



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. Jane Howlett MP

Wednesday 25 September 2024

MEMBERS

Hon Rosemary Armitage MLC (Deputy Chair)

Hon Luke Edmunds MLC

Hon Mike Gaffney MLC

Hon Cassy O'Connor MLC

Hon Tania Rattray MLC (Chair)

Hon Meg Webb MLC

IN ATTENDANCE

HON. JANE HOWLETT MP

Minister for Primary Industries and Minister for Racing

Jason Jacobi

Secretary, Department of Natural Resources and Environment

Deidre Wilson

Deputy Secretary, Department of Natural Resources and Environment

Rae Burrows

General Manager Biosecurity Tasmania

Catherine Murdoch

Deputy Secretary, Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania

Robin Thompson

Acting Director of Racing and General Manager Office of Racing Integrity

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The Committee met at 4.17 p.m.

CHAIR - We'd like to welcome you to the table in your capacity as the Minister for Primary Industries and Water, and then a bit later this afternoon into the evening in your capacity as Minister for Racing.

Thank you very much for joining us, because you haven't been before the committee before. I know that you know everybody at the table, but just the same, we have the honourable member for Mersey, Mr Gaffney; the honourable member for Nelson, Ms Webb; the honourable member for Launceston, Ms Armitage; myself, Ms Tania Rattray, the member for McIntyre; the honourable member for Pembroke, Mr Luke Edmunds; and the honourable member for Hobart, Ms Cassy O'Connor. With secretariat support, we have Craig and Julie and we have Gaye on Hansard.

We will allow you to introduce your team at the table. Anyone who you bring during the course of this afternoon and this evening, please introduce them for Hansard. We will be happy if you provide an overview of your portfolio areas. Then we'll launch straight into questions.

Ms HOWLETT - Excellent. Thank you, Chair. At the table with me on my left is Jason Jacobi, Secretary of NRE Tas, and Deidre Wilson, Deputy Secretary.

CHAIR - Experienced hands.

Ms HOWLETT - Very experienced hands.

On my right is Rae Burrows, General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment -

CHAIR - Again, an experienced hand.

Ms HOWLETT - A very experienced hand. Thank you, Chair. If you don't mind, I would like to stay and make an opening statement.

The 2024-25 Budget focuses on the delivery of our 2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania's Future. In my portfolio of Primary Industries and Water, the 2024-25 Budget delivers our important funding commitments. I'm sure many of you have heard me say this, but the agriculture sector is a lifeblood of our state. I will always back our farmers, which is what this Budget does.

Tasmania's agrifood sector is critical in supporting private jobs and public services throughout our community. The most recent measures show that agriculture and seafood sectors are worth a total of \$2.34 billion a year in raw value, but more than \$5.5 billion a year when packed and processed.

While some of our measures are responsive to current or recent circumstances, ranging from drought to flood in the same half year, most of the funding is directed strategically towards continued growth as we strive to reach the target of an agriculture sector worth \$10 billion a year in farm gate value by 2050.

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Already, the Seasonal Conditions Hardship Grants Program has paid nearly \$4.1 million to 549 grants to farmers on King Island and Flinders Island and on mainland Tasmania since the support scheme commenced earlier this year.

Looking ahead, the Budget backs important research and development, and it supports individuals or groups active in building agricultural communities. For example, there is a further \$2.5 million over three years to supercharge the highly successful Strategic Industry Partnership Program which assists a variety of agricultural organisations to support producers and agribusinesses, and \$1.6 million for an Agricultural Innovation Fund supported project to help farmers better understand influences on irrigation efficiency, amongst other things.

The Budget backs farm businesses to move up to the next level with low interest loans through the AgriGrowth Loan Scheme, as well as loans of up to \$250,000 under a Young Farmer Support package.

The good management of Tasmania's freshwater resources is vital to both farmers and the rest of us. There's an extra \$1 million over three years to implement the Rural Water Use Strategy, taking the total commitment to \$65 million. We are committed to our share of funding for the \$301 million Greater South East Irrigation Scheme. It's now up to the Australian government to come to the party now.

CHAIR - You're getting close to the end, minister?

Ms HOWLETT - Also integral to our primary industries is our world class biosecurity system. The government will invest almost \$13 million in biosecurity through this budget, including a \$7.9 million boost for frontline biosecurity services, \$3 million over four years to strengthen resources and expertise, \$1.2 million over three years for additional biosecurity officers, \$500,000 over four years to support Tasmanian farmers to continue to enhance on-farm biosecurity, and \$300,000 a year for three years so that industry groups like Fruit Growers Tasmania can help maintain community awareness.

Animal welfare also gets a boost with \$3.2 million over four years for the RSPCA Inspectorate, and separately \$400,000 to attract and retain vets, especially in rural regional areas. The 2024-25 Budget also funds a range of other election commitments: \$350,000 to support a multi-use structure, at Quercus Park, the home of Agfest; \$800,000 for farm-based education programs to inspire and engage students; and \$340,000 to highlight the diversity of careers in the ag sector.

Also, \$1.5 million over three years to drive growth and sustainability in the Tasmanian wine production. Something I am particularly proud of in my electorate is a \$1.5 million investment into Tasmania's first shearing and wool-handling innovation centre at the Campbell Town Showground. Thank you, Madam Chair. I am happy to take questions.

CHAIR - I am not sure there are too many questions left. I think we'll find some. I will launch straight into 2.1, which is primary industry.

DIVISION 7 (b)

**Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania
Minister for Primary Industries and Water**

**Output Group 2
Primary Industries and Water
2.1 Primary Industries**

Ms O'CONNOR - Are we not going to have an overview, Madam Chair? Does anyone else want an overview?

CHAIR - Alright, overview. Ms O'Connor?

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Serves me right. I would like to talk to you about slaughterhouses. I think it is an appropriate overview question because there are different outputs which it could touch upon. In November last year, serious complaints were lodged about cruelty in slaughterhouses with your department. The footage is very graphic. What is the status of those complaints and investigations? Do you or your department expect there will be any charges laid or proceedings under the *Animal Welfare Act*?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair, and I thank Ms O'Connor for her question. I, too, was absolutely horrified by the abattoir footage released last year. This is not acceptable to me, our farmers, the government or the community. That is why this government has taken action to improve animal welfare outcomes in livestock processing. I am committed to getting this right for our producers, our important livestock industry, and the jobs and family businesses the industry supports.

The Livestock Processing Taskforce has now developed new Tasmanian guidelines, and a strategy to achieve strong animal welfare practices that meets the expectations of the community. The guidelines follow the introduction of mandatory video monitoring on livestock process facilities which came into effect on 30 June. Tasmania's Chief Veterinary Officer, and an independent recognised world expert on benchmark practices have provided input into the guidelines to ensure best practice animal welfare outcomes are adhered to. I can hand over to Rae on my right to add some more to that.

Ms O'CONNOR - What detail do you think is necessary? What we would like to know is what the further proceedings are, or if any charges have been laid.

Ms HOWLETT - I will certainly pass over to Rae, but I note that the taskforce has provided its final report guidelines and an implementation strategy. The government is working through its response to the recommendations.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you for the question. Biosecurity Tasmania (BT) set up an investigation straight away, as you can appreciate. All five abattoirs have been investigated. The investigation is still active, I'm sorry to say, so I can't say much more at this stage.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you for that answer. Minister, these are complaints that were lodged with NRET in November of last year and they contain really serious allegations of

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cruelty in slaughterhouses in Tasmania. The investigation is still ongoing. These five slaughterhouses are still operating. Has there been any change to the practices within those slaughterhouses to prevent this kind of grotesque cruelty that is being alleged here, and in fact which is shown on video?

Ms HOWLETT - Thanks, Ms O'Connor for your question. There have been some changes, and I will refer to Rae to provide those changes that have been implemented so far.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you, minister, and through you, we investigated the five and of course we don't just wait until the results of the investigation are known before we actually instigate the necessary changes and those have been put into place. As you would be aware, one of them was an export facility and the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has dealt with that one as well.

All five of the abattoirs have brought their operations up to speed in that preceding time and also, as you're aware, the video monitoring surveillance guidelines were released in March and they had to actually comply with those guidelines by June 30 of this year and we've checked the compliance of that as well.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you and that goes to my follow-up question. Have there been unannounced visits to Tasmanian Quality Meats, the Gretna Meatworks, Footrot Flats Pty Ltd, the Local Meat Co. - formerly known as Kentish Quality Meats - or Scottsdale Pork? I thought it was important to get those names on the *Hansard*.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair, and thanks, Ms O'Connor and I'll pass to Rae to talk about those inspections.

Ms O'CONNOR - We need some reassurance that it's changed dramatically - the slaughter process.

Ms HOWLETT - I understand your concern.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you, minister, and through you. Since that time in 2024 I can give you the following data as far as visits are concerned. It's more than announced and unannounced visits, so, I thought a more fulsome response may be required at this point.

Just to take one step back, the *Primary Produce Safety Act* and accreditation actually has primarily food safety at its core, but in order to be accredited for food safety, you also have to meet several animal welfare guidelines. That's all incorporated into food safety audits as well. I'm just prefacing that because I'm about to say that we have done food safety audits as well, so you know that we've done animal welfare audits at the same time.

In 2024 we did: 11 PPSA audits; four Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry audits were done by the commonwealth at TQM; 27 saleyard visits; 52 restricted animal material swill inspections; seven intensive animal production inspections; 215 animal welfare reports; 17 unannounced visits and one announced visit; and 90 third-party food safety audits.

Ms O'CONNOR - Just to clarify before I move on for other members who want questions. Of those five that were the subject to allegations, each of them has been visited a number of times over the course of the past year, since November last year?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you. Rae, would you like to -

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister, yes, the five in question have been visited, as you say, multiple times.

Ms O'CONNOR - And do you think they're compliant now? I mean, this is a slightly unfair question to place on you, Rae, but is government reassured, or does government believe, that those slaughterhouses are now operating as humanely as you can when you're killing animals for food?

Ms BURROWS - Minister, through you. Again, we're not there 24/7 and one of the objectives of the task force was to actually set up to change the culture, basically, of the processing facilities. We started to create a humane animal welfare culture and as you know, a cultural shift doesn't happen overnight and it can't happen with a regulator sitting on people's shoulders at all times. We have to instil that desire to look after animals as a matter of course.

While they're compliant with the rules when we visit there, I'm not saying that it's perfect at this stage. As I say, it's a cultural shift, but I think we've now provided them with the tools and guidance and over time, as we provide education and training for the staff and all the things that we've identified in the new guidelines, I think we will be a long way down the track, but, 100 per cent perfectly humane treatment of animals, I can't guarantee at this point in time.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do they all have CCTV inside them now, these slaughterhouses? Every one?

Ms HOWLETT - From 30 June. Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - Is that correct?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you.

Ms WEBB - This is just a departmental stats question really around RTI. I'm just interested in your up-to-date stats on average time turnaround from receipt to determination for your RTI requests. I would like to know how many RTI requests you've had in the past year and what proportion of them were determined in full or partially, or refused. I'd like to know the number of days taken for each of those categories on average. If it's something you can give me now, that's great. I'm happy for you to give it to me later if you don't have it.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you for your question. I'll ask the Deputy Secretary to pass on that information.

Ms WILSON - If I've missed a part of that I might have to come back. There were 17 RTI applications relating to the Primary Industries and Water portfolio processed in the 2023-24 financial year. There were no internal reviews for applications, no external reviews requested for the Ombudsman. As for the total number of applications received by the department, did you ask for that? Or just for PIW?

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Ms WEBB - I'm happy to take it for the department if possible, because there's no other minister we have for this department.

Ms WILSON - The total number of applications received by the department during 2023-24 financial year was 65 and 60 were processed. I believe you asked for what kind of information and what decisions were made?

Ms WEBB - I'm interested in what proportion were determined in full or partially or refused?

Ms WILSON - I'll have to provide whole-of-agency figures. Of the 60, we released all information requests in 30 of the 60 and decided to actively disclose the information requested in one application and so obviously the remainder were in part.

Ms WEBB - None were fully refused?

Ms WILSON - My data here is that none were fully refused, but I'll confirm that.

Ms WEBB - You mentioned before, I think it was only in relation to the Primary Industries and Water, that there was no internal reviews or external reviews requested. Is that also true for the department overall or not?

Ms WILSON - Sorry, the Secretary has pointed out the previous question. For whole-of-agency there were three internal reviews requested. Two internal reviews upheld the original decision in full, and one upheld the decision in part. I still didn't answer the question that you were going to-

Ms WEBB - I was wondering about the whole-of-agency in terms of internal reviews or external reviews. Did any of those go to external review, then?

Ms WILSON - Two external reviews requested of and accepted by the Ombudsman's office.

Ms WEBB - Are any of those completed? There's probably no point asking that because we know the Ombudsman is under the pump with those external reviews and they can take a while to come back, so it's probably still in the process.

Can I also ask, does the department have an internal policy about the approach to uploading RTI request information to the website? Uploading disclosures to the website? In terms of how that's done, how promptly it's done and if there's any constraints on doing that?

Ms WILSON - Through you, Minister, we do have a routine disclosure policy. The aim is to release the information essentially when it's released to the applicant. Obviously sometimes there might be time delays. There is a policy that ensures that. It's about proactive release of the information, but there are some limited exemptions which the Secretary may apply, for example, if it's about a neighbourhood matter, about someone's personal information, that decision can be made by the Secretary. There are just limited circumstance where you might not put it on the disclosure log, but it is relating to confidential personal information of those kinds of matters.

Ms WEBB - Through the minister, a further question on that. Is that the case then, even for those ones where you're not going to actually put up the material for because they relate to personal matters, do you still note that their request came through as part of the log and was provided?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I think that would depend upon the nature of the request, but I would need to get that information.

Ms WEBB - The internal policy or guideline on the publication of it - is that a document that you have available that you could provide?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I'm happy to provide a copy of the internal policy if we can. We can table that this afternoon.

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

Mr EDMUNDS - Thank you, Minister. I've just got a couple of questions about the efficiency dividend. Is the department's savings plan finalised?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. Our government has a strong record of responsible fiscal management. We've invested significantly in essential services since coming to government and we're continuing to invest as part of our 2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania's Future.

We're continuing to take clear and meaningful action to ensure that the state can provide essential public service and job creating infrastructure on a sustainable basis. Tasmanians would expect departments to use their resources effectively and within budget. In developing the 2023-2024 budget last year, the Government recognised prudent, corrective action was required and implemented a modest budget efficiency program aimed at reducing unnecessary expenditure and reducing programs that no longer align with the government's strategic priorities.

Modest budget saving measures are not about cuts to frontline services. There will be no reductions to nurses, doctors, paramedics, police officers, teachers, child safety officers or any others working in frontline positions. We're growing our frontline staff and following through on recruitment actions in our 2030 Strong Plan. Since the 2014-2015 budget, the government has taken investment in health services from 5.8 billion to now 12.9 billion over the budget and forward Estimates. Similarly, investment in education has grown from 5.8 billion to now 9.4 billion over the next four years. These increases are well above the rate of inflation and point to a stronger record of increasing services to Tasmania.

Mr EDMUNDS - Thank you. But in terms of this department, has a plan been finalised?

Ms HOWLETT - Which part of the department are you actually referring to?

Mr EDMUNDS - Overall, or we can go for each one.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll refer that that question to the secretary who can provide more information with regard to a potential efficiency dividend.

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Mr JACOBI - I thank the member for the question. Through you Minister. The efficiency dividend to be achieved by my department is 1.7 million in 2024-2025, 3.4 million in 2025-2026 and 5.1 million in 2026-2027.

This represents approximately 0.53 per cent, so less than or half of 1 per cent of the department's total budget in the first year, increasing to approximately 1.9 per cent of the department's budget in 2026-2027. Firstly, I would like to say that I believe that the savings are achievable and will not compromise the department's capability. The priority initiatives that we've been tasked with by government and the core and essential services that we provide to the Tasmanian community will continue. We've looked hard at where we can make the savings over the forward Estimates and in particular we've focused on the target of \$1.7 million in 2024-2025. This is an opportunity for us to be more sustainable and efficient in our operations. If you like, I can speak to how we intend to achieve the target.

Mr EDMUNDS - Thank you.

CHAIR - That is what we are waiting for.

Mr JACOBI - The key strategies are ceasing, as the minister pointed out, ceasing or scaling back on non-core and non-priority activities that are either not in the highest strategic priorities for the department or that have been replaced with new commitments. We will receive new funding for a new commitment. We're redeploying staff to deliver on those commitments. In the first year, we only have a relatively small target to meet, which provides time to introduce more austere measures before 2026-2027 when the dividend target increases to the 5.1 million.

This year, our focus is on savings that we already make each and every year. I'll talk for a moment if you don't mind, about natural attrition and vacancies that occur each and every day across the agency, because these are a really important part of our savings tools and strategy. Staff transfer to different roles, or they're redeployed to other departments. Sometimes they're reassigned to alternative duties, or they might leave or resign from the department to take up opportunities elsewhere. Every single one of the vacancies created by those movements translates to a saving through what I call natural attrition.

We will capture those savings and monitor our vacancies throughout the year to ensure that we can meet our savings target. That becomes a core part of our savings strategy for this year. To be very clear, this is not a vacancy control process and it will not result in staff job losses, nor will it impact on the delivery of government priorities and services. It is simply capturing all of the savings that accrue when a position becomes vacant. It takes time to recruit to a position, and particularly in a competitive market like we're in at the moment, sometimes positions can be vacant for months because we don't get sufficient applications for the roles and it is a very competitive market. That all contributes to our savings target.

Naturally, there are positions that provide really critical, important frontline services, and the minister alluded to some of those, such as biosecurity inspectors, detector dog handlers, which the minister announced at the airport the other day, laboratory testing scientists and visitor services officers in parks. They all provide critical frontline services and it's important that those positions are recruited to as quickly as possible. They are very much front of mind for me and my executive.

Whenever a position in those frontline service areas becomes vacant, we try and recruit to them as quickly as we possibly can, and often that's backfilling the position immediately so there is no gap in service. That is a really important part of our strategy to ensure the psychological safety and wellbeing of our staff, because if a person disappears from a role and the role is important to helping you deliver on your job, then it becomes a gap in service delivery. We're very attuned to making sure those positions are recruited to quickly.

In saying that, we need to look at each and every position across the whole department, and no part of the department is immune from this process. We need to look at every position when it is vacated and make a determination about how that position is best assigned and best utilised, and how quickly we recruit to it. Like I said, the frontline service positions that we provide are recruited to almost immediately.

Some of our initiatives are on top of the natural attrition, including things like taking a close look at our discretionary expenditure, so travel, fleet, accommodation costs, printing costs and reducing our advertising or the use of consultants. They're all areas that what I would call discretionary expenditure, where we have the opportunity to look closely and to mitigate our risks. I can comfortably say that our latest report is that we're actually on target to meet the efficiency dividend scheduled for the 2024-25 financial year.

Mr EDMUNDS - It sounds quite organised; there are a lot of measures there. Does that mean the plan has been finalised and, if that's the case, would you be prepared to table it as has happened in some other hearings this week?

Ms HOWLETT - I will refer to the secretary.

Mr JACOBI - I am more than happy to take that question on notice and to table our efficiency dividend targets for 2024-25 - just for that financial year because it's still an evolving exercise for the output of the forward Estimates.

Mr EDMUNDS - One other question on that while we're here. You referenced frontline workers. Has there been any work to define specifically what a frontline worker is within the department?

Mr JACOBI - It's a very good question. I really don't like to quarantine or classify frontline workers. We have in the past identified for example, rangers as being frontline, but we don't really run frontline positions that can be equated to teachers or nurses, for example. It's important that we apply the efficiency dividend across all of our positions, but be very cognisant in the process about which ones are providing frontline services. We will do that on position-by-position basis, on merit, at every point in time when a position becomes vacant.

CHAIR - Minister, is there an opportunity for the department to speak with staff about what is going to be required in regard to an efficiency dividend? Is that something that you'll have a general conversation around - 'This is where we can see some savings'? Somebody might leave; somebody might need to step up. I'm aware that there's a focus on the health and wellbeing of the staff that remain, but I'm interested in whether that's something that will occur, because everyone would be a tad nervous, I expect.

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, you raise a very good point and a very good question. I believe those discussions are being had and I'll let the secretary speak more to that.

Mr JACOBI - I think it's really important that we keep staff well informed of this process to reassure them, particularly around the perception that 'I might lose my job', which is absolutely not the case here.

CHAIR - Or 'I'm going to have to work a lot harder because X person's gone'.

Mr JACOBI - Absolutely, and we've had discussions with my senior executive about the budget efficiency dividend and the principles that we will apply and adopt, not just this year, but over the forward Estimates, and the opportunity for us to look at longer term strategies that, yes, will take time to introduce, but will be a soft approach to achieving the budget efficiency dividend. Communicating with 1500 people across the whole department is challenging.

CHAIR - Hence my question.

Mr JACOBI - I would prefer to be able to do all of that face to face and, I think in the coming months, once we've got some real clarity around each of the measures and the quantum of those measures, I can do that via a webinar that I do regularly with all my staff and through other secretary messages. Most importantly, my senior leadership team will be well informed of the measures and they will be able to drill that down through all of their staff and colleagues.

CHAIR - Minister, the delivery of Tasmania's Sustainable Agri-Food Plan 2019-2023 - I am interested in the outcomes of that plan. Also, I note on page 199 of the performance information that there's a couple of missing actuals here when it comes to the value of agriculture and food production value added, and yet for 2022-23, it's a bit hard to tell why they're missing. Are you able to give me some explanation about those couple of areas to start with?

Ms HOWLETT - Progress towards the 2050 target is monitored through farm gate value reported annually in the Agri-Food Scorecard. In 2021-22, the agriculture farm gate value was \$2.34 billion and an increase of 2 per cent. The agri-vision target chart tracks progress against the 2050 goal by showing the estimated farm gate value - the bars - compared to the agri-vision target curve - the red line. The bars being above or on the red line show on-track progress to reach the agri-vision target by 2050. The deputy secretary would like to speak more to that. This is what it actually looks like, but, unfortunately in the printed version it's in black and white, Chair.

CHAIR - That's where you've already got some efficiency there with the printing - no colour. I'd like to commend the secretary.

Ms HOWLETT - It's certainly tightened the budget.

CHAIR - There's been a very small uplift, so are you absolutely certain that the target's going to be met?

Ms HOWLETT - We'll certainly do everything we possibly can to reach that target and, as I mentioned, we are monitoring that target. I know that the deputy secretary has more to say on that.

Ms WILSON - The other thing we've done in terms of the Tasmanian Agri-Food Scorecard is provided a consolidated report and a new active dashboard to make sure that people are understanding what's happening,

In terms of meeting the target, as the minister said, we are meeting the target at the moment. There is a need to keep on growing the agricultural sector as we get towards the 2050 vision, but that's part of why we've got our investment, for example, in the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture. What you need to do to keep on growing agriculture is not only doing what you're doing now well, but also to invest in research and extension so that you can grow. Our farmers are supported to be innovative.

There was a question around the NAs.

CHAIR - The missing data.

Ms WILSON - Standard. It's a lag in the data that's made available by ABS.

CHAIR - Just in those few areas?

Ms WILSON - Yes, it's just a lag in the data. It's always reported like this in the budget performance measure, but we do catch up -

CHAIR - But we're a lot later in the budget this year, that's why I was surprised that it wasn't there.

Ms WILSON - It's still relating to a time of when we get external data to inform our measure.

CHAIR - Okay. Even though it's going to be in the department's annual report, which is usually October, which is about two weeks away.

Ms WILSON - My recollection of our draft annual report will reflect this information. That's my recollection.

CHAIR - Right. Okay. So, the department has got it?

Ms WILSON - No, it'll reflect what's in the budget chapter.

CHAIR - Right. So, you won't have up-to-date data in the annual report in a couple of weeks' time?

Ms WILSON - Yes, that's my understanding.

CHAIR - Okay. To be able to grow the agriculture business in Tasmania, there's some real issue with game and browsing animals. I see them every time I drive home from this place because they keep on hitting my car. I'm interested in the management services for landholders, farmers and hunters around that control. There's such a focus on firearms and the use of firearms. I'm interested how you marry up browsing animal, game management, and all of those aspects to be able to - well, they eat the feed. It's as simple as that. They eat the feed.

Ms HOWLETT - That's a very correct comment. Property Protection Permits are an essential tool for managing wildlife on the land, and have been in use for many years under many governments.

Browsing wildlife possess a very real threat to our farmers, their stock, crops and infrastructure, and can result in significant losses of production and profitability. Under our plan for Tasmania's future, our government is committed to achieving that farm gate value of \$10 billion by 2050. To achieve this goal, we need to give our farmers and land managers a tool to maximise the return on their efforts and investments.

Wildlife numbers are managed using lethal and non-lethal options. The options are discussed with Property Protection Permit applicants to ensure that the most appropriate methods of control are employed, to provide a range of permits across species to help landowners in the easiest possible way. There's a combined five-year permit with no quota.

Ms O'CONNOR - Outrageous.

Ms HOWLETT - It's issued for Bennett's wallaby and brushtail possum. Individual permits are issued for other species as well.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, wombats, black swans, platypus -

Ms HOWLETT - Wildlife numbers are monitored using scientifically robust methods to ensure that each species' population is sustainable -

Ms O'CONNOR - Rubbish.

Ms HOWLETT - And enduring. The most recent surveys indicate the population of most commonly taken species are stable and within the population range. That has been monitored since 1985.

CHAIR - There is work with landowners, farmers, peak bodies, like TasFarmers, to be able to manage how they go about protecting their crops, but still mindful of the animals as well. I'm interested that we can get a balance here. I've heard the interjections by the honourable member for Hobart, and I know that that's certainly a significant feeling. How do you manage those competing interests if you like?

Ms HOWLETT - A balanced approach is absolutely correct.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's not balanced.

Ms HOWLETT - Game Services Tasmania focus on supporting landholders, farmers and hunters to effectively manage game and browsing animal issues relating to hunting and primary industry sectors and core stakeholders are farmers and recreational hunters, and they provide secretarial support to the Tasmanian Game Council, as well. I'm not sure if Ray or the deputy secretary would like to provide some more information on that -

CHAIR - There's an advisory council in place, I believe.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, the Game Council. Would you like to speak more to that?

Ms WILSON - We have a Tasmanian Game Council which supports the minister in understanding game matters, which is really important. I think in terms of the balance, it's really important to understand that when we're doing this permitting process, it is also about assessing and prioritising non-lethal methods of control as well, and understanding what's actually happening on the ground, what needs to be done in this particular circumstance.

CHAIR - Thank you. I'll open it up to other members of the committee.

Ms O'CONNOR - A couple of things, minister. Perhaps, if your government hadn't made feral deer a protected species, some of our primary producers would have to spend less on controlling them. But I'm interested in getting some updated information on crop protection permits that have been issued, and, seeing as it's probably about three years now since the Greens obtained the last table of crop protection permits issued, could you please provide them based on the permits that have been issued, which species, and for how many animals?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Ms O'Connor for her question. The number of active property protection permits is routinely disclosed every six months on the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania website.

Ms O'CONNOR - Broken down by species?

Ms HOWLETT - I have that information -

Ms O'CONNOR - Because the last time we obtained this information, I think we had to get it through right to information.

Ms HOWLETT - Would you mind just giving me a moment?

Ms O'CONNOR - No, not at all. And perhaps while we're finding that information, I noted what you said before about surveys that had been undertaken on wildlife to determine that populations were stable. Regular surveys taken out by NRET on all the species that are subject to crop protection permits? I don't think so.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll seek some advice, Ms O'Connor.

Ms O'CONNOR - Honestly, I don't believe it.

Ms HOWLETT - Perhaps we can come back to that -

Ms O'CONNOR - Sure, I'm happy to come back -

Ms HOWLETT - We do monitor key species -

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. I'm very interested in that, because last time I spoke to your predecessor in the role, we talked about the mighty forester kangaroo, which used to have a wide range over the island and is subject to 'crop protection' - crop protection in inverted commas - permits. Is there an updated number of forester kangaroo populations in the state? Because the number that your predecessor put out there was very hard to believe.

Ms HOWLETT - That aerial survey is actually happening right now for both deer and for kangaroo. That survey is being completed now.

Ms O'CONNOR - Before I move on, how do we go with my first question? A breakdown of crop protection permits issued over the last few years by species.

Ms HOWLETT - Just seeking the correct information for you. Would you mind if I take that on notice, Ms O'Connor?

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm very happy for you to, and I'll point you to the right to information- actually, it was through an Estimates process from June of 2022, and it broke down birds, deer, kangaroos, possums, black swans, all the things that are routinely and wantonly shot at scale on the island.

Ms HOWLETT - I'm pretty sure I have that information, and I just want to double check it before I do table it for you.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Like I said, I'm happy to put it on notice and move on.

Mr EDMUNDS - Yes, we are in 2.1. The comment about deer. I will just read a sentence in the footnotes. It says the decrease in 26-27 reflects the funding profile for the Strategic Industry Partnership Program and the completion of the implementation of wild fallow deer management. I'm just trying to reconcile with comments made from other members at the table and yourself what efforts will be taken to manage into the future if that funding ends?

CHAIR - And they're spreading by the day.

Ms O'CONNOR - They are protected under the *Nature Conservation Act*.

Mr EDMUNDS - I think you were there as well, minister, when we got that briefing about efforts, I understand that, but I'm interested in what happens when that program finishes.

Ms O'CONNOR - They'll just keep shooting them, and they'll keep breeding, and they'll keep their numbers up. Sorry, I'll shut up at some point.

Ms HOWLETT - Our plan allows us to sustainably manage the impact of wild fallow deer through the three introduced signs - on agricultural production, peri-urban areas, conservation World Heritage areas, and forestry production - whilst maintaining deer as a traditional hunting resource.

Implementation policies and initiatives has commenced and we're investing over \$2 million in implementing the plan. There are no plans to change the partly protected status of deer as it allows for the necessary controls and restrictions to be put in place so that deer can be managed consistently in line with our objectives, including managing population levels.

And, I'm not sure if you're aware, but there is a deer scan application to report deer sightings, which also helps inform where our priorities for managing deer, especially in peri-urban areas, should be. As far as-

Mr EDMUNDS - I know it's always a hot topic in some of the community groups up north - their deer sightings.

Ms HOWLETT - Bruny Island, Tasman not just Blackstone Heights.

Mr EDMUNDS - I understand you're answering, but the concern is that, if that drops off - what is the plan?

Ms HOWLETT - Okay, so future calls and culling, the government via Parks minister Duigan will continue to have discussions as I do with the Australian Government. As the state party in relation to effective strategies and plan to manage the TWWHA, which, like this program considers adjacent boundary issues as well. Would you like to add anything to that, secretary?

Mr JACOBI - Look, I think it's worth acknowledging the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area deer control program that's been conducted over the last two years, which was joint state Commonwealth funding, incredibly successful, it's pilot program. What it's informed us is that aerial control is by far the most effective method of control, particularly in remote areas, alpine areas, which are largely inaccessible.

But the really interesting thing about the second year of the program was that we engaged a number of people from recreational shooting organisations to conduct a ground trial, and we learned a lot from that process. I think the shooters really appreciated the opportunity to be engaged in the control program. They got training from the exercise. So, we actually ran them through a training and accreditation process.

We learned a lot about how we might be able to use the recreational hunting community for future control programs, maybe not just for deer, but for other pests, and it reaffirmed the value of that work, but it obviously is not as effective as aerial control, particularly when you're talking large-scale areas of remote wilderness.

Mr EDMUNDS - So what's the plan going forward and is there money for that?

Mr JACOBI - There is no funding allocated either from the Commonwealth or the state, but we absolutely intend to make application to the Commonwealth government for future funding. The success of the program, I think, has stood us in very good stead to receive additional funding. We've proven that it can work, we've proven that we can conduct the program without any animal welfare issues and we can conduct it safely.

I have very high level of confidence that we would be successful in a future culling funding program either through the Commonwealth or the Invasive Species Council.

CHAIR - A supplementary, Ms Webb?

Ms WEBB - That covered my supplementary. I can go onto other topics or maybe the member for Pembroke still has some other topics.

Mr EDMUNDS - No, thank you. You're fine.

Ms HOWLETT - To follow on, the plan is funded until 2027 as well.

Ms WEBB - Not the TWWHA related plan?

Mr JACOBI - I was just talking about the TWWHA. The peri-urban deer control plan is funded in future [inaudible].

Ms WEBB - Okay, the peri-urban plan. On that funding, does it fund specific positions and where are those positions located?

Mr JACOBI - We've set up a dedicated team in the Parks and Wildlife Service. Their experience in delivering the TWWHA program has stood them in very good stead. We are utilising skilled markspeople from across the department, but we also have dedicated people who are focusing on the peri-urban deer control program. Interestingly enough, Bruny Island peri-urban control kicks off I think next week or the week after, and we are doing that in conjunction with the Aboriginal people on Murrayfield, so it's a really good collaborative program.

The second round of that peri-urban deer program will focus I believe in the Meander area in Deloraine around Mole Creek. We know that's a hotspot. The Tamar is the third identified hotspot of activity.

There's a fourth, which is the Tasman Peninsula, but the staging and the rollout of this program is very dependent on getting landholders on board, addressing the safety issues of particularly the rural-urban interface. If you're going to conduct a control program in an urban area, you need to be very alert to and have programs and procedures around shooting and when and how. All of those things have taken time, but I am pleased to say that we are really at a point now where this is about to kick off.

CHAIR - Do you use private contractors at all?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. Adding to that, planning for the 2024 aerial survey of fallow deer and forester kangaroos is complete. It aims to be as sympathetic to landowners as possible. A contractor was recently appointed and the aerial survey is set to commence in October this year.

Ms O'CONNOR - I thought you said it was completed.

Ms HOWLETT - That was planning. In 2019, in response to the Legislative Council Inquiry into Wild Fallow Deer, the government undertook an initial baseline aerial survey to determine abundance and distribution. The survey will provide a comparison of the deer population to the previous 2019 survey.

The 2019 survey estimated the fallow deer population to be 53,660 and the forester kangaroo population to be 30,327. The 2024 survey will follow identical methodologies as the 2019 survey. It will produce an estimate of the total population and will produce distribution and abundance data. This information can then be compared to the 2019 findings.

CHAIR - My question was for game control, particularly for wild fellow deer, do you use private contractors as well?

PUBLIC

Mr JACOBI - Yes, we do. We haven't as a department engaged professional commercial contractors for the peri-urban deer control work. We are doing that internally. But I have recently issued an authority to a private commercial operator to undertake aerial control programs of deer on freehold land.

CHAIR - In the Meander Valley area?

Mr JACOBI - Not in the Meander Valley area, but they may work across the whole of Tasmania. Where they do the work is their commercial decision, but this is the first time in the state that we have had a commercial operator authorised to undertake areal deer control. It's a really important step in allowing and enabling landholders to take action if they so need to.

CHAIR - Any commercial operator can apply to the department? Is that the process?

Ms HOWLETT - I believe so, that's correct.

Ms WEBB - It is probably related, although I'm not sure if it fits into this space. The Chair already asked about native animals impacting on farms. We have just talked about feral deer in all sorts of places.

I wanted to ask about other roaming escaped farm animals with no established owner. We hear about them causing problems for local communities and posing a high risk of establishing feral populations. That would be animals like goats or pigs or cattle.

CHAIR - There's not many wild cattle, they're worth too much.

Ms WEBB - Their communication with affected stakeholders has left uncertainty regarding which agency or minister is responsible for dealing with those issues. Feral pigs is the one we have heard about a lot just in recent times. There's a serious problem around Waratah and Flinders Island, I think, too. Which agency and minister is responsible for the issue of roaming populations of domestic stock and what work is being undertaken to address those populations?

Ms HOWLETT - Under the *Local Government Act 1993*, councils are given powers to impound any animal straying or at large either near a highway or on council-owned or council-controlled land. Councils may also issue an abatement notice to anyone who directly or indirectly creates nuisance. For example, the Central Coast Council is advocating for legislative reform so local government can more effectively manage nuisance animals. I acknowledge the advocacy from the local government sector and I believe Rae might have some more to say on that.

CHAIR - That's interesting because the Launceston City Council said that they couldn't do anything about the animals that were on the road - Lebrina Highway. That's an interesting response.

Ms HOWLETT - Under the *Local Government Act 1993*, councils are certainly given the power to impound any straying animals.

PUBLIC

Ms WEBB - What's the plan? What structured approach is being taken then to work with local councils about how best to do that in their area? I imagine some local councils will potentially raise issues of resourcing to really deal with significant issues.

CHAIR - This was a significant issue, as well.

Ms HOWLETT - In your mention of Launceston City Council, it's certainly leading the response to Part 12 of the *Local Government Act 1993*. As I said, councils have the responsibility to deal with these animals that stray onto, or are otherwise at large on roadways. I'm advised livestock straying onto roads can sometimes be because of an underlying animal welfare issue, such as inadequate access to food. I asked the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania to investigate whether this is a contributor in the ongoing issue at Lebrina and the investigation is ongoing. I will refer you to Rae to provide some further advice.

Ms BURROWS - I think I can just provide some good examples if that's okay. The pigs at Gunns Plains, for example, you may have heard of those, are roaming stock from one property that we're very much aware of. The council up there has done an excellent job of issuing an abatement notice and has actually taken the initiative to totally replace the fences around the property from whence the pigs are coming. Unfortunately, the recent rains up there have undermined some of the fences, so they're starting to come out again. BT is working with that particular council because the stock is not considered feral until they're living totally independently from human beings. We have cameras up - and at the moment the pigs are going back into the property each night or every second night, or whatever. They're still roaming stock, but we're working, as I say, with the council to make sure that we can work together. That council is particularly active and has been extremely responsible in this.

Ms WEBB - The point where they're deemed to be feral, where's that line? When they don't at all go back to the property? And then they become whose responsibility?

Ms BURROWS - We can deal with them through the *Biosecurity Act* at that stage.

Ms HOWLETT - It's interesting with the feral pigs, and you mentioned Flinders Island before. In the 1800s, the numbers were supplemented by pigs that were accidentally or intentionally released in the 1970s, but there's estimated to be 2500 to 3000 feral pigs on Flinders Island. There's no known population existing on the surrounding Furneaux Islands, but Biosecurity Tasmania is managing the \$700,000 Australian and Tasmanian government funded strategic management and control of feral pigs on Flinders Island. The project is aimed to reduce the impact of feral pigs on Tasmania's high-valued agricultural and environment assets through strategic vertebrate pest management and engagement.

Ms O'CONNOR - Minister, the State of the Environment report, which was issued a decade late after two statutory deadlines were not met by the government you're part of, on page 41, it recommends the removal of protections of wild fallow deer from regulatory frameworks, including the Nature Conservation Wildlife Regulations of 2023. Given that we've just heard from Mr Jacobi that the department is, first of all, having to do surveys of deer, but also hiring professional shooters to help land owners manage their deer. That's an expense that comes out of the public purse. There's the cost of farmers; I've spoken to farmers who are paying \$60,000 or \$80,000 a year to try to control deer on their properties and that is a hit to their productivity and their profits.

Why is the government intent on providing this protection under legislation for a feral species which is causing so much damage and so much loss?

Ms HOWLETT - The Tasmanian Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan 2022-27 and associated implementation strategy combined to provide the Tasmanian government's blueprint.

Ms O'CONNOR - Minister, with respect, sorry, can I ask, I don't think it's good enough that every time you're asked a question you refer to a brief and not answer the question. The question is why is the Tasmanian government providing a protection under law to a damaging feral species which is costing farmers and taxpayers a bomb?

Ms HOWLETT - Well -

Ms O'CONNOR - I don't want you to read out another brief. I don't think it's fair to the committee.

Ms HOWLETT - I won't be told what to do by you, Ms O'Connor. I too was very pleased to see the State of Environment report tabled in parliament last week. The report has been prepared by the Tasmanian Planning Commission and I note the responsible minister is a Minister for Housing and Planning. I acknowledge the important role of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania has played contributing data and reviewing reports for 17 of the environmental indicators, as well as providing input through the preparation of case studies and other feedback where appropriate.

Ms O'CONNOR - You are still not answering the question.

Ms HOWLETT - The State of Environment report is an important means of documenting baseline environmental data trends and risks across Tasmania.

Ms O'CONNOR - Point of order, Chair.

CHAIR - Minister, can you please wait a moment.

Ms O'CONNOR - I ask you as Chair to help the minister to answer questions that are asked rather than reverting to a brief that goes nowhere near the question.

CHAIR - Minister, I appreciate that you do have a lot of information. Sadly, we don't have as much time as what we'd like. If it is possible to get directly to the question or if you need to then hand the question, that would probably be helpful. We understand that there is a lot of information, but we don't have enough time to listen to a lot of briefs, but we appreciate what you are trying to share with the committee.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. The report is broad ranging in scope, significant in length and highly technical in nature. It touches on many areas of government, industry and community responsibility and will bring important information and take time to consider the findings and I can hand you over to the Secretary of the department.

Ms O'CONNOR - Before you do that, because I don't think it's fair to fob that question off to the Secretary, it's actually a political question. It's a policy question because government

has made a decision to protect a damaging species under nature conservation regulations. It's not for Mr Jacobi to have to try to answer that. It's a policy decision that's made by government.

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, the report was handed down, tabled in parliament last week, Ms O'Connor, and I know the report's recommendations to continue to implement the plan -

Ms O'CONNOR - The recommendation is to remove the protection over the fallow deer under nature conservation regulations.

Ms HOWLETT - We will take our time as a government to review that plan.

Ms O'CONNOR - I bet you don't take on the shooting lobby.

CHAIR - Thank you. It is not an opportunity for a conversation engagement, it is a question and answer process here. I just hope that members might put their mind and the other side of the table as well. So, thank you.

Ms WEBB - Minister, the question I am going to ask is about climate change readiness. So, you have had a chance to read the Independent Review, no doubt, of Tasmania's state finances by Mr Saul Eslake, which was released in August this year. In it, as you will recall, Mr Eslake makes the observation, and I will quote from him just briefly:

One significant factor, surprisingly unremarked in Treasury's analysis of the Tasmanian economy presented in the 2023-24 budget papers or the 2023-24 revised Estimates report, has been the effects of persistent drought conditions on Tasmania's primary production sector, which accounts for almost 10 per cent of Tasmania's economy compared with less than 3 per cent of Australia's.

My question around that, or sparked by Mr Eslake's observations there is what monitoring and evaluation has occurred to measure the impact of recent drought conditions on the primary industry sector here?

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, I thank the member for her question. The government's strong plan to back our agriculture sector provides a \$2.13 million extension to the Rural Business Resilience package to manage the impact of drought on farming. More broadly, the government's competitiveness of Tasmania's Agriculture for 2050 White Paper committed to support agriculture producers to be climate ready, reduce their emissions, adapt to and be prepared for the impacts of a change in climate, as well as leverage opportunities for growth. Two key initiatives in this portfolio to support future climate preparedness are the Farm Business Resilience Program and the Tasmanian government's investment to the newly formed Zero Net Emissions Agriculture Cooperative Research Centre. I will hand over to you, Deidre, to speak more to that.

CHAIR - Briefly, because we are running out of time.

Ms WEBB - Can I just also, before you do that, minister, point to the content of my question because I would like to zero in on that. So I understand if you would like to mention the initiatives and that is fine. It is good that your government is providing support for climate change preparation. But my question was what monitoring and evaluation has occurred to measure the impact of recent drought conditions on the primary industry sector? And then my

next question, just to flag it, follows on directly; what modelling has been undertaken for potential future impacts or expected future impacts as well as any identifiable mitigation measures. So it is less about what money you are handing out to farmers to help with their individual preparation, more about monitoring and evaluation that has occurred and modelling for the future.

Ms WILSON - Thank you. I will try to keep this brief, but there is a lot we can say about this. So first of all our farm business resilience program, the minister has mentioned, is around farm business planning, building capacities of farmer and proactive approach. That has a monitoring, evaluation and learning components. So we are doing a proper evaluation of that. In terms of the -

Ms WEBB -No, that is an evaluation of your initiative. What monitoring and evaluation of the impact of recent droughts -

Ms WILSON - Through you minister, we are still in dry conditions, but particularly in King and Flinders Island, but our department and the Department of State Growth, will do an assessment of the activities we have undertaken to understand how the support measures have supported industry and also what future activities we might take. The other thing is in terms of future readiness. We are doing a range of activities obviously under the rural water use strategy. But one that I think is important to point out is we are doing an update of our climate change modelling. At that stage 2, climate change modelling will give us some - a toolkit - to understand what future scenarios might play out which would allow us to do future planning under the rural water use strategy, but also to inform those drought preparedness activities that the government has funded. It is multifaceted. It is not one thing; there is a range of activities that the government is undertaking, and the department is undertaking a range of initiatives to deliver what you are talking about. So, it is not one thing, it is a number of things.

Ms WEBB - Thank you, but that does partially answer what I was asking.

I'll move on as I am mindful of time. The last part of this set of questions that I wanted to ask around the climate change area was about the progress being made on the agriculture sector-based emissions reduction and resilience plans, which should be being done under the *Climate Change (State Action) Act 2008* and are due to be finalised by November this year. Is that on track?

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, that's a question for minister Duigan. I can speak about Sea Forest and the incredible work that they're doing, but that is a question for Renewables, Climate and Future Industries Tasmania (ReCFIT).

Ms WEBB - Just to be clear, I understand why ReCFIT would be involved, but surely if we're doing an emissions reduction and resilience plan for the agriculture sector, that would intersect with you and your department, minister, and there would be involvement in your department or in feeding into that plan. So presumably, you can speak to your department's involvement and whether you understand whether it's going to meet the deadline or not. Surely, you have a line of sight on that.

Ms HOWLETT - We do. I can ask the Secretary to speak more to that.

CHAIR - Please, don't fight over who's going to answer it. Just jump in, Deidre.

Ms WILSON - The department is making comments on the on the agriculture plan and it's in progress now.

Ms WEBB -Is it your expectation you will meet the deadline?

Ms WILSON - I have staff members engaged, but I don't have a line of sight on the end point.

Ms WEBB - Thank you.

CHAIR - Obviously, we are always mindful of time so we'll move on to 2.2 which is the Supervision of Poppy and Hemp Crops because I think there will be a bit in Biosecurity 3.1.

Output Group 2 - Primary Industries and Water

2.2 Supervision of Poppy and Hemp Crops

Ms ARMITAGE - Minister, I'm wondering what prompted the change of poppy cultivation licences that are no longer being issued annually, but for five-year periods? Is this more cost and resource effective? Are assessments for these licences more vigorous considering they're now valid for longer periods, obviously, one year versus five years? A lot can happen in five years.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, I thank the honourable member for her question.

That's about reducing red tape. Deidre will speak more to that.

Ms WILSON - The issuing of five-year licences is a red tape initiative of government but there's still the annual work that our staff do in terms of monitoring crops and undertaking field work -

Ms ARMITAGE - I have a question like that coming up in a minute so keep going, you might almost answer it.

Ms WILSON - We still have the regular activities that our staff do. The regulator will monitor crops and liaise with growers statewide which contributes to growers' compliance and timely reporting to police of suspicious activities, crop interferences and thefts.

I'll leave it at that now, unless there's a follow up, minister.

Ms ARMITAGE - What is the current number of poppy licences issued or active at the moment?

Ms HOWLETT - Would you like me to break it down by year?

Ms ARMITAGE - Just for the last couple would be great, to get an indication of how it's changed. Thank you.

Ms HOWLETT - In 2022-23 the number of growers were 162; hectares licensed were 6135; hectares sown were 3887; and hectares harvested were 2777.

In 2023-24 the number of growers were 291; hectares licensed were 8037; hectares sown were 5033; and hectares harvested 4629.

Ms ARMITAGE - Now we mentioned previously about the inspections. How exactly is an inspection of a poppy and hemp crop undertaken? I'm assuming it's by more than one field officer. Would you always have two that go to sites? I just wondered how long it takes? I guess it depends on the size of the property as well. Not being a farmer, I can imagine it takes a while if it's a large property.

Ms HOWLETT - Very true. Regarding staff employed to control poppy crops, for FTEs there's one manager, one poppy support office, three field officers, so the total FTEs are five.

Ms ARMITAGE - Okay, so there are five. So you'd have, what, two field offices at any one time undertaking checking on poppy crops? And hemp crops I'm assuming as well?

Ms WILSON - It depends, but there is the focus of the three field staff in total which we've talked about. They actually focus on a region.

Ms ARMITAGE - One last question, if that's all right, Chair, I am conscious of time.

It is regarding the Industrial Hemp Amendment Bill. Will the funding that's been allocated to the supervision of poppy and hemp crops now be sufficient over the forward Estimates now that we've got the Industrial Hemp Amendment Bill? Is there enough money in the budget?

Ms HOWLETT - We believe so, yes.

Output Group 2: Primary Industries and Water

2.3 Water Resources Management

CHAIR - If there are no further questions on the supervision of poppy and hemp crops, I'll move to Water Resources Management and invite Ms O'Connor to begin the questions.

Ms O'CONNOR - Minister, I want to do what the Greens have done at the table over the past few years and ask you as the new minister about river health. Despite your predecessor's best efforts to suppress this report, I refer to *Temporal and spatial patterns in river health across Tasmania and the influence of environmental factors* produced by the former Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and the Environment.

We did obtain a copy during the caretaker period in the 2020-21 state election, but it examined river health up to the year 2018 and found serious declines in all the major rivers across the state. I understand the department has continued to monitor river health. So what are the trends now in river health over the past six years since this report was produced?

Ms HOWLETT - Collectively, Tasmanian water monitoring programs provide wide coverage and long-term monitoring records for Tasmanian catchments. River health is of interest to all users of Tasmanian water resources. Healthy rivers underpin the state's economy, environment and way of life. Since 1994, the Department of NRE has conducted broad scale monitoring of river conditions in Tasmania, under the River Health Monitoring Program.

This monitoring provides important datasets on the health of rivers in Tasmania. The Rural Water Use Strategy is delivering several waterway health projects focusing on enhancing sharing of data information, developing a new state-wide water quality monitoring program and enhancing the understanding of the drivers of river health.

Ms O'CONNOR - How about an answer to the question?

Ms HOWLETT - I'd like to bring Catherine Murdoch to the table, who is a specialist in water.

Ms O'CONNOR - We're actually looking for some data as much as anything else, and if there's anything you can provide to the committee in terms of data on river health, that would be very helpful.

Ms MURDOCH - In regards to the River Health Monitoring Program that you discussed, which has been in place for a very long time, as you know, there are many factors that actually influence the health of rivers, including variation of climate, droughts, flows, and the range of activities in catchments, but this broad-scale monitoring program, which we have been doing since 1994 - the overall results up to 2023, based on monitoring during that time period, show that many rivers in the state are healthy and in stable condition, whereas some stretches of rivers are in poor condition and declining. The healthy -

Ms O'CONNOR - Sorry to interrupt you, Ms Murdoch. Are you able to provide information on which rivers are healthy and which rivers are declining? That's the sort of granularity we're after.

Ms MURDOCH - Yes. This information is actually on our portal. You can log in and get that; we put it on there every year. Of the 53 long-term sites, 51 per cent of sites are actually in healthy condition and 49 per cent are impacted to varying degrees. Importantly, to get trend data out of that - because the data is inherently variable because of conditions - what we can say is they're stable trends. On 12 sites, or around 23 per cent, only 10 sites indicated a decline. Improving sites are a trend of one site.

Ms O'CONNOR - How many sites are improving?

Ms MURDOCH - One, but only 10 sites are indicating a decline. That was all included in the State of the Environment report for 2024.

The other thing we also have is monitoring, as I think was mentioned, in regards to the projects under the Rural Water Use Strategy. One of those is the River Health Program, and within that is the Drivers of Change. That's been doing water quality and nutrient monitoring at 50 sites. Some 61 per cent of those sites have shown that there has been no decline in water quality for nutrients at those sites.

Ms O'CONNOR - Any improvements?

Ms MURDOCH - I haven't got that granular level. This is new work that we're doing under the Rural Water Use Strategy, so we have one year worth of data.

Ms O'CONNOR - So you can see through the data that there hasn't been decline, but you can't see through the data you have whether there's been an improvement?

Ms WILSON - What we're saying is that the new work we're doing in terms of the Drivers of Change project - we have 50 sites that we're looking at. It's a two-year project. We have some preliminary analysis of the first 12 months of data, which demonstrates that 64 per cent of sites have experienced an improvement or minimal change - we'll need to break that down further when we do the further report - in nutrient conditions since the baseline water quality program finished in 2008's dataset.

In 12 per cent of sites there has been a moderate or some degradation in nitrogen phosphorus concentrations, but I would like to caveat this - my team are listening - that this is preliminary data. They've provided it to me, but we do need the two years of data, and my team needs the time to do the full assessment and then produce a report so that it's not just based on one year of data.

Ms O'CONNOR - The question was specific to what the trends have been over the past six years, and I don't know if I've misheard, but is it true to say that you're only looking at data from the past year to determine whether there have been trends? I think the committee should see information that indicates, on those metrics that are detailed on page 105 of the report I referenced earlier, what the trend has been since this body of scientific work was extracted from government through the caretaker period.

Is this available? On all these rivers - is it possible to put it on notice and have an update at that level of data? I would have thought - they're just columns here, but there are indicators or inputs that are standard, so it wouldn't be a huge body of work to provide an update. I'm still unclear that there's been any significant improvement, if any, in our beautiful, life-giving rivers.

Ms WILSON - The water information web portal which was referred to earlier, to which there's a link on our website, has river health scores for 53 long-term monitoring sites. Full data sets are available since 1994. In terms of provision of information, I need to understand what we could extract and what would be useful in terms of what the honourable member is seeking, because that information is available on our portal.

Ms O'CONNOR - I understand that the department's Healthy Waterways Project is doing some case studies - I think four case studies - to understand what factors are behind the quite depressing river health decline, to be honest. My question is not about why, it's what. What are the statewide trends in river health? We want a holistic picture here. Has the water management branch engaged in further detailed work to update our understanding of these trends since 2018?

Ms WILSON - In terms of that broad-scale river health since 1994, of the 50, I think we've already -

Ms O'CONNOR - 2018.

Ms WILSON - Apologies. The 28 sites and the four case studies - that's work in action, and the intent is to finalise that. The team have given me an update that they are aiming to do that early 2025, and that information will be released at that time, once the report is finalised.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - So we don't have any clarity here at the table yet, and I'm probably slightly annoying the Chair by having another crack at the question -

CHAIR - This is the last time.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's just really important to all our communities. What are the statewide trends in river health?

Ms HOWLETT - Based on the monitoring from 1994 to 2023, many rivers in the state are healthy and in a stable condition, whereas some stretches of river are in poor condition and some are declining.

Ms O'CONNOR - Most of the rivers are in a state of decline.

Ms HOWLETT - Of the 53 long-term monitoring sites, 51 per cent of sites are in a healthy condition and 49 per cent are impacted to varying degrees, based on average scores for 2018 to 2023. Many - 17 per cent - of the sites have stable trends, indicating that they have remained healthy over a long period -

Ms O'CONNOR - The last thing I'll say - sorry, minister - the Spatial and Temporal Patterns Report found that the rivers at more than half of the monitoring sites are in decline. Is that trend being reversed?

Ms HOWLETT - Can I just finish my sentence?

Ms O'CONNOR - Can you finish reading your brief? Sure.

Ms HOWLETT - So, 15 per cent of the impacted sites have declining trends, which suggests the status of these sites has been changing in recent years. In addition, 6 per cent of the impacted sites have stable trends, which indicates that the status of these sites has remained the same in recent years.

Ms O'CONNOR - I didn't get an answer, but we'll keep at you.

CHAIR - I might go to the honourable member for Launceston, who thinks that she might have a waterway that's not very healthy.

Ms ARMITAGE - How do you determine which rivers you are monitoring? I'm interested in how you actually determine which rivers to monitor. I know that the Tamar is not going to be included in yours; it's in a pretty sad state and NRE do the best they can.

Ms HOWLETT - NRE certainly do the best they can -

Ms ARMITAGE - We can't do much with a river that needs help though, unfortunately, without a lot of money.

Ms WILSON - The determination of where the sites are for the River Health Monitoring Program is based on our experts. There was a review in 2018, for example. Post the 2018 review, we had 43 test sites and 10 reference sites. The number of test sites where river health is less likely to be impacted has increased. That's because we're testing more in the lower

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reaches. There was a report that was published on our website which indicates why we've chosen the sites that we're currently testing.

CHAIR - I've got some days for efficiency for dam permit processing, but I'm interested in how many dam permits have actually been provided for Division 4 works and Division 3 works. Given that we know that it's important to hold on to the water. How many works permits have been approved?

Ms HOWLETT - In 2023-24, dam work permit applications have been processed well within the statutory time frames outlined in the act.

CHAIR - That's in the budget page. I'm looking for the numbers.

Ms HOWLETT - Twelve months, 105 dam work permits were issued for 2023-2024.

CHAIR - Are they split up in Division 4 and Division 3?

Ms HOWLETT - This includes approval for 50 Division 3 permits and approvals for 55 Division 4 permits.

CHAIR - We'll be able to work that out once you give me one number. So thank you. Is that an increase on last year? I know there's a couple of very big ones close to my family home. Huge one.

Ms HOWLETT - Very good question, Chair.

CHAIR - It's okay if you haven't got it.

Ms HOWLETT - We'll find it and provide it by the end of the question.

CHAIR - My second question is around self-management for irrigation schemes. I'm interested to understand whether the department is looking at any self-management for irrigation schemes. Has anyone applied, and how are they progressing?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank the Chair for her question and I know you have a keen interest in the Winnaleah community.

CHAIR - I have to declare an interest. I have a financial interest.

Ms HOWLETT - Irrigation schemes. It's well known that Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme Limited, known as WISL, and Winnaleah Irrigators have a long-standing connection to the local scheme. I also know that WISL has a desire to take on greater responsibility.

When Tasmanian Irrigation (TI) made the decision earlier this year not to renew WISL's contract for operation and maintenance of the Winnaleah scheme, I know that the WISL board has concerns about this decision and it would hinder its opportunities for future community management of the scheme.

I'm advised that Tas Irrigation's decision was made purely for operational reasons and does not in any way prejudice a future application for community management. As you're

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aware, the government introduced legislation late last year that enabled TI to delegate some powers and functions to irrigator groups who want to take on a greater level of management of publicly owned irrigation schemes.

In practice, this means irrigator groups can apply to TI for delegation to undertake functions that Tasmanian Irrigation would otherwise undertake. I know that you're well aware that I have met with WISL and also with TI and they currently are in discussions.

CHAIR - About self-management? Right. Is there any other organisation, other than the Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme Limited?

Ms HOWLETT - As as you know, I've written to TI and WISL to indicate my willingness for them to work together to facilitate local management of publicly owned irrigation schemes. I'm advised Tas Irrigation had its first meeting with the Winnaleah Irrigation representative community today, and that the meeting was constructive. I hope that this, along with using Winnaleah as a test case for self-management application process, is the way forward and it also shows a willingness to work together.

CHAIR - I'll be watching.

Ms HOWLETT - I know you certainly will.

Ms O'CONNOR - Another water question. I know we need to move on. The recently released review of Tasmania's water accountability framework, which is connected to the Chair's previous questions, is the latest report to highlight that the current cost arrangements are not consistent with basic economic principles or the national water pricing principles. The report said:

Tasmania needs to move to greater levels of cost recovery to fund the water management activities it critically needs ... Not doing so means having an ineffective and unsustainable water management approach or cross-subsidisation from other areas of government.

Can you give us at least your in-principle support for the recommendations of the water accountability framework and give your in-principle support for a cost recovery process, so we're not having this inequitable system where some producers pay metered prices for their water, some don't, and the Tasmanian taxpayer is subsidising that?

CHAIR - That's why you need self-management so that your costs don't get out of control.

Ms O'CONNOR - If you had a metre, it would be easier to manage and it would be fairer, but that's when you're attached to an irrigation scheme properly.

Ms HOWLETT - The government supports all 23 recommendations in the independent report which span policy, legislative, administrative and operational changes. These recommendations will be implemented in consultation with key stakeholders -

Ms O'CONNOR - Time line?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't give you a time line on that unless the deputy secretary -

Ms O'CONNOR - I understood from this morning's hearing - sorry to interject - that you said you'd commence a review of water cost allocations on the completion of the Rural Water Use Strategy.

Ms WILSON - The Rural Water Use Strategy has a program of activities. The government has committed to that program of activities. One of those would be to review the water management framework in terms of understanding fees and charges. It is to review.

I'd point out that there was a review of fees and charges in 2019. There was a regulatory impact statement which was released at that time. That regulatory impact statement was subject to public consultation, and that went to water pricing. That's on the public record. It's available for people to see. That was not that long ago.

The other point we would normally make - we've made in these hearings before is the Rural Water Use Strategy has a number of pieces of work which will inform water management into the future. That will then determine our compliance regime and how we undertake our activities. It would be pre-emptive to undertake any work without having that new model in place.

Ms O'CONNOR - Pre-emptive? Sorry.

Ms WILSON - It's about a staged approach, which is put forward in the Rural Water Use Strategy.

Ms O'CONNOR - You talk about it being pre-emptive, but previously you'd referenced work from 2019 that touched on the same pricing issues. It's not like this is a surprise to government that there's inequity and economic foolishness and massive public subsidy associated with this. I don't think it's reasonable to say it would be pre-emptive to take some action here. You've had multiple reviews, you know what the issue is.

Ms HOWLETT - Is that a comment or would you like to add to that, deputy secretary?

Ms O'CONNOR - I want to know, is the government going to implement any of the recommendations of the review into Tasmania's Water Accountability Framework?

Ms HOWLETT - I have already stated that the government supports all 23 recommendations in the independent report.

Ms O'CONNOR - Are you going to implement them?

Ms HOWLETT - I stated that the government supports all 23 recommendations in the independent report, which span policy, legislative, administrative and operational changes, and these recommendations will be implemented in consultation with key stakeholders.

Ms O'CONNOR - Sounds like taxpayers are going to be footing the bill for a lot longer.

Output Group 3
Biosecurity

3.1 Biosecurity and Product Integrity

CHAIR - Thank you very much. I'll now move to 3.1, which is Biosecurity. I expect that we don't need too many changes at the table because we already have Ms Burrows with us.

Ms HOWLETT - I have the dam permits trend if you would like me to read that information in.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms HOWLETT - So, 2022-23, Division 3, there were 39; in 2023-24 there were 50; Division 4, 2022-23, 45; and 2023-24, 55.

CHAIR - Bit of an uplift there.

Ms HOWLETT - There is a significant uplift there.

Mr EDMUNDS - Minister, I saw the press release and media conference from the weekend, 'Budget provides biosecurity boost'. My question is about the new biosecurity officers. Are they new employees or a continuation of fixed-term contracts?

Ms HOWLETT - A bit of both. I will hand over to Rae Burrows from Biosecurity to get you that exact information.

Ms BURROWS - The Strong Borders, Strong Sector \$4.2 million over four years creates 13 new positions. It is over four years, so they're fixed-term. It consists of: five biosecurity inspectors, travellers and cargo; two senior biosecurity officers, travellers and cargo, so they will be in different regions; three technical officers that are part-time, as part of our entomology group; one intelligence analyst; two senior biosecurity inspectors in the animal welfare area; two food safety management officers, who are existing, so it's extending them; and one molecular technical support officer.

The biosecurity frontline services are \$1.99 million, which was for ongoing, is funding: two market access positions which are existing but only fixed-term; three biosecurity inspectors, who are also existing but only fixed-term; one veterinary liaison officer, again existing but only fixed-term; two food safety management officers, again existing but only fixed-term; one senior biosecurity inspector for animal welfare and biosecurity, again existing but only fixed-term; one principal biosecurity officer, animal welfare, biosecurity product integrity, again existing but only limited fixed-term; two senior biosecurity inspectors, animal welfare; one stakeholder engagement officer for animal welfare; and one principal biosecurity officer for the dog detector unit.

Mr EDMUNDS - Are all those positions currently -

Ms BURROWS - The ones I mentioned that were existing were only for fixed terms, so the funding is extending them.

Mr EDMUNDS - And they remain fixed or are they ongoing now?

Ms BURROWS - The \$1.99 million is ongoing funding, so they will now be permanent.

Mr EDMUNDS - So, how many actual new positions are there?

Ms WILSON - There are 13 new positions under the \$4.2 million. Then there are the three - sorry, five in the other, sorry, four in the other. But I would point out that moving fixed-term positions to permanent is a significant boost for biosecurity.

Mr EDMUNDS - Absolutely. So, there are 18 positions that were fixed that are now permanent?

Ms BURROWS - I have 14, actually.

Mr EDMUNDS - How many fixed-term contracts are still within Biosecurity Tasmania?

Ms BURROWS - Biosecurity Tasmania currently has 102 fixed-term and permanent staff in the area of policy and planning, and 129 frontline operational staff. Of the 129 frontline operational staff, currently 77 are permanent full-time staff; 14 permanent part-time staff and 38 seasonal casual staff. I apologise, it was primarily our frontline operational staff I am able to break down.

Ms HOWLETT - There are 10 dogs around the state and 12 handlers as well.

Mr EDMUNDS - We will look at those numbers and then see if we might have to ask another question in parliament or something. No worries.

I was reading the NRET's 'Be aware of bird flu' webpage before. What preparations have you got for if or when bird flu arrives in Tasmania? How many people from across NRET will be required to stand up in response to bird flu being reported in Tasmania, and can you tell me what the response would look like?

Ms HOWLETT - Thankfully, no strain of avian bird flu has been detected in Tasmania and, thankfully, Australia is the only continent that has not had an outbreak of the deadly H5N1. The government knows the value of protecting our state's unique environment from pests and diseases. Tasmania's biosecurity system is well-equipped to respond to an outbreak of bird flu and there are nationally agreed response procedures in place. Biosecurity Tasmania is actively monitoring the situation, including issuing advice to industry as well as the community. As we know, bird flu is highly contagious and there are many strains of the virus that can cause symptoms in birds and other animals, and also in humans. I am not sure, Rae, if you would like to speak any more to the preparedness?

Mr EDMUNDS - I am interested in the response.

Ms BURROWS - As the minister points out, there is a variety of variants of avian influenza. As you are probably aware, Victoria, New South Wales and ACT have recently had an incursion of H7, HBAI, that is exotic to Australia. It was exotic to Australia. They are probably well on the way now to eradicating it.

Because it is exotic to Australia and it is considered one of our highest priority emergency animal diseases, it forms one of our species that we respond to nationally under the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement, which all states and jurisdictions have signed up to. We have a protocol whereby the approach to responding to it is stamping out, which is, unfortunately, destroying all poultry, disposing of their carcasses in a biosecure manner, and then decontaminating the areas they were living in. That is what has happened with H7 on the mainland.

With H5N1, we will do the same approach with commercial poultry. It will be stamping out. If we can protect any commercial poultry areas for as long as we can, we will. Commercial poultry producers now know what they need to do to minimise the risk to their poultry because avian influenza is carried by wild birds. They have been advised to feed and water their birds away from any impacts for wild birds. We'll keep commercial poultry as safe as we can. As far as wild birds, mammals and other unfortunate animals that get impacted by H5N1, that's going to be an issue. We won't be able to do much about that.

Mr EDMUNDS - In terms of people power, how much capacity is there to stand up?

Ms BURROWS - The H5N1 response will be an interagency response. No question. An H7 response, BT will be leading it. We will be able to go for some time, but because it's a [inaudible] response, we will at some stage need to bring in interagency assistance as well. They become huge. The ACT and New South Wales had to kill 1.5 million birds. It's a huge undertaking just for H7. You can imagine how big it's going to be for H5. It's going to be an interagency response.

CHAIR - Minister, you have something to table?

Ms HOWLETT - In relation to Meg Webb's question in relation to the number of RTI decisions NRE delivered within the timeframe prescribed by the RTI legislation, in 2023-24, there was 48 of 54, so 88 per cent; in 2022-23, 66 of 78 which is 84 percent; in 2021-22, 68 out of 75 which is 90 per cent. I'd also like to table this document as well, Chair, in relation to our -

Ms O'CONNOR - Property protection permits, is it?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, that was property protection permits and the species.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, we need to correct a number.

Ms WILSON - We were asked about the new biosecurity positions. There are 17 new biosecurity positions. We just had to count properly.

CHAIR - Any advance on 17?

Mr EDMUNDS - They're new positions filled by people off fixed term contracts?

Ms WILSON - They're the new positions. I'm sorry, no, I would have to do another number of that.

Mr EDMUNDS - The crux of the question is, how many more warm bodies is it essentially?

Ms WILSON - I've been informed it's 17. If we need to come back to that anytime during the evening, of course we will.

CHAIR - My question is around biosecurity truck wash and livestock effluent dumps. It's now five years since we've had one opened, other than the one that we have at Smithton. I'm interested in what your government is doing to facilitate another one of those biosecurity truck wash effluent dumps across the state, preferably in the north of the state. One is not sufficient, or two is not sufficient when you've got them at Powranna and Smithton.

Ms HOWLETT - It is an important question, Chair, and I know it's a question that's very close to your heart.

CHAIR - It's a biosecurity issue.

Ms HOWLETT - Rae is very passionate about this and we attended the Powranna truck wash only a few weeks ago.

Ms BURROWS - As you're probably aware, the Powranna truck wash has recently been upgraded. We spent, I believe, \$310,000 on that.

CHAIR - We can thank the former minister for finding the funds for that. I think that's fair to acknowledge.

Ms BURROWS - That is correct. The changes that they've made to Powranna mean the efficiency and effectiveness of that particular truck wash have been increased out of sight. It's really good to see that work. That work is providing the foundation for the work at Smithton, which the chair of the steering committee, of which I'm a member, has agreed we need to fast-track because it's been going a little slowly. It has been good in as much that we can now use the experiences of Powranna throughout the whole process to make sure that the Smithton one is as good as it can be and perhaps we can even have some more efficiencies in the construction of that one

CHAIR - That doesn't solve the problem. Not every truck with cattle goes to Smithton. It doesn't solve the problem of coming out of the north-east, particularly around the east coast north-east with nowhere to dump their effluent. That's my question.

Ms WILSON - Thank you for your ongoing interest in this matter. I appreciate we've had some discussions around this in the past.

CHAIR - We're not getting very far, sadly.

Ms WILSON - As we've indicated previously, when we did a study on truck washes and effluent management, it was identified that it was critically important that we had a partnership approach with local government or another provider, that we needed to identify for sustainability and make sure that it would work for the local community. That we had a partner to help to run the facility-

CHAIR - The ongoing.

Ms WILSON - To run the ongoing. At this stage we are focused on Smithton but we do look for other opportunities, but it really does come down to, as the report said, finding another operator to help so that it's sustainable.

CHAIR - Is there still money in the budget for an operator in another part of Tasmania other than Smithton and Powranna?

Ms WILSON - I have to check the exact amount, but I believe all the funding has been allocated. Obviously, if an opportunity comes up, we could take that to government for consideration through the ordinary budget process.

CHAIR - I hope we get something before I have to retire.

Ms WEBB - A question around invasive weed management. I think it comes under this area. Minister, it's concerning to see a decrease in the funding for the 2025-26 year here in the budget. By the notes, it's due to the apparent completion of the Weeds Action Fund. I would have thought surely the ongoing threat posed by invasive weeds to our ecology and our primary industries requires ongoing vigilance.

My questions around that are: What funding is allocated in each of the next four financial years for managing invasive weeds? How many government funded positions have been working on weeds over the past five years? How many positions will be in each year across the forward Estimates? What outcomes have been noted from the Weeds Action Fund to date? Are we measuring that, and what metrics are we using? How many new weed incursions, which are highly likely to have come from escaped garden plants have been recorded in the last 10 years? I'd like a list of the species and locations of those, if that sort of detail is possible.

That's my full set. I can repeat any of them if needed but I wanted to give you the full set.

Ms HOWLETT - We might go through one by one.

Ms WEBB - Sure. The first one was about the funding allocated in each of the next four financial years for managing weeds.

Ms HOWLETT - In 2018-19, the government committed \$15 million to the Weed Action Fund. We're also co-investing with farmers, councils and community organisations to tackle invasive weeds, including gorse. The 2023-24 Budget continued the government's support of the Weed Action Fund with an additional investment of \$1.4 million over two years.

The government also supports a network of authorised weed officers from local government and statutory land management agencies. Biosecurity Tasmania is working closely with these agencies to support the transition of activities from the *Weed Management Act 1999* to the *Biosecurity Act 2019*.

We're also working with our national counterparts on weed management. I'll hand over to the department to provide more details on the project under the Enhancing National Pest Management and Weed Management program.

Ms O'CONNOR - It is usual to ask the committee if they want to hear from the department rather than just automatically assume you can hand over.

Ms WEBB - May I redirect you back to my question though? You described funding you've already provided in the past budgets.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, and you are asking about future funding.

Ms WEBB - I am asking about the next four financial years and what funding is allocated in each of those for managing weeds.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. The core component is the Weeds Action Fund. In terms of the cash flow, there is what's in the budget. I sit on the steering committee for the Weeds Action Fund, and it's -

Ms WEBB - Just to clarify, it finishes in this financial year, is that correct? It doesn't appear to be in the 2025-26 year. It was in last year's budget for two years.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister: it's likely we'll be cash flowing the money into an out year, because of the way that the Weeds Action Fund works. In terms of the next round, I'd have to give you some further details about that, because we're working through the budget at the moment. The other thing I'd point out is that in biosecurity, we have an invasive species branch that would continue to undertake weeds-related activities outside the Weeds Action Fund.

Ms WEBB - That probably relates to my other question, which is around how many government-funded positions have been working in the area of control of invasive weeds over each of the past five years? Then what we're looking ahead in terms of those positions. Will they be maintained?

Ms BURROWS - We have four invasive species officer, one coordinator, and one for each region. They deal with weeds, they deal with rabbits, they deal with cats. To say how much time on one just for weeds would be quite difficult, I have to say.

Ms WEBB - That's fine, that's enough context. It's part of a role that is one in each region and a manager over the those three-

Ms BURROWS - Sorry, I missed one. There was a policy officer specifically for weeds, as well.

Mr JACOBI - If I can, through you, minister: Also, there are three biosecurity officers focused solely on the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Those biosecurity officers are focused on weeds primarily.

Ms WEBB - Okay, thank you. That's good to understand. That allocation isn't expected to change in the coming years?

Mr JACOBI - No, they are positions that are funded.

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Ms WEBB - Great. The other questions that I had related to the Weeds Action Fund are: what outcomes have there been to date and what metrics are we using to measure its success?

Ms WILSON - We have case studies around what the Weeds Action Fund has delivered. For example-

Ms WEBB - I don't really want a description, given the time we're at in terms of the session. I'm more interested in if we have firm metrics to assess the success of that program.

Ms WILSON - NRM North helped the agency undertake stages 1 and 2, and they'll be doing an evaluation of the program. We have specific projects which have a value-added component, so that's part of how we'll be doing an assessment of the of the program.

Weed management and these projects are around the long term. Some of the things that will add great value, particularly where the Weeds Action Fund is, is funded plans for particular areas. At the moment, there's a plan to fund a weeds management program for the north-west, because if it's a mix, you need to do plans for particular areas, and those plans aim to engage local communities and to prioritise. There's also been a mix of specific projects dealing with highly invasive weed species. A good example is the Coal River Valley with the Chilean needlegrass.

Ms WEBB - That final question I had - and hopefully it's just a quick one, you can say whether you have this or not - do we maintain a list, or some sort of record, about new weed incursions over the last 10 years? In terms of species and locations, and where that's arriving or cropping up?

CHAIR - Has there been any one or any thing added to the list? It's starting to be a long week. Any additions to the list?

Ms WILSON - We keep a list of incursions. One thing to point out is, you asked the questions about 'escaped' from gardens. We've done some good work on foxglove. But, they're in the environment. We do some Spanish heath, for example. There are some things where we go, 'oh gosh, there's something here' and we've funded specific and particular work for areas around things that we think are eradicable.

Rae, I'm not sure if we've got any figures on anything that might have come into the state.

Ms BURROWS - The most recent new weed was the Chilean mayten in 2023. There were no new weed species in 2024 or 2022 that I can -

CHAIR - You probably haven't been to my garden.

Ms WEBB - Is there a public list like that somewhere that we maintain?

Ms HOWLETT - We can make that public.

Ms WEBB - That would be great.

Ms HOWLETT - Just weeds?

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Ms WEBB - Yes, thank you.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, we have that information on our website.

Ms WEBB - If it's on the website that's fine.

Mr JACOBI - Invasive grasses program details all the grasses that are of particular focus for the agency.

CHAIR - We don't need it tabled then, minister. Members when they get three minutes can find that. We'll have one last question and then we'll have a few minutes break while we move to racing regulation.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you. Minister, I want to go back to the slaughterhouses issue. I note that the CCTV which is in slaughterhouses is not something that's readily accessible immediately by Biosecurity Tasmania. Are you able to inform the committee how often Biosecurity Tasmania would look at, for example, the CCTV footage held by Tasmanian Quality Meats?

CHAIR - You don't need to repeat them all.

Ms O'CONNOR - No, no, I'm not going to repeat all the cruelties. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR - No, but you don't need to repeat the names again.

Ms O'CONNOR - No, I'm not going to repeat the names, but I am going to talk about Tasmanian Quality Meats, with respect, Chair.

The Farm Transparency Project footage, which was the subject of the legal complaint about Tasmanian Quality Meats was taken in August and September 2023. Five months later, your government gave this company \$430,000 in May. Minister, that's reward for cruelty, isn't it?

My first question is how often does Biosecurity Tasmania look at the CCTV footage inside these five particular slaughterhouses? Secondly, why was the decision made to give nearly \$500,000 to a company which has been accused of such grotesque cruelty?

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, I thank the member for her question. It was paramount that we provided money for that company.

Ms O'CONNOR - Why? Because they're a Font client?

Ms HOWLETT - Do you know why?

Ms O'CONNOR - Because they're a Font client.

Ms HOWLETT - Because there would have been a huge animal welfare issue in the state and do you know why?

Ms O'CONNOR - Why didn't you just apply the regulations and make them fix it up.

Ms HOWLETT - Because they are the only bobby calf processor in this state.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, okay, so why should the state pay for that?

Ms HOWLETT - You know how many dairy cattle -

Ms O'CONNOR - You rewarded cruelty.

Ms HOWLETT - and it would have destroyed the dairy industry in Tasmania. That money provided the facility to do the upgrades that were required. As I said that was an animal welfare issue and we would have had severe animal welfare impacts if that had not occurred.

Ms O'CONNOR - How do we know that that's not happening now, given that the CCTV footage is held on the premises? I don't know yet how often it's looked at by Biosecurity Tasmania, but it's not something you can watch live.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll hand you over to Rae. Felicity Richards and the task force have done an incredible amount of work on this and I thank them for all the work they have achieved. I just want to put that on record. I'll hand you over to Rae.

CHAIR - The question is about how often the CCTV footage is looked at, thank you, and that's the only question.

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister, the TQM video cameras were in place before all this happened, and as I mentioned before, it is audited by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. It's an export accredited facility, so it is the federal department's responsibility to check that. As with all -

Ms O'CONNOR - Isn't it our responsibility as well under the *Animal Welfare Act*, with respect, Rae?

Ms BURROWS - No, it's an exporter, so it's a DAFF responsibility.

Ms O'CONNOR - Are they exempt from Tasmanian animal welfare laws?

Ms WILSON - If DAFF was to identify anything that required an investigation, they would refer it to the appropriate authorities.

Ms O'CONNOR - Sorry, last question. Is no-one in Tasmania looking at the CCTV footage at Tasmanian Quality Meats? Who's looking at the footage? We just got a shrug from the deputy secretary.

Ms HOWLETT - We love naming people in this place, don't we. Name and shame.

Ms BURROWS - The footage for the other domestic abattoirs and processing facilities, as you know, the VMS guidelines were only made mandatory on 30 June. We are trying to make it so that we can look at whatever sections we like in real-time. We're having some problems with the software. At the moment, they have to provide us with whatever footage we want. We can say we want 1 September to 5 September between these hours and they must

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provide it to us. That's part of the announced and unannounced visits. I do apologise, I recognise that I should have mentioned that when you asked the question before, but I got carried away on something else.

Ms O'CONNOR - You're doing beautifully, Rae. Just to confirm, Tasmanian Quality Meats' CCTV footage is not looked at by Biosecurity Tasmania?

CHAIR - At this point in time.

Ms BURROWS - Unless DAFF refers to us and says, 'we think we have a problem'. They will refer to us and we will work with them.

Ms O'CONNOR - Extraordinary. I guess it pays to be a Font client.

Ms HOWLETT - Ms O'Connor, I think you should withdraw that comment.

Ms O'CONNOR - No.

Ms HOWLETT - I really do.

Ms O'CONNOR - Not a chance.

Ms WILSON - To be clear, we can access the site.

Ms O'CONNOR - But you haven't.

Ms WILSON - No. We were there on 15 August. We will have the capacity to inspect, but as Ms Burrows has said, it's a DAFF accredited site. They have a person on site.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do they?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, and they're not the only DAFF accredited site.

Ms O'CONNOR - Full-time on site?

Ms BURROWS - Part of their accreditation through the Commonwealth is they must have a vet on-site all the time and they also must have animal welfare officers. I'm not sure how many, but they definitely have to have a vet on site.

Ms O'CONNOR - Did they have a vet on-site during this footage?

CHAIR - Question for the federal government.

Ms HOWLETT - Correct.

Ms O'CONNOR - I don't think the vet on-site helped for this particular issue at the time.

CHAIR - Order. It's not a question. Thank you very much, minister. We will take a break. Thank you very much to those who have provided input into this afternoon's session. The committee very much appreciates it.

We will suspend while we move to Racing Regulation. Thank you to those who are leaving us. About five minutes and that will give anyone time for a break. Thank you.

The committee suspended from 6.31 p.m. to 6.42 p.m.

**Minister for Racing
Racing Regulation and Policy**

5.1 Racing and Regulation Policy

CHAIR - We're back on air. Thank you, minister. You have a couple of new people at the table since your area of responsibility now is Racing Regulation and Policy. If you could introduce those people that would be excellent.

Ms HOWLETT - To my left I have Deidre Wilson, Deputy Secretary of Primary Industries and Water and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Tasmania. Then I have Robin Thompson, Acting Director of Racing and General Manager Office of Racing Integrity, and our secretary Jason Jacobi, Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. To my right, I have Anita Yan.

CHAIR - Anita's position?

Ms HOWLETT - Anita is Deputy Chief Operations Officer of the Department of NRE.

CHAIR - Is there a very brief overview or are we launching straight into questions?

Ms HOWLETT - I would like to give an overview.

CHAIR - Fairly brief.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. As many are aware, I grew up around racing. It's always been part of my family life and that's why it's a really important part of many regional Tasmanian communities. I love its animals and I love its people and I'm pleased to be here today to talk about racing, which generates more than \$208 million in economic activity for Tasmania annually and involves 6400 people across the state, directly or indirectly.

The government is a proud supporter of Tasmania's racing community and the passionate Tasmanians who are part of it. Chair, I know some members hold opposite views and I respectfully accept that, but the government wants to provide the Tasmanian racing industry with a modern, effective and fit for purpose model for regulation and integrity, to strengthen all three codes of racing in Tasmania and to see them thrive. That's because we know how important it is to the families, communities, local jobs, and businesses that it supports.

In recent weeks we've taken a big step forward in delivering our 2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania's Future in racing. The passage of the Racing Regulation and Integrity Bill 2024 and the Racing Regulation and Integrity (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2024 delivered an important part of our plan. The delivery of this reform will provide the Tasmanian racing industry with a modern, effective and fit for purpose model for regulation and integrity. It incorporates the recommendations from the independent Monteith Review for a best practise

integrity model and reflects the feedback received from stakeholders and the community. This has been the result of two years of work to introduce the biggest reform in decades to the industry. I thank my colleagues for supporting these important reforms to deliver this key policy commitment.

At this point I want to recognise and thank members of both Houses who worked constructively with the government during the passage of the legislation. They provided important scrutiny and feedback and in a number of cases helped to improve the legislation through amendment. We now look forward to implementing the legislation so we can continue to progress this work and help rebuild trust and restore faith in racing across all three codes and see them thrive.

The 2024-25 Budget drives the delivery of our 2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania's Future by supporting measures to improve integrity, animal welfare and the overall wellbeing of the Tasmanian racing industry.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Chair. We'll get down to some detailed questions over the course of the next couple of hours, but I refer you to a report which I know you're aware of called A Few Bad Apples by Animal Liberation Tasmania, who've done a very thorough body of research using various pieces of evidence over the course of one year.

What this report finds is that five per cent of all racing greyhounds that were listed as racing in that year are deceased, 50 per cent of them, half, died from track injuries, half of them died when they were less than three years old - just stopped being puppies really - and there's about 30 dogs for which there's no obvious trace.

Minister, do you agree that this report, again, paints the most damning possible picture of the greyhound racing industry, and if there's anything that's in this report that you do not regard as fact, perhaps you could share that with the committee.

Ms HOWLETT - I thank the honourable member for her question and her remarks. The report was given to me at approximately 11.00 a.m. today.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, that's fair.

Ms HOWLETT - We had Primary Industries first.

Ms O'CONNOR - You haven't had a chance to read it, that is fair.

Ms HOWLETT - Dr Woodruff presented me with the report. I told Dr Woodruff that I would certainly read the report. I look forward to seeking some recommendations on that report.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's interesting. I just want to commend you also for agreeing that greyhound trainers and owners shouldn't be able to advertise their dogs on Gumtree and that you, as minister, are going to take steps to address that. I think that's really good. Thank you. That part of the committee made me quite happy.

If you determined, once you read this report, that there are really serious animal welfare and integrity issues - which there are - what will your next steps be under this new structure?

PUBLIC

Where would you take a report like this to drive the kind of change in the industry that you might regard as acceptable? Of course, the Greens want the industry to end, but if you want to restore the social licence, what do you do with the report like this, which paints a devastating picture?

Ms HOWLETT - As I mentioned this morning, I look forward to reading that report. I will certainly get back to yourself and Dr Woodruff. What I would do in future with that report would be discuss it with the Tasracing Integrity Commissioner, who sits above Tasracing and is completely separate to Tasracing. I would have discussions with the Integrity Commissioner. What I will say is that if you know of any animals that are ill-treated and have been identified, or any kennels or any stables that aren't up to standard, I would suggest you present -

Ms O'CONNOR - It's in this report.

Ms HOWLETT - Well, you shouldn't have waited for the report. If there -

Ms O'CONNOR - I know what you are trying to do here. It's actually not going to work, because this is not my report. I didn't do the investigation, so I couldn't possibly take anything I found out to the Tasracing Integrity Commissioner or police.

Ms HOWLETT - You only received the report today too.

Ms O'CONNOR - I received the report this morning. That's right.

Ms HOWLETT - Right, so you've received at the same time.

Ms O'CONNOR - Probably a little bit earlier than you.

Ms HOWLETT - You've had a fair bit of time to read through it, noting your -

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, yes, Dr Woodruff actually did most of the core reading, because I have been at this table all day. But what this report shows us is that the Rules of Racing as they apply to greyhounds are allowing dogs to be confined without exercise. They're allowing them to drink slimy water. They are allowing them to be kept in pens that are no more than a metre square. You don't need this report to tell you these things. As minister, you know. They've come up before. We bring them up at the estimates table all the time. You know this industry has cruelty at its heart.

Ms HOWLETT - I know the industry well, Ms O'Connor. What I will tell you is that the majority of participants in the greyhound code, thoroughbred code, and the harness code, love and care for their animals. That's what I can tell you.

Ms O'CONNOR - We can agree on that. We can agree, okay? That's why it's called A Few Bad Apples.

Ms HOWLETT - If there are any significant animal welfare concerns in that report - as you have stated, you have had a couple of hours to go through that report. I would have thought that those welfare complaints would have been provided to the RSPCA.

Ms O'CONNOR - You are the minister.

PUBLIC

Ms HOWLETT - Now -

Ms O'CONNOR - You are the minister.

CHAIR - Order.

Ms HOWLETT - If you are so concerned about what is in that report, why have you not provided that to the RSPCA this afternoon?

Ms O'CONNOR - This is the most pathetic attack. It's an absolutely pathetic attack. You are the minister. You have the power. These are issues that have been brought to government's attention.

Ms HOWLETT - You have animal welfare complaints there in your hand.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do you know what? Most of this is -

CHAIR - Order. Do you have a question?

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Chair. Most of what is identified in this report is actually lawful under the Rules of Racing. I'm not sure if I took it to the RSPCA there'd be much that they could do.

Ms HOWLETT - Right.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do you understand why the Rules of Racing are failing greyhounds?

Ms HOWLETT - Greyhounds, not thoroughbreds or harness racing. You're talking about greyhounds.

Ms O'CONNOR - Were you confused about the report I was talking about?

Ms HOWLETT - I'm certainly not confused about the report that you're talking about, not that I've had time to even open the report. The first point of contact for all animal welfare complaints in Tasmania is provided to the RSPCA. If you have any significant concerns in that report you should have phoned them an hour or two hours ago when you've clearly read the report.

Ms O'CONNOR - What a piss weak response, I mean, honestly.

Ms HOWLETT - Really? Order, Chair.

ACTING CHAIR - Order.

Ms O'CONNOR - Is she trying to attack me for her not doing her job.

ACTING CHAIR - The minister has pointed out that she will read the report. She hasn't read the report yet. Do you have further questions?

Ms O'CONNOR - I'll be back. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR - Mr Gaffney, did you have questions?

Mr GAFFNEY - I do have one. It's specifically about the greyhound trainers. I'm not sure whether you're reading about greyhound racing. I'll ask the question and I'll give people a chance to reflect.

If any legal proceedings against racing or greyhound trainers do not find any breach of the law, does the Director of Racing Integrity have grounds to still find them a not fit and proper person to hold a training licence on the same matters the court found no breach? I'm concerned about what that relationship is. I'll say it again because I can see some people looking. If any legal proceedings against racing or greyhound trainers do not find any breach of the law, does the Director of Racing Integrity have grounds to still find them a not fit and proper person to hold a training licence on the same matters that the court found no breach? I'm trying to find out the relationship between that authority. Double jeopardy question.

Ms HOWLETT - I thank the honourable member for that very important question. That is a question for the Office of Racing Integrity. The Chair is here, I'll ask Robin to speak to that.

Mr THOMPSON - Fit and proper is a very broad church. It's a multi-dimensional, multifunctional test that we use, which really isn't well-defined in legislation but is mentioned in some of the Rules of Racing. The fit and proper test that I use, the criteria that it contains is: the physical and mental health of the of the applicant; the respect of the applicant for the rules of society; the respect of the applicant for the Rules of Racing; the applicant living according to the principles of honesty, ethics, morals that we generally expect the community member to abide by; and, of course, financial sufficiency to meet the requirements, to be financially viable themselves, but also to meet the requirements of maintaining a racing animal. We know that can be quite expensive. Also, the actions and history - the historical actions of the person that won't be bringing the industry into disrepute.

The fit and proper test is really an aggregate test. There's no individual weighting on any of those individual components. Rather, we must weigh up in making a decision as to whether a person is licenced or not on the aggregate components of that. Those components were tested recently in a review of the decision I've made by the Tasmanian Racing Appeal Board. Those criteria were upheld as being acceptable criteria by the board and by the appellant. I think that means that they have a level of robustness around them, and a level of due process around them. We need to consider them as an aggregate rather than as one particular criterion alone.

Ms O'CONNOR - It doesn't mean Ben Yole was a fit and proper person.

Mr GAFFNEY - On that, I just want to understand, if there's a legal proceeding against a racing greyhound owner and they've found not to breach the law, does the Director of Racing Integrity have grounds to still find them a not fit and proper person to hold a training licence, on the same matters that the court absolved them, found no breach? I just want to know the relationship between the Director of Racing Integrity and the courts making a decision on legal proceedings against a racing trainer.

Mr THOMPSON - If the courts have determined that someone is not guilty, essentially, they have determined that the accusation or charge levelled against them hasn't been upheld and therefore they have nothing to answer for and therefore it wouldn't be an issue that I would consider against them in that it wouldn't be a part of their national police check and it wouldn't be an issue that I would take into account when considering their licensing application.

Ms WEBB - Can I follow up on that?

Deputy CHAIR - You can; I have a follow-up as well if that's all right.

Ms HOWLETT - Excuse me, Chair, honourable member, just before we move on to your question, would you mind if Robin added to evidence from this afternoon's hearing, please?

Deputy CHAIR - That could be quite worthwhile.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you.

Mr THOMPSON - I'd just like to add to the contribution I made this morning regarding actions that we had taken against persons posting comments on Facebook which were detrimental to the sport, detrimental to our racing controlling bodies and members of the sport. I'd like to add that stewards have now completed an investigation and an inquiry into a post that was made by Ms Brooke Hammond. The result of that inquiry is that that person has been found guilty of an offence under the Australian Harness Racing Rules, rule 248, and she was fined \$500 for making that breach. That penalty was wholly suspended, in keeping with the remorse and the level of the comment that was made by that person.

Ms WEBB - I just wanted to clarify a little further the member for Mersey's question. If somebody had a legal proceeding against them for a certain action, they're found not guilty of that in the court context, but can the matters surrounding that still be taken into account when you are determining whether the person is fit and proper?

Noting that it's not just the finding of the court; obviously a guilty finding would be very pertinent to your considerations, but in the absence of a guilty finding, in a not guilty finding, there are still going to be facts and details around that case; can you still take them into account when you are determining a fit and proper person?

Ms WILSON - Although this is definitely a matter for the director, because we're talking hypothetically, just because of my particular background and my understanding of the fit and proper test and some reading I've done, fit and proper, as the director has said, is a broad parameter. It's really difficult to answer the question you've put forward though, because it is quite hypothetical. Why I say that is, it would come down to the particular circumstances of the case.

If a matter was thrown out on the legal technicality, for example, then the decision-maker may go, well, I would still consider the particular facts that led to that matter and the non-conviction. But if all of those matters were considered by the court and the evidence was tested completely in court and the person was found not guilty, I think that then a decision-maker would definitely give weight to the decision of a superior jurisdiction, particularly a magistrate or the Supreme Court.

Ms WEBB - I think the question is actually just checking in on whether there is a legal barrier to those matters being taken into consideration in the fit and proper person test, because they were considered in the legal process. I think it's that, we're not testing hypotheticals here, but just is there a legal barrier to having that?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, honourable member and I'll allow the Chair to speak to that.

Mr THOMPSON - I don't believe there's a legal barrier but, as Ms Wilson has already intimated, a criminal court would be a much higher jurisdiction than decisions that I would make. I would probably withhold making a decision until I had a decision from the higher authority being a criminal court and then could take into account their findings and the considerations that they took into account in making that finding.

Ms ARMITAGE - I might add, before I start a bit of a preamble, that my questions are all from members of the racing industry. This is along a similar vein of the member for Mersey's.

First, is it fact that the Murrihy Report has been totally ignored and the Office of Racing Integrity has employed an independent board of stewards to re-examine corruption and welfare issues in the racing code?

Second, why has the Office of Racing Integrity granted a licence for the participant who is still under scrutiny and no decision as yet has been handed down by the independent review?

Ms HOWLETT - Our government released, in full, with no redactions, the final report from Mr Murrihy. Importantly, the implementations of our response to the Murrihy review is well underway. The Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania is overseeing an implementation committee that reports directly to me and is progressing the findings in the Murrihy Report. The second quarterly progress report was published in full on NRE Tasmania's website in June. The progress report also detailed that the chair of the Independent Stewards Panel has advised more time is required to consider evidence and to make a finding into every matter under investigation by that panel.

The final report of the Independent Stewards Panel will be provided to me on 30 September and this final report will coincide with the next progress report on NRE Tasmania's website with an update on all recommendations. As I've said before in other places, it is really important that the work of the Independent Stewards Panel can continue without any political interference, and I won't comment on -

Ms ARMITAGE - Just to be clear for the people who have given me these questions, the Murrihy Report findings have been ignored because ORI has now employed an independent board to re-examine the very matters that they had findings on. Is that correct?

Ms HOWLETT - No, Mr Murrihy, in his final report, specifically stated:

It is important that if charges are to be laid, they are heard and determined in a separate forum to this more general and wide-ranging inquiry.

...

Following this report, and noting matters in this report which are of some gravity, the Tasmanian Government may choose to refer these matters to an authorised appointee who is empowered to investigate specific matters and if deemed appropriate, proceed to lay and determine charges.

That is what the government has done.

Ms ARMITAGE - I appreciate the extra information. The other part about the Office of Racing Integrity granting a licence when a person is still under scrutiny and no decision has yet been handed down by the independent review, can you advise on that part of the question?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, I can and I will allow the director to comment on that - Robin.

Mr THOMPSON - As the minister has intimated, the independent panel of stewards was convened to investigate the issues that were raised by Mr Murrihy in his report, and they've been diligently working through that.

It is also of note that that panel consists of three very learned gentlemen in the regulation of harness racing in Australia and sports law. Probably, between them they've got 90-plus years of experience in that area. I think the contribution that they are making and the diligence with which they are doing it is probably higher than is attributed to any stewards panel probably currently operating in the country. I think that their outcomes will be of the similar high quality and similar legal veracity.

It is also of note that some four gentlemen who were subject to mention in the Murrihy Report were warned off by some actions by Tasracing and that warning-off was subject to appeal to the Tasmanian Racing Appeal Board, and the appeal was upheld. By upholding that, the report is saying that the issues required further investigation, which is what the independent stewards are doing. I'm waiting for their report to make a determination, again, using proper process and the process of natural justice before making any further decision, other than to change the licence status of any of the people who are mentioned in the Murrihy Report.

Ms ARMITAGE - I appreciate your answer.

Mr EDMUNDS - First, if I can ask a supplemental to the member for Mersey's question which had a few extras.

What happens if, when you're doing your fit and proper person check, you become aware of something that if it was prosecuted by police, probably would be a crime, a.k.a. forgery?

We had a high-profile case of that recently. I assume your answer will be that because there was no conviction it didn't come into consideration, but is that something you feel you should have the power to forward to relevant authorities? I notice it does come with a hefty criminal punishment.

Ms HOWLETT - To Mr Edmunds' point there, as soon as I was made aware of that, I referred it straight to the police and I'll allow the director to speak to that.

Mr THOMPSON - Thank you, minister. The issue referred to is on the public record. It was, in fact, a stewards' investigation that uncovered the forgery and that was definitely taken into account. When the person pleaded guilty to the charge and had a penalty imposed on them by the stewards, that was part of my determination in not granting the applicant a harness-racing licence. That decision was upheld by the Tasmanian Racing Appeal Board and the documentation we used in that has received some commendation from Harness Racing Victoria. As a collective group, I believe we handled the situation very well. I, as director, have referred that forgery to Tasmania Police and it's up to them what actions they do or don't take.

Mr EDMUNDS - I have a few questions here that we didn't quite get to this morning in the other place. Labor received an RTI earlier this year that shows an interaction between Tasracing and the Office of Racing Integrity. I understand that Mr Winter started asking about that earlier today, but you ran out of time.

In the RTI on page 13, Tasracing CEO, David Manshanden asked Mr Thompson to confirm whether Mr Yole [audio missing]

Mr Wayne Yole has declared to stewards that he does not employ any stablehands because he manages the correction horses in his care using volunteer stablehands and volunteer licensed drivers. I could go on. How is it believable that Wayne Yole is a hobby trainer and has no staff, when he has more than 100 horses in work?

Part B of the question is, does he hold workers' compensation insurance?

Ms HOWLETT - Before you respond to that, I wouldn't mind making a few comments, Mr Edmunds.

In May 2024, WorkSafe Tasmania commenced a workers' compensation and work, health and safety compliance program across all three codes. The program aimed to audit compliance with the *Workers Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1998* and *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*. As of 12 August 2024, 48 compliance inspections have been completed with no contraventions identified under either of the above legislations. Inspections in the greyhound code identified most operators are hobbyist and not employers. Fatigue was identified as a significant risk for many workplaces in the racing industry.

Whilst no notices have been issued in relation to fatigue management to date, inspectors are looking closely at what system employers in the industry have in place to manage fatigue and the compliance program is ongoing with an anticipated completion date at the end of October 2024. I'll hand over to the director to add to that.

Mr THOMPSON - I have legal advice that says that holding a current workers' compensation policy is not a prerequisite for applying for a licence in the harness-racing industry, nor is a prerequisite to being granted a licence in the harness-racing industry in Tasmania. I presume you were referring in the RTI to Mr Wayne Yole?

Mr EDMUNDS - Yes, I read that out, didn't I? Even in my question, I said Mr Wayne Yole.

Mr THOMPSON - Apologies. It's probably all about timing as to when the RTI was registered because, at one stage, Mr Wayne Yole did have a very small number of horses, but

that has changed over time. At that time, I reported to Tasracing that Mr Wayne Yole reported to me that he had worked his operation with volunteer labour and he was meeting the requirements of the workers' compensation act, which, as I said, is not an issue for me as the Director of Racing. As the minister has already pointed out, it's a matter for WorkSafe Tasmania and they are duly investigating that.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, director, but in matters relating to workers' compensation, they are the responsibility of my colleague, Minister for Small Business and Consumer Affairs. But, as the Minister for Racing, I believe there are changes that need to be made to the rules of racing to further enhance compliance and participation safety.

Industry and participants do have an important role to play in ensuring workplace safety for their workers and there's more work that needs to be done. Tasracing has indicated that they are already undertaking a review of their rules to ensure consistency across the codes. Determining workers' compensation insurance needs can be complex. Where applicable, participants are advised to seek independent professional advice and section 97 of the WRCA places an obligation on an employer to maintain, in force, an applicable policy of insurance in respect to liabilities to pay compensation. An employer who fails to comply is guilty of an offence and subject to a penalty.

Compliance with this act is regulated by WorkSafe Tasmania and, as detailed in legal advice released under RTI, neither the Office of Racing Integrity, Tasracing, nor the director of Racing have any powers under the WRCA to undertake compliance activities.

Mr EDMUNDS - Okay, so what were the inspections you were talking about before then? Were they around compliance?

Ms HOWLETT - They were the WorkSafe ones, yes.

Mr EDMUNDS - So, it's not a requirement of licencing arrangements that trainers hold relevant workers' compensation policies.

Mr THOMPSON - No, it isn't for the harness-racing code and that non-requirement is pretty much universal across all Australian states.

CHAIR - I have a question, minister, if I might. Why wasn't the Tasmanian Racing Appeals Board process placed with TASCAT?

Ms O'CONNOR - What a good question.

CHAIR - I'm just interested to have some understanding around that. Was that considered? Was there some rationale behind that decision?

Ms HOWLETT - The TRAB board - there were discussions around that. It's a very specialised nature. Under the Racing Regulation and Integrity Bill 2024, the TRAB continues and, being an expertised, specialised, independent appeal mechanism established by the act, is not subject to direction or influence by any person. Any appeals may be lodged through TRAB against a decision of Tasracing or a registered club to issue a person with a warning notice; the decision of a steward to impose a fine, suspension, or disqualification; a decision of the director of racing to impose certain licence conditions; or a dispute with a bookmaker regarding a

wagering dispute. To lodge an appeal, the appellant applies within the prescribed time and pays a deposit as follows -

- Within seven days with a \$200 deposit for a minor appeal where the fine did not exceed \$500 -

Ms O'CONNOR - This is not an answer.

Ms HOWLETT - or suspension did not exceed 30 days.

- Within 14 days within a \$500 deposit for a major appeal.
- For all other penalties, sanctions, and deposits may be refunded in whole or in part as provided by the act pending the outcome of the appeal.

CHAIR - I certainly appreciate having the understanding around the TRAB board, but my question goes back to what discussions were had and why wasn't TASCAT considered an appropriate independent process for appeals through the work that TRAB undertakes because that is an entirely independent board? They bring in expertise on any particular issue, is my understanding.

Ms HOWLETT - They do and TRAB has a lot of appeals and they're an independent body. TRAB is fit for purpose and it didn't fit into TASCAT.

Ms O'CONNOR - It could have, like every other board and tribunal that's been brought under TASCAT's new areas of responsibility, it could have. A decision was made not to put it in there. Or in the lawyers' professional tribunal, surprise, surprise.

CHAIR - I was looking for some understanding of why you chose not to go down that path and I think you've made your point. The member for Pembroke has a supplementary on that.

Mr EDMUNDS - Is it correct that 64 per cent of decisions by stewards were either varied or overturned by TRAB, and 46 per cent were overturned? If so, do you find that acceptable?

Ms HOWLETT - As far as TRAB and the overruling of decisions:

For the period of 1 July 2023 to June 2024, 22 decisions by ORI stewards were appealed to the TRAB and eight decisions imposed by Tasracing as a joint controlling body. Options open to the TRAB are to dismiss an appeal against decision in the favour of the stewards, to uphold an appeal against decision in favour of the participant, or to uphold or vary a penalty. Eight of the appeals against steward decisions were upheld, with four resulting in the penalty being varied by the TRAB.

Between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024 no licencing panel decisions were appealed by the TRAB. All penalties and appeal decisions are published on the Office of Racing Integrity website.

Ms O'CONNOR - In Council recently, we had a debate about the hemp regulation miscellaneous bill and we enacted a fit and proper person test for people who are licenced to grow hemp here. Why haven't we legislated a fit and proper person test for people who train and, in some cases, and I can say this here, like Anthony Bullock and Ben Yole, are not kind to animals - torture them? Why wouldn't we enact a fit and proper person test for people who have responsibility for sentient creatures.

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, I thank Ms O'Connor for her question. The deputy secretary has some information on 'fit and proper person' in relation to the bill that passed through the Legislative Council last week.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. The bill is a significant step forward because it does include provisions relating to 'fit and proper' which is not in the current *Racing Regulation Act*, so it is now enshrined in legislation and it sits in the rules. This is a significant step forward in terms of the bill.

The other thing around the bill is that it refers to 'fit and proper' in a couple of places. It's not just in one place. It's around licencing, it's around whether - I think it's the CRIO - the Chief Racing Integrity Officer is 'fit and proper' and I think also in the TRAB, I'd have to check. Yes, it is. Therefore, it's going to be applied in different contexts in the bill.

The other thing is the fact that there's a common law definition for 'fit and proper' which has been tested in the courts, including in decisions relating to racing matters. In appeal courts, not just in Tasmania but in other jurisdictions, it means that it is actually quite robust and means that the decision-maker has guidance, but can also apply the test in an appropriate context, based on the fact that they are considering at the time.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Ms Wilson. Minister, is Ben Yole a fit and proper person to hold a trainer's licence given the findings of the Murrihy review which had findings of fact in relation to team driving and race fixing and had findings of fact in relation to the way the Yole stable treated animals, including overstocking, barren paddocks devoid of pasture, substantial areas being waterlogged, sanitary issues, feeding issues, shelter and shade lacking, insufficient and inadequate. Is Ben Yole really a fit and proper person to have a trainer's licence?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Ms O'Connor for her question. I will state this again today. It's really important that the independent stewards' panel is allowed to do its work without prejudice and without any political interference. I am not going to comment on that. What I will comment on is I am looking forward to having that independent stewards report on 30 September. I am not going to say anything that will jeopardise that independent stewards report. We're nearly there. It's next week and I am not going to comment on it.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you, Ms Armitage.

Ms O'CONNOR - Chair, sorry, I waited 40 minutes and I've just asked two questions.

Unknown - We've got lots of questions.

Ms O'CONNOR - I understand that but -

CHAIR - I'll come back.

Ms O'CONNOR - I waited really patiently for a long time to get my rotation, and I've been cut off after two questions.

CHAIR - Yes, and I'll come back.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, you haven't cut anyone else off at the table after two questions today, I might say with respect, Chair.

CHAIR - Ms Armitage, thank you.

Ms ARMITAGE - Chair, I'm wondering which question I will go with now.

CHAIR - One question.

Ms ARMITAGE - I am only going to go with one question at a time. I hope that you will come back.

Minister, are you aware that Tasmanian trainers have the highest insurance rates of any state in Australia and that this is sending some Tasmanian trainers broke and making their businesses non-profitable? This is what I've been advised by members of the industry.

The question is whether there could be some sort of levy or government assistance so that we don't have a situation where there are no trainers, therefore no racing?

Ms HOWLETT - Chair, I thank Ms Armitage for her question. I think what you are actually referring to with the insurance increase is workers compensation. That is a discussion that I will have to have with Tasracing but, as you're aware - and I'm sure you've been told by many businesses around your electorate, and I certainly have - of the rising costs of insurance for all businesses right across the state and nationally as well.

Mr EDMUNDS - Last year, at GBE hearings, Tasracing said they had put in a draft deed to the government. What is the status of negotiations about a new deed and when will we see it?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. I thank the member for his question. Discussions are ongoing in relation to the deed.

Mr EDMUNDS - A bit like Ms Armitage, participants are communicating about the decisions they're trying to make about capital investments and breeding. They need a long-term idea about where this is headed. Do you understand that is causing a lot of stress for participants with that lack of certainty from leaving it this long? Again, I'll ask you when we should expect to see a new deed?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you.

CHAIR - 2028 is coming very quickly.

Ms HOWLETT - It certainly is and I can tell you, I've had my meetings with Tasmanian breeders and it is vitally important for the breeding sector that they have some security. The government will review future funding to the Tasmanian racing industry -

Ms O'CONNOR - Have you had any meetings with animal welfare advocates for example?

Ms HOWLETT - through the normal budgetary and parliamentary process.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do you meet with animal welfare advocates?

Ms HOWLETT - Ms O'Connor, I'm well aware that what you want to do is not just shut down the greyhound industry, but you want to shut down all three codes -

Ms O'CONNOR - One hundred per cent.

Ms HOWLETT - of racing. I can assure you that is not -

Ms O'CONNOR - and the \$40 million in public funding that's dumped into that dog of an industry each year.

Ms HOWLETT - what this government will do. I can assure you if there was a Labor government they wouldn't be doing it.

CHAIR - Order. We can't have two people speaking at once -

Ms HOWLETT - Sorry, Chair.

CHAIR - because it's impossible for Hansard to be able to decipher that and it'll become really untidy and not while I'm the Chair.

Ms HOWLETT - My apologies, Chair.

CHAIR - I have a supplementary -

Mr EDMUNDS - I think she was still answering my question.

CHAIR - I have a supplementary -

Ms ARMITAGE - Do you want me to do the supplementary first before you answer?

Mr EDMUNDS - Go for it.

Ms ARMITAGE - I had some questions raised as well about the funding and it might -

CHAIR - Then you can answer once only. So you need to answer.

Ms ARMITAGE - The concern that I had raised was the same, regarding the funding model from Tasracing for the 2025-26 racing season. Have you looked at Racing Victoria Ltd?

I've been advised that the way they operate, they have a fabulous funding model in Victoria, but that all three thoroughbred clubs for the 2023-24 racing season actually ran at a loss. As far as members of the industry that have come to me with their questions, they feel that the evidence couldn't be stronger that they actually need something to happen and soon.

Ms HOWLETT - Unfortunately, we're in this situation because Labor sold TOTE -

CHAIR - We don't get political here, minister.

Ms HOWLETT - What I can say, Ms Armitage, is the government is committed to support the longevity and sustainability of the industry that generates close to \$208 million in economic activity and also it involves more than 6400 people indirectly and directly right across the state and importantly, a lot of those people are in regional communities.

As I've stated, the government will review future funding to the Tasmanian racing industry. We know how important it is and that will go through the normal budgetary and parliamentary process.

Ms ARMITAGE - The last part of that question was, have you looked at Racing Victoria Ltd's funding model? Have you looked at the funding model they have in Victoria, which was part of my question?

Ms HOWLETT - No, I haven't looked at the Victorian -

Ms ARMITAGE - Will you look at it then? Will you have a look at it?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, I will look at it but I haven't looked at it to date.

CHAIR - Thank you. Ms O'Connor.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Chair. It's good to get back to animal welfare.

Minister, I want to talk about another person who the Greens don't regard as fit and proper to have animals in his care, and that is Anthony Bullock, who, as we know from this report, had been operating without a kennel licence from the West Tamar Council for about a decade. We've got pictures here of his suffering animals. He came up quite often at the greyhound inquiry that we had nine years ago. How many greyhounds does Anthony Bullock currently have in his custody?

Ms HOWLETT - The amount of greyhounds in Mr Bullock's custody - I would have to refer that to the Office of Racing Integrity, to the director, to answer that question, Ms O'Connor.

Mr THOMPSON - Through you, minister: Mr Bullock has a kennel licence from the West Tamar Council which allows him to keep 91 registered greyhounds on his property and four other dogs of other breeds.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Mr Thompson. That's sad news. What checks are carried out on Mr Bullock's property?

CHAIR - The second question from the honourable member is around inspections.

Ms HOWLETT - Inspections? The kennel operated by Mr Bullock is part of this inspection program and has been subjected to unannounced inspections four times in 2024, with the latest being by the regulatory veterinarian on 17 April this year. I am advised that the regulatory veterinarian provided a written report that stated:

In my opinion, the standard of animal welfare of the dogs on his premises was high.

Ms O'CONNOR - Oh, that's interesting. Did Mr Bullock replace all the kennels that he had his dogs contained in?

Ms HOWLETT - That's an animal welfare question, and it's important to note, too, that Tasracing has accepted a recommendation by the director of racing regarding the need to implement an enforceable greyhound welfare code of practice and will soon release a draft document for consultation. All licensed greyhound racing kennels are regularly inspected for compliance with the rules of racing and the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

Ms O'CONNOR - And, at those unannounced inspections, has there been a good look at the bullring Mr Bullock has on his property? That's a fair question, why would you roll your eyes at me?

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, and I will pass to the director to answer that question.

Mr THOMPSON - Yes, the bullring is part of Mr Bullock's property. Yes, it is inspected, and all the inspections that I've been privy to, there's no evidence the bullring is being used.

Ms O'CONNOR - Just in this report there are cars parked outside that bullring. The drone footage taken by the Farm Transparency Project shows there are cars parked outside Mr Bullock's bullring, just for reference.

CHAIR - That is a statement, not a question.

Ms WEBB - I just wanted to go back to - we were talking about the legislation now having a fit and proper person in it in a number of locations, and that's the first time we've had it in the statute, relating to this industry. What I'm interested to know is when that legislation receives Royal assent. I don't think it has. Has it?

Ms HOWLETT - Not yet.

Ms WEBB - When it does receive Royal assent, does that then trigger a reassessment of current trainers who hold licences under that and in order to then apply that test that's now in a statute sitting behind it? Or, does it not trigger a reassessment under that statute?

Ms HOWLETT - I will just go to the deputy secretary and she will provide you with the date of Royal assent and the answer to the other part of your question.

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CHAIR - I am pretty sure the date for the Royal assent belongs to the Governor. It's when the Governor is available.

Ms HOWLETT - It is, but I think we do have a date for that.

CHAIR - Oh, you do have a date? Okay. We've already arranged that with the Governor, and the President of the Legislative Council, and the Clerk. We know our processes around here.

Ms HOWLETT - You're absolutely correct. Some time in October, I believe.

Ms WILSON - I think the minister's answered the Royal assent question, but it's really important tonight that the bill commences upon proclamation, and the reason for that is -

Ms WEBB - Yes, but the mechanism is in place.

Ms WILSON - Yes, that's right. To put the mechanism in place.

Ms WEBB - On proclamation, then -

Ms WILSON - Whilst it is new in legislation, the application of the fit and proper test, at least in harness, for example, is already part of the rules of racing, which means that the director already makes that assessment.

Ms WEBB - Can I check, are you saying to me that, having put it into the statute, we haven't actually elevated the threshold of the fit and proper person test? It's the same test being applied it's just now in legislation.

Ms WILSON - It will depend upon the code and I might go to the director on that. What it does do is it makes it quite clear. Say, for example, not that I could foresee this happening, the rules of racing were changed and fit and proper was no longer in the rules. I'm not suggesting that in terms of harness at all, that means that the fit and proper test would always be there. That's the importance of having it in legislation.

Ms WEBB - Is it in the legislation but it hasn't changed the test itself or the sort of thresholds for meeting that test by putting it in the way we've treated it in the legislation now?

Ms WILSON - When the parliament puts something into legislation, that does mean that the decision maker would say that there is statutory responsibility. But, particularly in harness, there is already a fit and proper test that is applied in relation to the rules of racing, but I should check with the director, who is actually the decision maker, beside me.

Mr THOMPSON - Discretion is always a good thing to have when you interpret any statute, because there's always mitigating circumstances that will probably never be taken into account when there is no discretion, or by any hard and fast rules that are made. Maintaining the discretion by the decision maker, I think, is a really important facet.

To go back on your questions there. Under the rules of racing for greyhound racing explicitly, the controlling body can consider whether a person is fit and proper to hold a registration. But, under the rules of racing for the harness and the thoroughbred codes, the

controlling body can consider fit and proper but it may refuse a licence without signing any particular reason for doing that. It can be a broad church in considering the facets that we talked about, components of fit and profit prior to.

Ms WEBB - That's the current arrangement. Therefore, putting it in the legislation will, in essence, put a more stringent threshold there that has to be met that won't be as discretionary anymore in those spaces you just mentioned. Is that correct? Have I interpreted your comments correctly? You're saying before it could be part of what's considered but wasn't mandated to be and now it will be mandated to be.

Mr THOMPSON - To be considered as a component of licensing, possibly so.

Ms WEBB - The reason I'm asking this is for many people out there they feel that people who have been provided with licences, they wouldn't regard them as fit and proper. That's clearly a view that's held broadly.

CHAIR - By some.

Ms WEBB - By some in the community, that's what I'm getting at, Chair. I don't think we need to shy away from that. It's pretty clear. What I'm imagining is there might be a hope that, in putting this as a mandated requirement to the legislation, we've imposed some higher threshold of some sort or some requirement that now might mean, when those people come up for renewal of their licence or have to be reassessed, that's a more rigorous test that will mean their concerns may be addressed in assessing fit and proper against those people.

Is that a fair assessment that people will now be held up against a more stringent measure of fit and proper and that that might be relevant when considering other people who've previously been granted licences? I know it's speculation, but I'm just trying to get the gist of what I think people are hoping for from this legislation.

Mr THOMPSON - Maintaining discretion by the decision maker is still really important even though there may be guidelines and legislated issues around the definition of fit and proper. Fit and proper will always be something which needs to be considered in the individual circumstance, in my opinion.

Ms WEBB - I have one more stage of that. I have one more supplementary of my own to it, if I may. It's the same exact matter. I wanted to flesh out my understanding of that. To remind me, because it's now in legislation, it would also be something that people could potentially appeal against if they felt it hasn't been applied appropriately in the decision-making about the granting of a licence. Where do we go to appeal decisions that are made about the granting of licences? It's not TASCAT; we established that earlier.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's TRAB.

Ms WEBB - It's TRAB, okay. So, it becomes a matter that, because it's in the statute now, can be appealed in relation to decisions made to grant a licence.

Ms WILSON - Yes.

Mr GAFFNEY - If I was somebody who was about to apply for a licence - I have never had a licence and I'm going to become a greyhound trainer - and there was some question about my background, or I've been involved with some criminal activity or had something that was untoward, would there be a requirement, if someone went to the director to say, 'We've heard some not good things about this person', now we have a fit and proper person provision in the legislation, might we have to examine that? I'm just interested to see how somebody would deal with that.

Ms HOWLETT - You're referring to a new licence? I will hand you over to the director.

CHAIR - Or an existing licence with new information.

Mr THOMPSON - In making decisions on licensing applications, we have a very rigorous process involved in assessing the applicants and making sure that the rules of natural justice applied. If an applicant for any licence in the racing industry is a new applicant, it will automatically trigger an interview with the director, and through that interview process, all the issues associated with gaining that licence will be considered.

There are levels of licences in the racing industry which are based on experience, and normally a new applicant who would come to the racing industry with no experience would be coming in at a very low level, and therefore it's a very low risk to the industry from their actions.

If a licensed person who has been in the industry for a while has lost their licence for whatever reason, then in order for their licence to be regained, they too come to the licensing panel, which is an interview with the director and the licensing and registration officer, and their fitness to hold a licence is tested through that interview process. The director, in making that decision, will take information from the stewards and from the licensing and registration officer, but the decision is solely that of the director.

Mr GAFFNEY - The question there is if a current licence holder has their licence run out, and there have been questions over that person as a fit and proper person because of a whole range of things, does the director then have to reassess on the information that's been coming through the community or through the courts about that person being fit and proper, now that it's clearly in the legislation?

Ms HOWLETT - The answer to that is yes. Director, would you like to add any more comments to that?

Mr THOMPSON - Certainly any renewal licence is a decision of the director. It can go through the process of being through an interview, which is triggered by the things we talked about a moment ago, but it may be a process that we call the chairman's book. The chairman's book is a licensing procedure whereby the chairman of stewards makes a recommendation to me regarding the licence of an individual, and I can take that recommendation or I may choose to bring that person in for an interview to further explore some of the issues that may or may not be associated with that person. Of course, you have to be mindful that people don't get convicted through the court of public opinion, and it's my role to deal in facts and due process, not public opinion.

Mr EDMUNDS - I have the Murrihy report here. On page 45 it talks about the rating system. I'll just quote a little bit from the document to provide context. It says:

It's recommended that one of the first tasks of the new governance should be to address the absence of the necessary level of competitiveness in Tasmanian harness racing

To skip ahead:

The national rating system, as it works in the Tasmanian model, will continue to expand the number of horses eligible for lower rating races to the detriment of better class racing.

Then specifically about ratings, it says:

Tasmanian handicap conditions need to effect changes that incentivise winning and discourage the quest for shedding rating points, which creates an unhealthy race to the bottom.

The recommendation is:

With a local handicapping system, measures could, for example, be introduced requiring that a horse have six consecutive unplaced starts before dropping a rating point, and as such, horses will take much longer to drop down the rating scale.

The provision to do this is already available at 13.1 and 13.2 of the Australian Handicapping Rules. Adopting, managing and implementing a local rating system will require additional resources.

That's one of the recommendations from the Murrin report. I wondered when that will be delivered.

Ms HOWLETT - Importantly, in relation to competitiveness in Tasmanian harness racing, Tasracing has recently implemented an equity in participation policy, which limits the number of horses from a private training complex to a maximum of four or half of the field, whichever is the lesser, participating in any race other than special races.

Tasracing has also recently commenced targeted stakeholder consultation regarding a draft equine code of practice. The code of practice sets minimum standards for the care, management and training of registered racing horses in Tasmania, and the government will implement that. We have a draft report.

Mr EDMUNDS - Yes, that's fine, but I'm asking not necessarily about the number of horses from stables, but specifically around tackling the issue of competitiveness and the incentive to - perhaps to use an AFL term - 'tank' to go down a level. Can the government commit to recommendation 14.1?

Ms HOWLETT - Changes to the Equity in Participation Policy, EIPP, have been considered by the Tasracing Board. Amendments to the EIPP were introduced in mid-April 2024. These included restricting a trainer, as I mentioned before, to a maximum of four runners per race, including horses at the same private facility, and the removal of the

ability to top up a field. The government notes that Tasracing will consider the matters raised relating to industry competitiveness and will engage with industry as appropriate.

Ms O'CONNOR - If you are the manager of the Greyhound Adoption program, do you need to pass a fit and proper person test?

Ms HOWLETT - That question is a Tasracing question. I'm not going to comment on where your question may go to.

Ms O'CONNOR - How do you know where it's going?

Ms HOWLETT - Because I can predict that it's going to staffing issues at the GAP facility.

Ms O'CONNOR - Actually it's more about the metrics that are being used to determine whether or not a dog that's in GAP should be euthanised. We understand that it's much easier now for the chief vet to give an approval for a dog to be euthanised at GAP because it is an imperative of the industry. This was the throughput policy that your government is saying wasn't implemented, but the information we have is that the testing that's done on greyhounds there to determine whether or not they should be euthanised is pretty loose, and a dog might, for example, be regarded as worthy of euthanasia if they're trying to protect a ball that they were given and are playing with.

Ms HOWLETT - I totally disagree with your comments. The GAP program is managed under the direction of the Tasracing Chief Veterinary and Animal Welfare Officer, Dr Martin Lenz, with the support of his highly qualified GAP Coordinator, behaviourist and staff. GAP operates based on protocols which have been adopted nationally to protect greyhounds and their owners.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, minister. Can you tell the committee -

Ms HOWLETT - The director has to approve.

Ms O'CONNOR - I understand that. Have the processes and the assessment metric of whether or not a dog in the greyhound adoption program should be euthanised - I use that term lightly because it's not really a mercy killing, is it? It's just a killing. Has the metric for determining whether a dog that's in GAP should be euthanised changed? Is it now easier, as we understand it is, for a recommendation to be made to euthanise a dog?

Ms HOWLETT - I believe it's far more difficult, Ms O'Connor.

Ms O'CONNOR - Is that a belief or a fact?

Ms HOWLETT - I believe that's a fact. I've had discussions and meetings with the Chief Veterinary Officer Dr Martin Lenz. I believe it's a lot more difficult to euthanise a greyhound. On a positive note, Ms O'Connor, a DA has been lodged to the Southern Midlands Council to increase the facility at the GAP Adoption Program.

Ms O'CONNOR - Dr Martin Lenz, as we understand it, helped to shape the new throughput policy that makes it easier to clear dogs out of the Greyhound Adoption Program.

Dr Martin Lenz designed the throughput policy. You're telling me you believe it is harder for a greyhound to be euthanised through GAP? Dr Lenz arrived and basically wrote a policy that would make it easier for the dogs to be euthanised. Are you saying it is now harder for you to get approval to euthanise a dog that goes through GAP?

Ms HOWLETT - That policy was never adopted.

Ms O'CONNOR - He wrote it.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll ask for the director of the Office of Racing Integrity to add some comments.

Ms O'CONNOR - Not officially adopted maybe.

Mr THOMPSON - All dogs in GAP are still registered dogs. For any to be euthanised they require the permission of the director. That decision and permission is not given lightly.

I believe in the last year since I've been back in this position, I've only provided permission to euthanise two dogs from the GAP program. That decision was based on some very well documented evidence that came to me. It was evidence in the written form, it was evidence in video form. I will give you a flavour of the evidence that does come through the testing criteria. The evidence is provided about how the dog acts in the presence of people, whether it's relaxed, cautious, whether it's extremely fearful, or whether it allows a collar and a lead to be removed, how resistant, or is it really passive in allowing that to happen to it, whether it walks on a lead, if it does walk on a lead, does it do it calmly? Does it do it in an aggressive manner? Is there still a prey drive? Is it highly interested in prey or is there no interest? Is the animal social to people and to other smaller dogs?

All that comes to me in the form of written and video evidence. Upon that evidence, I make a decision and by virtue of that, I've made a decision on two animals. It's a very considered process.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you very much. This is a little bit personal for me because I met one of those dogs, a big, black greyhound called Billy, who is one of the two dogs that you approved for euthanasia. I'd like to ask if there are any protections in place for greyhounds being transferred between states, particularly in light of the Ross Work connection in the Ken Buxton animal cruelty case in Victoria and South Australia, which resulted in two dogs dying, including Tasmanian-bred greyhound Wynburn Skye.

What are the protections for greyhounds that are sent interstate to race? Because there's no lifetime tracking, it's very hard for the Tasmanian authorities to offer any sort of protection to those dogs, isn't it?

Ms HOWLETT - Ms O'Connor, part of your question is for Tasracing and you'll have that opportunity in GBE scrutiny in December and -

Ms O'CONNOR - No, it's an animal welfare issue.

Ms HOWLETT - I'm not sure if the director would like to add some more to the other part of your question.

Mr THOMPSON - Dogs regularly move between trainers. The trainers can be within the state or between states. In doing so, those dogs are still tracked while they are licensed racing animals. The racing authorities in the state that they move to know that those dogs are there. Through the stable and kennel returns, they are tracked and they would be subject to the same tracking and processes that they would be if they were still in Tasmania.

Ms O'CONNOR - Was this dog, Wynburn Skye, tracked into Victoria to Buxton's property? They left the island and then died in Mr Buxton's custody. And then I'll -

CHAIR - The minister's just taking some advice.

Ms HOWLETT - I don't have any advice on the animal that you're referring to. I'm not sure if the director does.

Mr THOMPSON - No, I don't have anything specific on that. I do know that if a registered dog dies, the trainer or the owner has an obligation to immediately notify ORI. ORI then goes through a triage system to determine what our response is. That response could be a visit and an examination of the body of the dog, or it could be right up to a post-mortem, depending upon what we think is the risk of foul play being involved in the death of that dog.

Ms O'CONNOR - My final question here on this - I'm backtracking to something you said earlier. Under the new racing arrangements, does the Director of Racing still have to approve an euthanasia request or will it be left to the chief vet alone?

Ms HOWLETT - The deputy secretary will talk through that.

Ms WILSON - In terms of the determination of approvals for euthanasia, there'll be a transition period where the Rules of Racing will be updated - the Rules of Racing need to be updated before proclamation of the act. That will happen. The Chief of Racing Integrity Officer in the Integrity Unit may be an entity that would undertake that task, but it hasn't yet been determined. It's important to note that there'll be oversight from the Tasracing Integrity Commissioner who can set integrity standards.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's holistic. That's not oversight of individual decisions that are made on whether or not a dog should be killed before its time.

Ms WILSON - The Tasracing Integrity Commissioner has the capacity to set standards and audit standards. The new bill or act will have a requirement for Tasracing to develop an annual animal welfare and integrity plan. The new TasRIC will have capacity to audit and also undertake investigations.

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I get some clarity then, Ms Wilson? The question was, will it be up to the chief vet themselves? Will they have the authority to make a decision to euthanise a dog under the new arrangements?

Ms WILSON - I think that that's something that we have to determine through the model. The integrity unit and the chief racing integrity officer will take on many of the functions of the director. I indicate that that integrity unit and chief racing integrity officer sits within a particular unit within the new model. It reports to a board which will have two independent

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members, one of which will be the chair. Critically, the Tasracing integrity commissioner will have very strong, very significant oversight powers to ensure and can set, for example, standards.

Ms O'CONNOR - Must set standards under the act, because we fixed the act up for you.

Ms WILSON - Must. I'd forgotten that.

Ms O'CONNOR - You must. The commissioner must.

CHAIR - It's a big difference, that may and must.

Ms ARMITAGE - Chair, you understand, minister, I'm reading someone else's questions. I'm not a racing person, so I am hoping I get the context right.

This is with regard to the TasBred scheme. My understanding is there are 150 maiden races a year with 96 of those having TasBred. The question here is that it's believed that the race is now being flooded with tried horses. I'm assuming a tried horse is a horse that's run on the mainland, which are winning the majority of the maidens. The concern was this will have a domino effect on the clubs as it is killing the yearling sales and the breeding industry in Tasmania. The question is-

CHAIR - Shut the gate, don't let them in.

Ms ARMITAGE - Pretty much. Will the minister consider having TasBred on all maidens, which would ensure that trainers and owners buy or breed local with a chance for prize money to stay in the state and not go back to mainland owners? The further question is how do you propose to rectify the breeding incentive? As I said, I'm not a racing person, so I am trying to get the gist of what it is that they've asked you to ask.

Ms HOWLETT - I certainly don't want Tasmania to be a dumping ground for -

Ms ARMITAGE - For tried horses from the mainland.

Ms HOWLETT - No, I certainly don't want that. As I mentioned earlier in May, I was pleased to meet with leading figures in the thoroughbred breeding sector including Bart McCulloch of Greenville Stud and David Wishaw of Armidale. We discussed how we can move forward the very successful TasBred scheme including ratings and stakes as well. As I mentioned before, the breeding industry is vitally important to the Tasmanian racing industry and TasBred races are such a fantastic initiative, of course I'd certainly like to see more of them.

Ms ARMITAGE - Am I able to just slip one more quick one in before you go to someone else? I do have a few.

CHAIR - You can.

Ms ARMITAGE - The other one is programming. Is there a programming statewide committee? The question was asked: why does the Tasmanian Turf Club stop racing in April, have one meeting in August and then start again in October and then have to jam 27 meetings

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in from October until April. I'm assuming that they're advised where the races have to be and when -

CHAIR - Isn't all of that Sky?

Ms HOWLETT - Some of it is about Sky, Chair. In answer to your question, programming is controlled by Tasracing.

Ms ARMITAGE - Is it a GBE question?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. It is a GBE question, but I'm speculating that the timeframe that you've given me there would allow for restoration and resurfacing or potential maintenance to the track.

Ms ARMITAGE - I think it's more the jamming the 27 meetings in from October to April.

CHAIR - It might be about giving the horses a spell.

Ms ARMITAGE - There's no spells with 27 meetings.

Ms HOWLETT - It's a summer carnival as well. As you know, in winter, we use our all-weather track at Spreyton, which is fantastic during the winter because it's weatherproof, which is great.

Mr EDMUNDS - I'm conscious of time, but I wanted to come back to one of your previous answers about the deed. You said it would be considered in the context of the next budget. I wanted to clarify does that mean that we are unlikely to see a deed until next May?

Ms HOWLETT - Discussions are ongoing and it's a budgetary discussion that will be had with me, the Premier and the Treasurer

Mr EDMUNDS - So if you were thinking, when might I see this deed, you think that the next budget might be when you would see it?

Ms HOWLETT - Well, we haven't -

Ms O'CONNOR - It doesn't expire for another five years.

Ms HOWLETT - Well that's right -

Mr EDMUNDS - Well, just on that the reason and you understand why I'm asking the question because of the -

Ms HOWLETT - The importance of Mr Edmunds' question is because people need to invest in the breeding sector in Tasmania and that's the importance of his question and the breeding sector is vitally important to the Tasmanian racing industry.

Ms O'CONNOR - It is not vitally important to the state, what rubbish.

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Ms HOWLETT - I disagree with you, Ms O'Connor.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's why so many animals end up dead before their time.

CHAIR - Order. I am running out of patience.

Mr EDMUNDS - I'd just like an answer.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, we're currently in discussion.

CHAIR - Are there any other questions in racing regulation and policy? I have one in grants and subsidies, so I'm just checking.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, I do have one on horse racing. Minister, as you know, because I know our office and your office has been talking and it's been an ongoing conversation which I hope we can get a good outcome out of. As a result of the legislation that's now been passed, the racing regulation and integrity bill, the commissioner can set standards which Council amended to make best practice standards.

Tasracing has put out a code of practice for racing racehorse welfare which is a draft attempt to have a standard set for horse racing. It's come under pretty heavy criticism from the coalition for the protection of racehorses. I've been thankful for your officers for the conversation that's happening, but do you agree that we should have the best practice standards for the care of horses in this state? We can have a difference of opinion on the industry in terms of how animals in the industry are treated. Do you agree the standards should be the best practice?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Ms O'Connor for her question. I believe that animal welfare should be paramount across all three codes, as I've said before and we've benefited from our officers engaging to have best-practice models and we will continue to do so.

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I ask, there's a five-domains model of horse care and it came up in conversation on the floor in the Council when we debated it. It talks about what best practice is and, in fact, New Zealand's racing industry has applied the five domain models to their practices across all three. Do you agree we have to have best practice?

Ms HOWLETT - As I've stated before, I want to see best animal welfare practices across all three codes -

Ms O'CONNOR - I think you are trying to be a bit tricky with words here. Do you agree our standards should comply with the law which now requires them to be best practice?

Ms HOWLETT - You were there, Ms O'Connor, during the debate of the legislation and may I state again the biggest legislative reform in decades for the industry and animal welfare is paramount throughout that legislation. That is my focus on having best animal welfare practices and restoring faith and integrity across all three codes of racing.

CHAIR - Thanks, minister. A question in regard to the point of consumption tax funding, and I note that it's slightly decreased by \$50,000 from 2023 to 2024, but still a nice sum of around \$7 million. That information was available on the website and I thank your office,

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minister, for providing this earlier today at the request of somebody else. The question: is there any reason why it's come off the website for general information - the point of consumption tax.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you Chair. I can't understand why the information had been -

CHAIR - Either that or we have some IT issues.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll take that up with Treasury.

CHAIR - Thank you. I note that. Mr Gaffney also has a question about grants and subsidies.

Mr GAFFNEY - It's more about costs. To set the context, on 20 August 2022, 27 hectares were set aside at Wesley Vale for a new greyhound and harness racing facility with a \$16 million figure, then on 24 March it blew out from \$18 million to \$38.6 million, so the government withdrew from consideration of that proposal. What did it cost the government from the inception of 'Let's build this', because we told the north-west community we would, until three years later when they said 'No, we're not going to do it anymore' because of a blowout from \$18 million out to \$38.6 million in developing and building the centre.

It's a concern, I suppose, with any project that you announce for building, that there's always going to be a blowout. There was in this case, and it caused the government to walk away from that project. Could the minister explain some of the decision behind that and what it cost Tasmanian ratepayers going down that path in the first place?

Ms HOWLETT - That's an important question. The government and Tasracing will continue to work with industry stakeholders so that we can deliver a solution at the right price, but not at any price. I've spoken directly to and met with a broad range of industry stakeholders since Tasracing made its announcement on 8 May about the north-west tracks project. Tasracing's advice was that it was not financially prudent to proceed with the north-west tracks project because of a significant increase in cost, and the government accepted that advice.

I believe the recent costing that I have was in excess of \$40 million. As per our election policy, we will invest in training facilities that suit the daily requirements of north-west harness and greyhound trainers to ensure that they can train and prepare their horses and dogs at a fit-for-purpose training facility on the coast. We've asked Tasracing to provide advice on a solution, and that's their focus. I'm looking forward to receiving that very shortly.

Mr GAFFNEY - When you say, 'very shortly', minister, is it this year you're expecting something from Tasracing, so that the people on the north-west coast can at least get something for what they were expecting?

Ms HOWLETT - Tasracing has assured me that I will receive that advice soon, and I would certainly expect it in the coming month.

Mr EDMUNDS - A supplementary on that. Can I ask what the total amount spent was in attempting to develop both Palmers Road and Mill Road?

Ms HOWLETT - That's a question for Tasracing.

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Mr EDMUNDS - So ask them at GBEs?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. I don't have that information in front of me. That's a Tasracing question.

Mr EDMUNDS - Are you able to confirm that Tasracing was making monthly payments of about \$5000 to the owner of Mill Road while it was seeking to develop the property, and do you know how much in total was spent?

Ms HOWLETT - That too is a question for Tasracing. I don't have Tasracing figures in front of me, but you'll have the ability to ask that question at GBE hearings in December.

CHAIR - Thank you. The time being 8.16 p.m. - most of us have probably had a reasonable day - I'd like to thank you all for your contribution to this. Thank you, minister, for the work that you've done. I know that it takes a lot of effort by a lot of people to provide the information. I particularly thank Robin for coming down from the north-east.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. I take this opportunity to thank my department and my very hardworking team in the office. The team in our office has worked for weeks on preparation for this.

CHAIR - We completely understand, as you do, when you've sat on this side of the table.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you to the committee as well.

The Committee adjourned at 8.17 p.m.