



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. Gavin Pearce MP

Monday 1 June 2026

MEMBERS

Hon Rosemary Armitage MLC (Chair)

Hon Luke Edmunds MLC

Hon Mike Gaffney MLC

Hon Casey Hiscutt MLC

Hon Meg Webb MLC

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

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

(in the room)

David Midson

General Manager (Marine)

Ashley Bastock

General Manager (Agriculture and Water)

Rae Burrows

General Manager (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Justin Helmich

Director (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Deborah McSweyn

Chief Veterinary Officer (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Chris Lyall

Chief Inspector of Primary Produce Safety (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Susanna Driessen

Chief Plant Protection Officer (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Louise Wilson

Deputy Secretary, Environment, Heritage and Land

Jo Crisp

General Manager (Environment)

Anita Yan

Deputy Chief Operations Officer

Inland Fisheries Services

Ryan Wilkinson
Director (Inland Fisheries)

Veterans' Affairs portfolio

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Melissa Gray
Deputy Secretary Policy and Reform

Jodi Wilcox
Executive Director - Policy and Intergovernmental

Karelle Logan
Manager Transport and Building Services (Previously Senior Program Officer, Veterans' Affairs)

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DIVISION 8

Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania

The Committee resumed at 6.15 p.m.

CHAIR - Welcome, minister, to our final session of the evening and thank you very much. If you'd like to introduce your team at the table, then I'll introduce ours.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. To my right is Jason Jacobi. Jason is the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania. And next to him is Mandy Clarke, our Deputy Secretary for Primary Industries and Water. Behind them I have my staff and my team from the department, and I'd like to thank them all for not only their attendance tonight but the work that that they've done this year. Thank you.

CHAIR - No. Thank you. And to my right I have the honourable Casey Hiscutt, member for Montgomery, and Rosemary Armitage, member for Launceston, the honourable Mike Gaffney, member for Mersey, the honourable Meg Webb, member for Nelson. We have Julianne James, our secretariat, and we have Gaye on Hansard.

So, as I'm sure you're aware, minister, that you may advise that an answer to a question or a part of a question will be given to the committee later, preferably the same day, but it is late in the evening, so acceptable. If it's not achievable, the committee will consolidate the outstanding questions and will provide them to you for written response. So, I would invite you to provide a brief overview, if you could, and then we'll go to questions.

Mr PEARCE - All right. Thank you, Chair. And thank you, committee. Tasmania's agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture sector remain central to our economy, supporting regional communities, driving exports and sustaining thousands of jobs. With a farm gate value now valued at \$2.83 billion, this government is working towards our target of increasing farm gate value to \$10 billion by 2050. Irrigation underpins our growth and we are now continuing to invest in our transitory projects, including Northern Midlands, Sassafras Wesley Vale augmentation in the greater south-east.

Biosecurity is absolutely vital for our state. And we continue to advance key work on animal welfare, on traceability systems, invasive species and pest control, and statewide rabbit management. This includes a \$2.3 million investment in natural resource management bodies, along with targeted funding to tackle invasive weeds.

We are also strengthening Tasmanians living marine resources including \$1 million of investment into our abalone industry reinvestment fund to combat the long-spined urchin. And we are now providing an additional \$68,000 in order to strengthen inland fishery services operations and enhance recreational fishing experiences.

We are taking strong action to reduce wild fallow deer numbers and to cut red tape. Feedback from the deer management policy review was clear, and that was that more action is needed, and we're certainly delivering it. All landowners will only require on permit to cull male and female deer all year round. Quotas and tagging will apply only to male deer in zone 1, and permits will be valid for five years. Restrictions on taking male deer and antlers have been removed, reducing the number of permits from eight to two.

PUBLIC

Recreational hunters will have expanded opportunities, including taking two stags during the male season in zone 1, while the eight-month antlerless season remains unchanged. In zones 2 and 3, hunters will have a year-round open season with no bag limits or tagging requirements. We are also removing labelling requirements for deer parts to reduce red tape. We are enabling expanded commercial harvesting opportunities which will create new markets and support farmers. It'll improve environmental outcomes and will ensure that carcasses are not wasted.

We are also bringing forward the Tasmanian deer management plan review, and this will include consultation on the status of deer and further measures in order to return populations to sustainable levels. This consultation is essential to protect community safety, safeguard productive farmland and to ensure that deer numbers are responsibly managed. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR - Thank you. And our first question -

Ms WEBB - Can I have some overview ones because it's a new department.

CHAIR - Okay. Yes.

Ms WEBB - Is that all right?

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. Just before we get to line items -

CHAIR - Okay. Ms Webb.

Ms WEBB - I'll just ask a couple of overview ones that relate to your aspects of this department that you're responsible for. I'm interested in external consultancies. Are you able to provide us with a breakdown - detailed breakdown of the total number of external consultancies used for the 2025-26 current financial year including any still underway, the quantum of the costs for those consultancies.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Give me one minute. Just for Primary Industries and Water?

Ms WEBB - Yes. Just that are relevant to this minister's portfolio area. Thank you.

Mr JACOBI - That was just for the 2025-26 financial year?

Ms WEBB - Yes. The current - yes.

Mr JACOBI - Okay.

Ms WEBB - If it's a long table and it's easier to table it -

Mr JACOBI - No. I can get the - pretty straightforward.

Ms WEBB - Okay.

PUBLIC

Mr JACOBI - Our consultants here are currently consultancies, valued at \$10,000 or more for the 2025-26 financial year. Do you just want the name of the consultancy and the value? Is that - - -

Ms WEBB - Yes. Or the project that it's relevant to.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. There are four. I'd have to just double check, get you the actual project it's relevant to. But the first is - and this is pretty obvious - consultancy services for the eID automation project, \$34,634; consultancy services for the Tasmanian Livestock Processing, \$17,250; consultancy services for Biosecurity Tas organisational review, \$16,483; and consultancy services for the Rock Lobster Harvest Strategy, \$10,000. So, the total value of those four consultancies was \$78,367.

Ms WEBB - And in that table have you got the details of who the consultants are in each of those?

Mr JACOBI - Yes. So, the consultancy services for the eID automation project were - and I don't know if I'm pronouncing this correctly, so my apologies - Ruadh Consulting, R-u-a-d-h. The consultant for the Tasmanian Livestock Processing was the trustee for the Furneaux Agriculture Trust based out of Launceston. The consultant for the Biosecurity Tas organisation review was the Worklogic Unit Trust and the consultant for the Rock Lobster Harvest Strategy was Thalassa Consulting Pty Ltd.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. And any consultancies that are planned for 2026-27 and onwards, are they likely to be subject to your operational efficiencies that need to be applied in these areas? And are you already looking at whether you need to adjust any planned consultancies going forward?

Mr JACOBI - I'm not aware of any consultancies that are pending that are subject to review at this point in time but certainly, as part of our operational efficiency process over the forward Estimates, we will be looking very closely at consultants and whether we can undertake the work in-house using internal expertise. There will, of course, be certain circumstances where we don't have the capability. And in those particular circumstances I would continue to progress with an external consultant, but we'll be very mindful of costs going across the board Estimates.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. Can I have another area that's a broader one relating to these portfolio areas in this department. A range of other departments are having some significant challenges getting their projects that relate to IT or digital areas completed on time, on budget and effectively. Are there any IT or digital upgrade programs or projects in development at the moment in this department, in these portfolio areas that are on foot that you can report on in terms of progress and how those projects are being managed?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question, and could you go through the digitisation maybe of [inaudible].

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Sure. So, the digitisation of our fisheries program is probably one of the key projects that we have underway at the moment in relation to this portfolio. There's also been some digital improvements and enhancements undertaken in Biosecurity Tasmania. I'm just trying to find my papers on that, if you can bear with me for one minute. I'm sure I had

PUBLIC

a data and digital - yes. It doesn't look like we have a list of projects. Just one minute. Just give me one second. I can give you cybersecurity incidents, but we might have to just take that on notice, if that's okay. Yes. So, you're just looking - just to be clear for you, minister. You're looking for a list of digital and data.

Ms WEBB - I'm just interested any on foot project that are IT or digital upgrade programs or projects that are in that area, and an indication of whether they are on track and in budget and how they're progressing.

Mr JACOBI - Okay. All right. Good. Thank you.

Ms WEBB - Can I ask one final overview one, if I may. Are there any areas in your portfolio, minister, that relate to Closing the Gap priorities under our Closing the Gap plan for 2025 to 2028.

Mr PEARCE - We do. And the Indigenous fishing one - would you mind going through that?

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Are you actually wanting it by program or are you actually looking at, sort of, numbers across in terms of -

Ms WEBB - I'm interested to know any that are connected to Closing the Gap priorities under Tasmania's plan for closing the gap 2025 to 2028 that are allocated in these portfolios, and an indication of - there's two things, really. How they're tracking, but I'm also interested in, are you anticipating they'll be subject to efficiencies and operational efficiencies going forward?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. None of the current agreements or targets under the Closing the Gap are subject to an efficiency dividend. They're really just business as usual within the department.

Ms WEBB - Okay.

Mr JACOBI - The first is the national agreement on Closing the Gap which was signed in 2020 and the Coalition of Peaks. And that includes a commitment to develop an inland waters target. We just actually met with [inaudible] recently to talk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders about inland water bodies and jurisdictional water rights and regimes.

There were a number of different ideas or suggestions discussed about how that might be progressed. And, in particular, there was a working group that was re-established in 2024 to progress work on how an inland waters target might be designed and agreed to.

So that work is currently underway. As I said, it's business as usual within the department and we're looking at possible enabling reforms that would help us to achieve a physical water holding target under the Closing the Gap. And we've also keyed onto those enabling reforms just to support water literacy, building strong relationships between water managers and Aboriginal people and having the right policy settings in place.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. Appreciate that. Thank you, Chair.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - No, thank you. Mr Hiscutt? We could go to overview or straight to 2.1?

Mr HISCUTT - No. 2.1.

CHAIR - 2.1 Primary Industries.

Output Group 2.1

Primary Industries

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you, minister. So, there's a significant drop in funding in appropriations for that output, from \$14 million this year through to \$7.8 million, almost a halving. Now, that is explained by a few different programs finishing during that time. I'm just wondering if you could possibly apportion out how much those different funding profiles were contributing to that and how much of that decrease is due to the operational efficiencies for that particular output.

Mr PEARCE - 2.1 Primary Industries. The difference between the 2025-26 original Budget and the 2025-26 estimated outcome reflects our latest assessments of additional funding requirements. Cash flow funding changes and updates to the Australian Government funding and the department's specific purpose accounts based on revised estimates. The decrease of \$549,000 between 2025-26 original Budget and the 2025-26 estimated outcome is due to, first of all, cashflow changes for rural Business Resilience initiative, \$750 grand.

Budget cashflow changes for the Strategic Industry Partnership Program, \$657,000 - 675. Budget cashflow changes for the implementation of the Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan, \$435,000, and budget cashflow changes for Sustainable Wine, \$250,000.

Now, these items are partially offset by additional funding requirements in the 2025-26 Budget, including in the estimated outcome figure of - sorry, for the 24 Storm Disaster Response. And that was a total of \$1.54 million - \$1.54 million. The increase of \$24,000 between the 2025-26 estimated outcome and the 2026-27 Budget largely reflects indexation.

And the budget movements between those financial years - I'll just cover that briefly. The decrease in the 2025 - correction, the 2026-27 of \$525,000 from 2025-26 original Budget, largely reflects the funding profile of various initiatives including implementation of Wild Fallow Deer Management. There was some money for Fruit Growers Tasmania, the rural Business Resilience package and the Strategic Industry Partnership Program. The 2027-28 and the out years operational efficiencies have been allocated primarily on an output basis and the department in 2026-27.

We'll be developing a budget plan to deliver these efficiencies. The budget plan will focus on continuing reviews of discretionary expenditure, including things like, travel, consultancy, advertising, supplies, consumables, operational savings through targeted accommodation improvements and implementing technology enable the efficiencies and strategic workforce planning, and active management of vacant positions. And if we could just finally add, the department will also consider appropriate and fair cost recovery of services.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you. Are we able to, I guess, put it in dollar terms the operational efficiencies in that department per year?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - Yes. And for that I might just hand over to the secretary. He can run you through that. Thanks, secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I thank the member for the question. In the budget papers - and this is quite complicated, so I might try and just spell it out one by one if that's all right with you.

The operational efficiencies target for the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania in the 2026-27 year is \$4.9 million. In 2027-28 the department will need to find an additional \$9 million, with the target increasing to \$13.9 million. And this is then followed by an increase of \$6 million to \$19.9 million in 2028-29. To summarise all of that, the overall accumulated impact of the operational efficiencies as outlined in the budget papers is \$20 million per annum by 2029-30 financial year.

Mr HISCUTT - Are we able to break that into the output groups or not?

Mr JACOBI - That's across the entire department. I don't have a breakdown that I'm prepared to provide right at this point in time in relation to Primary Industries and Water. That will be subject to a budget savings plan that we'll develop, as the minister mentioned earlier. We are already on track to meet our key savings target of \$3.4 million this year. We will develop a budget savings plan next year. The targets to date have largely been achieved through savings and discretionary allocations, so fleet, accommodation, travel, marketing consultancies, printing, for example.

And, in fact, some good news stories have emerged from that. In printing alone we've reduced quite significantly our printing costs across the whole department, which has contributed to savings. There are more savings to be achieved in those discretionary figures. We will have to make a saving across paid equivalent full-time FT positions as part of right sizing the public service. To date, since March 2025 we have found, I think it's 57 equivalent paid FTE positions since March 2025. We've achieved those savings with, I believe, very little material impact on service delivery.

Our attrition rate going forward across the forward Estimates is in the order of about 13 per cent per year. So I'm fairly comfortable that with our attrition rate, which is people resigning or leaving the department. On a case-by-case basis we can look closely at each and every one of those positions and make a measured and considered decision about how critical that position is to the work that needs to be delivered. Now, some positions will be fundamental to enabling us to continue to provide service delivery. Other positions we will be able to identify, and we will need to identify and hold those positions vacant.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you for the answer. That was quite comprehensive. Appreciate that. Moving to a non-money related question. I was just wondering, haven't had an update for a little while regarding the potato mop-top virus and just wondered if you could give me an answer how that has impacted our export markets across the strait.

Mr PEARCE - Good question.

Mr JACOBI - As a potato farmer, or the son of one anyway.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - Between July and November 2025, Biosecurity Tasmania and the state's potato industry responded to a detection, as you would rightly know, of potato mop-top virus, PMTV, in Tasmania. We as a government led a response to this detection that wound down in October 2025, with an industry-led management of the virus now in place. A general biosecurity direction for PMVT was issued on Friday 20 March 2026 under the Biosecurity Act 2019. Now, that provided guidance to growers, to contractors, to processors on measures to help slow the spread of PMVT, as you'd be aware.

We will continue to support our potato industry. We're working with Tas Farmers to provide on-farm biosecurity support, and that was extensive. And on that point, I want to publicly put on the record how pleasing it was to see industry and those growers working with our Biosecurity Tasmania. They were hand in glove, it was seamless and they fed off each other's enthusiasm. It was just textbook stuff. I want to congratulate the BT teams, and I want to congratulate our great industry in Tasmania. It's no wonder that we lead the country.

We're also concerned about market access and the controlling of powdery scab, which was the vector, as you'd be aware. And we've put measures around R&D and farming methodologies to control *Spongospora subterranea* or powdery scab, so we figured if we could control that, we can control the spread.

Now, we've done a lot of work through our Institute of Agriculture and there's a specific piece of work that they're doing, and working, again, hand in glove with industry. And I was only there not long ago and there was a group of farmers there watching that work being conducted. And that's exactly how I like to see it, and it was, as I said, textbook stuff.

We'll have to continue to watch this. We'll have to continue to look at things like domestic trade, particularly for that locally grown potato industry where they don't necessarily have the measures around them like we do with certification of commercial seed. But overall, very positive, and it was pleasing that Tasmania moved through the non-eradicability of that particular pathogen.

If we hadn't done that, it would have gone on and on and on, cost a lot of people a lot of money. So that sort of thing, the decision was made early. I know behind me is our chief plant scientist, and she was instrumental in leading that and was recognised by the national bodies, so thank you.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. And just to clarify, so seed market export domestically has been relatively unaffected then?

Mr PEARCE - It has been affected. I could -

Mr HISCUTT - I know that was the major concern for - I know that was a major concern financially for Tasmanian farmers.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. It was. Obviously, as time goes by there'll be arrangements made interstate. Happy to bring the chief plant scientist up. She can run you through quickly the fallout of that, if you'd like that extra detail.

Mr HISCUTT - Sure. I would appreciate, Rose, if that would be okay to get that information.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - Susanna, would you mind?

Ms DRIESSEN - Thank you. Your question through you, minister, is around the impact on trade?

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. Especially seed potato through to the mainland and what that might look like in the future.

Ms DRIESSEN - Yes. At the moment there is, generally, full prohibition on the movement of seed potatoes onto the mainland. So, each of the jurisdictions, pretty much all of them have some form of movement restrictions in respect of seed potatoes or potatoes holistically. So, coming back one step with the fresh ware potatoes, we are currently working with the jurisdictions around a potential protocol to allow the movement of fresh ware potatoes, but those are still in deliberations with the other jurisdictions.

For seed potatoes, like I indicated, there is, generally, across the board, prohibition, because that's one of the highest risks of movement of PMVT. We are also working with a number of the jurisdictions on potentially not seed potatoes but mini tubers.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. There's prohibition, so there's no movement of seed potatoes to the mainland, is that -

Ms DRIESSEN - There's no movement of seed potatoes.

Mr HISCUTT - All right. How is that affecting our export crops and those businesses, minister? Is there any support for those businesses?

Mr PEARCE - Obviously, Victoria, New South Wales and to a certain degree, South Australia, were a huge consumer of Tasmanian seed. That's been put on pause. We were able to protect the commercially grown crop, but the seed, unfortunately, no one is prepared - no other state, no other minister is prepared to allow that. And nor would we allow that, I'm sure, chief plant scientist, if the boot was on the other foot.

Ms DRIESSEN - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - The mini tuber piece is incredibly important because we - I wouldn't mind, Susanna, if you run through the risks around mini tubers also with plant medium as well.

Ms DRIESSEN - Yes. No, happy to. Each, kind of, product from along the production of potatoes has a different level of risk. Now, the way that the mini tubers are produced, there's two main risk elements. It's really about infected planting material and then it's also soil in which the powdery scab contains PMVT.

When they say soil is high risk, what they're referring to is the presence of the powdery scab, the vector, which has PMVT within it. So, when you're talking about mini tubers, when

PUBLIC

you're talking about tissue culture production, there's no exposure to the soil, so you're immediately reducing one core element of risk.

Mr HISCUTT - All right. Okay. And so, to the second part of my question, are we providing support to the farmers who have been affected by no longer having their export market available?

Mr PEARCE - We are. And that's done through the institute. They're doing a lot of work with them, and obviously Potato Growers Tasmania are doing a hell of a lot of work in that regard.

Mr HISCUTT - Okay. I'm happy if there are other questions. I've got -

CHAIR - Does anyone have any questions?

Ms WEBB - Sure. Yes. I'll jump in with a question.

Mr PEARCE - Can I thank - that was just for the Hansard. That was our chief plant scientist, Dr Susanna Driessen. Thank you, Susanna.

CHAIR - Thank you. Ms Webb?

Ms WEBB - Thank you.

CHAIR - You have some questions on Primary Industries?

Ms WEBB - Sure. Just for a little bit of something different, how about weed management? Is that going to belong in this area maybe? So, the weed -

CHAIR - Would that be natural values?

Ms WEBB - Pardon?

CHAIR - Would that be natural values?

Ms WEBB - Natural values? Okay. I'm going to hold that one off until natural values. I'll just write that down.

CHAIR - Any other questions before we move onto supervision of - sorry, you have some more questions?

Mr HISCUTT - Sorry, I did have one more question from a different -

Ms WEBB - You keep going and I'll see if I can dig another one out.

Mr HISCUTT - It's from a different area. That's why I just wanted to give a chance for someone else to go if they want.

CHAIR - No. That's fine.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - We can deal with natural values also again in Biosecurity Tasmania.

CHAIR - Well, we do have a line item, 7.3, for natural values.

Ms WEBB - We'll get there eventually.

CHAIR - We actually go along line items, always.

Mr PEARCE - You're organised, team.

CHAIR - Always.

Ms WEBB - We're very structured here.

Mr HISCUTT - It's because our Chair keeps us in line. If I may ask, then, and I'll continue to advocate for bringing it to the front of mind, my views on the Protection of Agricultural Land

Act and how it's affecting the next generation of farmers not being able to have homes on their inherited land, and whether the minister had any opinion on that or any views towards any changes in that? I presume the answer may be no, but I'll give the minister a moment.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. So, what the good member is alluding to is the right to farm.

Mr HISCUTT - It's more that you can't build houses - you can't subdivide small lots off farming properties for the next generation to build their houses on to continue on farming that land. And that's under the Protection of Agricultural Land Act that prevents that. And I think that is a serious concern for young farmers, young - or children of farmers who may want to stay and farm.

They decide they can't get a house nearby; therefore they move away and then don't necessarily come back. And I think that's a particular concern for our rural communities that can't, you know, subdivide that little block of land that they used to be able to do 30 or 40 years ago for their children to move into. And I just wouldn't mind - - -

Mr PEARCE - And I know the secretary's in probably a different life has dealt with some of this, so.

Mr JACOBI - I really can't speak to this one, unfortunately, minister. I suggest we take it on notice and see if we can find some more information.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - The other issue, it's not a subject that I've not heard before. This is brought up to me. We are governed by the Primary Industry Activities Protection Act 1995, which protects the lawful farming activities and limits the interference or nuisance. But in terms of town planning, I'm happy to take that on notice and try and provide you a mechanism by which we could consider that more seriously.

PUBLIC

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you. I appreciate that.

CHAIR - We'll provide you with that written question.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you.

CHAIR - You're good.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes, that's me done.

CHAIR - Ms Webb, do you have a question?

Ms WEBB - Yes, I have a few that relate -

CHAIR - Before we move on because we do have a few areas, but that's right. No, no.

Ms WEBB - It relates to the deer matters. And then the minister spoke about some of those in his opening remarks, and I may have not plucked some answers to these already, but we'll see how we go. My understanding, minister, is that Tasmania and Victoria are the only remaining Australian states that retain a partly protected status for feral deer as a game resource.

That status means landowners have no obligation to manage deer, limiting the effectiveness of any coordinated eradication or control program. So, does the Tasmanian government have any plans to remove the partly protected status of deer to facilitate more effective management across land tenures?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, and it's an excellent question. And in my announcement, in my opening remarks, aside from the actions that we've taken around management of deer, I was also going to bring the deer management plan forward a full 12 months.

Ms WEBB - Is this part of the reprofiling of the spending in that space?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, of the reclassification of deer.

Ms WEBB - I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. You keep going with your answer to my question. Sorry.

Mr PEARCE - So in terms of the reclassification, so the partially protected status under the - it's actually under the Nature Conservation Act. Our decision to remain partly protected - at the moment, it is partially protected. However, we have heard loud and clear during the consultation period that we've just conducted, and it was unprovoked, the fact that people would like to see that considered.

So, in moving the deer management plan forward and conducting that review, I intend to put that out to public consultation and hear from Tasmanians, from landowners and alike and those that it affects, what they'd like to see done with that. Because that particular subject wasn't included in the last consultative period, it is only fair that that's put back on the agenda.

Ms WEBB - Okay. So, to follow on in terms of bringing that review forward that you're doing, because in the budget papers here we've got the Peri-urban Deer Management, \$840,000,

PUBLIC

and the pest control program support, \$500,000, both having no allocated funding, it looks like, beyond 2026-27, this upcoming financial year. Are they expected to be extended beyond that? Maybe based on whatever the review is that you're doing, or are they coming to an end at that period of time or what's the situation with that funding?

Mr PEARCE - Have we got a closed time on that consultation period?

Mr JACOBI - We're expecting to bring it forward into 2026-27 financial year.

Ms WEBB - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - And a decision would be formulated pending that information, pending that feedback.

Ms WEBB - So those two programs I mentioned, which are funded in the 2026-27 year in the budget papers, but not past that, may they continue then, potentially based on outcomes from your review or what's the plan for those programs? Peri-urban Deer Management and pest control program support.

Mr PEARCE - I wouldn't like to pre-empt the outcome of that consultative period. It's our position that we want to put that out. It was mooted and suggested in the previous consultation period that not only we look at the Nature Conservation Act, but also other measures that may exist for the reclassification of deer. So again, I don't want to pre-empt the outcome of that consultation.

Ms WEBB - Okay. Do we have any deer issues on Bruny Island?

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to hand to the secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Yes, yes.

Ms WEBB - Okay. So, I just was getting confirmation about that because then my question coming from that is, Bruny Island's designated priority area under the Commonwealth Threatened Species Action Plan. So, can we leverage some Commonwealth funding to assist with deer management things there?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. Yes, deer is one of several key hotspots for control across the state. It is particularly effective given it is an island. So, it does present some unique opportunities to actually eradicate deer from Bruny Island. Some of the peri-urban deer money, I believe, in the past couple of years has been put towards assisting and supporting landholders to deal with deer on the island.

However, to completely eradicate deer on Bruny is a multi-year, quite a substantial and significant investment that would be required from government. We would absolutely be leaning into both Commonwealth and also invasive species funding programs to seek to eradicate deer on Bruny over time.

Ms WEBB - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - There's also King Island as well, secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. So, King Island is one of the other identified locations. The Tasman Peninsula and also the Tamar region and Deloraine are typical hotspots.

Ms WEBB - And is there potential Commonwealth funding that can be leveraged for those other areas as well in this space or are they similarly classified under Commonwealth Threatened Species Action Plan and therefore able to be potentially some funding sought?

Mr JACOBI - Yes. So, through you, minister. In another portfolio in the parks and wildlife and environment space, we have actually secured Commonwealth funding for quite a substantial monitoring program in the Central Highlands that will test and trial methods to identify and locate deer. And I would expect that some of the learnings from that process would be applicable to a future funding bid through an invasive pest species program or through Commonwealth funding.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. Appreciate that.

CHAIR - Any other questions on primary industry before we move to supervision of poppy and hemp crops? No.

Output Group 2.2

Supervision of Poppy and Hemp Crops

CHAIR - 2.2 Supervision of poppy and hemp crops. Mr Gaffney.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yeah, thanks Chair. We should get through this reasonably quickly, minister. Quite steady over the forward Estimates with funding a little bit down, however, just some numbers. The growers in 2025-26. The numbers. The numbers in 2024-25 were 366. So, if you could just give me this year's numbers for the growers.

Mr JACOBI - Performance measures. Sorry.

Mr PEARCE - Sorry.

Mr JACOBI - You're going to talk about the performance measures.

Mr PEARCE - The outputs.

Mr GAFFNEY - And the hectares licensed, sown, harvested, that sort of thing.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Okay.

Mr GAFFNEY - Last year you gave us quite a - but we just need this year's figures.

Mr JACOBI - 2025-26. Total number of growers. Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - Growers. Is how many?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. Okay. So, 2025-26, number of growers total 389.

PUBLIC

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. So that's an increase of about 23. Hectares licensed?

Mr PEARCE - 10,794.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes, that's down a thousand. Sown?

Mr PEARCE - 9867.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. That's a better percentage than last year. And harvested?

Mr PEARCE - 9710.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. And that's an increase of harvest and sown which is good. FTEs, still about 5.

Mr PEARCE - Spot on.

Mr GAFFNEY - And have you been able to maintain funding for the Tasmanian Hemp Association? You've given them some money, \$400,000, \$130,000 recently. In 2024, they got \$130,000. I'm just wondering if there's any funding available for them this year.

Mr PEARCE - Have you got that on your spreadsheet?

Mr GAFFNEY - And if you haven't, you can take it on notice and come back to us - the Tasmanian Hemp Association. The main question here is the supervision of poppy and hemp crops. In January in the northern midlands this year we had one of the largest thefts of poppy capsules ever. Over half an acre, in fact. Can you give us an update on that event and any changes that may come from a result of that event?

Mr PEARCE - The security of the Tasmanian poppy crop is absolutely critical as you rightly point out, not only for safety but it's also our reputation as a major global supplier of regulated poppy material. The Poppy Advisory and Control Board is responsible for oversight and the security of the cultivation of poppy crops.

Whilst any poppy thefts are concerning, I am advised that the number of poppy thefts this season is similar to previous seasons. The board is actively working with Tasmania Police, with Poppy Growers Tasmania, with the poppy licence holders and poppy processing companies.

I've visited both companies recently, and investigations led by Tasmania Police continue and I continually am updated on those. As always, farmers are advised to immediately report any suspicious activity in or around their poppy crops to Tasmania Police and their regulator crops officer. And I repeat the very simple message to all in Tasmania, that any thinking of taking any poppy material, it is prohibited for a good reason. If you misuse poppy material, you won't get high, you will likely die. So they're the ramifications.

Mr GAFFNEY - With that actual theft, was the farmer involved do the right thing and reported it straight away?

Mr PEARCE - The farmer worked in accordance with the SAP. Yes.

PUBLIC

Mr GAFFNEY - Has there been any capture of the people who are involved with it? No.

Mr PEARCE - No. And that investigation, as I said, is ongoing.

Mr GAFFNEY - Is ongoing. Okay.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. And I'm led to believe that it also involved other police agencies from around the country.

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. And since that major theft in January, have there been any other instances of theft?

Mr PEARCE - Since that one?

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - Just hang on a tick.

Mr GAFFNEY - If you might have to take it on notice, that's fine.

Mr PEARCE - I might have to take that.

Mr GAFFNEY - That's fine.

Mr PEARCE - I think, off the top of my head, there was one in Forest in Circular Head, but we'll get back to you, and we'll take that one on notice.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. I just want to see whether - because they didn't get caught, whether it's happened more frequently.

Mr PEARCE - Okay. In relation to your question on the hemp industry.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. So if we can just clear that up. Our government has provided \$700,000 to the industry since 2017-18 for industry support and development, including research funding comprising: 130,000 over the two years commencing 2025-26 to the Tasmanian Hemp Association to bolster operational and industry capacity. Does that answer your question?

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. But that was in 2025-26, so there's nothing in 2026-27?

Mr PEARCE - It was over two years. Over two years.

Mr GAFFNEY - So 2025-26, 2026-27.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. Over two years.

PUBLIC

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. Okay. Cool. And you were going to check up if there had been any other -

Mr PEARCE - Interferences since the major one which you spoke of?

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. But you can come back to me on that.

Mr PEARCE - The 665,000 heads one. Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - Last year the report from the three-year Epping Forest hemp variety trials came out, with 80 per cent of Tasmania's hemp seed coming from Tasmania. What is the scope to expand on this to international market? That was a good trial, it was a good result. I'm just wondering what's happened since the Epping Forest variety trials. Quite comfortable to come back with that.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. I'll take that one on notice. Thank you.

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. Thanks. That's it from me.

CHAIR - No, thank you. Ms Webb, did you have any questions on this area?

Ms WEBB - Not on this line, no.

CHAIR - No?

Ms WEBB - Not on this line.

CHAIR - No. That's fine. Then we shall move on to 2.3 Water Resources Management. Ms Webb?

Output Group 2.3

Water Resources Management

Ms WEBB - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - I'm sorry. I do apologise.

CHAIR - No. That's totally fine.

Mr PEARCE - I'm sorry.

Ms WEBB - We're moving on to 2.3 Water Resource Management, those areas. I was looking into the table 8.2, page 165 of the budget papers on this line item and saw that the 2025-26 budgeted amount and estimated outcome amount are a little different. There's about \$200,000 less in the estimated outcome. So, I just wanted a quick explanation for what that was, what had caused that, what's that disparity.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. The difference between the 2025-26 original Budget and the 2025-26 estimated outcome, that reflects latest assessments around additional funding requirements, cashflow funding changes, updates to the Australian Government funding and the department

PUBLIC

specific purpose accounts based on revised estimates. So, the decrease of \$240,000 between 2025-26 and the original Budget 2025-26 estimated outcome is due to budget cashflow change for the drought support, Bass Strait Island's Water Resilience Program.

The decrease of \$154,000 between the 2025-26 estimated outcome and the 2026-27 Budget largely reflects the funding profile of the Rural Water Use Strategy, so that was \$440,000, and the impact of operational efficiencies. This was partially offset by indexation of \$184,000 and a provision of the 27th pay period which totalled \$178,000.

Ms WEBB - All right. So operational efficiencies are coming in in the 2026-27 part of the Budget and then dropping even more across forward Estimates. Are we expecting, in relation to those operational efficiencies, that that's going to be relating to staff cuts? If so, how are you looking at approaching that in this particular area of water resources management?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. And I appreciate the question. Secretary, are you able to step through staffing?

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Sure, I can. Look, before I do, I think it's important to note across the forward Estimates that some of the more substantial reductions that you'll see are in relation to national water grid funding, so that funding re-profiled across the forward Estimates.

In terms of your question which relates to how efficiencies or operational efficiencies will be achieved in water and resources management, this is a challenging space because a lot of the positions are fundamental to delivering on key programs such as the Rural Water Use Strategy and all the programs under that strategy.

There will, however, need to be, as I mentioned before, a case-by-case review of positions as they become vacant. The other thing that's important to mention is that as of today I announced across the department that we will commence an expression of interest process for targeted negotiated voluntary redundancies.

Staff will have the opportunity through that process to self-nominate, and we will again consider each individual position with a view to how critical that position is for the delivery of these programs. And I suspect that there will be some positions that we will determine are appropriate to offer a redundancy package to.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. Yes. It's a sensitive area, I know, for staff across all departments at the moment. You mentioned that some of this was relating to federal funding that was changing. What is the breakdown, then, of operational efficiencies versus the changes to that Australian Government funding? Was that the National Water Grid initiative? Is that the change that was happening there?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I might let the minister talk to the specific changes across the National Water Grid, if you just give me one minute. Was there a particular year that you were interested in?

Ms WEBB - No. It's that you, sort of, put them both together saying that some of the drop is related to those Australian Government funding arrangements, and I'm just trying to tease out how much of a drop.

PUBLIC

Mr JACOBI - I'm not in a position, at this point in time, to explain exactly what the percentage of operational efficiencies would be.

Ms WEBB - Okay. Can I move onto another then, around this: Rural Water Use Strategy implementation plan from 2025 to 2027. We're right in the middle of that. Last year it was announced that the Rural Water Use Strategy program was being extended to deliver new and expanded projects detailed in an updated implementation plan 2025 to 2027 with an additional 440, which you were just speaking about before. In terms of being funded in this Budget, is it being funded in this Budget?

I know you just mentioned it a moment ago. I'm just trying to make sure I'm clear about is it being funded to the same extent? Is this the line item that it's found in still, and will it remain here?

Mr PEARCE - The Rural Water Use Strategy's been continued for right through to 2028-29, and that total is \$256,000. It largely reflects the completion of the Rural Water Use Strategy, which that total is 250. Budget movement between financial years, the decrease in 2026-27 of \$394,000 from the 2025-26 original Budget is due to budget changes for the drought support for Bass Strait Islands Water Resilience Program of 240, and the funding profile of the Rural Water Use Strategy of 440.

Ms WEBB - That's the one I'm asking about: the Rural Water Use Strategy and the funding attached to that.

Mr PEARCE - The Tas Rural Water Use Strategy implementation in 2025-26, the original Budget, 690; the 2025-26 estimated outcome, 690; in 2026-27 Budget was 250; the 2027-28 forward Estimate is 250; and that's as far as I can give you figures.

Ms WEBB - Okay. Can I ask about the climate mitigation areas in this water resources management area if it's relevant? I'm not sure if this is the right place to ask this question, but the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tas Annual Report 2024-25, details were taken by AgriGrowth Tasmania staff within NRE to facilitate programs to support producers to help manage, prepare for, and navigate drought and climate change. These programs have included delivering resilience funding, emergency grants, water infrastructure rebates, and mentoring support.

My question around that is: can you provide a breakdown of the amount of funding that was provided for in that 2024-25 year, as well as what's expected to be provided in the current year we're in, 2025-26, for each of those areas: the resilience funding distributed, the emergency grants, the water infrastructure rebates, and the mentoring support?

Mr PEARCE - I'll take that on notice and get back to the committee.

Ms WEBB - Okay. Is this line item the area where I'd ask about matters relating to flow-through fish farms in our freshwater areas, or do I ask that under Marine Resources?

Mr JACOBI - That's a matter for the minister for Environment.

Ms WEBB - Is it? There's no responsibility that you have in relation to the inland waterways?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - In terms of water quality that you speak of, it's best dealt with through the minister for the Environment.

Ms WEBB - All right. Anything to do with flow-through fish farms and water quality? Right. But I can ask around the Greater South East Irrigation Scheme? It's your area. Is this the right line item to ask about that in?

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Ms WEBB - That's one of our largest irrigation schemes. It's planning to extract nearly 40,000 megalitres of water per year from the River Derwent system at Meadowbank dam located in the lower regions of the catchment upstream of Hobart's primary water supply, extensive wetlands of the upper Derwent estuary.

One of the things I'm wanting to ask about is the concerns that've been expressed with that irrigation scheme is that the proponents haven't yet assessed potential impacts associated with extraction of this large volume downstream on downstream water quality and the environment, particularly during the summer months, where previous detailed studies recommended against further summer extraction. Is the government willing to commit to undertake the work to update that work and have updated studies to look at whether that's recommended now or not as a condition of that expansion of that Greater South East Irrigation Scheme?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for the question. I would also like to point out at the onset that this is very early in the stages of planning, and there is an exhaustive environmental hydrology piece of work that needs to be completed, and it has not been at the moment completed, so this is very early stages.

You rightly point out that the River Derwent is a highly regulated - and obviously Hydro Tasmania - as a hydro power district. The operation at the Meadowbank power station, that strongly influences River Derwent below the dam. Hydro Tasmania is responsible for releases from Meadowbank Lake and maintain freshwater quality between Bryn Estyn Water Treatment Plant, to prevent saltwater incursion moving upstream, and to supply industrial water for users under the commercial agreements.

Water licences and allocations from the River Derwent for irrigation and stock and domestic below the Meadowbank dam are regulated by NRE Tas under the Water Management Act 1999, and the offtakes for water for the Great South East Irrigation Scheme, once commissioned, will be at or above Meadowbank dam.

Hydro Tasmania and Tasmanian Irrigation will enter into a commercial arrangement to supply the volume of water required for the purposes of the Great South East Irrigation Scheme, and in addition to providing that water, TI will also liaise with Hydro. Hydro Tasmania will continue to release that water flow in order to reach requirements for current commercial water supply arrangements downstream of Lake Meadowbank. It's important to note also that this will provide a flow regime at all times intended to protect freshwater quality and river health.

In terms of the environmental studies for the Great South East Irrigation Scheme, this will undergo a comprehensive assessment of the approvals process under both Commonwealth

PUBLIC

and Tasmanian legislation, and at the Commonwealth level, the project will be referred under the EPBC Act in order to determine whether it is a controlled action, with the assessment focused on matters of national environmental significance and all credible impact pathways considered as part of that process.

At the state level, approvals are expected to include planning permits, water management approvals with requirements proportionate to the level of environmental risk, which is identified, and a suite of technical studies will support these approvals.

Ms WEBB - I'm just interested in who's doing those assessments and those technical studies and the hydrology studies you mentioned earlier. Can you outline in relation to this project and this proposal exactly what assessments and studies are being done to inform this decision?

Mr PEARCE - No, I can't, and I doubt at this stage whether even TI would have that information at hand, but what I am saying is its very early stages. That environmental work, that hydrology is yet to commence, and once it does, then I'm sure that that detail and that granularity will fall out.

Ms WEBB - Do we know when it's expected to commence?

Mr PEARCE - I can get back to the committee on that. I'll take that on notice.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. I appreciate that. More broadly, the River Derwent has no water management plan, and so that sort of plan would enable coordinated management of river flows and water quality. It could be seen as a major gap in our ability to manage this essential waterway in the longer term, particularly around serious longer-term risks for water users and the environment.

Is the government intending or will the government commit to a water and/or catchment management plan for the Derwent, including clearly defined environmental flows, for example, as a key piece of work that would seem sensible?

Mr PEARCE - Can I say, and I'll get back to my initial statement about that environmental work commencing, I think you raise a very valid point, and in terms of the holistic consideration of the entire catchment, TI, I can categorically state, looks at and considers the entire catchment before they commence their planning and environmental process, and it would be an ideal time to catch all those considerations when we're looking at that initially.

Ms WEBB - Yes, and I would've thought that a water management plan for the River Derwent shouldn't belong to TI as a piece of work or an undertaking. It would, I would've thought, been something that as a state government with responsibilities in that area, the state government would take responsibility for to inform the decisions it makes in relation to TI and what it might be putting forward as proposals or projects.

Mr PEARCE - Again, you raise a very pertinent point. A lot of those projects right across the state that TI undertake is fed back to planning at NRE and myself in my position. The work that TI do, that hydrology work, is absolutely invaluable for the future of our state planning in terms of environmental flows and water usage, and the other thing that they do is

PUBLIC

consistently monitor those flows so that we can track things like climate variability, rainfall runoff, transpiration, and the like.

Ms WEBB - Sure, but they also have their own set of interests that they're pursuing, quite rightly.

Mr PEARCE - Everyone has an interest.

Ms WEBB - Sure. That's right. It just concerns me in a way if we're not independent of TI, do we have any other baseline monitoring that's done that's the responsibility owned by state government, as opposed to that GBE, who's naturally pursuing its own interests?

Mr PEARCE - At the moment, as I said, that's a responsibility for Hydro to manage in terms of environmental flow.

Ms WEBB - Yes, but again, Hydro wouldn't be responsible for a River Derwent management plan, would it? That's not really their responsibility, either, because they've got their own particular focus, too. It's probably an ongoing conversation for further days, but it just seems like something we should have a view of as a state government, rather than just what our GBEs might be interested in in relation to this space.

Mr PEARCE - I can tell you that our focus at the department, at NRE, is exactly the points that you raise, and that's something that we take very seriously.

Ms WEBB - We can move on, if you like.

CHAIR - Are you ready to move on to our next, which is -

Mr PEARCE - Can I get back to, when you have a chance, please, Chair, to Mr Hiscutt's question?

CHAIR - Yes, about the house on the farm?

Ms WEBB - Do it now.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. Regarding the question taken on notice earlier this evening from Mr Hiscutt regarding the protection of agricultural land, I am advised that this is administered under the State Policies and Projects Act 1993, which falls under the remit of the minister for Housing and Planning.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes, I was aware, but I was more wondering from an agricultural sense, because this is obviously affecting our prime agri.

Mr PEARCE - You raise a very valid point, and I hear that point.

Mr HISCUTT - Let's work on it outside of Estimates. Thanks for the answer, though.

Output Group 2.4

Marine Resources

CHAIR - Thank you. So, 2.4: Marine Resources. Ms Webb.

Ms WEBB - Thank you, Chair. Just a couple of questions in this area, then. I think you mentioned in your opening remarks we've got an independent study underway in relation to finfish farming in the state. Is this an area that I can ask you about; or is it your responsibility; or is that something that, because it was announced by the premier or somebody else, it belongs to somebody else? I'm not going to ask detailed questions about it necessarily.

Mr PEARCE - From the Department of Premier and Cabinet, I've got Mr Mat Healey. Mat, would you give us an update on the good member's question?

Ms WEBB - I'm not necessarily looking for an update necessarily. I'm just wanting to ask a specific question. It's in train, the study that's being done, and I understand, stepping out the different stages of that, consultation is open right now around the term of reference for the study.

The thing I'm interested in asking you about is, while that process is on foot, whether the government's committing to not extending any existing licences in the finfish farming area during that time, pending the review being done and various, presumably, recommendations coming out the other end of it.

Mr PEARCE - Before I hand over to Mr Healey, I would like to put on the record the fact that in terms of the study, government remains at arm's length from that study and does not have any direct interference, nor should it, with that study. In terms of spatial pauses, I'm sure you can cover that.

Ms WEBB - I'm asking about whether there's a commitment to not doing any extensions of existing licences or any new licences during the time that that's happening. Someone will take it, I'm sure.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister.

Mr PEARCE - Everyone's so keen.

Mr JACOBI - As part of the independent study, there was a commitment to honour existing licences that've been agreed through the marine farm planning process.

Ms WEBB - 'To honour'? Does that mean you're going to renew some during the time frame of the review? There are significant ones coming up, of course: Macquarie Harbour and Long Beach.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. Through you, minister. I will consider renewal of licences on advice from my team. Only in cases where there's been a material breach in the license conditions do I refuse the license.

Ms WEBB - Refuse the renewal of licence?

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Mr JACOBI - Refuse the renewal of a licence.

Ms WEBB - Essentially, you're saying that they are a done deal. Unless there's been a significant breach of those licences, we're not going to be holding off consideration of renewal, pending what might come out of the review?

Mr JACOBI - Not at this point in time. There's no reason for me to refuse a licence unless there is a significant breach in that licence, and I take advice from my team every year on year as to whether there have been any breaches which need to be considered.

Ms WEBB - It's a flaw, though, isn't it, given that we might have updated science that says it's no longer suitable for these licences to be given in Long Beach. You're saying that under legislation, there's no way that you can consider that; you just have to roll it over and renew it.

Mr JACOBI - There is a difference between the marine farming licences and the environmental licences.

Ms WEBB - Right, so you're saying there's no legislative basis to refuse a marine farming licence other than some significant breach.

Mr JACOBI - That's correct.

Ms WEBB - But an environmental licence can consider updated science or indications?

Mr JACOBI - And that is a matter for the EPA. Through you, minister.

Ms WEBB - Knowing that's not your area, but during this course of the review that's being undertaken, are we in a similar position where environmental licences and extensions or renewals of existing ones are going to be granted during this review period? Are you aware of that?

Mr JACOBI - I suggest that is a question for the EPA.

Ms WEBB - We've got DPAC here, who's in charge also of this process. Maybe there's an understanding of what's being committed there on that front.

Mr HEALEY - Through you, minister. It's probably important to differentiate between the role of the study leads in doing a comprehensive assessment and study into the regulatory system and the practice of salmon farming in Tasmania versus the ongoing role of the regulators. The regulators need to continue to perform their functions and to assess applications under the existing regime whilst the study progresses.

Ms WEBB - Right. So environmental licences will be considered as well, then, during the process, by the sound of it, from that answer?

Mr HEALEY - The study leads are not stepping into the shoes of the regulators during that period.

PUBLIC

Ms WEBB - I'm not asking whether the study leads are stepping in; I'm asking whether the government will commit to not extending those things during the process of the review to be informed by potentially what might come out of the review.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I think not extending those licences, whether that was the EPA or my department, would, in effect, bring a halt to the operation of those agriculture industries in those locations.

Ms WEBB - My understanding is that, for example, the current environmental licence for Long Beach expired on 30 November. Are we outside an environmental licence period already? Nothing seems to have halted.

Mr JACOBI - Again, that is a question you should ask the EPA.

Ms WEBB - Sure. We're not, then, currently outside of marine farming licences for either of those areas: Long Beach or Macquarie Harbour? When are they out?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. Even though the marine farming licences may come to an end, they remain in effect until such time as a decision is made to renew them.

Ms WEBB - So they're just ongoing, rolling, until a decision's made?

Mr JACOBI - No. I am awaiting advice imminently for those licences.

Ms WEBB - Can I ask what would constitute a serious breach of a licence that might trigger your ability to potentially not grant an extension or a renewal?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I might ask David Midson to give an example of what might be considered a material breach of the licence.

Mr PEARCE - David Midson is our general manager, Marine Resources.

CHAIR - Welcome to the table.

Dr MIDSON - Thank you. With the licences, there is the ability to extend them, and we do that for a range of administrative purposes, but as the secretary said, once the licence holder applies for a new licence, then that licence continues until a decision is made on it.

There are a range of licence conditions that attach to those licences, and were one of those licence conditions to be breached, particularly where that breach was persistent, then we would consider providing advice to the relevant delegate that that licence not be continued, or, more likely in the first instance, that additional conditions were made to it.

One of the main reasons of the Marine Farm Planning Act licences is around the collection of fees, such as the Salmon Cost Recovery levy. So, our licences under marine farm planning are much more around the administrative processes.

It's really important that compliance activities are not something that we leave to when a licence renewal falls due. It is something that we do continuously throughout the year to make sure that those who are using our state's waterways are following the appropriate rules. Some

PUBLIC

of those rules are in licence conditions, but there may be a range of other regulations that they need to follow.

Ms WEBB - Thank you. So, there's not sort of a threshold matter of breach, a particular significant breach that triggers an automatic 'No, you're not going to have your licence renewed'?

Dr MIDSON - No. Each case is case-by-case, and we can consider the full context of that breach, the history of the licence holder, their various other conduct, the impact of that. So, it is really important that those are considered on case-by-case basis because it is a compliance activity and we certainly wouldn't wait necessarily for a renewal process to start. We would undertake compliance action continuously if we found someone in breach of their conditions.

Ms WEBB - Yes. Yes, for sure. Can I ask then one other question around - while I'm mindful of time. Are you wanting to move on?

CHAIR - We are running tight on time.

Ms WEBB - That's okay. It's one I can follow up elsewhere.

CHAIR - Okay. Thank you. No other questions?

Mr GAFFNEY - Marine resources.

CHAIR - Did you have another question on marine resources?

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes, on marine resources.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - Notice that this item seems to whittle away some money from it, but my question is about eleven-armed sea stars that are having a devastating effect on our scallop fisheries. Stuart Ritchie from my electorate has identified a possible solution in his own efforts in finding a market with South Korean processors who are eager to convert protein from the eleven-armed sea star for de-icers and use remains to make fertilisers.

I'm wondering whether you're aware of this potential. A lot of fishermen get the eleven-armed sea stars confused with the crown of thorns and they're actually 40-50cm and they have 11 arms. However, they can drop off, and they can grow another couple. So, I'm just wondering, have you got any information? Have you spoken with Stuart? Is there anything in the train that could potentially see this as a good thing?

Mr PEARCE - And I reckon we speak to the same constituent.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes, I think so.

Mr PEARCE - So the eleven-armed starfish is native to Tasmania.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - It lives in a wide range of Tasmanian waters from shallow areas below 100 metres. The Department of Natural Resources and Environment manage the state's fisheries, and the eleven-armed starfish is no different. It is important, as you rightly point out, not to confuse the native species with the introduced pest, the North Pacific sea star. The eleven-armed starfish are fish within the meaning of the Living Marine Resources Management Act 1995, and any intentional or incidental take may be regulated under that act.

The department works with IMAS through a Sustainable Marine Research Collaboration agreement to ensure that Tasmania's marine resources and industries are sustainably developed and managed. The SMRCA is a significant and long-standing partnership between University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian government. And I want to note the comments of associate professor Neville Barrett that indicate that populations of the starfish fluctuate severely due to environmental factors and conditions.

We welcome the investment by the FRDC to better understand the environmental factors affecting scallop fisheries. They bring these starfish up with a dredge. The Living Marine Resources Management Act also provides pathways for research and development, as you rightly point out, one suggestion, and fishing technology.

To that end, I've actually only in the last month or so written to the department and asked them to engage with the scallop industry about the eleven-armed starfish and the opportunities to enable research and development in that regard.

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. Thank you.

CHAIR - You're right, Mr Gaffney.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - Chair, if I may, I can get back to Mr Gaffney with his question I took on notice earlier, if you like, at your convenience.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - In relation to Mr Gaffney's inquiry about the poppy interferences that occurred after the matter of the 67,560 capsules stolen from one property.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - Now, that theft was reported on 12 January this year and a further nine interferences were reported between 12 January and 6 February: 1983 capsules taken in total for those nine, for those sites across growing districts across the state.

Mr GAFFNEY - So they weren't constrained to the Northern Midlands.

Mr PEARCE - No.

Mr GAFFNEY - So it might have been a different crowd.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - No. And they were mixed varieties, so some fine, some other varieties.

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Mr JACOBI - Can I just correct something for the record?

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr JACOBI - So through you, minister, for the Chair, Dr David Midson just made reference, I believe to - or may have made reference to the Marine Farm Planning Act where it was intended to refer to the Living Marine Resources Management Act.

CHAIR - Thank you. No. Thank you.

Output Group 3.1

Biosecurity and Product Integrity

CHAIR - If we now move on to 3.1 Biosecurity and Product Integrity. Mr Gaffney.

Mr GAFFNEY - Thank you. We've touched on the biosecurity a little already. Looking at the figures, if we take this year's estimated outcome as a base and extrapolate it across the 2026-27 Budget and forward Estimates, we're looking at significant funding cuts.

In terms of the anticipated operational efficiencies of NRE Tas of around 60 million over the same period, suggests a huge chunk of it will come from this line item. So how can we justify it as a threat? Or has the threat disappeared? I'm not sure our farmers - it looks as though there's a significant decrease in funding. Can that be explained?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. And the question you raised is an important one. I meant what I said earlier in my introductory remarks about the importance of biosecurity. Tasmania's biosecurity system is underpinned by an evidence-based system and of important requirements and conditions. Now, these requirements and conditions are legislatively supported by the Biosecurity Act of 2019, as the member rightly knows. They effectively manage the risk and the point of entry and establishment of invasive pests, disease and pathogens not present in the state.

The performance measures of current and relevant import requirements in place for plants and plant products and imported permits and conditions for animals and animal products reviewed have been met with a 100 per cent rating achieved.

Requirements are reviewed as required in accordance with the program specifications and our government's biosecurity laboratories, both plant and animal, are nationally accredited in order to provide essential support to the system of requirements and conditions. The performance measure of compliance with the relevant international standards as applies to veterinary and plant testing laboratories has been met.

Under the Biosecurity Act 2019, there are requirements, i.e. import considerations, that must be met by importers in order to reduce the risk of introduction of invasive pests and diseases into Tasmania. These requirements and conditions are technically informed by the

PUBLIC

comprehensive important pest risk analysis described in the Tasmanian Government's published Import Risk Analysis framework.

Plant animal biosecurity diagnostic services enable Biosecurity Tasmania to quickly and accurately confirm or to rule out the arrival of potential pests and diseases of biosecurity concern in Tasmania. Our diagnostic laboratories undergo national and international proficiency testing with excellence success rates. And in terms of the funding fallout that you speak of, I'm going to handover to the secretary, if you wouldn't mind talking the good member through that part of the answer.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you. I thank the member for the question. I think one of the really important things is to remember that Biosecurity Tasmania operates under, like, a mixed-funding model. It's a composition of Commonwealth funding, state appropriation, industry contributions and retained revenue. One of the key things has been recently, through our Securing Our Borders program, we have sought approval to retain approximately \$3.8 million from treasury, which is supporting frontline biosecurity operations.

To be clear, in the revenue summary - and if you've got your revenue tables in front of you, you'll see they vary from 2025-26. The original Budget outcome was \$35,782,000 and then there's \$27,616 in the forward Estimates. Some key components of that are that the decrease in 2026-27 of \$3.55 million from the original Budget of 2025-26, that largely reflects the funding profile of the sheep and goat eID implementation ending, \$2.28 million, and also the Weeds Action Fund, \$430,000 and, of course, there will be operational efficiencies in there.

The decrease in 2027-28 of \$3.2 million reflects the completion of the additional biosecurity offices initiative, \$400,000; the Weeds Action Fund, \$410,000; and also reverting back to the regular 26-day period which the minister has referred to before. The decrease in 2028-29 of the two million dollars reflects the completion of initiative such as the RSPCA support, \$800,000; and strengthening biosecurity to keep Tasmania disease-free, \$750,000. If you'd like me to, I could talk also about the expense summaries.

Mr GAFFNEY - No. Just give me an example. When you say the \$750,000 for - what was that one for, the last one you just said?

Mr JACOBI - Strengthening biosecurity to keep Tasmania disease-free.

Mr GAFFNEY - That money's not there, so -

Mr JACOBI - From 2028-29 -

Mr GAFFNEY - It's not there.

Mr JACOBI - It's there until that time, and then 2028-2029 that particular program ends.

Mr GAFFNEY - Does that mean we're just ending it because we don't think it's done a good job, or it hasn't been - we don't think it's worthwhile anymore or it has no value? I'm just wondering, we've just stopped the funding because -

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. None of the above. It's purely a case of when the budget program was announced it was for a fixed term across the forward Estimates. There is

PUBLIC

nothing to suggest that we won't undertake a review or that there might be a separate budget submission made for either continuation of that program or a different program.

Mr GAFFNEY - I would hope so, because I hate to think that we put money into a program and then cut it because the funding's not there and the program's really good. It's been doing a good thing for Tasmania, you know.

Mr PEARCE - Can I make the point, also, with biosecurity. We don't know necessarily until we find something that it's there, and I'll give an example of potato mop-top virus. The only reason we found it is because Biosecurity Tasmania were doing their job. We don't know in another month, another week, another season, given the climate variability that we see here in the state, what we're going to be up against and that vigilance and that adaptation focus, that flexibility that Biosecurity Tasmania maintains is paramount.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. I completely agree and I would think that \$750,000 a year would probably pay for four or five people to be able to do that work or whatever.

Mr PEARCE - And who knows, by the time that's exhausted there may be a new threat, a new frontier.

Mr GAFFNEY - And they'd be applying for more money.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - Okay. Yes. That's it from me. No, I have. You might know of a guy called John Bowden who you would know has eradicated over thousands of cats in the last 20 years in the Port Sorell area alone and has been used in other areas. I just feel as though are we getting somewhere with the feral cat program.

I know that the new cat management plan - because the old expired four years ago, so what are we doing? I appreciate the fact that there's been some successes in Macquarie Island and places where we can - like, Bruny Island with the deer.

CHAIR - Bruny Island, also with cats?

Mr GAFFNEY - With the cats. I'm just thinking, where are we going with this, can we get on top it, is there a better way of using our resources to impact? I think I read somewhere once that every cat takes between 7 and 10 smaller animals, birds or whatever a week. I'm just wondering what are we doing with cat management and where are we going with it and is there funding for it?

Mr PEARCE - It's an incredibly important piece of work that we do. We are committed to reducing the impacts of roaming cats on the environment and agriculture through responsible cat ownership and regulatory mechanisms. Now, on 6 March 26 we released our cat management plan in our Tasmanian discussion paper seeking community feedback to shape our next plan.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - So we released the cat management discussion paper to inform the plan. The consultation period has now closed. It closed on 15 May this year.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - And I would like to thank all of those individuals - and I want that on the record, please that all those organisations - and this was strongly responded to.

CHAIR - I bet it was.

Mr PEARCE - Individual submissions and a summary of those submissions will be published on our NRE Tas website in due course. Now, the new plan. The new plan will provide a revised framework for cat management, including feral cats in Tasmania for the next five years. It will build on achievements of the previous cat management plan, which marked the first comprehensive collaborative study on strategy for managing cats in the state.

We are committed to - in the 24 election the Tasmanian Government committed half a million dollars for the new cat management facility on the north-west coast. I visited there some months ago. And we've provided \$360,00 per annum since 2017-18 for the employment of three regional cat management coordinators who work closely with local government and the community to spread awareness and increase participation in cat management across the state.

We've strengthened the cat management regulatory framework by better supporting responsible cat ownership and provide some protection of private property from cats, implemented by the highly successful Tassie Cat campaign in order to enhance public education and engagement.

In addition to that, several successful local cat control programs have been initiated by Tasmanian municipal councils, and cat management facilities in response to community concerns around the state for domestic and feral cats.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. I really appreciate that. One thing that everybody in this room would say - and I travel back through Longford quite a bit, through the Midlands. Every time I've seen a feral cat, I wish I had somebody I could ring and say, 'I've just seen this cat again at this spot for the fifth week in a row' or whatever. I just think that there needs to be - and, by the way, the council were the first one to introduce a by-law too in 2006 when I was the mayor, so I'm very aware of the process.

It just seems to me there'd be a lot of people out there, who have seen a feral cat and they don't know what to do with that information. There is nobody to ring to alert the council, the farmer, the regional officers for cat management. I think it's an issue that - hopefully, it's come up in the submissions -

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - that somehow, we need to have a process where we can do in a cat sort of thing, so there can be some action for it. It needs to be -

Mr PEARCE - It needs to be reportable. Yes.

PUBLIC

Mr GAFFNEY - because I think most Tasmanians would do that, would report it and want to be involved with it. At the moment there is no - as I can see, no capacity for me to alert anybody to the fact that I just saw a cat and three kittens, they're obviously feral, they're in the middle of the bush, and I just keep driving because there's nothing else I can do.

Mr PEARCE - And I take your very valid point on board and -

Mr GAFFNEY - I hope it comes up -

CHAIR - And you may look at doing something in the future.

Ms WEBB - Hopefully they contain their own cats, that's the main thing. Containing domestic cats would be the best thing.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - That's where they start.

Ms WEBB - Did you say when the cat management plan was going to be completed; what the anticipated timeline was for that? Did I miss that?

Mr PEARCE - This year.

Ms WEBB - This year?

CHAIR - Thank you. Minister, I have some questions about the culture and the approach of biosecurity operations when dealing with small-scale primary producers. Recently, we've seen a legitimate egg producer, Rookery Creek Eggs, who I believe was actively communicating with the food safety branch about a genuine equipment failure, have his eggs seized from retail stores by biosecurity operations officers resulting in two of his largest customers immediately cancelling orders and significant commercial damage.

- (1) Minister, do you accept that there's a growing perception that regulators within the biosecurity operations area are defaulting to punitive and disproportionate enforcement action rather than practical risk-based engagement with producers who are acting in good faith?
- (2) What specific steps are being taken within biosecurity operations to ensure that officers exercise judgement and proportionality?
- (3) Sorry -

Mr PEARCE - Sorry, sorry, Chair. I didn't mean to interrupt.

CHAIR - No, no, no. That's all right, no. I was only going to say, and (3), noting there's a review of the operations of the Forest Practices Authority, another regulatory body that interacts closely with the rural sector, will the outcomes of that review be applied to improve the culture and approach of biosecurity operations as well, and if so, when do you expect this to change?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - Yes. And thank you, Chair, for the question. In order to answer that question, I think it's best served by Chris Lyall, the Chief Inspector of Primary Produce Safety, and also Rae Burrows, our General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - And I invite both Rae and Chris to the table.

CHAIR - Thank you. So, this is a question that's been provided to me. I have no personal knowledge, but it's -

Mr PEARCE - The first part of the question obviously went into egg production, and if you wouldn't mind covering the specifics of that one, thanks, Rae.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you, minister.

CHAIR - Did you want me to reread - you're right? Are you okay? You heard it, yes.

Ms BURROWS - That would be fine. Would you like me to introduce myself for Hansard?

CHAIR - Absolutely. The minister did, but you can again.

Ms BURROWS - Okay. Rae Burrows, General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania.

Mr LYALL - Yes. Chris Lyall. I'm the Chief Inspector of Primary Produce Safety and Manager of the Product Integrity Branch.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister, if you wouldn't mind, sorry.

CHAIR - As I said, this is a question that I've been asked to ask the minister. It was recently we've seen a legitimate egg producer, Rookery Creek Eggs, who was actively communicating with the Food Safety branch about a genuine equipment failure, have his eggs seized from retail stores by biosecurity operations officers, resulting in two of his largest customers immediately cancelling orders and significant commercial damage.

The questions were: minister, do you accept that there's a growing perception that regulators within the biosecurity operations area are defaulting to punitive and disproportionate enforcement action rather than practical risk-based engagement with producers who are acting in good faith?

So, well, let's do one at a time.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you. And through you, minister. Firstly, the first principles, I suppose, with this is eggs can provide a huge risk as far as human health is concerned.

CHAIR - Yes.

PUBLIC

Ms BURROWS - They can have salmonella within them and they can cause significant problems. We have a two-tiered system for egg accreditation. The accredited eggs for more than 50 laying birds or 20 dozen -

Mr LYALL - Twenty dozen eggs per week.

Ms BURROWS - Twenty dozen eggs per week, they must be fully accredited with a food safety management plan. Unaccredited egg producers are those that produce less than 20 dozen eggs per week, and all they have to do is have an egg stamp on them and notify the chief inspector that they're producing. Unfortunately, in this particular case there was no egg stamp.

CHAIR - Okay.

Ms BURROWS - And this can cause significant issues, because we don't know where and when and how the eggs have actually come to market. So that's the background on that.

CHAIR - No, that's good. As I said, I -

Ms BURROWS - And if, through you, minister, Chris might like to add anything to that.

Mr LYALL - Yes. Thank you for the question. And through you, minister. Further to what the general manager BT has outlined, requirement for stamping eggs is quite clear in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr LYALL - We pick that up through our *Primary Produce Safety Act*. And there's also a requirement for a unique identifier across those businesses, and that unique identifier is for the purposes of traceability should we have a need for a recall or should there be a food-borne illness arising from consumption of eggs, and that tends to be where it's raw egg products. Well, then we need to know, and for effective traceback, where those eggs have come from.

And whilst there's a level of traceability on the carton with, you know, name, address and some other identifiers, we have found in the past that there's a risk created through the reuse of egg cartons where maybe somebody's retained cartons from a larger producer, they're a backyard producer and reuse those cartons. And if those eggs aren't stamped, well, then technically we don't know where those eggs are from.

CHAIR - No, I appreciate you having the opportunity as well to answer the question that was provided. No, it's really good. Thank you. I'm not really sure whether the last one - probably has a little bit of relevance, but I'll just ask.

Noting there's a review of the operations of the Forest Practices Authority, another regulatory body that interacts closely with the rural sector, will the outcomes of that review be applied to improve - well, it says 'the culture and approach' of biosecurity operations as well? It's all working together, I would imagine.

Mr LYALL - And, Chair, whilst we can't comment on another portfolio.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - No, no.

Mr LYALL - Can I say for the record that, you know, it is my experience - and I've looked at this very carefully about the interactions that BT have with our producers, be they large or small, and I can state without reservation that they're there to tell people who are, you know, producing this produce how they can, rather than why they can't.

CHAIR - Yes. Yes. No, look, and as I said, I really appreciate the opportunity that you've actually been able to advise with regard particularly to that incident that was asked a question.

Mr LYALL - Yes. Yes.

CHAIR - No, it's great. Thank you.

Mr LYALL - So, thank you.

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister.

Mr LYALL - Yes.

Ms BURROWS - If it's okay.

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms BURROWS - Unfortunately, with the production of food, it doesn't matter how big or small you are, the risk to human health remains the same. So, you must meet those standards which are set nationally through FSANZ and so forth. So, we have to. I mean, human health - paramount.

CHAIR - No, look, appreciate it, and appreciate the opportunity for it to be on *Hansard* so that the response can be there, so I think that's really great, so thank you very much for your response. Mr Hiscutt had a question.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. Thank you. Just in relation to the ever-growing threat of Varroa mite, now that that is in Geelong, I believe, and getting much closer. I know the north-west branch of the Tasmanian Beekeepers Association wrote to yourself and Biosecurity and a few other members with about six recommendations that they have. Is there any indication from the government whether they're planning to implement any of those recommendations?

Mr PEARCE - The work that we've done around preventative measures and preventative posture for the state, as well as remedial action should that occur, is exhaustive. Rae, would you like, while you're here, to run us through some of those measures?

Ms BURROWS - Yes, certainly, minister, and through you. And thank you for the question, and particularly the question about Varroa now having reached Geelong. And it's something that we're particularly concerned about, and we've just started negotiations with the TT-Line again about reviewing and revising our MOU with them, and that revision of the MOU. I don't know whether you're aware, but currently we have contractors in Geelong who are trained by BT to actually look at biosecurity risk matters of vehicles and passengers before they get onto the ferry.

PUBLIC

So, we will expand through the MOU. The revised MOU will actually expand the responsibilities of those contractors to look for bees, bee products and so forth, because we know that the risk is heightened because Varroa is in Geelong. More generally speaking, we have a significant action plan that's been developed by the industry plus government, which we're going through. I think we're pretty much - most of the actions have been completed now.

The biggest outstanding one was the import risk assessment, which we're just going through consultation now to ensure that the settings that we've got for the import risk assessment for Varroa are correct, and then they will be incorporated into the import conditions. And we've also just finished the first draft of the response plan, which has just come back from the taskforce for their initial consultation.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes.

Ms BURROWS - So, while there's still a few things to do, the action plan that we actually published on the website some time ago now is well advanced. I think the only thing that probably we haven't had a chance to address yet is we did suggest that we would use some thermal imaging on vessels to actually see if there were beehives and stuff coming through on vessels. We haven't quite got to that point. But the dogs have been imprinted with all kinds of honey and bee equipment and so forth.

Mr HISCUTT - Related products, yes. One of the other recommendations around, like surveillance sites near airports and the ferries - has that been -

Ms BURROWS - Yes. Through you, minister. We have six national sentinel hives at - hive?

Mr HISCUTT - Hives.

Ms BURROWS - Hives at Bell Bay. They're part of the national surveillance system. They're live hives. We have a further six - I left my notes back there. I think we have another. We have live hives, also guard hives, which BT actually pays for and looks after at Hobart - thank you - Hobart, Devonport and - what am I missing?

Mr HISCUTT - Launceston Airport?

Ms BURROWS - Launceston, of course. Thank you. And so, they're also checked every six weeks, just like the sentinel hives are. So we've got sentinel hives, guard hives and catch boxes at each of those ports. The Bell Bay ones get checked at least twice every six weeks.

There's also a floral - what do they call it? They take the nets over all the vegetation and see if they can capture anything through that. So, whenever they go out there to check the hives, they actually do that as well. The hives have a special mat in them that actually collects Varroa mite and other things, so the surveillance is actually quite intense -

Mr HISCUTT - Comprehensive.

Ms BURROWS - and more than what's expected through the national system. We're very much aware that this is one of our key risks for Tasmania. We know how important our

PUBLIC

fruit and veggie industry is. We know how important European honey bees are for pollination and so forth. We're serious about this.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you for the commitment. I appreciate that.

Mr PEARCE - And just to quickly get on the record just the extent of what BT do, 83,461 vehicles and 13,940 foot passengers were inspected prior to coming in just in Victoria by coming across on the *Spirit*. It's a significant and important job and I would like to put on the record, you know, my gratitude for your professionalism and the team at BT and the job that they've done thus far, and look forward to continued surveillance in terms of biosecurity.

Mr HISCUTT - Keep up the good work.

Mr PEARCE - So, thank you.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you. If we have no further on this area - we are running a little behind - if we could go to Natural Values Management, 7.3.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you. Thanks, Rae. Thanks, Chris.

CHAIR - Thank you. Thanks, Chris and Rae, thank you.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you.

Output Group 7.3

Natural Values Management

CHAIR - And just I have a quick question on weed beds.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

CHAIR - If I could ask, minister, how the recovery of the weed beds at Arthurs Lake are progressing. I've been told it's been a slow recovery, and I just wondered, is this to be expected? How is it being resourced and how much will it cost?

Mr PEARCE - I've got here Ryan Wilkinson, Dr Ryan Wilkinson. He's our manager of Inland Fisheries. We're very proud of him and the way they go about their business. They run a good show up there.

CHAIR - Actually, so this is more under Inland Fisheries, is it, the weed beds?

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

CHAIR - I will leave that until Mr - you can always stay there. You could actually stay there.

Mr HISCUTT - It mixed up, but this is -

PUBLIC

CHAIR - I'll ask another question, if that's not -

Mr HISCUTT - Natural Values Management.

CHAIR - I was thinking the weeds were really into the natural values. I'll ask one quick question on natural values and then if no-one else has any questions we can actually go, rather than you have to run away.

Have there been any surveys or management undertaken of the natural values - flora/fauna identified as endangered - during any planning projects over the last 12 months? Because I believe that's generally when you identify the endangered flora and fauna.

Mr JACOBI - I might just call, through you, minister, Jo Crisp to the table. But can I just ask you to repeat the question?

CHAIR - Absolutely. Have there been any surveys or management undertaken of the natural values of the flora and fauna identified as endangered during any planning projects during the last 12 months?

Mr JACOBI - So, I think - through you, minister - it's important to spell out the difference between the work being undertaken by the department -

CHAIR - Yes. Yes.

Mr JACOBI - and there's a substantial and very exciting body of work being done to the Natural Values Atlas, which is a digital system.

CHAIR - I've been looking up the Natural Values Atlas, yes.

Mr JACOBI - Yes. And Jo may wish to, in a minute, talk to that work.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr JACOBI - That is different to the environmental assessments that proponents might undertake for a particular major project, whether it be a -

CHAIR - Okay. So it's more proponents as opposed to the department, or on behalf of the department?

Mr JACOBI - So, typically if you take a major project like a transmission corridor, a proponent will be required to undertake a whole range of different assessments, many of which are focused on natural values and threatened species.

They consult with my department through Jo's team and seek advice around how they should undertake those surveys, and more importantly, what are the acceptable mitigation strategies that would then sit inside their environmental impact statements, so how might they actually mitigate their impacts to threaten species as part of that development before it goes through an assessment process.

CHAIR - Thank you.

PUBLIC

Mr JACOBI - But Jo may wish to - I think it would be worth to talk to the natural values work.

CHAIR - Yes. If you just want to outline, that would be -

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister.

Ms CRISP - Thanks very much.

CHAIR - You good? Thank you.

Ms CRISP - Through you, minister. I'd just like to also say there's a whole range of monitoring that's undertaken by the department as well as survey guidelines that are prepared that support proponents, developers and GBEs to undertake their work in a way that is good for the environment and sustainable.

And the Conservation Assessment Team support that work in the Environment area of the department. But a really important project that's underway at the moment is the Natural Values Atlas is getting updated, and we have - it's called the Evolution Project, and I'll be very excited.

CHAIR - 50,000 species records, I'm reading.

Ms CRISP - It's absolutely amazing, and the work that's being done is a huge body of work, so that it'll be able to be used in a way that is a lot more sort of user-friendly. It's a very dated system, I think you would say, now, but used by regulators, developers. It's used by colleagues across the department. It's used by conservation organisations, so it's a wealth of knowledge. Researchers use it. But a great body of work to update the Natural Values Atlas, and coming soon. I think we're going to say October of this year there'll be a launch and a lot of sort of awareness-raising so that people -

CHAIR - We look forward to the launch in October.

Ms CRISP - Yes. Yes. Thank you.

CHAIR - No, look, thank you very much for the update. That's really appreciated, so thank you, no.

Ms CRISP - Thanks.

DIVISION 14 Inland Fisheries Service

CHAIR - So, if we have no other questions on natural values, we'll catch up with time and go to Mr Hiscutt with Inland Fisheries. Thank you very much.

Mr PEARCE - Come over, Mr Inland Fisheries.

CHAIR - Yes. Yes. You didn't have to go far.

PUBLIC

Dr WILKINSON - No.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you, Chair. And I'd just like to make note for the record of your amazing tie. You're very committed to your - and for *Hansard*, it's full of fish. I'm not sure if it's the same tie as you wore six months ago or whether you have multiple fish ties.

Dr WILKINSON - It is. It is the same tie.

Mr HISCUTT - The same tie.

Dr WILKINSON - This is the one time of year I'm allowed to wear it.

Ms WEBB - Yes, it's the Estimates tie.

Dr WILKINSON - It is the Estimates tie.

Mr HISCUTT - That's the Estimates tie. That's a beautiful tie. I just wanted to ask, minister, the decrease in the 2027-28 program appropriations says it reflects the profile funding for the Anglers Alliance Tasmania, tagged trout programs, IFS operational support and junior waiver initiatives. Given the budget narrative is a decrease, can I confirm that you are reducing and stopping funding to these important community functions?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. Ryan, as the independent director, will take this question.

Dr WILKINSON - Thank you. I'm happy to address that. Thanks for the question, and through you, minister. So, yes, as you pointed out, there is a reduction in the grants line, I guess it would be in our statement of comprehensive income there, and that does signal the conclusion of the three main policy commitments that were made in 2024-25: Tagged Trout Promotion, the junior fee waiver, and funding for Anglers Alliance Tasmania. There's one more year of those initiatives to run. We've had a little bit of a discussion internally about tagged trout.

There's a little bit of discussion around maybe that sort of program's run its course, and we might like to try some other things in terms of trying to promote angling engagement and angling participation. We'll be looking at that fairly closely, and I'm thinking that I'll continue the fee waiver for junior anglers, whether that comes with funding from the government at that stage or not. I think that's something we can manage ourselves. I think that's been a really important program.

Mr HISCUTT - Definitely been very positive.

Dr WILKINSON - We've probably doubled the number of junior anglers who have taken on a licence since that came in, and I'm also continuing to work fairly closely with Anglers Alliance Tasmania. That funding for them is really important.

They're a small, community-based organisation. They're trying to do some good things for the fishery and promotion of freshwater angling, and prior to that funding, which was \$220,000 over three years, the IFS was committing \$24,000 a year to Anglers Alliance Tas, and I actually have included that in the outyears under grants and subsidies.

PUBLIC

My intention is to at least, if we can't get more funding, we'll revert back to the original baseline funding, and I know they're also looking at in terms of how they can be more sustainable and generate their own revenue streams as well. That's going to be part of that equation as well.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you for [inaudible]. It's great to hear that the junior waiver especially will hopefully continue.

Last year, we spoke about the cormorant problem. I believe it's slightly better, although that may be seasonal. The talk was about improving fish habitats. I just wondered if anything's been moved forward in that space in the last six months.

Dr WILKINSON - Through you, minister. We continue to work pretty closely with NRM groups and others around how we can establish programs to improve fish habitat. In recent times, I've actually employed a freshwater ecologist within the unit, so there's a few people behind me who probably are not so pleased about that because I actually poached him from another area in the department.

We're starting to look more at those types of things as a service. We probably don't have a lot of resources ourselves to do on-ground works, but we seek to partner with other organisations that can progress that work. A really great example of that is the work that we've been doing with the Derwent Catchment Project on the Tyenna.

We've been funding that work to the tune of about \$10,000 a year since 2017, and that's involved around 52 kilometres of river restoration work. That's a really good model of how, with a little bit of money, we've made a meaningful difference to the fishery, so just seeking to potentially expand on that type of work going forward.

The other thing we're doing this year is partnering with Landcare Tasmania on a small pilot project up in the north-west, where we're utilising some of our Anglers Access infrastructure and trying to mobilise the anglers who use that area to get involved with community organisations in that area who are doing river restoration work. Again, we don't have a lot of resource to put into the river restoration work itself, but if we can mobilise our angler base to get involved in that type of work, that's another thing we're trialling.

Mr HISCUTT - I'll put on the record, attending the Ulverstone Anglers Club AGM, their appreciation for having someone from Inland Fisheries attend that meeting. I just wanted to mention that.

Dr WILKINSON - Thank you.

Mr HISCUTT - Has there been an increase or decrease in compliance checks? Is that done through your area, and have there been any trends at all with illegal activities?

Dr WILKINSON - Through you, minister. Thank you for the question. In terms of statistics in terms of compliance checks, we've currently got eight authorised officers within the Inland Fisheries Service. Three of those are full-time compliance officers, and then there are five other officers who do field work but do compliance work as part of their field activities.

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These are complete financial year figures: 2024-25, we did 2787 angling licence checks, 109 whitebait licence checks, and 401 vessel safety inspections; year to date - so these stats are up until 31 March 2026 - we did 2801 licence checks, 160 whitebait checks, and 519 boat safety checks.

So, there's been an uptick in the amount of compliance work that we've done. I think a key component of that was we had a bit of an organisational restructure. We had a staff member who was based up in Liawenee who was actually promoted into another role within the organisation, so Liawenee was not staffed for a period of time, but as of August last year, we actually put a full-time compliance officer back up in the Central Highlands, and I think just having that extra presence on the ground has resulted in an uptick.

In terms of compliance rate, if we look at the numbers of infringement notices or conditional cautions that we issue relative to those checks, last year, we issued 101 infringement notices and conditional cautions. This year, we've done 91. As a percentage, this year, that's a 3.2 per cent rate compared to 3.6 per cent for last year, so fairly consistent in terms of noncompliance rate.

Mr HISCUTT - People have been a little bit better. Beautiful.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes.

CHAIR - We have a follow-up from Mr Gaffney.

Mr GAFFNEY - Thank you. Really pleased with the Inland Fisheries trying to get to the masses to spread the word, and you'd be very aware of Taylors Dam outside Anvers opposite the road and Frombergs, but I don't think Frombergs works anymore. There's another one. I think they have a fishing competition in Penguin in the area there.

What I'd be interested in - I help sponsor some of the events there. I go out and have a look, and there's just heaps of families and kids fishing and whatever. It's great. They do have a real problem accessing fish for a suitable price. Things have changed, and it wouldn't surprise me in the next two years or so that that becomes defunct like Frombergs because they just can't keep going with the cost, and they also had issues with cormorants there, but that's part of the deal.

It would be so sad to see that stop because it's a huge community event, but I think they are just at the end of their tether. They just can't afford what's being asked of them where 10 years ago, access to fish was much cheaper, much more viable, but I would suggest within two years, it'll be done and dusted. I'm not sure whether you can comment on that, or whether there's a way forward, or whether that's an issue you would like to make comment.

Dr WILKINSON - Through you, minister. That is an issue that we recognise, and obviously we have a fair bit to do with those clubs that you mentioned. The supply of fish is becoming increasingly more difficult. There's a few different reasons for that. Typically, we would use domestic rainbow trout for those events, and just due to changes in the commercial market, they're less available, so companies are moving away from those in favour of Atlantic salmon. Atlantic salmon are fine to use. They're also getting quite difficult to get hold of.

PUBLIC

Again, companies are changing the way that they manage their stocks, and previously, some of the ex-brood stock fish that we used to get that would be suitable for those types of events, they're large and the kids love catching them.

These days, the companies are very focused on - with their selective breeding programs, they're tracking the performance of individual families and individual fish, so quite often, they've got microchips that are in the fish. Obviously, that becomes a health issue, so we can't use those fish. We continue to work with the commercial sector to try and source fish for those junior events.

Part of the funding that was delivered to Anglers Alliance Tasmania that we spoke about before is actually hived off to try and support junior angling events. Those clubs can actually access funding from Anglers Alliance Tas to purchase fish. Some of those fish for those events would be purchased through that mechanism. That's probably helping the situation.

And I also appreciate, too - I go to a lot of club meetings, and it's an ageing demographic - and I appreciate that they probably have trouble finding volunteers to keep some of that work going as well. That's probably a related issue. There's a few challenges there, and we just continue to work with them to try and keep those events going.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. Thank you. And I suppose that when you talk about improving health of rivers with volunteer work and support, there seems to me to be a synergy there somehow where - that if the people at Taylors Dam take their kids there to whatever, there should be some sort of - I don't like to use the word 'runoff' - but there should be some sort of relationship between them improving their local rivers in that as well.

It seems to me that once we lose that base of people interested in fishing, you're not going to have the fisher-people in 10, 20 years' time anyway because they won't have experienced it as a young kid.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - So that is the conundrum they find themselves in.

Ms WEBB - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - And I think it's draining on those administrators and officials because it is so difficult and hard to get appropriate stock at an appropriate price, and so then they go, 'What's the use?' So, thank you. I'm pleased that you're aware of the issue, but it'd be very sad to see that one fold because Frombergs was good for many, many years, and Taylors - 200 people there just fishing.

CHAIR - Thank you, Mr Gaffney. That's good.

If I could just ask you a question with regard to Arthurs Lake - and it is something that I write quite regularly to ministers. Often ministers change about who's responsible for it. But I do have some constituents who go to Arthurs Lake quite regularly. One who's told me: 'Having fished this lake for over 40-plus years, now, on my regular visits to our cabin since October 2025, I've only ever seen two boats on the lake. In addition, restocking other lakes by removing fish in quantities depletes Arthurs of fish that can grow to adult size.' And I notice in the letter

PUBLIC

from yourself, minister, you advised that over the past five years the IFS has trapped a total of 52,215 fish from Arthurs Lake; and of these, 13,392 fish were transferred to other waters to support fisheries elsewhere.

There are quite a group of people at Arthurs Lake that are actually concerned. There's one or two spokespeople. But what they have asked, whether it would be considered that there'd be a moratorium on taking further fish from Arthurs Lake to give it a chance to restock, because they're saying there basically are no fish or very few fish.

They dispute the fact that cormorants are taking the large fish. There's no way, some of the large fish, that they could actually pick them up and carry them off, and they really feel that it's the small fish that have been taken to restock other lakes. So, is there a possibility of having a moratorium to stop taking some fish from Arthurs Lake for a period of time to allow it to become the great fishing area it was previously?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. You raised Arthurs Lake, and, you know -

CHAIR - Often.

Mr PEARCE - It is difficult for a number of reasons. These complexities are almost a layered issue for us, and we've concentrated a lot of effort there. So, what I will say - so you've got that, you've got the cormorant thing, which is a cyclic - it's not every year. We probably had the worst year for a long time.

CHAIR - Well, they dispute that they're taking the large fish.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. In terms of long-term forecast and what you're doing, I'd ask Ryan, would you mind giving the Chair an update?

Dr WILKINSON - Yes. Through you, Chair. Thanks for the question. I appreciate the passion and the interest there is around Arthurs. We understand that concern. It is a topic that we discuss internally very regularly. We discuss it very regularly with Hydro Tasmania as well, as the responsible water manager for that system.

In terms of the background context to Arthurs, the cause for the decline in the fishery of Arthurs, in our opinion - and you touched on it before in the earlier question that you wanted to raise - was the loss of that critical weed bed habitat. So, we had that period in 2008-09, the Millennium Drought.

CHAIR - Receding of the lake level to make - diminishing the weed bed.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes, so the lake went really low for a long period of time and then the lake level shot up really quickly following that low-level event, and the weed beds just haven't recovered. So, the productivity in Arthurs is very different to what it was prior to that event. The other characteristic of Arthurs is it is subject to big recruitment events.

So, those La Niña years that we had from 2020 to 2022 or 2023, whatever they were, we had a lot of small fish being recruited into that system. So, you've got a situation where the food's gone - well, not gone but the food's diminished - and you've got a large population of fish that cannot be sustained.

PUBLIC

So, through the monitoring we do with our electrofishing surveys and monitoring the fish that return to the spawning traps, we've seen a year-on-year decline in the size of those fish, and that's why we're confident that removing small numbers of fish just to support other fisheries, important fisheries around the state, will not diminish the Arthurs fishery itself because it's a productivity issue, not a fish number issue. That's the main key.

And I would stress, if there are people - and I've spoken to people at length about this. I spoke to a gentleman last year. I spent an hour on the phone talking to him. I don't know if he's in that group that you speak to, but -

CHAIR - Very possibly could be.

Dr WILKINSON - I would certainly encourage them to come to us directly.

CHAIR - I think they have in the past. There is a group of them.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes.

CHAIR - But I think they just see the 52,000 fish taken and then - so the 38[,000] go back into Arthurs?

Dr WILKINSON - Yes, yes. Over that five-year period, we actually trapped 52,000 fish in the spawning traps. The 38,000 were released above the trap to do their thing, so they're not removed. The other point is the main spawning creek on that system, Jones Rivulet, is not touched by us. So, there are lots of spawning opportunities on that lake, and the fish that we take we feel are not materially causing a decline in the fishery. It's a productivity issue in the fishery. So, that's why Hydro have done some work on macrophyte beds.

CHAIR - So the weed beds, they're slowly recovering?

Dr WILKINSON - They're slowly recovering. I'm aware of at least four studies that Hydro have done, in 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019. And in that 2019 study, I think they were starting to see signs of recovery. When we also look at our survey results - so every year we ask anglers, we put out a survey, ask them what their angling experience has been through the year - we've actually seen a year-on-year improvement in catch rates.

Admittedly it dropped through the floor from that 2008-09 event, but from - what was it? - 2018-19 to 2023-24, there was actually an increase in catch rates. So, I was quite optimistic that things were starting to improve. And then we had the cormorant event, which kind of made things difficult as well.

So, I understand the concerns. If we take fish, there's very, very low levels of fish relative to what is in the lake. We are closely monitoring the stocks every year, and I would urge them, if they've reached out to us in the past and maybe didn't get anywhere, I'd urge them to come and talk to us again, and I'm happy to go up and show them the fish in the trap because the fish in the spawning traps are, on the most part, quite small.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - That would be quite good if you could go up there because I believe that they have been told consistently that cormorants are taking them, which they don't believe that's the case. So, that would be great if you could.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes. There's no doubt cormorants had a big impact across the state in all fisheries and we're probably only a year post the cormorant event, and I think last time when we had a cormorant event it was probably three years before catch rates sort of got back to normal.

CHAIR - Yes.

Dr WILKINSON - So, we're really still in a recovery phase.

CHAIR - Thank you. Mr Hiscutt had another question.

Mr HISCUTT - In the interest of time, it's not -

Mr GAFFNEY - Supplementary.

Mr HISCUTT - Supplementary. Go to that.

Mr GAFFNEY - Just quickly, you said there've been surveys done. Has there been any R&D done about weed development and improving the weed quality in a quicker - like from some of the scientists, whatever, how they can do that?

Dr WILKINSON - Yes, through you, minister. I know Hydro at the moment are refining their methodologies in terms of how they assess macrophyte coverage in weed bed - in lakes. So they're doing some ROV work - remotely operated vehicle work - and also some drone survey work. So they're trying to validate a methodology to measure those sorts of changes.

We're about to commission a study through UTAS involving Hydro and Anglers Alliance Tas to study four Central Highlands lakes in quite a bit of detail. So, Anglers Alliance are putting in \$30,000 from their funding.

We're putting in about, I think it's around \$90,000, and Hydro are putting in something around \$75,000 to fund a PhD student to study four lakes in detail. And we haven't landed on the four lakes yet but I'll be pushing to make sure that Arthurs is in that study so that we can get a really good appreciation of what the ecology is doing in that system.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. Because if there's damage in Arthurs for their weed beds it's probably in other lakes as well.

Dr WILKINSON - There are other examples that the ecology in Woods Lake has changed recently. It went from a macrophyte-dominated state to an algal-dominated state. So, we ended up with blue-green algal issues. There's concerns at Little Pine Lagoon.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes. We're not the water managers, but we're trying to work closely with Hydro to understand those changes.

PUBLIC

Mr GAFFNEY - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you. If we have our final question on this area from Mr Hiscutt before we go to Veterans' Affairs.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you. From my reading from last year's Budget delivered in November, Inland Fisheries operational support was at \$258,000, and that was across the forward Estimates including this year. But this year it looks like it's been reduced. Can I just get a clarification on that number?

Mr PEARCE - Say again? I missed the last bit.

Mr HISCUTT - Sorry, it was just can I get a clarification that that has been reduced, or have I just missed that total?

Dr WILKINSON - I can deal with that if you want, minister, and through you. That operational support that was provided in the last Budget was \$208,000 for this financial year and then \$258,000 for next financial year. That initiative just - it was a two-year initiative and that really gave us a little bit of breathing space while we had a downturn in our licence revenue, which - we did a bit of a forecast, two years, about what they might look like. That was, sort of, to give us a little bit of a headspace as we go through.

Mr HISCUTT - And that was in this Budget, though. I thought it was to be in the 2026-27.

Dr WILKINSON - It's still there. It's included in the - it's hidden now, but it's still there. Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - That's what I wanted to know. It is still there.

Dr WILKINSON - Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - No, perfect. Thank you for answering that question. I just want to make sure that hadn't been lost somewhere. Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you. And if we have no further questions of Inland Fisheries, thank you very much for coming to the table.

Mr PEARCE - Please pass along our thanks to your team. Thank you.

CHAIR - Absolutely. And our final line item of the evening is 1.5 Veterans' Affairs. Minister, did you have anyone that you wish to come to the table?

Mr PEARCE - I've just changed these -

CHAIR - If we could just halt - off air for a moment, please. Thank you.

The committee suspended from 8.27 p.m. to 8.29 p.m.

DIVISION 10

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Output Group 1.5

Veterans' Affairs

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. And if you would like to introduce your people at the table with regards to our line item 1.5 Veterans' Affairs.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks, Chair. I'm honoured to introduce to the committee Melissa Gray, Deputy Secretary Policy and Reform; and to her left, Jodi Wilcox, Executive Director Policy and Intergovernmental. Welcome. Chair and committee, I'm pleased to be here in my capacity as Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

As a proud veteran myself, I believe I share a lived experience with more than 17,500 ex-serving men and women in Tasmania. I'm absolutely passionate about leading this portfolio. I'm very pleased the Tasmanian government's 2026-27 Budget continues to deliver strong funding for Veterans' Affairs with \$983,000 in 2026-27 and \$2.4 million across the forward Estimates.

Now, this Budget will support a continued delivery of the state's first Veterans' Employment Strategy and the Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program, the delivery of the Teddy Sheean Grants Program, the Cameron Baird VC MG Scholarship and the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize; \$60,000 also to be shared between Hobart and Launceston Legacy to ensure dependents of our veterans are never left behind. We are also continuing to fund RSL Tasmania as Tasmania's peak body for veterans.

This Budget also includes the Tasmanian government's implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide's final report, and our continued advocacy for Tasmanian veterans on this very important issue.

In addition to these measures included in the 26-27 Budget, I am pleased to announce to you here today that the *Anzac Day Observance Act 1929* will be reviewed. In no way will this review or any amendments to the act diminish the focus on preserving observance or commemorative activities. And at the centre of this is the trading restrictions prior to 12.30 p.m. on Anzac Day and ensuring that people can attend such activities and such services. Having administered this act for Anzac Day 2026, this year, it was clear to me that this 1929 act is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. We need to make it easier for businesses and organisations to understand the requirements and the protocols around Anzac Day and when they need to seek advice and approvals to operate, to trade or to hold events on Anzac Day. The act, in my opinion - in our opinion - needs to reflect current business practices in a modern society. Now, there's a red tape that we can cut for businesses here also, and as a government these administrative efficiencies are also built into this review.

There's also an opportunity to consider Victoria's model, which requires a percentage of revenue from ticket sales and gate takings at major sporting events to be paid back into a fund, and this fund is then reinvested in our veteran community.

PUBLIC

I'm proud that the Tasmanian government continues to deliver practical targeted support for our veterans, and we owe it to those families who carry the memory of our fallen to do everything in our power to support them.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister, and you've actually answered a couple of my questions in your overview. But one question I would ask you, with regard to the Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program, how many veterans and family members have access to the Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program to date? I'm just wondering what level of support has been provided and what other targeted measures are in place to support families affected by service-related mental ill health, transition challenges or suicide risk.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. No, thank you, Chair. And in the 2025-26 year to date, 856 vouchers have been redeemed with a value of \$84,701.50. In terms of the question you have around suicide prevention and -

CHAIR - And service-related mental ill health as well.

Mr PEARCE -Yes. Tasmania also supports veteran mental health through partnerships with the Australian Government's Open Arms and the Department of Health initiatives delivered statewide, including Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. Mel, I'd invite you to share anything that may augment that answer, please.

Ms GRAY - Yes. Through you, minister. As you note, we have had this year the 856 vouchers and, of course, in 2024-25, last year, we saw a 50 per cent increase in the vouchers. Now, this year there was the extension of the vouchers to spouses and widows of veterans, which is a wonderful addition to the eligibility for the vouchers.

CHAIR - Is that because they weren't being uptaken - that there were many there that no-one was using? Is that the reason you increased the availability?

Ms GRAY - We had - through you, minister - in past years lower uptake and pushes on - you may recall -

CHAIR - I do remember asking. Yes.

Ms GRAY - in the Legislative Council some questioning about that. We responded with a push to really promote the vouchers, and through that push was the request to extend the eligibility of them. The other part of that question was -

CHAIR - What other targeted additions are in place to support families affected by service-related ill health, mental ill health, transition challenges and suicide risk?

Ms GRAY - Yes. Veterans are a priority cohort for the Premier's Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategy, and a priority cohort as well with the 20-year Preventive Health Strategy. And I am aware that there were some targeted consultation sessions - I think, from memory - specific for the veterans community.

CHAIR - So, with the 856 vouchers redeemed, was that the total amount available? Or how many were available, and is it ongoing?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - We had to find some more -

CHAIR - You had to find more.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. We had to, but we fixed it. We found more.

CHAIR - Is it ongoing for in the foreseeable future?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. I'll leave that to you, Mel.

CHAIR - And the number that it is ongoing. So, how many - is it capped at 500 or what's it capped at normally, apart from this one that was increased?

Ms GRAY - The funding for the vouchers, is that what you mean?

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms GRAY - Yes. The funding is capped at \$100,000, I think,

CHAIR - Because I appreciate it wasn't all used previously, and I'm assuming it was able to increase.

Ms GRAY - Yes, \$100,000. The funding's capped at \$100,000. We do have a further 356 vouchers that are yet to be redeemed, but they are part of this year's program as well.

CHAIR - And it's \$100, is it, the cost of the voucher?

Ms GRAY - Yes, \$100. I think there was an increase to allow for two vouchers, as well, and that was, again, part of the drive and the push to increase uptake of the vouchers. It's been very successful. Too successful, perhaps.

CHAIR - Did you increase what they could use them for? I was just trying to - so it's for sport, but was it for -

Ms GRAY - Yes. I can give you -

CHAIR - I think it changed, increased, didn't it?

Mr PEARCE - So, mental and physical health, basically it is, Chair.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - Including the activities you ask about - bowls, gym, golf, swimming, pickleball.

CHAIR - Pickleball's apparently really quite prevalent now. You're a pickleball champion?

Mr PEARCE - I'm yet to experience. No, I've not experienced pickleball, unfortunately, Chair, but I'm told that it's very popular.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - All right. Thank you. Yes?

Mr GAFFNEY - Have you thought about things like the Port Sorell U3A? It's not just about recreational sports but about connecting people in community in different groups. And there's over 430 people at that thing, at the Port Sorell University of the Third Age. And a lot of those are older and a lot of them have been vets and stuff.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - I think it's about expanding so their whole focus is not just sport stuff - I mean, which is great, don't get me wrong - but I think that connecting people with community and that there could be other ways for that voucher to expand the program. So, I'm just wondering, have you considered those sorts of groups? Like the line dancers or, you know, social service groups and Lions Clubs and that, that have to pay -

Mr PEARCE - I'll take your suggestion on board.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes. Because they pay membership and they pay weekly fees and they pay for the courses that they run.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - If they had an extra hundred dollars in their pocket, they probably might be more involved and included.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. The positive thing about that, the thing I like is I've tried to encourage veterans not to necessarily stay in their own group.

Mr GAFFNEY - Exactly.

CHAIR - Mix with others.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. It becomes a microcosm, so the wider we spread the net, the better the outcome, I think.

Mr GAFFNEY - And there's 10 or so U3As across Tasmania. I think Kingborough - Kingston's got a good one as well, or a large one.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

CHAIR - Mr Hiscutt had a follow-up as well.

Mr GAFFNEY - Sorry.

Mr HISCUTT - A follow-up from that as well. Also areas like circus, like Slipstream Circus in Ulverstone, which you would know. I know Mum fought pretty hard to get them in the Ticket to Play so I don't know if they're included in those sorts of activities that are currently included.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - Yes. We do it quite a bit with our north-west veterans hub at Burnie. Mel, did you want to just outline some of the things that they're - which is very similar to your point.

Ms GRAY - Yes. Through you, minister. It was with great delight that I reviewed the January to March progress report on the veterans hub and saw that there were a lot of social inclusion activities being offered as a way of addressing mental health and wellbeing.

In January, activities including kayaking, fruit picking, toasties, walks, tenpin bowling and a visit to QVMAG - so, not just all sport-related things. In February, activities included timber workshop, yoga, walks, trivia games, barbecue in George Town and Tai Chi in Wynyard. And in March, activities included networking, lunch, yoga, a barista workshop, barbecue in Scottsdale, fly fishing, pyrography.

Mr PEARCE - What's that, Mel?

Ms GRAY - Somebody, quick, look it up.

CHAIR - It sounds a bit like lighting fires.

Ms GRAY - Pyrography in Devonport and a sausage sizzle in St Helens.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you very much.

Mr GAFFNEY - So, if I got the Port Sorell U3A group to send a letter to you, minister, about what activities they run and whatever and they can identify they've got 70 veterans there or whatever, and they can just send you that and then see where it goes?

Mr PEARCE - One hundred per cent. And there's a lot of people out of the community who probably have never served. And I'm encouraged. The amount of support that we get out of our - particularly our regional communities - around Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and just generally, support for our veteran community is incredible.

Mr GAFFNEY - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - And it's something I promote. It's something we need to keep going. And although that immediate feedback - you mightn't receive that immediately from the veterans, they certainly feel it inside and it does them the world of good.

CHAIR - No, that's great, thank you. And pyrography, it is to do with burning, 'the freehand art of decorating materials, primarily wood or leather, by burning designs with a heated controlled tip'.

Ms GRAY - Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes. We've all learned something.

Mr GAFFNEY - Sounds like vandalism to me.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - It had the sound of burning. So, do we have any other questions?

Mr GAFFNEY - We need more fireworks.

CHAIR - Yes. One last question from Mr Hiscutt.

Mr HISCUTT - Well, I'm just wondering, do we know how many veterans we have in Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - It's 17,500, and a further 900 who are serving defence members.

CHAIR - Thank you very much.

Mr HISCUTT - You're all over that one. Thank you.

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr HISCUTT - I'm just saying that uptake - 856, as a percentage of that total - is actually quite large.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. In terms of enlistment per capita, Australia is higher than any other state or territory in the country and always has been.

Mr HISCUTT - Yes.

Mr PEARCE - And when you look and peel the lid off that and have a look at retention rates within defence, we tend to stay there longer. There's more of us, we stay there longer.

Mr HISCUTT - No. It's probably a better defence force forward, I guess.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, and if we have no other questions, we really appreciate the time you've taken today. Thank you for coming to the table as well.

Mr PEARCE - And thanks to my team, and thank you, Chair and committee.

Mr HISCUTT - Thank you.

CHAIR - If we could stop the broadcast, please. Thank you and thank you our team.

The committee adjourned at 8.44 p.m.