



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL  
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE  
CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2021-2022](#))

**Members:**

**DR M PATERSON (Chair)**  
**MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)**  
**MR E COCKS**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 1 NOVEMBER 2022**

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**Acting secretary to the committee:**  
**Ms K Mickelson (Ph: 620 50199)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

## **APPEARANCES**

<b>Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.....</b>	<b>10</b>

## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 11.50 am.**

Appearances:

Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment  
Lewis, Dr Sophie, Commissioner  
Grimes, Mr Sean, Director, Sustainability, Environmental Assessments and Reporting  
Gardner, Mrs Miranda, Director, Complaints and Investigations

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning and welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity's Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2021-2022. The proceedings today will examine the annual reports for the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment and the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate.

Before we begin, on behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people, we respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

The first time witnesses speak, please state your name and the capacity for which you appear today. Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, could you please state that clearly for the record.

In the first session we will hear from the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment and welcome Dr Sophie Lewis and officials here today. Can I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement in front of you? Can you please confirm for the record that you have read and acknowledge the privilege statement?

**Dr Lewis:** I have read, and I acknowledge the privilege statement.

**Mr Grimes:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

**Mrs Gardner:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

**THE CHAIR:** Great, thank you. Commissioner, thank you for appearing today. I am interested to have a chat about one of the findings from your reports into scope 3 emissions and greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT, that household consumption makes up 59 per cent of scope 3 emissions. I am interested in how the ACT government is engaging with households to empower people to take action on emissions.

**Dr Lewis:** Thanks for asking about the *ACT's scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions* report. One of the pieces of information we are communicating in that report is the breakdown by user group of the source of those greenhouse gas emissions. So whether that was from the business sector, government or household users.

We found that a large contribution of scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT comes from households. Part of that is because of the make-up of the Canberra economy, in that we do not have a lot of manufacturing or heavy industry—those big heavy emitters—in the ACT. So when we look at the proportion that comes from households, it tends to be what is going on at the household and individual level that is making up that large proportion, and that is from things like food use and housing consumer goods.

One of the threads that was discussed throughout the scope 3 report was that it is really important to get all of those user groups—government, business and individual householders—together in terms of reducing the scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions for the ACT, and that is through things like improving people’s understanding and awareness of what are scope 3 emissions. And that what is happening at the family or household level is important in terms of the city’s overall greenhouse gas emissions, like what we do with our food waste and what we are bringing into our houses in terms of new purchases. That is where we made recommendations around improving awareness and understanding through education campaigns.

**THE CHAIR:** The ACT government has just launched its draft *Circular economy strategy 2022-25* for public consultation. I am interested in if you see this as a constructive step and what do you hope to see in terms of reductions of scope 3 emissions from a flourishing circular economy in the ACT?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, so we did note the *Circular economy strategy 2022-25* was released last week. Although we have not looked at it in enough detail to make a contribution to the feedback process on that, we as an office, are really pleased to see a more complete circular economy strategy developing because of how closely circular economy adoption is tied to improvements in sustainability and environmental outcomes overall.

Particularly because of this relationship between scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions and the circular economy. Jurisdictions that have greater circularity in their economies tend to have much lower scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions. They are very closely related. That is because the less we adhere to that linear economy principle of buying and discarding, in simple terms, and the more we have products that are in use for longer, less new products, new materials, resources entering and being discarded, the lower our greenhouse gas emissions tend to be. Both of them relate to an improvement in sustainability and environmental outcomes. So to see a strategy being developed that starts to address the need to move to more circular economy principles, rather than looking at just very singular narrow aspects of that such as recycling or reductions of particular waste streams, is a really positive step. I do note in that strategy one of the focus areas is on consumer goods and consumption, which goes back to your questions around householders and how we can reduce the greenhouse gas emissions or that linear approach to economy where we are just buying goods, using them for a short time period and then discarding them.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you think there are issues in terms of comparison with other jurisdictions that maybe have different makeups of their scope 3 emissions, that may have a broader business sector or manufacturing sector that produces more emissions than what we do here in the ACT? Do you think there is particular challenges for the ACT government in the fact that the bulk of our emissions do come from households and that is a different type of conversation to be had?

**Dr Lewis:** I do think it is a particular challenge. We do have a unique greenhouse gas emissions profile for the ACT compared to a lot of other jurisdictions because of the nature of our population and the nature of our economy here. So a huge proportion of the emissions for the ACT are scope 3, rather than scope 1 and scope 2. Part of that is because of progress we have made to reducing scope 1 and scope 2 greenhouse gas emissions through climate change mitigation policies but a large part of that is because of the consumer nature of our city state. If we are looking at reducing those scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions we have different challenges from jurisdictions that have very high scope 1 and scope 2 emissions. Because of that difference it will require different approaches. But fundamentally to reduce those greenhouse gas emissions we have to acknowledge them, we have to count them and then we have to have deliberate strategies for reducing them.

**MS CLAY:** Commissioner, I really appreciate in your annual report that you go through and give a good indication of where the ACT directorates are at in relation to your recommendations. Quite a lot of those have come through as unsatisfactory. How do you follow up on an unsatisfactory recommendation?

**Dr Lewis:** This is an approach that we have adopted in the last couple of annual reporting cycles. That is to look at the information that is provided in response to our request for updates on open recommendations in our investigations and *State of the environment* reports and then look at the progress of that recommendation and programs and activities to meet that recommendation. Then we apply our own comment to the status of that. In some cases they are listed as unsatisfactory, in other instances we have satisfactory responses, or in some cases based on the information and evidence that is provided to the office, we have closed our recommendations and no longer request directorates report on them.

In terms of the unsatisfactory, that is where we have not been provided with what we feel is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that progress is being made over a timeframe that we expect. So for example, for recommendations from the *State of the environment report*, some of those may take the full *State of the environment* reporting cycle of four years to plan, to commence and fully implement or complete. Whereas others can be undertaken in a much shorter period of time.

But in terms of what happens after that, there is no recourse for recommendations that we categorise as unsatisfactory. The purpose of that is then to guide the information we request for the following reporting year if we want to seek more specific information or a more complete set of information around that recommendation.

**MS CLAY:** I might dig into one of them as an example. So we have your response to recommendation 8 to the *Independent audit of the Molonglo Valley strategic assessment* of June 2018 and it is about the Karma Nature Reserve buffer. That is one of our unsatisfactory responses. I am interested, if we have an unsatisfactory response to that, that we do not have a sufficient buffer on Karma and we are going ahead with developing Whitlam, do you have concerns about the pace at which we are responding to that recommendation? Do you have any concerns about that area?

**Dr Lewis:** In general, most of the recommendations we categorise as unsatisfactory

would be because we have a concern around the progress of that recommendation. In that particular case we have noted that we would like in the next reporting cycle, so for the next financial year, additional information regarding the Karma Nature Reserve and why the buffer has not been finalised while development of the Whitlam suburb has already commenced. So in that case, my simple response would be yes, I do have concerns regarding that.

**MS LAWDER:** Just to follow up from that, if you said you were unsatisfied with the response, are you saying there is no obligation of the government to change its approach or come back with further information in a following year so, for example, you could be unsatisfied again the next year with the response?

**Dr Lewis:** Sorry, can you repeat that for me?

**MS LAWDER:** Where you have said you are unsatisfied with the government response what obligation does the government have to change its approach or provide the information the following year? Or might you, for example, say you are unsatisfied year after year with the same recommendation?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, there would certainly be the possibility that we could say that we are unsatisfied over multiple years. In terms of the obligation, my understanding of what is required according to the commissioner's act, our legislation, is we make these recommendations and then we report on the responses to the recommendations in our annual report, but there would be no requirement for any specific change in response to the information that we are requesting. So if I said that about the response, for example, to this recommendation 8 that Ms Clay asked about, there would be no requirement to the government to change their response to that recommendation. This is more the means by which we can keep track of progress towards these recommendations and how quickly they are occurring and how completely they are occurring.

**MS LAWDER:** So in an ideal world, would you prefer there to be more obligation on the government to respond more fully to your finding that you were unsatisfied? Should there be a more formal process to obligate the government to provide a better response?

**Dr Lewis:** I think I will take that question on notice, thank you.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you. I wanted to go back to some information you provided during recent estimates hearings, which seems like just yesterday.

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, it does.

**MS LAWDER:** Now you said, again, there was no formal process after a recommendation or opportunity had been identified. You said, there was no formal process by which there was significant accountability around delivering on a recommendation. So just to reiterate, you said that back whenever estimates was—

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, in August, yes.

**MS LAWDER:** What sort of process would you like to see introduced to ensure recommendations are followed up on?

**Dr Lewis:** Given that that is somewhat similar to your previous question, I think I will also take that question on notice.

**MS LAWDER:** Do you have the opportunity to conduct progress briefings with the minister or officials in the directorate about progress on the recommendation? Are there any ongoing discussions? Or do they come to you and ask whether what they are doing might meet your recommendation, for example?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes we certainly do discuss with officials aspects of recommendations depending on what report investigation and what area we are talking about because a lot of these recommendations are essentially whole of government particularly if we look at Scope 3, that is across vast numbers of business areas. But we certainly do discuss these recommendations and progress towards them throughout the year with officials. In particular, when we request the information for our annual report regarding progress towards agreed-to-recommendations, that is essentially a conversation that occurs with directorates where they provide us with often quite expansive information about what has occurred in terms of meeting recommendations.

**MS LAWDER:** Where you have said there is insufficient evidence to determine whether it is progressing well or not, do you think it is incumbent on the directorates involved to provide better supporting evidence? Or is it something that in your recommendation in the first place you should perhaps identify what evidence you might be looking for?

**Dr Lewis:** I think that would very much depend on what recommendation we are talking about. Recommendations for background information are surprisingly difficult to write. Would you like to answer this one Miranda? Miranda is often extremely helpful in terms of writing recommendations for our reports. But they are quite difficult to write in a way where the intention is clear, they provide sufficient specificity and they can be measured without being overly prescriptive in a way that would be problematic for delivery. Would you like to provide some further detail on recommendation writing?

**Mrs Gardner:** As Sophie said, it is a bit of a balancing act and if you look back through previous recommendations from previous reports the degree of specificity in the recommendations is quite varied. Sometimes it is helpful to have very specific recommendations that can be easily responded to, but equally those types of recommendations can make it difficult to cover the breadth of topics that we would really like government to be working on. So that is the kind of balancing act we have to do. Sometimes some of the reports have extremely long recommendations with A to X subparts to respond to, which does make reporting very difficult.

In terms of your question about whether there could be better processes for government to provide data where there is insufficient data, I think once government has accepted a recommendation from the commissioner the onus probably falls on them to figure out how they would provide that information, given that it becomes government policy once it is accepted by government in terms of responding to it. If we had specific metrics that we required from government it would be something that we would include in a recommendation. But because most of our recommendations are at that slightly higher



level that does not happen particularly often.

Potentially, we would welcome a process where, after government has responded to a report and accepted or declined recommendations, we could then potentially have a meeting with them to determine what sort of reporting matrix might be acceptable on both sides, which is not something that has happened in the past, as far as I am aware.

**THE CHAIR:** My question is about the quite technical reporting around recommendation 7 on Indigenous matters. You note it is unsatisfactory that only two of the 60 heritage grants awarded since 2019 relate to Indigenous culture. Can you speak more about your comments in response to that recommendation and if you are aware of any work that has gone on and where the government should be on that one?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes. Just to be clear, that is recommendation 7 from the *ACT state of the environment* report of 2019.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes—page 35.

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, that is correct. The EPSDD response to that recommendation was agreed and the current status was listed as, “The programs and activities were well advanced.” In terms of establishing a specific category of Indigenous heritage grants, we note that we would request further information in the next reporting year about the heritage grants because in the recent reporting years very few of the grants that were awarded we understood to be relating to Indigenous matters. In that case we were noting that the intent of the recommendation was not being met by the evidence that was presented to us. Did you have anything further on that one?

**Mrs Gardner:** No, I do not think so. I think you have captured it. That information is publicly available. It is not something that was provided as a response. We went and checked the grants that had been awarded.

**MS CLAY:** Commissioner, in your annual report, on page 13, you talk about urban encroachment as one of our biggest threats and that greenfield development is placing pressure on our environment through vegetation clearance, degraded land condition and invasive species advancing. You have said:

It is of critical priority that we pause ever-expanding our city and instead embrace the challenge of creating liveable, efficient and sustainable future housing that sits within our current footprint.

I am really interested in that at the moment as we go through a planning review and have quite a lot of conversations about that. Are you planning any future work on greenfield infill development in that area?

**Dr Lewis:** That discussion on the expansion of the urban footprint emerges from the *ACT state of the environment* report of 2019 and the data that underpinned that report, particularly in terms of those pressures on the environment you mentioned; the vegetation, the invasive species and various other aspects. That is also evidence that came out and was clear in the *ACT's scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions* report and also the *State of the lakes and waterways in the ACT* 2022 report. In terms of where the

research is headed that will be central to our forthcoming ACT state of the environment report 2023 and again looking at the impact of expansion on those various aspects of our environment.

**MS CLAY:** That is quite interesting. Most of your recent investigations have found that urban encroachment is actually affecting a lot of different environmental measures of health.

**Dr Lewis:** That was not the primary focus of those two recent investigations but it is clear in both of those that the expansion of the city footprint into new greenfield developments is having an impact in terms of resource usage, in our Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions but also in terms of the urban lakes and waterways. Did you want to speak at all to the impact of the green—

**Mr Grimes:** Yes. That is true. There are a lot of impacts. The work that Canberra University did for us on the *State of the lakes and waterways in the ACT 2022* report showed that even some developments in the Upper Ginninderra Catchment were having an impact on water quality of Ginninderra Lake and beyond and we have certainly seen it in our other *State of the environment* reporting where we have looked at biodiversity impacts from the loss of mature trees and things like that. So, yes, it is an issue that we are familiar with and we will be reporting on this in more detail in the next SoE, following up on those issues that we had in the previous 2019 one. There is a lot. It is very hard to discuss because when you change the land and you develop it, you not just increase run-off for pollution but also loss of buffer zones and there is more impact on fragmentation of existing environments. It is something you could probably talk about for several hours but it is something that we have identified and we propose at this stage to have a separate chapter in the next SoE about urban development, its impacts and management.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I would like to thank the commissioner and staff for their attendance today. We had some questions on notice, so please provide the answers to the committee secretary within five working days.

**Sitting suspended from 12.16 pm to 1.46 pm.**

Appearances:

Vassarotti, Ms Rebecca, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Heritage, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services and Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

Ponton, Mr Ben, Director-General

Burkevics, Mr Bren, Executive Group Manager, Environment, Heritage and Water

Jeffress, Mr Stuart, Senior Director, Parks and Partnerships, ACT Parks and Conservation Service

Glennon, Mr Chris, Senior Director, Resilient Landscapes, Environment, Heritage and Water

Watts, Ms Michaela, Acting Senior Director, Parks and Partnerships, ACT Parks and Conservation Service

Magee, Ms Alexandra, Executive Branch Manager, Communications, Engagement and Media

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome to this public hearing by the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity in our inquiry into the annual and financial reports for 2021-22. We will now hear from the Minister for the Environment, Ms Rebecca Vassarotti MLA.

Please be aware that the proceedings are being recorded and transcribed and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. The first time that witnesses speak, can they please state that they are aware of the privilege statement and its privilege implications? When taking a question on notice, could you use the words, “I will take this question on notice”?

We have received the minister’s opening statement in writing, so that will be tabled as a submission, and we will now proceed to questions. I will start. Minister, I am interested in understanding the balance regarding heritage versus end of life in buildings. I am specifically referring to Callam Offices in Woden. With buildings in Canberra that are incredibly run-down and that some may think are an eyesore, I am interested in the balance between heritage and end of life.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I note that I have read the privilege statement and I understand the privilege statement. Thanks, Dr Paterson, for your question. It is a really interesting question because the whole concept of heritage and how we balance heritage and protecting what is special and important in our city, particularly in terms of an evolving city, is an interesting one. Certainly, when buildings are heritage listed, it is something that needs to be considered. I will look to officials to talk about some of the specific elements.

Generally, with a heritage-listed asset, there is a need for a conservation plan to look at how the heritage elements can be protected and enhanced, and ensure that they can be maintained so that we do not get to a point where things are so run-down that it is almost impossible to maintain the heritage assets.

There are instances where heritage assets may have been destroyed. We have seen that

in terms of some of the bushfires, with assets under a heritage listing being destroyed. It is about how to manage that issue, and there are different ways that you might be able to do that. In some instances there is an assessment made that keeping the ruins of an asset and identifying what assets used to be there is important. Sometimes it is about rebuilding. It is very contextually and specifically based. There is a range of processes that are worked through.

Mr Burkevics will probably be able to talk about some of the specifics around what happens in terms of maintaining heritage assets, particularly as they age, and looking at issues such as accessibility.

**Mr Burkevics:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In relation to your question, Dr Paterson, there is some really good information on the heritage website about the process that is used by council, established under the Heritage Act 2004, in relation to the criteria for nominations.

A number of criteria apply to those nominations. I will mention a few of them: rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history, and a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period. The guidelines are available. Of course, council, following the receipt of a nomination, will go through a process within the statutory provisions of the act to make a determination of that place, that object or infrastructure.

There are also a number of policy documents available online that provide information about the approach that council will use to make a determination on a place. Callam Offices is a good example of a place that ticks a number of the criteria, for its architectural design and so on. Certainly, all of the information is available on the website regarding the process that council uses.

**THE CHAIR:** For example, I am advocating to another minister to get the adolescent mental health services out of that building because it is so run-down. We would have to do up the building and invest in it heavily to bring it up to a modern-day standards—or is it just not worth spending taxpayers' money on it? There is that cultural heritage balance.

**Ms Vassarotti:** With what needs to happen in relation to maintaining a heritage asset, it is normally determined through a conservation strategy. Certainly, asset managers are in discussion with council and others in terms of the determination of that conservation plan and how it moves through. In an example such as that, asset managers need to determine the types of uses of a building, and they may change over time. Certainly, different types of services might be appropriate at different points in time.

The issue of how we look at adaptive re-use of heritage-listed buildings is a piece of work that we need to do in the ACT. Some good work has happened in Victoria around looking at issues of sustainability. A good example of a local heritage asset around which there has been a lot of work is the Shine Dome, in terms of a much-loved, beautiful building. In terms of energy efficiency and running costs, a lot of work has been put into identifying how that can be improved and how it can be a more useable building. It is a piece of work that asset owners need to work on. There are opportunities to work with the council in terms of what their obligations are. This is something that

evolves over time.

**THE CHAIR:** On the heritage website, is there a plan, for example, for Callam Offices, that I can look at and see—

**Ms Vassarotti:** Not necessarily specific conservation plans; that is my understanding. But there will be obligations on asset managers.

**Mr Ponton:** I have read and understood the privilege statement. A conservation management plan for Callam Offices has been prepared and it is currently being reviewed by the Heritage Council. That conservation management plan will guide long-term conservation and responsible management. As to whether it is publicly available, I will look to my colleagues to answer that.

**Mr Burkevics:** Generally not, Dr Paterson. Those plans are not publicly available because they are managed by the property owner. In this case Callam Offices is an asset of the ACT government, managed through ACT Property Group. As the minister mentioned before, it is the responsibility of the property owner to upkeep that property, in accordance with the conservation management plan.

**MS LAWDER:** Another example is Hill Station in Hume, which I think was heritage listed in 2012. It looks, to the naked eye, to be pretty much falling down. What role does the ACT government play in ensuring that the owner of that asset is maintaining it or adhering to a conservation management plan?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. I am not aware of who the asset owner is for that property. I do not know whether we have that information. That might be one that we take on notice, in terms of who the asset owner is. Asset owners have the responsibility. For a listed asset, there should be a conservation management plan in place, and that should be adhered to.

**Mr Burkevics:** I have some information, Minister, that I can provide on that matter. Recently, Hill Station was sold to a new owner. I am advised that ACT Heritage has recently met with the new owner to provide early advice on the conservation and management approaches to that place. And that is a private owner.

**MR COCKS:** Going back to Callam Offices, where the ACT government is the asset owner, such as in this case, what power is there to compel the ACT government to maintain a heritage asset like this and not allow it to get into the dilapidated state that the committee has already referred to?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I am not sure that there was reference to a dilapidated state. Certainly, Callam Offices—

**THE CHAIR:** I might have suggested that, yes.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Certainly, Callam Offices is a building that has particular challenges, in terms of how it may operate, because of the nature of the design, as well as, potentially, maintenance. There are obligations on asset owners. Again, I will look to officials to outline some of the details of obligations that—

**MR COCKS:** Yes, and particularly around enforcement; I am interested in that.

**Mr Burkevics:** There are a number of powers under the Heritage Act that allow Heritage to take action against a property owner that is failing to maintain their heritage-listed asset in accordance with their plans. That is, of course, a last resort, should it be needed. Certainly, the Heritage Act is one of the options and powers under the act that can be used as required.

**MR COCKS:** How does that work when the asset owner is the ACT government?

**Ms Vassarotti:** The ACT government is under the same obligations as any asset owner. It has to adhere to the same rules. As well as enforcement, certainly, through the heritage grants, there is also some assistance that can be provided around repairs and maintenance for asset owners. There is proactive support that can be provided. It is a pretty small fund, but that is something that is there as well. I am not sure whether officials have any more to add in relation to specifics of enforcement regarding ACT government agencies.

**Mr Burkevics:** In relation to Callam Offices, it would be fair to say that the asset owner manages the operations of that facility in accordance with their plans and arrangements. Whilst there may be operational challenges with that building—all of us that have been to Callam certainly know about those; the elevators and navigating our way around the building—that may not be captured under Heritage Act arrangements. It may be more about the operational aspects—for example, the state of the elevators or other access control arrangements—that are dealt with as part of the asset owner's primary responsibilities for building maintenance, outside Heritage Act requirements.

**THE CHAIR:** What about private residents who have heritage listing on their properties? I understand that we give grants to those residents to do up aspects of their houses to ensure that they stay heritage—

**Ms Vassarotti:** We may give grants. That is not a given. People can apply for grants. Again, if they have heritage-listed assets, they need to have an approved conservation management plan and adhere to that.

**THE CHAIR:** They do adhere to that? Do we enforce those plans?

**Mr Burkevics:** Certainly, where breaches are brought to the attention of Heritage ACT or the government, they are investigated in accordance with the arrangements for heritage. As an example, earlier this year, a report of damage to a heritage-listed wall in Swinger Hill was notified. That was investigated, and corrective action was taken in relation to that matter.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, we were talking this morning to the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment about heritage. She noted her recommendation that there be specific First Nations heritage grants, in addition to the regular grants. She also noted that, of the 60 heritage grants, only two had gone to First Nations people. I gather the directorate has responded differently. The directorate thinks that having the standard heritage grants is actually sufficient. Can you talk me through that?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thanks, Ms Clay, for the question. In relation to the heritage grants, we have identified the celebration and protection of First Nations heritage as key criteria. Rather than having a specific stream for First Nations heritage, we have identified that as one of the priority areas.

Certainly, the need for us to do more in relation to First Nations heritage is a really important point that the commissioner has identified. There is a view that, in terms of identifying whether it is a priority area of work within the full grants program, it means that it is not narrowly focused; it can actually be more broadly focused.

One thing that is a real opportunity, and something that we have been working on over the last little while, is that while we have had a relatively small number of heritage grants that have had a First Nations focus, we have been looking, through the heritage festival in particular, at increasing the number of First Nations events that have occurred there. Over the last three years we have tripled the number of First Nations events that have happened as part of the heritage festival. That has provided a good opportunity to connect and engage with First Nations organisations who are working in this area, to raise the level of awareness about heritage grants and to start to foster those relationships.

In the grants program, although a small number of grants have had that First Nations focus, a number of those have been partnership grants with organisations such as the catchment groups, which has provided even greater enhancement to the learning that is going on, particularly for non-Indigenous members of the community, and how we can bring together those different forms of knowledge and expertise.

Again, I will look to Mr Burkevics, in terms of any detail that he wanted to add that would be useful to provide at this point, regarding the heritage grants in particular.

**Mr Burkevics:** It is fair to say that, certainly from a directorate and heritage point of view, we are very keen to increase the diversity and number of applicants for the grant program, which is a significant investment. It remains a challenge to ensure that people are aware, so we are reviewing the approach. Certainly, at the moment the scheme has a priority for Indigenous applications. It is a priority under the current scheme that is run. Certainly, there will be ongoing effort to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds to apply for heritage grants.

**MS CLAY:** That is good to hear. I imagine it will succeed, or not, based on the quality of the consultation you do and maybe on the support that you provide during the application process. Apart from expanding consultations during the heritage events, do you have you a targeted consultation plan to help people to become aware that they can apply for these grants and to give them assistance in how to do so?

**Mr Burkevics:** As part of the launch of the grants, there is a comms program for the grants, to ensure that they are widely published across Canberra and widely known across Canberra. Certainly, there are opportunities through the existing mechanisms, as we have discussed before, within the directorate. With the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee, we can use those mechanisms and other consultative bodies to promote engagement, particularly on the grant opportunities that are available, which

will not be too far away.

**MR COCKS:** I am keen to know for how long the issue around diversity of applicants has been a challenge for you. Do you have any analysis yet of what the barriers are that are preventing those applicants?

**Mr Burkevics:** We could say that it always remains a challenge to ensure that you are getting as many applications as possible from across a diverse field of groups and diverse backgrounds for heritage grants. No doubt, with all grant programs that are run by ACT government, there is an absolute desire to ensure that all groups, all individuals, are aware and have the opportunity to apply. It is a fact that all too often you hear of good nominations that occur after the closing period.

I think it remains a priority, certainly from a heritage grants point of view, that we continue to use every mechanism to promote the program early and strongly, and to consult; and, where necessary, provide assistance to potential applicants to apply. I know we have a very committed grants officer that engages incredibly strongly across all applicants, and new applicants as well, to assist them in applying for and, should they be successful, completing all of the acquittal and deed-of-grant type arrangements. There is a full-time officer on that matter. They have been very effective in ensuring that people that apply are supported through the process.

**MR COCKS:** It sounds like it has been a longstanding challenge.

**Mr Burkevics:** It is fair to say that we are very keen, from a heritage point of view, to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to apply. We will continue to look at all efforts and opportunities to ensure that everybody that may have an interest in heritage grants is able to do so.

**MR COCKS:** The question was around for how long this has been an issue. Despite good intentions, I am interested in understanding for how long it has been an issue and what analysis you have done to understand what the barriers are.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Mr Cocks, in terms of a response to your question, I would point to the fact that, certainly, since I took on the role of Minister for Heritage—I came into the role in 2020—there has been a real commitment to look at how we elevate the role and voices of First Nations people across the heritage portfolio.

We have focused, as an entry point to that, on the heritage festival, and how we could look at how we elevate those voices, create connections and create an understanding of the incredible wealth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history that we have in the community. You will see over that period that we have done things such as some of the specific artwork, where we have employed First Nations people—

**MR COCKS:** Minister, I am glad to talk about the last two years; I am happy to work with that time frame. I am happy for you to take on notice what analysis you have around the barriers to Indigenous people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, participating in these programs.

**Ms Vassarotti:** They are the same as the barriers for First Nations people across the



board, particularly around the grants process. There has not been specific analysis over the last two years. I am not sure that we could take it on notice. We can provide a review of the heritage grants. There is an annual review that happens.

**Mr Burkevics:** There is an annual review which looks at community feedback, the applications process and so on. As the minister indicated, it is always a priority to ensure that people are aware of the grants program and are supported through the process. That exists year after year. I do not think you would set a time frame around it. It is just one of the challenges in that, if opportunities are available for people to apply, you want to ensure that you attract diverse and innovative applications, to ensure that the selection process is absolutely worthwhile.

**MR COCKS:** I am happy with that.

**MS LAWDER:** You talked about the great work in supporting people who have made an application. But going back to perhaps a proactive outreach, encouraging people and providing them with information to enable them to think about a nomination, do you go out specifically to particular organisations with an information package to encourage them to think about applying?

**Mr Burkevics:** Absolutely. As part of the launch of the Heritage Grants Program, there is a very comprehensive communications program that utilises a range of communication channels to advertise the program. As I mentioned before, there is a heritage grants coordinator that is well connected to the Canberra community, and certainly works through all avenues—existing bodies and representative bodies—to ensure that people are aware of the grant opportunities.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Including through bodies such as the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee. We have specific First Nations people that are represented on the council that take a role in this. It is a proactive process that happens.

**MS LAWDER:** Are you able to provide for the committee a list of particular sessions you have provided to First Nations groups or organisations over the financial year? Also, do you provide ongoing engagement? There are a couple of First Nations people or groups listed in the Heritage Act. What is your ongoing engagement with them?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Are you talking about the registered Aboriginal organisations?

**MS LAWDER:** Yes.

**Mr Burkevics:** We could certainly provide some general information around how the program is promoted across the region and any specific measures that may have been taken with specific First Nations groups. We could certainly take that on notice. There is, of course, a wide range of opportunities. Certainly, general information on how that program is advertised would be entirely possible.

**MS LAWDER:** I am also interested in specific sessions that you might have delivered—information sessions.

**Ms Vassarotti:** We can certainly see what we have. Certainly, my understanding of the

work of the grants officer is that it is a little bit more organic. It is not a case of three sessions happening on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; it is actually a much more integrated process, in terms of the grants officer going out and connecting with groups as they are doing their business. I am sure we will be able to provide—

**MS LAWDER:** It would appear that that is not actually working, in terms of encouraging them to apply.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I would make the observation around the registered Aboriginal organisations that they are a specific type of organisation that are seen as experts and that are contracted to do specific work to support the identification of First Nations history. They may well be involved in organisations and activities that could be appropriate to be engaged in heritage grants, but they are entities that do specific works under the act, and they may not be the most appropriate people to be doing community-based grants engagement activity.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, I want to ask about an independent review into the ACT Heritage Council that you mentioned recently in estimates hearings. At that time you said you were expecting to receive it by the end of September. Have you received that review?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I can provide you with some information. I have received the report. I was provided with a preliminary briefing around the report. I am meeting with the independent evaluator after this session, to get a fulsome brief in relation to the heritage review.

That review has provided findings. It did not provide specific recommendations. I have been working with the directorate in terms of clear recommendations and a next-steps document—the next steps in relation to where we go from here. I am anticipating your next question will be around release of the review. Certainly, as soon as I have the clear recommendations about steps forward and have spoken to the Heritage Council, we will provide the findings of the review publicly. I would be happy to provide you with a brief around that, when that occurs, if that is helpful for you, Ms Lawder.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you. When you commissioned that report, what scope did you provide to the independent reviewer? Were you expecting recommendations or were there never going to be recommendations?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I am fairly sure that, as part of the last estimates hearing, I provided you with the terms of reference in relation to the review. It was around looking at the key issues and providing findings. Certainly, with the outcomes of the review, it has been really helpful, and it is appropriate that the directorate and I will identify what the key next steps forward will be. It has been a helpful review. It has raised some issues that we feel that we need to address. We are looking forward to finalising that and providing information regarding that, because we understand there is a level of interest in the community.

I have had very positive feedback from across the community in relation to commissioning that review. I am keen to move forward on this as soon as we have a clear understanding about next steps, which will be very shortly. I do not want you to

think that this will be dragging on for months and months. We wanted to make sure it happened relatively quickly. We will be moving forward in the next couple of weeks.

**MS LAWDER:** Has the ACT Heritage Council recommenced work? If not, what may be happening in the meantime? Is it going to create a backlog of work? How is that being managed?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is a fair question. In making the decision to suspend the activities of the council, we did not want to create additional backlogs, so I appreciate where the question is coming from.

In relation to the general business, particularly around general applications, that is all able to progress through delegations. I will look to officials shortly to give a little bit of an update. As part of that we have employed additional resources to respond to some of the issues around the volume.

The key issue that we are not able to progress while the council is not operating is around registrations. That is the issue. Again, we are very cognisant that, while we are in this holding pattern, it is an issue. There are three registrations in particular that have the potential to be impacted. I have been working closely with the director regarding the implications of that and mitigating any response to that. I will look to Mr Burkevics to provide some further detail.

**Mr Burkevics:** I will hand over to my colleague the senior director of heritage, Stuart Jeffress. It is fair to say that we have appreciated the patience of all referrals. It has been a good opportunity within Heritage to use the time, with council non-operational, to regroup and review some of the referrals that have come in and how best to process those. I am very happy to hand over to Stuart Jeffress to give some commentary on some of his work.

**Mr Jeffress:** I have read and understand the privilege statement. While council activities have been suspended, the heritage unit has been focusing on the advice and approvals stream that we can progress. We have had some additional resources come into the branch to progress some of the work that is outstanding. We currently have an additional four positions, on top of the existing branch FTE, that are assisting to progress the work of the heritage branch and which we can undertake while the council activities are suspended.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, you very carefully said that you would release the findings of the review. Is there any reason why you would not release the review in full?

**Ms Vassarotti:** We will be releasing the findings. In terms of some of the specific operational elements, in terms of providing transparency and accountability, the review gives a very good understanding of what the key issues are, moving forward, so I will be releasing the findings of the review.

**MR COCKS:** But not the review in full?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will be releasing the findings of the review.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, I want to ask about animal rescue organisations and their ability, or not, to care for injured joeys and juvenile kangaroos under the eastern grey kangaroo controlled native species management plan. I believe that only 35 joeys and no juveniles can be exported to New South Wales for care and rehabilitation. What do you suggest animal welfare groups do with injured juveniles and joeys once they have reached the 35 figure?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. I recall that this was a question that was canvassed in question time a little while ago. As you know, Parks and Conservation works with ACT Wildlife and Wildcare Queanbeyan regarding the issue of joeys, and the 35 joeys per year.

Given that I canvassed this in question time, I am not sure whether you want me to go into any more detail. Our understanding is that the issue of the number of licences has not been raised with us by the wildlife organisations, and that the process is working quite well. I will look to Mr Burkevics.

**Mr Burkevics:** I will invite my colleague from PCS, Michaela Watts, to make a few remarks in a moment. I recall that we did discuss the licensing arrangements; you are correct that there is a licence issued under the Nature Conservation Act to the wildlife organisation to care for 35 joeys over the border.

**MS LAWDER:** The question was: what do you expect wildlife groups to do with injured and rescued joeys once they have exceeded the 35?

**Mr Burkevics:** We would expect them to comply with the licence conditions that they have been allocated. To the best of my knowledge, the conservator's office has not received a request to review the licence requirements.

**MS LAWDER:** I am asking you—

**Ms Vassarotti:** He has answered the question, Ms Lawder.

**MS LAWDER:** You have not. Once they have exceeded 35 and they get joey No 36, what do you expect them to do with that joey?

**Mr Burkevics:** Ms Lawder, if there was a particular reason that they were approaching the provisions of their licence requirements, I think that, through existing good relationships, there would be a discussion around next steps. Whether that is a review of the licence arrangements or other arrangements are put in place, those would be the appropriate next steps.

**MS CLAY:** Minister and Mr Burkevics, if somebody wishes to revisit the terms of their licence, who should they contact?

**Mr Burkevics:** We have a team within the Parks and Conservation Service, the licensing and compliance team, that would be very happy to assist with review of licence requirements.

**THE CHAIR:** My question is in respect of the biosecurity rapid response team that

was established in early 2022. Have they discovered any new invasive species in the ACT? What sort of work has been undertaken by that team since they started?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. We were pleased to be able to establish the rapid response team. As evidenced yet again today with the rain, this third year of La Nina has been an incredibly challenging one, in terms of invasive species, and there is the need for us to get on top of invasive species quickly, particularly new species. It is really important as this is a weather pattern that has certainly supercharged the growing of invasive species. I will look to Mr Burkevics to provide some details in terms of the work of the rapid response team in recent times.

**Mr Burkevics:** We have certainly supercharged our ability to answer this question. I am pleased to invite the senior director for resilient landscapes, Chris Glennon, to provide some overview of the work of the invasives team. The invasives team work under Mr Glennon's supervision and that of his team. He has a range of really good examples of the work of that invasives team throughout many years of experience.

**Mr Glennon:** I have read the privilege statement and understand it. Thanks for the question. Yes, the rapid response team has been functional pretty much since the start of this year. The budget process came through mid-last year, recruitment processes et cetera, and the staff have been put on. There are five FTEs as part of that team. There were existing staff within the directorate working on those programs as well.

Going to your question about the achievements or highlights of that program, there have already been a number of biosecurity incursions—red fire ants, imported fire ants, twice, privet leafhopper, fall armyworms and myrtle rust. They are an example of some of the programs where they have responded quickly to a biosecurity threat.

In addition to those activities, they have provided assistance to New South Wales—10 FTE equivalents for seven days to New South Wales—to help with the Varroa mite response, which was really effective for us. Obviously, we are a small jurisdiction. When we have a biosecurity incident, we rely very heavily on New South Wales. We already do. They do a lot of our analytics for us and things like that. Where we can maintain those strong relationships by assisting other jurisdictions when there is a need, it will help us in the long run. We like to foster that relationship.

We have had five days deployment with staff with the New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service on the hawkweed response. There is beetle monitoring in the ACT, and fruit fly monitoring. There are national weed conferences; we have presented at biosecurity symposiums and New South Wales weed conferences. There is a strong relationship there.

In terms of some of the outcomes that have been achieved, the team has already done 320 hectares of survey and control of high-risk incursions, and 140 hectares of rabbit control, with an additional 200 hectares on new sites. We are trialling new methods of control of invasive weeds which, in the long term, will reduce our reliance on chemical control. We are very keen to do that. The staff have been trained in using drones to do the mapping. We do not use drones in terms of the actual weed eradication at this stage, but we do use drones in terms of seeking out incursions, mapping and those types of arrangements.

In the six to nine months that the staff have been employed, they have been extremely active. We are very appreciative of the budget enhancement to be able to do that.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of the weeds that come into the territory, or threaten to come into the territory, are there any patterns? Do they come from one direction? Are they brought in by birds? Is it wind that blows the seeds in? Are there any patterns in how weeds end up here?

**Mr Glennon:** That is an extremely good question, and it is something that we have been researching ourselves. We are currently in the process of doing a major risk assessment of biosecurity risk to the ACT. We will certainly be looking at how that risk might occur—exactly what the pathway is, I suppose. That is what your question is getting to: what will be the likely pathway for a biosecurity incident in the ACT?

We are looking hard at trade, with horticulturists. Some of our responses so far have been with horticultural firms that have imported plants. Cane toads and things like that came in on a truck to a horticultural industry. It is the same with Bunnings. We have had great support from Bunnings in looking at some of the risks they have had in their nursery.

That is the likely place where it is going to come in—more so in trade. You are right, though: being a major tourism centre, there is a chance that it will come in on vehicles, in terms of weeds, dust and mud. As the minister said, with the wet weather, it will be easier for those sorts of risks to stick, if you like, to trucks and vehicles. Traditionally, that is a way that weeds move from farm to farm, so we are very keen on that.

We are working very closely with any industry using heavy machinery regarding the proper hygiene for keeping that machinery clean and washed down before it moves from site to site, so that we do not spread weeds in that manner.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Just to round off that response, Dr Paterson, it is also useful to note that, particularly on the issue of biosecurity, there has been a strong focus on biosecurity nationally. We have seen some great coordinated and collaborative work. I would note that the commonwealth government has stepped up in this area, in terms of recognising their role, particularly with issues around international borders, and the role they can play in terms of coordinating work with the states and territories.

With some of the threats that we have experienced—and Varroa mite is a good example—the ability of jurisdictions to work in close collaboration has been a really positive thing. I think we have learnt a lot. Recently, we all signed on to the very first National Biosecurity Strategy. This is an area where there is increasing understanding of the need for us to look at these issues, and work in an effective and coordinated manner. Particularly, as a small jurisdiction, that is really important for us. As we are a small jurisdiction sitting inside another jurisdiction, we have some key risks that we do not control. Working closely with both the commonwealth and our other jurisdictions is really important, and it is happening really well at the moment.

**MS LAWDER:** On weeds, and investigating where some of it came from, have you found anything about slashers on the roadsides in rural areas perhaps bringing weeds in

to the suburban areas? Have you also looked at the timing of slashing so that they are not being slashed when the seed heads are about to drop their seeds?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will look to officials to identify key work that is happening. I would say, as an opening statement, that working with our rural leaseholders is important. It has been fantastic to work with the Rural Landholders Association. There is a renewed effort in terms of that association coming together and working in close partnership with government. It is a really positive relationship.

There is the issue not only of people doing onsite work but also of how the work of, say, government contractors on public land connects with what is happening on private land. That is important. The land management agreements are key, in terms of how, particularly, conservation values are managed. In terms of particular work that has been happening, in terms of that interface, I will look to one of my officials. Ms Watts, from Parks and Conservation, can talk about some of the operational ways that this happens.

**Ms Watts:** I also acknowledge the privilege statement; I have read and understand it. PCS undertakes mowing, and we have contractors that undertake mowing on a lot of our rural roadsides in the ACT. We operate under the premise that we start in the least weedy places and move to the weedier places. That helps us to control the spread of weeds through the use of slashers and mowers.

When we are moving from site to site, we also wash and clean our mowers. We pay particular attention to making sure that seed heads are not carried across different sites. Unfortunately, we do find that the requirement to mow, especially on rural roadsides, does align with when seeds are setting, with a lot of our grasses. That is typically when they are at their highest. We do have to mow at times that would potentially result in the spread of weeds, which is one of the reasons why we pay extra attention to removing weed and seed material from our machinery when we move them across sites.

**Ms Vassarotti:** The only other thing to note, particularly with the rapid response team, is that one of the key strategies we put in place is that it is tenure blind. So it will operate with land managers independent of whether or not they are private landowners or public landowners. It sounds pretty obvious that you would do it, but it is quite a significant step forward and really helps in terms of ensuring we are responding to the right issues at the right time and not saying, “Oh, that is private land; that is not ours.” It is to ensure that we are meeting the needs rather than waiting for the incursion to march up to public land.

**MS CLAY:** Minister and Ms Watts, I am really pleased to hear about some of those very sensible standard practices about weed control and moving from the least to the most and cleaning the blades. All of that sounds great. I am aware that there is a biodiversity forum that I think PCS sits on. I think TCCS might sit on it and I think a whole lot of volunteer and other land carers. Do you talk about those sorts of weed management practices in that forum?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes. We were in fact talking about the agenda for the next forum, and these issues are a key area of interest. How we can support our volunteers to be engaged in this issue as well as both our rural lease holders and government landowners is really important. I might look to Mr Burkevics for some of the details.

**Mr Burkevics:** Thank you very much Minister. I think it is absolutely fair to say we absolutely value and appreciate the effort of all environmental volunteer individuals and groups that support the environment in their own right, in a wide range of government programs and activities to protect, conserve and enhance.

I am a co-chair of the Biodiversity and Conservation Forum. I co-chair, or triple co-chair that now, with the Executive Director of the Conservation Council ACT and the CEO of Landcare. The next meeting is coming up in about two weeks time.

Whilst weeds are not on the agenda, it is one of the many agenda items that the BCF could consider. I think from my perspective and certainly from an operational angle, the more we can safely and better equip volunteers to do their role in a fast and more capable way, the better outcomes will be for the Territory. Talking about weeds, one of the agenda items for the next meeting is progressing a form of safety risk assessment for the use of electric power tools by volunteers, which is currently restricted. I think that it be a very, very, productive discussion and the best way forward so that we can analyse the safety and operational requirements and their appropriateness for volunteers in sometimes sensitive areas. So all those issues will be considered as part of that review.

**MR COCKS:** Mr Glennon, the work you were talking about, looking at the risks of invasive species entering the ACT, will that also consider transmission within and movement within the ACT?

**Mr Glennon:** Yes, it will. The main focus of the study would be to look at where the risk is likely to occur and what type of risk it might be. It will look at the pathways that it gets into the ACT and yes you are correct, we will be looking at what its likely transmission around the ACT could then be. Then obviously we will work with those key stakeholders to help them redesign, if you like, their biosecurity plans to mitigate those risks.

**MR COCKS:** Wonderful. Sorry, I might have missed it, when is that work due to be completed?

**Mr Glennon:** That work has not commenced yet. So we will be looking to commence it shortly. It will go out to tender and we have not got the tenders in yet. I would be guessing but I would imagine a job like that would be around about the six-month mark. But that is without getting the tenders in, that is a little bit of a—

**MR COCKS:** Yes, understood.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Mr Cocks, in relation to how we manage some of these biosecurity issues on an ACT basis, it will obviously depend on the biosecurity risk itself as well. I think again in terms of the case study for looking at the issue of Varroa mite. This is a really interesting one in terms of we have had to engage deeply about what we would do if we did see an incursion. Given the nature of our jurisdiction, it is likely that we would need to deal with it on a jurisdictional basis. So the management strategy would be very similar across the board but certainly we would need to think about what we would really be looking at in how we mitigate the risks.



**MR COCKS:** No, absolutely. I would be hoping we would be looking at hopefully learning some lessons from things like African lovegrass and the way that that has become such a problem in the ACT.

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is exactly what the rapid response team is all about, really getting things going. Now we talk about it, a bit like the COVID response, go hard, go early. Because it is going to be a much better cost benefit analysis if we do that, get on top of things really early and do not look at an issue ten years down the track, which is really just about containment rather than eradication.

**Mr Burkevics:** Mr Cocks, further to the minister's remarks and those of Mr Glennon as well, another entity we are seeking to energise in terms of a supporting response to invasive species is the rural landholder network. The leadership team and I had the pleasure of meeting with the executives of the ACT Rural Landholders' Association recently to discuss ways for increased collaboration between government and all rural lessees through the RLA. It was a very productive discussion. We are looking forward to meeting with them approximately every three months, and one of the key agenda items we discussed was how to best work together on targeting and combatting invasive species, weeds, pigs, foxes, dogs, you name it. So that is another body beyond those in the environmental groups that I mentioned earlier, another formal mechanism for us to work with the community on working together on invasive species.

**MR COCKS:** That is good to hear and I would hope that that is a good collaborative approach rather than enforcement of the—

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Cocks this is commentary, we might move onto Ms Clay.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, you and the director have done a lot of work over threatened species recovery over the last year and that is really good to see. Can you tell me what are the biggest threats for some of our threatened species, like the Grassland Earless Dragon, our Pink-tailed Worm-lizard and our Brush-tailed Rock-wallabies?

**Ms Vassarotti:** The ACT should be really proud of the work we are doing around threatened species. With some of the most intact grasslands in particular, we have a really important role to play in terms of custodianship of these threatened ecological communities and the threatened species that live within those. In terms of the key threats, certainly the issue of climate change and a changing climate is front of mind in relation to this work. We also are very focussed in the ACT around ensuring we maintain habitat, so that is an ongoing issue. In terms of our strategy around threatened species, it is around looking at how we understand the threatened species and what they need. So there is incredible work that is going on within government, within the conservation and wildlife team about really understanding our threatened species. There are some fantastic breeding programs going on. There is also great work happening around habitat restoration. I think the Namarag Reserve is a good example of that in terms of the Pink-tailed Worm-lizard, in looking at how we maintain a fantastic habitat for a species that I note does not really have the charisma of the Gang-gang Cockatoo or even the earless dragon but is a really important species to look after. Again I might defer to some of the experts on the officials table in terms of some of the key threats around threatened species and how we are mitigating those.

**Mr Burkevics:** Yes, no surprises the minister mentioned the ongoing loss of some of these habitat areas through whatever reason. We have threats through weeds and pest species as well. So there is a wide range of reasons or threats against our threatened species. Through the team there is a wide range of activities that are ongoing to ensure where habitat is to be disturbed that occurs in the least possible way that poses a threat or that there is an appropriate offset as required under legislation. Loss of trees as a course of mature native trees is another one through areas of development. One that part of the current Connecting People, Connecting Nature project is looking to address and better map areas of connectivity to ensure we do not have habitat areas that become islands and disconnected from other areas. So a wide range of threats, the spectrum is quite wide and of course a fairly significant effort across that spectrum to address them.

**MS CLAY:** We heard from the Commissioner this morning she is so concerned about urban sprawl and loss of habitat that she listed all of her previous *State of the environment* and investigatory reports and said habitat loss was one of the main contributors there. She is looking next year for the next *State of the environment* report to make that a big focus. I am interested in how that will fit in with what is happening in government at the moment as we are part way through a planning review and as we have a lot of pressures on our land, if we are hearing that urban sprawl is one of our key threats.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think the need to protect habitat and understand at a landscape level how important habitat is has been a real focus of ours, certainly within the environment area of the portfolio. I would reference our Connecting People, Connecting Nature project which is looking at habitat at a landscape level as well as a specific habitat level. If we look at some of our specific reserves and grasslands is probably good example, it might be seen as a specific ecological community that is a remnant community and is potentially not well-connected up to the rest of the system.

That is why the Connecting People, Connecting Nature initiative has been really important, to respond to some of the issues the Commissioner has raised and to build a good understanding across government about the importance of particular landscapes and habitats, particularly around the connectivity value that sit beyond the specific ecological community that might be within a remnant habitat. One of the things I have been quite excited about in terms of that initiative and that project is the first key thing that we wanted to do around mapping. That work has continued and as part of it we have embedded a member of the team to sit with the planning area as they develop the district plans. The district plans have been released today. You will see when you look at them there is a very strong representation of the blue and green network of the city and particularly around the connectivity of that.

The mapping process has started but we really want to work with community in particular to ground truth that and understand how it works on the ground. We know there are patches missing in terms of connectivity and so that is where the next part of the initiative will come in relation to the 20 sites of restoration. We are not just looking at what is in the reserves or offset area but what are the other important pieces of habitat that are providing really important wildlife corridors for our native species.

I think that is a key way that we are responding to some of the real concerns the Commissioner is raising and has been raised within the *State of the environment* report.

I would suggest the national *State of the environment* report has identified how the issue of habitat maintenance and restoration is a really significant one. Nationally we have made a commitment around the national reserve. It is really interesting that there is a national commitment around 30 per cent. We are way beyond that—60 or 70 per cent of our habitat is in reserve. In terms of conversations I have had with our federal minister that does not mean we do not have habitat and ecological communities that we still need to protect. There are some live issues in relation to that even in terms of national capital land. Lawson North is a good example of that. There are real concerns in terms of the potential habitat loss, not because of a decision of ACT government but a commonwealth decision. I am looking to Mr Burkevics again in terms of what I have missed.

**Mr Burkevics:** Minister, I think you summed it up very well. I think the changes to the planning framework at the moment have provided a renewed opportunity to best integrate the habitat mapping and consideration as part of the reforms. I think that provides a real embedded approach to ensuring in the growth of the city the requirements for habitat mapping are considered for the protection of the various species. I am not sure if the DG has any remarks in terms of the integration but I certainly think it is an absolute renewed opportunity, particularly with the mapping that is underway and has occurred already.

**Mr Ponton:** I think that has been covered very comprehensively so I do not think there is anymore that I need to add.

**MS LAWDER:** With respect to connectivity and protecting and conserving native flora and fauna, there has been quite a bit of excitement, perhaps prematurely, about the sign that went up on Blewitt's Block recently. Are you able to explain what that was about and what happened?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will note this does not sit within my portfolio area. It was an action of Parks and Conservation so it sits within Minister Gentleman's portfolio. Are we able to provide any information?

**Mr Ponton:** I think that would be helpful. It does sit with Minister Gentleman but I am sure that Mr Pitch or Ms Watts—

**Ms Watts:** As part of an update of our signs across the Molonglo River Reserve, we have been installing new signs along the boundaries. Unfortunately, in this particular instance we had a slight map-reading error by one of our sign installers that has been rectified. The sign has been removed and will be placed in its correct location.

**MS LAWDER:** So Blewitt's Block has not been declared a reserve?

**Ms Watts:** There are no changes to the status of Blewitt's Block.

**MS LAWDER:** I would like to ask about the GonaCon trial, the fertility management trial for kangaroos. How many female kangaroos received the GonaCon shot and in what time frame were these administered in the past year?

**Ms Vassarotti:** In the past year?

**MS LAWDER:** Relating to the annual report.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I want to make some opening remarks about GonaCon. We see this as a really important addition to the toolkit in terms of providing a way to manage kangaroos within the landscape. Again, it is an area that we should be really proud of. As a small jurisdiction we are global leaders in this area and the success of the work that has happened over many decades means we have been able to integrate it into part of our general program. I am happy to provide information about the program as it relates to the annual report. I will seek officials to provide the details.

**Mr Burkevics:** Similar to the minister, can I acknowledge the team that is delivering the program over a long period of time. Certainly the research is indicating the delivery of GonaCon is reducing the amount of conservation culling that has to be done for very specific reasons. I am very pleased to see how that program is going and it has now expanded to Farrer Ridge. I am advised that we have completed the administration of GonaCon at Farrer Ridge with 41—

**MS LAWDER:** I am not asking specifically about Farrer Ridge. It is a general question.

**Mr Burkevics:** Okay. Just in general, 41 female kangaroos were treated at Mulligans Flat and 18 female kangaroos at Farrer Ridge Nature Reserve.

**MS LAWDER:** You mention that it reduces the need for conservation culling. Are you able to provide some statistics comparing the number of GonaCon shots, perhaps “shots” is the wrong word, the amount of GonaCon administered versus the numbers of kangaroo culling over the past five years?

**Mr Burkevics:** We would have to have a look at that because the trial has been ongoing. This was the first year that the program has expanded beyond a trial so it is very early days in terms of—

**MS LAWDER:** You did say that it is reducing the need for conservation culling.

**Mr Burkevics:** Certainly the early signs are that it is reducing the fertility of female kangaroos and over time that should reduce the need for conservation culls. So, whilst the trial is ongoing and has expanded beyond Mulligans, the early signs are that it is proving successful.

**MS LAWDER:** Right. So just to be clear, originally you said it is reducing the need for conservation culling but you are now saying “it will reduce”.

**Mr Burkevics:** The early signs are that it is reducing the need and the fertility of kangaroos and over time we do hope that through this means it will continue to reduce the need for conservation culls through lethal means.

**MS LAWDER:** Can you tell me the cost of the GonaCon program per kangaroo?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I am fairly sure we provided that in the last estimates hearing. It is on the record.

**MS LAWDER:** How does it compare to the cost of the cull program?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think that is also on the record.

**MS LAWDER:** On notice?

**Ms Vassarotti:** No. It is on the record. We were asked the very same question at the last estimates and we provided that answer.

**MS LAWDER:** I would actually like to go back to the *Eastern grey kangaroo: controlled native species management plan* and the 35 joeys, not juveniles, that can be exported to New South Wales for care and rehabilitation. I think we got to the point of saying that wildlife groups could contact the licensing and compliance area. Are you saying that, if a member of the public rang up about a sick or injured joey, a conservation or wildlife group would have to say, “Hang on, I have got to call licensing and compliance to see if I can take kangaroo No 36”? I am coming back to that question: what do you expect these wildlife groups to do when they reach 35?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Ms Lawder, as has been discussed in earlier questions on this issue, the licence is provided under the Nature Conservation Act with wildlife agencies. My understanding is there are very strong relationships with wildlife organisations and the licensing area. So if there were a concern in terms of an emerging issue there would be a discussion and a strategy moving forward to discuss that—not at the point in time when someone is looking at the very upper limit and there is an injured joey—there would be a conversation well before that. I am not sure if Mr Burkevics has anything more to add—

**MS LAWDER:** I am not suggesting there is an issue but I think I am entitled to ask a question in this hearing and get a reply. I am not suggesting that some of these wildlife organisations have a problem with the administration by the government. I am simply asking a question.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I am just suggesting that we probably answered the question but I will look to Mr Burkevics.

**Mr Burkevics:** I suppose the onus is on the licence holder to comply with their licence. Should they feel the need to have their licence commission removed there are mechanisms to have that removed and reviewed. There are mechanisms through engagement with the Parks and Conservation Service to have those licence conditions reviewed.

**MS LAWDER:** How long might that take do you think if they were?

**Mr Burkevics:** I think it depends on the circumstances. It is very much on a case-by-case basis. Certainly noting the joeys are taken over the border on a very case-by-case requirement.

**MR COCKS:** Perhaps it would be useful for me to understand those licence requirements. You have referred a couple of times to licence requirements as being

what kicks in once you hit that cut-off. What are those licence requirements? Are there standard requirements? Is there a standard procedure? Or we talking about just a hard cut-off and they have to come to the government and say, "Please help"?

**Mr Burkevics:** There is a very good website about the licensing requirements under the Nature Conservation Act. Staff from the PCS licensing compliance team are available to assist potential applicants on any form of licence that is required under the act.

**MR COCKS:** Perhaps you could walk me through it to help my understanding. Are we talking about just a hard cut-off or is there a procedure that would kick in?

**Mr Burkevics:** We have a range of applicants for licence conditions under the Nature Conservation Act and for whatever purpose, zoos, people wanting to handle native animals or bring them into the ACT. There is regular engagement with the licensing and compliance team with regard to the purpose of needing to handle or manage those native animals, what is the intention and they are assessed against the Nature Conservation Act by the licensing and compliance team.

**THE CHAIR:** My question is about the recent assessment of the ecosystem condition in the ACT. So it was a score of 2.5 out of 5. I was wondering if you could detail how this result is calculated?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is one that I will look to officials to support.

**Mr Burkevics:** We will have to take that on notice. The technical approach to calculating the score includes a range of factors. So I will need to take that on notice to get the specific means and measures the team uses to assess that method.

**THE CHAIR:** In the annual report it says it is reporting a fair condition. It is only half of what the best condition is. Do we actively work to increase that ecosystem score?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think there is a key. There is obviously a whole range of factors impacting on our natural systems. We cannot ignore the impact of issues such as climate change on our ecological communities. We know some of that is baked in and we will see changes and impacts to the environment. One of the things we see with particular climatic changes but certainly when we are going through a drought period, is a deterioration of our ecological score because of the impact of those climatic scenarios. Obviously when we have extreme events, such as extreme wet periods and things like that, there will also be impacts. Again, in terms of details?

**Mr Burkevics:** Yes, thanks minister. I think Dr Paterson it will be fair to say that everything the division does from environment, heritage and water is all focused on protecting, conserving and enhancing biodiversity and the environment in accordance with the provisions of the act. I think every effort is used to deliver those responsibilities of the act through monitoring, through our conservation monitoring team, research team, through the parks and conservations service as the land managers, through our resilience team, through targeting invasive species. I think there is a wide range of programs and activities that we use including healthy waterways and different ministerial portfolios that all work together in a systematic way to deliver those

functions.

**THE CHAIR:** In parts of the territory, for example Molonglo Valley is under substantial development, you would think that is an ecosystem that is in high stress and impact. Does extra resources and attention go to those areas or scoring those areas so that you can monitor when you are getting to a critical ecosystem issue?

**Mr Burkevics:** I think it would be fair to say that it is part of any development application or proposal to develop an estate that there is strong and early engagement with EPSDD in relation to the environmental values, the environmental risks of that site. I know it is very, very regular that the representatives and I, as the conservator, will make comment on the estate development plans or development applications. So very early the values, particularly threatened species, are identified and appropriate controls recommended or put in place as conditions in the approvals to ensure that as part of the development and allowing that to proceed, the impact on the environment is minimised as far as possible or offset through other means. Certainly some of the sites in Molonglo are of high value. But there are a lot of high value sites across the ACT. There is a very strong history of data the team use in relation to mapping of threatened species and others that provide really strong and informed advice when the time comes to support, inform and guide development in a way that minimises any unnecessary environmental risks or damage.

**Ms Vassarotti:** In terms of doing that, I think Molonglo Valley is a really good example if we note where some of the pressure points and some of the risks are. I would like to reference we do have our colleagues up the back from Access Canberra and EPA who report to Minister Cheyne. I think this is an area where we do need to work really closely. We have worked in recent times to enhance that. With Minister Cheyne we recently introduced some new, much stronger development guidelines, particularly around looking at the issues of reducing pollution and things such as sediment and erosion control. We were able to gain more enforcement resources as part of the last budget ensuring we are working across government in terms of environment protection and ensuring there is enforcement occurring to protect environmental values. It is a very close relationship and something we need to work closely on. As well as the work that is happening on the ground in terms of protecting threatened species, we need to make sure that the development activity is not creating additional risk.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, I would like to talk about wombats. We have a new wombat portal that launched at the end of last year. I am just wondering what that does for us and what the community uptake has been like so far?

**Ms Vassarotti:** You are correct we do have a new wombat portal which is an exciting way for us to be able to provide a mechanism for the community to identify wombats. It was particularly important to identify wombats that might be impacted by mange so we could work with our community organisations to ensure we can help the wombats as quickly as possible. In terms of how the portal is going and what the engagement has been, again, I will look to officials to provide the detail of that.

**Mr Burkevics:** The portal provides the opportunity and some future opportunities as well for the community to report issues with wombats. We have certainly had some strong engagement recently with ACT Wildlife in relation to wombat matters at a

number of sites across the ACT, Molonglo, Casuarina Sands. They have been very productive engagements and we thank ACT Wildlife for bringing those matters to our attention. Outside development impacts on wombats, there is an ongoing national and local program in relation to managing wombat mange. One of our senior fauna ecologists chairs a working group on that specific issue which involves representatives of ACT Wildlife and other community organisations. So there are a range of current programs that are being used to combat that mite and ensure the welfare of wombats as far as possible.

**MS CLAY:** That is great to hear. In terms of both ecology and animal welfare it is a pretty awful disease, the wombat mange. It is pretty upsetting. With the wombat portal do you think we now have enough tools to do the best we can do to deal with that? Or are there still other things that we need to be working on?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think there are always opportunities to do more and to do better. I think that is one of the key reasons we have the working group across government and also engage with environmental volunteer organisations. It was good to be able to provide some funding to support that work. This is an area where there is emerging research so I think engaging with what is happening both locally and nationally is really important. We are keen to engage and do the best that we can to respond to, as you said, a pretty horrible disease. Again, I am not sure if there is additional information that you would like to provide?

**Mr Burkevics:** I think there are a range of new treatments that have been trialled and from memory Bravecto is one of those treatments. I am not sure if Ms Watts or Mr Glennon have further advice on wombat mange. Ms Watts?

**Ms Watts:** PCS is participating as part of the wombat mange program along with conservation research who is the policy arm of this division. I would like to talk a little bit about Bravecto and Cydectin or Moxidectin which are the two chemical treatments we use to treat wombat mange. The trials in the ACT are ongoing and we are looking at new and innovative ways of applying Bravecto and Cydectin to wombats. Typically we have used a pole and scoop method. We are also trialling the use of burrow flaps, so looking at home burrows for wombats and treating them with a direct dose there. We are also looking at other opportunities in terms of how we can get that direct dose of Bravecto onto a wombat, noting the combination of chemicals or the use of Bravecto is going to provide the most effective treatment. We will keep working on our strategies and our options. Is there anything in particular that you wanted to know about our operations?

**MS CLAY:** No that has probably covered it. I know one of the issues that was raised a lot in the past was access for wombats and I do not know if that is progressing well. If where wombats are identified if you can access them for treatment.

**Ms Watts:** It does depend on the landscape. As you are probably aware wombats have more than one home burrow. So one of the difficulties we have is making sure where we have multiple burrows we are treating all of those burrows and all of the wombats in that community. We have good control over access to those sites where they are on PCS land and we are working with rural landholders in terms of having the meta landscape approach to treating wombats and that work is ongoing.



**Ms Vassarotti:** I would say that is probably one of the useful things about the portal, that we are getting better and better information about where wombats may be so that then provides the opportunity for engagement with private landholders as well as on public land.

**THE CHAIR:** What proportion of Parks and Conservation resources are going to actually giving the wombats the mange medication or is most of the work being carried out by ACT Wildlife and Wombat Rescue? What would be the share of work?

**Ms Watts:** It is a shared workload definitely. As was mentioned previously access is an issue so I think our rangers, where they can access more remote sites and do that frequently and regularly, will take responsibility for some of the treatment. But we do rely on the partnership with the wombat volunteer organisations to do a lot of the treatment.

**THE CHAIR:** I guess what concerns me is we have a very serious mange problem and we have \$10,000 grants going to volunteer organisations, which is not very much and they are volunteers. Should not the government be taking more of the bulk of this work and having more resources allocated to addressing this mange problem?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Certainly, over the last couple of years, we have been working on bringing people together and responding to this issue. In terms of the Parks and Conservation workforce—again, this is slightly outside my portfolio responsibilities—people who are working in parks areas are managing a range of issues. It is not about allocating three wombat rangers to go out and do the work of looking after wombats; it is something that is integrated within their general work. There is a workforce that is identifying and responding to the issues. I am straying slightly outside my portfolio area. Ms Watts can probably fill in a few of the details.

**Ms Watts:** I do not have much more to add. As the minister mentioned, when we see communities of wombats that need to be treated, we work in partnership with the wombat volunteer groups. I note that it is our goal to treat communities and make sure that they can recover to a point where sarcoptic mange is not impacting the health of wombats.

**Mr Burkevics:** One of the many challenges that we face as an organisation is how to best allocate resources towards the great spectrum of animals and species that need assistance. There is a very fine-tuned balance in that regard. Our threatened species, of course, get the focus, as they should; those other resources can then be applied as required. As Ms Watts indicated, through those terrific partnerships that we have with community organisations, we have those early feeds, if you like, early intelligence, on what is happening out there with our wildlife, and we can respond accordingly.

**THE CHAIR:** Why aren't we treating the mite that causes the mange as a biosecurity risk and addressing the mite? The treatment is dealing with the problem rather than prevention of the problem.

**Mr Burkevics:** It would be fair to say that the biosecurity response targets those diseases, insects or other issues that have the potential to cause harm or significant

economic loss. In relation to mange, to the best of my knowledge, it is a mite that is restricted primarily to wombats. That may be why it is not classed to the full extent of a national biosecurity response. In saying that, I note that there is a national working group that is focused on mange. The ACT is represented on that group. Whilst it may not be picked up under the usual biosecurity arrangements, it certainly gets a national, coordinated approach.

**MS LAWDER:** Do you have any way of measuring the wombat population in the ACT and how it may have increased or decreased over five, 10 or 20 years? The thing I am most interested in is: how do we know, given the risks, whether it is destruction of habitat—I think you spoke about that in estimates—mange or being hit by cars, that, in the near to middle future, wombats will not become an endangered species?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Ms Lawder, that is a really good question. It is a question, particularly in the face of climate change, that we are really starting to think about. We have obviously put our focus on threatened species, and we do not want to see the end of species, but there is an ongoing conversation about how to keep common species common. This is a particular focus of conversations that I have been a party to, and that I know that the directorate is talking about, particularly around climate adaptation. For me, it is particularly important around that connectivity piece of work, in terms of how we are understanding things at a landscape level. It is really difficult. As we all know, the methodologies about how we count particular species are the subject of significant scientific research.

What is exciting is that there are new technologies that are being used. With wombats, I understand that there is an honours student at the Uni of Canberra who is looking at technologies such as drones and LiDAR data, in order to look at how we detect burrows at a landscape level. That will not tell you how many wombats there are, but it might give us a better understanding of how the burrows are identified throughout the landscape.

This is an ongoing piece of work. It is really difficult. As I said, there is significant science literature about how to count particular species and learn about what species need. That is a key focus of the conservation and wildlife area of the directorate. Again, it is an area where we should be proud of the leading work that is happening, particularly for a small jurisdiction—the ecologists and the researchers that we have working for us. It just blows me away, every time I meet one—how incredible they are and the contribution they are making to a better understanding of the species that we share our home with.

**Mr Burkevics:** Through the arrangements that we have in place, there are sophisticated committee and governance arrangements, should there be a shift in the condition of a threatened species. That triggers mechanisms of response. It is about having regular surveys. If I am not mistaken, we are still looking for volunteers to undertake surveys in Namadgi in the night-time in the not-too-distant future of the greater gliders. We undertake regular monitoring. If, for example, there was a national shift in wombats becoming threatened or vulnerable, that would trigger the arrangements not only here in the ACT but at a national level.

Of course, that spectrum of species that are under threat is wide. Certainly, the *State of*

*the environment report* confirmed that it is one of the greatest risks that we face at the moment.

**MR COCKS:** I might have missed it, in that response, but I am very interested in numbers and analysis that have already happened. You said that this is ongoing work. Is there actually a project to measure the numbers of wombats and their ranges across the ACT?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I did reference the work that is happening with UC around the mapping of burrows.

**MR COCKS:** Yes, and numbers?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is looking specifically at burrows. I will look to officials in terms of the specific surveying that happens around wombats.

**Mr Burkevics:** I am not aware of any specific count numbers happening in relation to wombats. Certainly, our energies go into monitoring threatened species; that is where the effort is—the greatest good for the greatest number. My team kindly remind me, to add reassurance on wombats, that in Victoria they have completed a wombat count, and the estimate was 432,595 wombats in Victoria alone. Whilst we have not undertaken specific counts in the ACT, that is a reassuring number.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, I would like to go to the government response and updates to the *State of the environment* report 2019 recommendations. Recommendation 1 states:

... establish a sustainable funding model for the conservation of biodiversity, environmental protection, water management, the reduction of fire risks, and citizen science initiatives to assist in the planning, prioritisation and acquittal of programs and works.

The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment found that the ACT government's progress was unsatisfactory. In our conversation this morning, there was an indication that maybe there is not a great deal of particularly great feedback. I am keen to understand why, on this recommendation, the ACT government's performance was unsatisfactory.

**Ms Vassarotti:** This is the response in 2019?

**MR COCKS:** This is the 2019 *State of the environment* report, the government response to it and the OCSE's comments regarding the response and those updates.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I do not have that recommendation in front of me. It was quite a long recommendation. I would not mind—

**MR COCKS:** It is recommendation 1.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I do not have that piece of information in front of me.

**MR COCKS:** Perhaps officials can talk to that recommendation.

**MS LAWDER:** It is on page 24 of the commissioner's annual report.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I might look to officials to respond to that. There are some key things that I would note have happened since 2019. We have made a recommendation around the Office for Water, which is responding to some of the issues around governance. In terms of citizen science, we have moved to provide ongoing certainty around funding, particularly for our key environmental volunteering groups.

**MR COCKS:** To be really clear, the point is that the commissioner found, in this year's annual report, that the government's progress is unsatisfactory.

**Mr Burkevics:** I am not quite aware of the specifics of that recommendation. In relation to your question about a sustainable funding model, the minister has described a wide range of government initiatives in relation to those matters. Certainly, through this year, I can confirm that approximately \$10½ million is allocated to the bushfire operations plan, which was recently finalised in conjunction with emergency services. Mr Glennon mentioned previously the funding by the government regarding invasive species and the biosecurity rapid response team, the Connecting People, Connecting Nature initiatives, and the Healthy Waterways program, which is a significant investment. Beyond our standing budget, there is a good range of examples in relation to government investment on the wide range of challenges, risks, threats and solutions that we need to consider.

**MR COCKS:** Given all of these things that you say are happening, why was the government unable to provide evidence of progress on the recommendation to the OSCE?

**Mr Burkevics:** I would probably refer to my previous answer, without having with me the specifics of the recommendation or the government response. It remains a challenge, with the finite resources of the territory, to allocate them across the different range of requirements.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I would note that there has been a significant increase, particularly around environmental initiatives, that has happened over the period since the 2019 report.

**MS CLAY:** We heard this morning from the commissioner about what she does when she finds a government response unsatisfactory. I note in this particular one that the unsatisfactory status is with regard to providing evidence of additional progress, so it may be that what has happened has not been communicated back to the commissioner. She told us that what she thought would be suitable would be a better response in the next reporting cycle and maybe a conversation. Is that something that EPSDD might be able to arrange with the commissioner, with respect to all of these unsatisfactory responses, before our next annual report hearings, so that we know whether evidence has gone back, and we will get a better review?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you for providing that context. It is a really good opportunity because I think that we have made significant progress over the last couple of years in areas that were identified in the 2019 report. I know that the commissioner is starting the process of the next *State of the environment* report. I see these as very important

independent analyses; they give us really good status reports, in terms of where we are putting our focus and where we need to put our focus in the future. The work of the commissioner in relation to the 2019 report has been really impactful in terms of where we are investing both our time and resources. We will absolutely take that suggestion on board and engage with the commissioner.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, again, the *State of the environment* report 2019 lists relevant areas that need to continue to be monitored. Recommendation 20 talks about the replacement of wood heaters, specifically targeting the Tuggeranong Valley. According to the commissioner, there was no additional input from the previous year and that EPSDD should respond, as the lead agency for this recommendation. Can you give us an update on where you are up to when it comes to looking at the hazards of wood smoke, especially in the Tuggeranong Valley?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. The issue of air quality and wood smoke is something on which we have been doing quite a lot of work in recent times. You would be aware that, following a motion primarily around bushfire smoke, there was a commitment to develop an air quality strategy.

When I took on the role, I was quite keen to expand that strategy to include wood heaters, as we know that it is a significant issue. Last year we released both the strategy and the first action plan, which identified a range of actions. We have been working through the action plan.

In relation to wood heaters, work has occurred primarily around looking at the replacement scheme. There was a review of the replacement scheme and a bit of a revamp in relation to that work, which saw a significant increase in people accessing that scheme. We also looked at a review of the “burn right tonight” campaign. We have done some useful market research in terms of community attitudes. It was one of the most widely accessed Your Say community panels on this issue.

Alex Magee has been leading some really useful work in this area, so I might defer to her, in terms of some of the specifics. Given that the commissioner is referencing this, I know that she has also been engaging on this issue; she has been working through a number of complaints, and has recently identified that she will be doing a self-referred inquiry around this issue. This is something that is warmly welcomed by me, as the minister. It will be really useful input, particularly as we look at the second action plan and where we go in relation to wood heaters into the future. I will look to Ms Magee.

**Ms Magee:** Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. I might step you through a couple of pieces of work that the communications team have led over the last 12 months. The first, following the release of the air quality strategy in November last year, was a look at our campaign “burn right tonight”. That is an annual campaign that has been run for a number of years. We did some initial market research on whether or not the messaging of “burn right tonight” had any cut-through with the intended audience and how it was perceived in the community, both for wood heater owners and for the general community.

Some of that work evolved into changes in our advertising campaign. That is both the look and feel of the advertising campaign, which was amended this year to help to get

that cut-through with the audience. We also reworked the strategy on that “burn right tonight” campaign. We geo-targeted some of the areas through social media—some of those areas where wood heaters are prominent, in both Tuggeranong and Belconnen. We geo-targeted some of the users within those areas to make sure that the message was received in those areas. The second part of the research, which the minister touched on, was to go out on a community Your Say panel. The panel is a really useful tool for communications professionals. Six thousand community representatives signed up to the panel, and we were able to access them for the wood heater panel survey.

As the minister mentioned, it was one of the most successful responses to community panel surveys, with 1,955 responses over the seven-day period when it was open, so there were quite a considerable amount of responses in a seven-day period. That period was over in August this year. I can touch on a couple of the statistics from that community panel. The community panel survey looked at items such as how people perceived or felt about wood heater heat; 72 per cent of all respondents noted that they felt that wood heaters produced a unique source of heat. That was across wood heater users. Fifty-nine per cent found wood heaters enjoyable. It helps us with our communications to know the intrinsic value of why people like to use wood heaters.

Of the people that responded, 11 per cent of the respondents had a wood heater in their home and five per cent of that 11 per cent used it as their primary source of heating. Again, it is useful information for us to know the reasons why people are using their wood heaters and how widespread they are.

**MS LAWDER:** Does the government have any visibility about how many wood heaters were removed in the reporting year that we are looking at, or how many new wood heaters were installed?

**Ms Vassarotti:** We do have that information. I am not sure that we have it on hand. Certainly, if someone installs a wood heater, they need to get certification for that, so we will have that information. Certainly, through the rebate program, we will have that information. Do we have that here?

**Mr Burkevics:** Yes, we do, Minister; it is on page 47, for reference. Ms Lawder, in relation to your inquiry about wood heater statistics, there are a number of rebates that you may be aware of that the government offers. There is a rebate of \$250 for the removal of a wood heater, \$750 for the removal of a wood heater and the installation of an electric reverse-cycle system with a minimum of three stars, and \$1,250 for the removal of a wood heater and the installation of electric ducted. For 2022-23, 25 applications have been received and 12 rebates have been paid. For the 2021-22 financial year, there were 45 applications and 24 rebates paid, broken down into the following area. For removal only, \$250, there were four; for upgrade to reverse-cycle split, \$750, there were seven of those; and for the full electric ducted system, \$1,250, there were 13 of those. A total of 24 rebates were paid.

**MS LAWDER:** Is it allowable to resell a wood heater that you have removed from your home? Anecdotally, I hear of people buying them for their sheds, so that they are being put back into use.

**Ms Vassarotti:** This is an issue, in terms of the resale of second-hand heaters on things

such as Gumtree. That has been identified—ensuring that it does not occur—as part of our first action plan. I am not sure whether we have information about the status of that recommendation.

**Mr Burkevics:** I am not aware of particular provisions. I am advised by the policy team that they must be disposed of, once removed.

**MS LAWDER:** What about those people who believe that wood heating is a cheaper option for them than electricity? Are you doing any work on trying to address that belief? Electricity can be quite expensive.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes, it is a real issue, and it is an issue that we have not really engaged with, in terms of what we might do in the future. Some of the research that Ms Magee spoke about has been helpful in understanding the motivations of why people might be using wood heating, as well as what some of the key motivators might be around the removal of wood heating. Certainly, issues around ease, efficiency and cost are key issues that we need to look at.

If people are purchasing seasoned wood, that can actually be quite expensive. Certainly, with people's access to wood and other issues, cost can become an issue. In reflecting on some of the ways that people use wood heating, it does often tend to be a secondary source. Often it is something that people do as a special treat on the weekend rather than as a primary source of heating. That is an area that we need to look at.

Reflecting on the motion earlier in the year that looked at ways in which we can support lower income people to replace wood heating, as part of that piece of work, we are looking at that issue of cost and ensuring that, particularly around the issue of how we transition and how we electrify the city, this issue of transition more generally is a really important consideration. It is certainly something that we are looking at. I do not know whether we have any additional information regarding that.

**Ms Magee:** From the Your Say community panel survey, four in 10—about 40 per cent—of wood heater owners that were represented on the panel indicated that they were planning to or considering replacing or removing the wood heater from their home. The main drivers in considering removing that were environmental reasons, the inefficiency of wood heating, mess and the hassle associated with the fire. They were the main ones, with a trigger point around renovations, most commonly.

**THE CHAIR:** On the Your Say survey, did you ask about attitudes towards the smoke?

**Ms Magee:** We did, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** What was the response there, especially given that the majority of people who responded to the survey did not actually have wood heaters?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes. We specifically looked at the issue of health impacts. Ms Magee is finding that information. It is a great question. We got really important information from those questions that were asked. Again, it is about working with the community and ensuring that there is a good understanding by the community of the health impacts of wood smoke on their neighbours and other community members. It is an important

piece of work on which we need to do some work.

**Ms Magee:** With some of the high-level figures, just over half of our respondents considered the air quality in their suburb and across the ACT as a whole to be good, very good or excellent during the winter months. We focused on the winter months for this survey. We had some concerns from those living in Tuggeranong that the air quality was “fair”. Those who did not have a wood heater were considered to be more likely to consider air quality to be good. Almost three in 10 respondents indicated they were impacted frequently or sometimes by smoke from a neighbour’s wood heater. This was most common in Tuggeranong, Weston Creek, Molonglo Valley and Woden Valley.

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is interesting given that Molonglo—

**THE CHAIR:** In Molonglo it does not happen.

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really interesting panel. I note that the results are on the Your Say website, if people want to have a look at those results. It is a really useful part of the discussion in terms of what the community’s perceptions are around the impact of wood heaters. It will be really important in supporting our ongoing work and discussion with the community around this issue.

**MS CLAY:** That is great progress to hear about—that we have 40 per cent of people considering removing their wood-fired heater. I did not catch all of the figures on how many have taken up rebates; it sounds like it is in double digits. The rebates sound great, but there is quite a low uptake. How many wood-fired heaters do we have out there? What line are we tracking on to replace wood-fired heaters with electric ones?

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really good question. We do not know how many wood-fired heaters we have within the community. We have had discussions about whether or not we should move to some kind of registration, so that we can track the numbers. In terms of the value of doing that, it is questionable as to whether that will provide additional value for us. We do have some visibility about wood heaters that are being installed. That sits with Access Canberra rather than the environmental area, because you need to get certification to ensure that it is appropriately installed.

There is a really important conversation to have, particularly as there is increasing evidence around the health impacts of wood heating. We have started to have a conversation around the gas transition and the electrification of the city. It is important that we think about wood heaters in the context of the broader conversations we are having in terms of our future energy needs.

**THE CHAIR:** We will finish up for today. I would like thank Minister Vassarotti and officials for their time. For questions taken on notice, could you please get those answers to the committee secretary within five working days of today? If members wish to lodge questions on notice, please get them to the committee secretary within five working days.

**The committee adjourned at 3.46 pm.**