of that tends to pack up, so we need to keep them well for longer and prevent them from even going down that track.

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This is a good program and also talking with CEO and the president of RSL, a lot of the land that they're building on has been almost granted to them, so that it's a force multiplier where you build more housing for less amount of money.

Prof RAZAY - And they built them cheaply and very efficient.

Mr PEARCE - Yes, 100 per cent, so terrific program and I look forward to that.

The other point I would like to raise just on the end of that is with a lot of these programs, it almost seems as if all veterans are destitute, and I want to make that point very loudly and very clearly that that happens, but it doesn't happen very often and 99.9 per cent of our veterans transition very well. The point I want to make tonight is that, particularly to our businesses and our employers around the state, that employing a veteran is good for your business. They bring a set of skills and a set of values that will make your business better. The other thing I want to get across is I don't want people feeling sorry for our veterans and pitying them. They're not to be pitied. They're just to be respected and some of them are having a rough trot, and that's what these programs are all about. We seem to spend an inordinate amount of time talking about these programs for our poor veterans, I don't want that to be perceived as pity. I want to make that very clear for the committee.

Prof RAZAY - My last question was, are there any veterans in need of crisis accommodation?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, there are.

Prof RAZAY - How many?

Mr PEARCE - They're being covered. We have a number of veteran hubs around the state, RSL run some, the federal government have funded some as well, and that is being conducted as we speak.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, I already told you earlier today your first speech was a wonderful insight into your own life, and I thought it was a generous sharing of your journey, including some of your own challenges as a returned serviceman. I hope it's okay if I mention that in my preamble to this question. I really love the way that you were able to make it very real for the parliament and the many men and women who would have been listening and who will later one day read your first speech and I think you will give them strength for what you've done and for what you've said, including that wonderful message about the path to recovery with mental health.

In view of that, I ask you what mental health programs are being delivered for veterans and their families, which you emphasised? I wonder if I can invite you, as well, to reference the development of the education and training facility at Dago Point and what role that plays in the health and wellbeing of our veterans and their families.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks very much for the question. Again, mental health and that program that some veterans are involved in is one thing, but not all veterans need them, only some. I've said on the record that, that I've been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of my active service in the military and the reason I make that public and talk about it in a matter of fact way is because I want to get the message out there to our veterans that this is not something that should preoccupy your life. It's something you can work through. To me, it's like an itchy rash -

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Mr FERGUSON - It doesn't define you.

Mr PEARCE - It doesn't define you, exactly.

Ms BUTLER - It's not easy though.

Mr PEARCE - No, it isn't and that's why these measures are here.

The Dago Point Retreat is a veteran retreat. I was actually involved in its inception way back when Sarah Courtney was the minister. It was before I ever got into politics.

Ms BUTLER - It's a great spot.

Mr PEARCE - It is a great spot and it's right adjacent to the Vietnam veterans - have you been up there? So you have the Vietnam veterans and then across the road you have the contemporary veterans, if you like, Dago Point. It was the state government that chipped in. It was an old building that was almost to gifted to the program and the diggers did it up and now it's a great retreat. The other thing it does is it breaks the barriers between the old Vietnam diggers and the young blokes and girls - that camaraderie is good. I like it on a number of fronts.

The other thing that happens there is - they'll have events, activities that involve qualified clinical psychiatrists who are almost undercover, they are just part of the team and they can get you on the right track in other ways. So, trying to break the ice there with that sort of help.

The other thing that they do there well is they have kids there and there are activities for veterans and their families. I think we're seeing a big transition from the traditional old pokie days, the smoke-filled poker machines in RSLs, to now where they're putting climbing walls in and activities for kids.

Ms BUTLER - They don't want pokies in them.

Mr PEARCE - No, but you get what I mean. We've changed to that family focus, and I think that's a positive thing that we need to foster.

Ms BUTLER - Going back to add to Prof Razay's question. The Veteran Acute Housing funding of \$1.8 million. It's \$1.8 million state and \$1.8 million federal. I can't find the \$1.8 million in this Budget, but is that because it might be in Homes Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - You're right, I'd say that's what it would be.

Ms BUTLER - Will that be for this financial year in Homes Tasmania? I know you're speaking outside your remit now, because I'm concerned because it's my understanding that the arrangement is the federal funding will come through if the \$1.8 million does come through from the state in February. So, it has to be within this financial year. I'm just making sure that that funding is there otherwise the federal funding will fall apart, and it won't be able to proceed. I couldn't find it in this budget. I'm hoping it's in the Homes Tasmania budget. Could you find out for me?

Mr PEARCE - Certainly and appreciate you raising it. We will take that on notice, Chair.

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Mr GREGORY - Through you, minister. What we can advise is that the development application has been submitted for the housing in Huonville. So that is in and -

Ms BUTLER - There's an issue with parking.

Mr GREGORY - There is always an issue with parking with development permits.

There's transfer of land occurring at Railton, and we would expect construction of that housing to commence fairly soon. On that basis, I expect that the funding would be matching at the right time.

Ms BUTLER - So that will be within this - because Homes Tasmania - I'm not sure, because they don't have an annual report, do they?

Mr GREGORY - Yes.

Ms BUTLER - They do. Because I couldn't see it in any of theirs either. So I was just wondering how that funding will be coming through because it's not in the state budget.

Mr PEARCE - We can have a look and get back to the committee.

Ms BUTLER - I really want to make sure that that does come through because there it is so important, as you know, because of that huge commitment. I would hate to miss out on that \$1.8 million federally because we can't come through.

There was also some concern around whether or not that would be a grant or whether that would be made in a different kind of payment to RSL Tasmania. I don't believe they were interested in it being a grant payment of \$1.8 million. I think it was more of a cash payment of sorts. Do you know anything about that background?

Mr GREGORY - I don't, but I also don't understand the difference between those two.

Ms BUTLER - Yes, I'm not sure. I think Homes Tasmania wanted to make it a grant, and there was some discrepancy about what that would mean from RSL Tasmania's point of view. That could, potentially, be holding up the \$1.8 million with Homes Tasmania. I'm not quite sure, I don't have the document in front of me, but there was concern about how that money would be transferred, or how that money would be provided through Homes Tasmania to ensure that federal grant came through. Is that making sense? Probably not.

Mr GREGORY - I understand what you're saying. I don't understand what the problem is conceptually. The Commonwealth generally doesn't give money directly to other bodies; it funnels it through the state. Then the mechanism for that money to be transferred from the state to another entity, whether that's council or the RSL, would be through a funding agreement. Whether you want to call that a grant or not call it a grant, the principle is the same. It's a contract between the state and the other party to hand the money over. That's why I don't understand conceptually what the concern is.

Mr PEARCE - That's probably getting into Mr Ellis's bag.

Ms BUTLER - As the minister for veterans, you have that close relationship with RSL Tasmania and an understanding of the importance of these hubs. Would you be able to provide

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assurances that you're happy to manage that, or advocate on behalf of RSL Tasmania if there is an issue with Homes Tasmania? As the minister, is that in your remit?

Mr PEARCE - As the minister, what I will commit to do is write to Mr Ellis and update him on concerns. I'll have him write back to me with the remedy to that.

Ms BUTLER - As the opposition minister, I really am not as effective as you would be advocating on their behalf. That would be good, because I'd hate to see it fall through. It's been years of work.

Mr PEARCE - I will commit to doing that.

Ms BUTLER - Well, thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Mr PEARCE - It's not my - This is Mr Ellis's portfolio, and he does a fine job.

Mr BAYLEY - Chair, I'm happy to just ask one last question, because I know we're right on time. I guess it's following on from that in terms of housing and homelessness. How do you coordinate the strategies between what you aspire to deliver for veterans and what is delivered through Homes Tasmania? The coordination of strategies and delivery there sounds like it could be better.

Mr PEARCE - Yeah, it could. I just don't want to plonk those diggers in a cheap house and then give up, basically, because it's easy. I think the biggest thing is, they'll basically sleep anywhere, trust me, but what we need to do is use that opportunity wisely, and use that opportunity to get them back on their feet, and use that opportunity to teach them to respect themselves again. To give them that purpose.

I used to tell my diggers for the last 12 months that you're in, you want to use that time to prepare yourself for the outside world in a number of ways. You'd have a quiet chat with them. As a 30-year-old and as a warrant officer, you're like an old man and you've got so much wisdom in the military, because it's a young person's game. I used to take that very seriously. I think once they leave, they don't have a sergeant major any longer. They don't have any mates around them that they serve with, their brothers-in-arms. They don't have the support mechanism. The divorce rates for veteran families is much, much higher than standard, so sometimes they don't have a family either. They don't have the support mechanisms.

That's where I think we need to put the focus, in almost re-educating and lifting them up, basically. I don't want it to be like - you see some places with emergency accommodation where you see them all gather out the front and it's sort of like a camp. I don't want that. I want this to be a transition place for our veterans.

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired. The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the minister for Education at 9.00 a.m. tomorrow.

The committee adjourned at 8.24 p.m.