



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

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

(Reference: [Inquiry Into Annual and Financial Reports 2022 - 2023](#))

Members:

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

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 2023

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**Secretary to the committee:
Mr J Bunce (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

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate	48
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10 am.

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, and Conservator of Flora and Fauna

Cooney, Dr Rosie, Senior Director, Office of Nature Conservation, Environment, Heritage and Water

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

Jeffress, Mr Stuart, Senior Director, ACT Heritage

Larson, Ms Eliza, Conservator Liaison, Office of the Conservator of Flora and Fauna, Environment, Heritage and Water

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity inquiry into annual and financial reports 2022-23. The committee will today hear from Minister Vassarotti, the Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today, the Ngannawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today or may be online.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and live streamed. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used the words, “I will take that as a question on notice.” This will help with the transcript.

In the first session we will hear from the Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage. We welcome Minister Vassarotti MLA, and officials from the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly. The first time that you speak, could you please confirm for the record that you have understood the implications of the privilege statement and agree to it?

We are not inviting opening statements, so we will begin with questions.

My question is to do with wombats in Denman Prospect. There are many reports of

wombats coming into the current Denman Prospect area. It is very distressful; wombats are getting hit by cars, and residents do not know what to do with them, because they are walking along the streets. I have asked these questions before. I think something needs to be done about this. We need to somehow address the problem or understand where the burrows are that are being impacted by the land clearing. Is there further work that could be done on this?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. I recognise the statement. As we have talked about before, in some of these hearings, we have been doing quite a bit of work on understanding some of the issues around the impact of development on burrowing animals.

In terms of the specific comments about interactions with people within the suburb, I have not been alerted to those specific things—once a development has occurred, and that interaction with the community, once there are residents there. The discussion primarily has been around, when we are looking at development activity, what work needs to happen from the developer’s perspective in terms of the impact, particularly on burrowing animals. That work has been continuing over some time, working with stakeholders such as Wombat Rescue.

It is fair to say that, in the discussion, some complex issues and some real dilemmas have been raised, regarding how to respond to those. I know that those conversations have been continuing, particularly in relation to finalising the guidelines for some of the pathways as to how to respond. They have brought up issues that are quite difficult to deal with. We are reflecting on what to do around that; that has created a bit of a delay, in terms of the finalisation of the guidelines.

I will look to the office of the conservator, who have been primarily doing this work, particularly given the role of the conservator. It would be good to know whether there has been a discussion, not just at the point of development but once new suburbs have been established, on interaction and engagement with the community around wildlife, including wombats.

THE CHAIR: Just to clarify, the wombats are coming out of the land-clearing area into the next suburb, which is Denman Prospect. What is happening is that residents in—

Ms Vassarotti: They are being displaced, yes.

THE CHAIR: Denman are suddenly getting alerted to the fact that there is an issue going on because these animals are coming into their suburb.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. That is an aspect that I have not been across to date. Maybe my staff have. I meet with Wombat Rescue quite regularly, but that element has not come up. Mr Burkevics can answer as to whether he has been engaging on that part of the issue, as well as the broader issue.

Mr Burkevics: I acknowledge and accept the privilege statement. Of course, any injury to native wildlife in the ACT, particularly wombats, is distressing. Our rangers from the Parks and Conservation Service deal with that issue every single day, and

that does take a toll on everybody that manages this area.

You will recall, in conversations over the last year and at the last hearings, that we have allocated a high priority and focus to this important issue. I will invite comments from Conservator Liaison Eliza Larson in a moment. There are a couple of reflections on your reports. Any injured wildlife should be reported immediately. I understand that the Canberra community have opportunities to do so, obviously, through Access Canberra. I reaffirm the opportunity to report that as soon as possible, and rangers from Parks and Conservation Service or, indeed, other teams can assist.

In terms of what we are doing to minimise the impacts on wombats, there are a couple of things. Now, with construction environmental management plans, we have a far greater focus on ensuring that instructions to developers are very clear around their responsibilities for the identification and proper management of wombats. I would certainly say that the focus of the regulation of development areas where wombats are occurring has certainly been strengthened.

Where there might be activities that require damage to or destruction of a burrow of a wombat, there always were licensing arrangements, but it is about making sure that those licensing arrangements are being understood and followed. The fact that we are regulating has also been a big focus for us, and through the office of the conservator as well.

Avoiding this problem in the first place is where we want to get to, so that we are not responding to issues of harmed or injured wildlife. I will invite Eliza to talk about the work that we are doing to finalise some guidelines for the relocation or management of wombats in a development area, which remains a tricky issue. There have been some wonderfully productive discussions with our stakeholders—ACT Wildlife, RSPCA and others—on this issue, with officials within EPSDD. That is leading us down a path to finalising those guidelines very soon. I will hand over to Eliza.

Ms Larson: I have read, understood and agree to the privilege statement. As Bren and the minister mentioned, we are finalising the conservator guidelines for the management of burrowing animals. As has been alluded to, some challenging issues have come out of the stakeholder engagements that we have been undertaking. They are close to finalisation, although we have added some other burrowing animals, including rakali and possibly long-necked turtles.

We are planning stakeholder engagement in early December to finalise those last remaining management issues. Even though they have not been finalised yet, we are already applying the expert advice on management that we have received to developments that are currently occurring.

In the case of Denman Prospect, for example, that is still under assessment by ACTPLA. We have already provided comments on what they need to do in relation to wombats and other burrowing animals on their site. They will have to address that as part of their development application, and as part of their construction environmental management plan.

With the other things that we are doing, which lead into your comments about

wombats moving into the suburbs, we have a greater focus on connectivity. Ensuring that developers consider fauna movements through the suburbs is also a key priority. That is also in the Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide that is coming in as part of the new Planning Act. That will also be a greater focus in general.

Work is ongoing. We have not received any reports like the ones you mentioned, about wombats moving in. I know PCS works closely with Wombat Rescue, as Bren mentioned. They are setting up monitoring cameras and that sort of thing to understand how wombats are being impacted.

Ms Vassarotti: Picking up on that issue of interactions, it might be useful to highlight that we have the wombat portal as well. That is a really useful information source. It is about the reporting of not just sick wombats but also healthy wombats. I would encourage people to use that portal. Again, it provides important intelligence in terms of where we are seeing some of the interactions and the impacts. We can then work through what might need to be done in terms of supporting better connectivity or whatever other interventions and responses might be helpful.

THE CHAIR: Can I suggest some education like a letterbox drop for Denman residents around who to call if they see a wombat, and what the rules are? It has been coming up a lot with residents and it is discussed on the Facebook page. If they see animals, they should know what to do about them, to be careful on the roads and that type of thing.

Ms Vassarotti: That is a really good suggestion, Dr Paterson. We can take that on as an action.

MS CLAY: Minister, we are probably always going to find things like wombats when we develop in new, greenfield areas. It is great to hear that there are licensing requirements and maybe now some new education measures, but do you think this is another reason why we should perhaps reconsider whether we need to keep redeveloping in greenfield areas?

Ms Vassarotti: Ms Clay, it is a really significant issue. We do know that when we are going into greenfield sites, particularly when they have environmental values, we will see this interaction. We love being part of the bush capital, so we will have interactions. When we look at what sites might be suitable for redevelopment, increasingly they are sites that will have significant environmental values, including wildlife.

Certainly, from my perspective, you are exactly right; it does bring up significant questions in relation to the suitability of greenfield sites, when we are having such a big impact on wildlife. Certainly, in terms of the environmental assessments that are required when we look at potential greenfield sites, these issues are being identified and are creating significant caution in terms of the suitability of particular areas for redevelopment.

We have had many conversations about some of the real constraints around the western edge investigation area, particularly around environmental values. Wildlife has a significant impact on that.

I would also like to pick up on the comment around the significance of some new tools, such as the Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide. That is a little different from going into greenfield sites. With proponents and decision-makers needing to take these issues into account, in terms of the impact on our urban wildlife, that is a significant game changer. With some of the issues that we are potentially having to address in areas like Denman Prospect, hopefully, bringing a much greater focus on the impacts on urban biodiversity will mean that we mitigate some of these issues and we do not have the issues that we are seeing.

As we have talked about around a range of wildlife, our location as the bush capital means that we will have interactions, so we do need to work through those.

MR COCKS: How do you monitor the impacts on burrows and on wombats, both from urban development and from other impacts?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Cocks, for the question. We are really lucky that we have a range of tools and a range of people that are involved in this work. Certainly, in our reserve areas, our Parks and Conservation rangers do a lot of work in terms of ensuring the health of our ecosystems, and our native wildlife is a really important element of that.

We are very lucky that we have an extraordinarily wide range of citizen scientists and community partners that are doing significant work, particularly in relation to monitoring and mapping what is happening within the landscape. Certainly, things like our mapping tools provide a really good opportunity to capture some of these.

In relation to supporting citizen scientists and some of that work, a program such as the Environmental Grants Program is one way that we can provide good support around those monitoring programs. A good example is the work that the National Parks Association is doing in relation to Rosenberg's goanna, for instance. We support that work through an environmental grant. There are also partnerships with other research partners in terms of issues around wombats, particularly dealing with wombat mange, for instance. There are good partnerships with research institutions, such as Tasmania university.

MR COCKS: It sounds like you do keep a record when you are informed of events that might have impacted wombats and wombat burrows?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, absolutely.

MR COCKS: Have there been reports of any ACT government activities that have damaged wombat burrows?

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the impact on wombat burrows—

MR COCKS: Or wombats.

Ms Vassarotti: or wombats, I would have to take that on notice. In terms of the role of the conservator, the conservator has responsibilities under the Nature Conservation

Act in terms of the protection of wildlife. If there were breaches, the conservator would be notified.

Mr Burkevics: Mr Cocks, if my memory serves me correctly, it was this committee last year that brought to our attention some impacts on wombat burrows in areas that were part of suburban development. As we have discussed since then, we responded quickly to those reports and had a look at what was going on. Any development, whether it is government or not, that is causing an impact on native wildlife that may be contrary to the act or guidelines needs to be reviewed and investigated. As a result of those reports last year, we are on a really good pathway to developing stronger avoidance frameworks, and relationships and actions that will mitigate the risk. It is a bit like crime: you can never completely eliminate the risk. The risk will always be there. But with good frameworks, good legislation and good relationships, we hope we can mitigate that risk as far as possible.

MR COCKS: The question was specifically about ACT government activities and whether you have any records or reports of damage from those. If you do not have the information now, I am happy for you to take it on notice.

Mr Burkevics: As I mentioned, I think we discussed one associated with Denman Prospect last year that we responded to—

MR COCKS: The reason I ask is that I did have someone raise with me some concerns about ACT government activities in our parks, and an event which appears to have resulted in a number of burrows being damaged and potentially the loss of a number of wombats. The photographs I was shown were pretty disturbing. I was told that not only was the government not interested in the report that came back to them but there was some degree of threatening response around that person releasing that information or going public with it.

Mr Burkevics: I am not aware of that. I do recall a report that came into the conservator's office last year from ACT Wildlife about some matters around maintenance works at Casuarina Sands that were occurring through our Parks and Conservation Service. There were some reports of wombat burrows being damaged as part of the rectification works. Inquiries were made into that matter, and we identified that nothing but the proper processes were followed by the Parks and Conservation Service in relation to that matter—the surveying of those wombat burrows for any scats or activity of live wombats, and the appropriate mitigation measures.

I am not sure whether that is the one you are referring to, but that was certainly one last year that was reported to the conservator's office. That was inquired into and no issues were found.

MR COCKS: That would have been within my question. That is the sort of thing I am interested in finding out about, in addition to that, and whether there are any other instances.

Ms Vassarotti: There are two issues that come up with that, Mr Cocks. If you are receiving reports of damaging activities and threatening behaviour by government employees when dealing with members of the public, I would encourage you to

provide details around an allegation like that, because that sounds very serious and that would not be—

MR COCKS: That is why I am raising it with you today, Minister.

Ms Vassarotti: All right. In terms of an individual circumstance, we would appreciate receiving additional information about that, so that we can investigate—

MR COCKS: I am afraid I cannot provide the information from an individual who felt that the person involved was threatened. That is why I am asking about it here today.

Ms Vassarotti: My advice is that if there are allegations of government employees threatening members of the public, that is a serious allegation. We need to investigate that, but without having the details of incidents, it is almost impossible to do that. Obviously, there are issues of privacy. If you are able to provide additional details in a private setting, we could look into the individual circumstances. That is a serious allegation and it needs to—

MR COCKS: I am happy to have a conversation in a private setting.

Ms Vassarotti: That is a request because that is not behaviour that we would condone—a government employee threatening members of the public. I want that to be very clearly on the table.

MR COCKS: I am not convinced that it was overt; however, that was certainly how the individual felt. I am happy to have—

Ms Vassarotti: You have made an allegation.

MR COCKS: I am happy to have a further conversation.

Ms Vassarotti: If you bring an allegation to a public setting, it is incumbent on you to provide details in order to deal with that allegation. If you are able to do that in a private setting, we will absolutely look into that allegation, because it is very important.

MR COCKS: My question was about whether you have had any—

THE CHAIR: Mr Cocks, the minister has suggested that you contact her, because it is very difficult for her to answer these questions when she does not know what you are talking about. I invite you to contact the minister.

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the nature of your question, queries and issues come into the office of the conservator all the time. The office of the conservator responds to those issues very transparently. How to categorise a complaint, an issue or a question is their bread and butter. It is their business as usual, in terms of responding to issues. We have a great community that really care about the wildlife in this city, and that is exactly what the office of the conservator is there to do.

MS CLAY: Minister, can you update me on the work that government is doing to review the management status of dingoes in the ACT?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Clay, for this question. It is a really important question. Again, this is an issue that has come up a few times in these hearings. We have identified through those hearings that there is interesting and important research work going on in this area. The evidence base is shifting, in terms of the issue of dingoes and how we manage and support them. It would be useful to bring Dr Cooney to the table to talk about some of the work that is happening.

Previously, we have talked about the fact that we had a number of PhD students working with our researchers in terms of getting a better understanding of the emerging scientific evidence. One of the other things that we are engaging in is the issue of genetics. The emerging evidence base, particularly in this region, is that most of our wild dogs seem to have the genetics of dingoes.

There is also interesting and important work happening in terms of engaging with First Nations evidence around dingoes. In this forum we have also talked quite extensively about the fact that we do recognise there is a particular ecological role of dingoes, particularly within our conservation areas in Namadgi, as an apex predator. In terms of our management of dingoes and wild dogs, that is a really significant issue. It is fair to say that, in terms of how we categorise our dingoes and wild dogs and what that potentially means for future management planning, that is actively being looked at. I will ask Dr Cooney to talk a little more about some of the details.

Dr Cooney: I acknowledge and accept the privilege statement. At the moment we have a range of work going on in partnership with various leading research institutions on dingoes. We have been very interested in recent genetic re-evaluation of dingoes across Australia, and the implications of that work regarding the genetic purity of our own dingo population.

We regularly collect genetic samples from dogs that are trapped as part of the management program in the ACT. They will shortly be going off to a number of different labs, including the University of New South Wales and Dr Kylie Cairns, who published work earlier this year prompting the re-evaluation of dingo genetics. We are looking forward to having more details of the genetics of our Namadgi population. There were only two dogs from the ACT in the original evaluation, so we need to understand that more. We hope to have that information either early in the new year or midyear next year. That approach will either make it into an early re-run of those genetics or a midyear one.

We also have two PhDs going on at the moment. I think I have mentioned those before—one with University of New South Wales and one with the University of Sydney. Those will tell us a lot more about the ecosystem function of wild dogs and dingoes within the national park—their impacts on suppressing populations of cats and foxes potentially, which has been found in some contexts in Australia but not in others, and the knock-on implications of that on native wildlife.

Something else we are doing at the moment that we just started about a month ago is to sit down and review all of the data that we have on dingoes and dingo management

in the ACT. That can then inform further review and evaluation of our approach here.

MS CLAY: You may not be able to answer this because work is still ongoing, but what might be the changes that could flow from that? Have you started thinking through that?

Dr Cooney: I might turn to Mr Glennon on those management aspects.

Mr Burkevics: I will make a few remarks. There are a number of processes that we will need to consider should the genetics show—and they are leaning this way; there is a growing body of evidence, as Dr Cooney has indicated. There are a number of statutory plans that exist in relation to wild dogs, and they are a declared pest. We are already starting to work through what the statutory implications may be, should the evidence indicate a high percentage of dingo genes, and we may need to have further conversations with the minister around a potential reclassification or renaming of that species.

Of course, as mentioned, under the Nature Conservation Act, there are a number of statutory provisions, declarations and management plans that would flow on. We need to understand more about how a potential reclassification may impact on those plans. Of course, there would be work to then rewrite those plans accordingly. It will be important that we do our due diligence once we gain that next layer of evidence.

Ms Vassarotti: Mr Glennon, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Mr Glennon: Thank you. I have read the privilege report and understand it. Mr Burkevics has pretty much summed it up pretty well. The only thing I would add to what Mr Burkevics said is we are planning, as part of the review that Dr Cooney spoke about, a significant science forum, if you like, early next year. That will be looking at the science issues but looking at a lot of other operational matters as well, including integrated approaches to control and whatever else there might be. The only other thing, too, I would add to the comments of Mr Burkevics, is the complexity is that we are involved in a number of interjurisdictional agreements, if you like, with New South Wales, and we would have to sort of work our way through that too.

You can look at the gene research and things like that, and you can look at the naming, and then you can look at the management objectives, and that is what we want to do to get a really good understanding of the policy issues—not only just the policy issues but the community consultation issues and social issues around that, and then we want to look at what are best practice management operations as well. That will be part of our review, which we will provide to government for consideration.

Mr Burkevics: Ms Clay, I think it is fair to say, just to reaffirm Mr Glennon's remarks, that there is high community expectation, particularly from our rural landowner community, that government is managing risks associated with wild dogs or dingoes to their property and to sheep on their property. So, that importance of having good, effective community consultations and discussions around this body of work is going to be so important just to reassure them that with what is, essentially, their livelihood, in a way, we are not posing any further risks to what they are managing at the moment—and in partnership with the government.

THE CHAIR: Lots of concerns have been raised to me about the National Wild Dog Action Plan committee—or council, or group. They are very against the work that is going on at the University of New South Wales. I guess it is in direct conflict with the action plan, and different perspectives. Would the ACT consider withdrawing from this National Wild Dog Action Plan promptly if the genetic testing turns out, as we have sort of discussed before, to be quite pure?

Ms Vassarotti: For us, the issue is around stepping through the process. I think processes such as the scientific forum that we are holding next year are a good example of really ensuring that how we respond is an evidence-based process, and we have got a really good understanding of the steps that we need to work through in relation to this.

Mr Glennon also talked about some of the complexities around interjurisdictional agreements. In relation to where our evidence is leading us and where we might wish to go, I think that it is really important that we look to engage with the evidence. I think the first response would be in terms of engaging in national processes in a way that seeks to influence and ensure that national plans and agreements are also evidence-led and reflecting that this is a really interesting area where evidence has been shifting. Potentially, a national action plan that has been agreed to a while ago—these processes are periodically reviewed.

Certainly, a first port of call would be to ensure, if it becomes clear that some of the things that sit with a national action plan are out of step with current understandings and evidence, that that would trigger a process for a review. From a jurisdictional perspective, we are very clear that we will be evidence based. We act to be collaborative. We are a jurisdiction that sits in the middle of another jurisdiction, so particularly on issues such as this, with wildlife that does not respect borders, our ability to ensure that we are acting in a way that is consistent is really important.

But you will note in other areas, where we are dealing with invasive species, we have been quite assertive in terms of our expectations for our interjurisdictional partners and the role that we see the commonwealth should be playing in these areas. That would be the basis on which we would be operating, but our commitment is to operate in an evidence-based manner.

THE CHAIR: There have been lots of Indigenous groups in other jurisdictions that have been becoming more and more vocal about dingoes and the importance of dingoes. Are there, as part of this work, thoughts to engage the local First Nations community here on this?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, I think that has already commenced. I think the work that is happening around First Nations' knowledge and evidence is a really important contribution to that. We certainly noted the work that came out quite recently—I think that was in Queensland or the Northern Territory—was really important and really impactful. Again, I might look to my colleagues in terms of the specifics of engagement with local First Nations traditional owners, but we see this as a core piece that we would want to really impact and influence how we move forward.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister, and thanks, Dr Paterson, for your reflections on how important it is to engage with our traditional custodians. As the minister and I, I think, regularly mention, we have a strong and engaged relationship with our Ngunnawal community. I chair the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee with Dr Hughes. The steering committee that we have on our wild dogs and dingoes does have a First Nations representative on it, so we are, I feel very, very strong. And as this body of research continues to develop our thinking around how it may form into new policies, that will ensure that the Ngunnawal community are engaged the whole way through.

THE CHAIR: Great.

MR COCKS: I want to turn to the Kangaroo Management Program.

Ms Vassarotti: We are doing the greatest hits, aren't we!

MR COCKS: The annual report says that it will continue.

MS VASSAROTTI: Yes.

MR COCKS: Can you tell me how many culls are planned for 2024 and when they are expected to occur.

Ms Vassarotti: Sure. In terms of the kangaroo management program, it does sit under the auspice of the Kangaroo Management Plan, and that outlines the terms under which each of the annual programs will be managed. The process continues in terms of the engagement around what might be needed on an annual basis, and so that work is continuing. I will look to my officials in terms of providing some of the details of where we are at in relation to that, because in terms of how the program is operationalised and implemented, it is based on what we find on an annual basis. Looking at the issues, in terms of grass distribution and the like, is actually occurring now.

It is also probably useful to note that, at the moment, we are undertaking a review of the Controlled Native Species Management Plan, which actually underpins the annual program. There is an independent researcher who has been engaged to undertake the scientific review of the management plan. This is a process that happens every five years, and there is information that is on the website in terms of the process as it is rolling out. We have engaged Professor Sarah Legge, who is renowned for her work in ecology and conservation. She is an independent reviewer; she has not worked in the area of kangaroo management in the past, but she has done significant work in terms of the management of other aspects of ecology and conservation. I think yesterday—was it yesterday?

Mr Burkevics: Yes

Ms Vassarotti: As part of this process, yesterday, stakeholders were contacted in terms of having an opportunity to participate in the review by Professor Legge, and that will give stakeholders the opportunity to contribute to the scientific review of the program, and then there will also be a public—and so that might actually see changes

to the advice in terms of how the annual program goes. But if you want to talk about next year's program—

MR COCKS: In terms of the question itself, the number of—

Ms Vassarotti: All I am saying is it might change, depending on the review.

Mr Burkevics: I can address some of Mr Cocks's question. At the outset, the integrity and transparency of the kangaroo management program is of the utmost importance to government and to me as a conservator, of course. So the program for 2024—

MR COCKS: I am sorry; we do have limited time. If we can get fairly narrow.

Mr Burkevics: Yes. The program for 2024 is an ongoing process. My colleague Dr Cooney and her team right now will be going through the process of reassessing grass height across our different parks and reserves to inform the modelling that we will do early next year to inform the final program for 2024. At this moment, we are in the lead-up process to determining what the program for 2024 will look like.

MR COCKS: Okay, so as of now you do not know what it will be next year?

Mr Burkevics: No, we will have announcements early next year.

MR COCKS: Okay. Related to that, what evidence will you be considering when you are pulling that together? Noting that the review is happening at the same time, will that review feed into consideration for 2024, and what other evidence will be taken into account?

Mr Burkevics: As part of good science and good policy we never stop learning and adjusting—through what we experience, what we see, what we learn and what new scientific research emerges—in relation to our kangaroo management program. That learning and adjustment process continues constantly, so as part of the review and Professor Legge's work, and the outcomes of that, if there are recommendations that there are further enhancements that can be made to an already very, very rigorous and tight program, we will absolutely consider those.

MR COCKS: There have been a number of references to citizen science today and to evidence generally; and, indeed, citizen science integration is one of your strategic objectives. But in the past, the directorate has certainly been critical of counts made by groups of citizens of kangaroos, and many people I speak with feel that their contributions have been ignored and are generally unwanted. How does the kangaroo management program consider and incorporate citizen science such as those community organised counts?

Ms Vassarotti: I would just like to take a bit of issue in terms of the assertion that the contributions have been ignored. They have not been. I feel that in terms of—

MR COCKS: The comment was that that is how people are feeling.

Ms Vassarotti: Okay, but in terms of the engagement, and in terms of some of the methodologies, there has been a lot of engagement with government in terms of those methodologies and a recognition that, in some circumstances, those methodologies might be appropriate.

There is a significant basis of evidence, though, particularly around counts, that is peer reviewed that sits behind that, so while citizen science is one contribution, we also need to look at the peer reviewed evidence as well. I think the review of Professor Legge is really important in this, and that is why we will also engage stakeholders—as recently as yesterday—

MR COCKS: Yes, yesterday.

Ms Vassarotti: in terms of providing them with the opportunity to contribute their evidence to that review. I think that that is actually an indication of us integrating and responding to citizen science, but we need to take that in the context of the range of evidence that is on the table and recognise, particularly for things such as count methodologies, that the particular circumstances of a reserve or an area are really important in terms of the ability of particular methodologies to be able to provide an accurate count. I would note the significant information that has been provided back to citizen science in response from government. There has actually been quite a significant analysis in terms of the methodologies that have been put forward and how effective or not effective they are in terms of a particular site and how that actually matches with the methodologies that have been used by government ecologists.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister; thanks, Mr Cocks. I think it is regrettable if people are feeling that there has been anything less than helpful advice provided. That is regrettable. What I know from the team and the colleagues that I work with is that we have, I certainly feel, gone above and beyond to provide helpful scientific advice in relation to citizen science and, in particular, the methodology used for kangaroo counts to ensure that, where citizens make a decision to apply citizen science to such matters as counts, it is done in a way so that we can provide our experience and our understanding of science. I know that the team that I work with have done a remarkable job to engage at an individual level, and at an organisational level, to provide helpful advice.

MR COCKS: The independent review that you have mentioned—does that include an independent animal welfare assessment similar to that conducted in 2013, 2015 and 2017?

Ms Vassarotti: Are you talking about the vet—

MR COCKS: The review you said you contacted stakeholders about yesterday. Does that include—

Ms Vassarotti: The review of animal welfare considerations is a core part of the review, yes. So, again, I can confirm that animal welfare organisations have been contacted as part of the review, yes.

MR COCKS: Sorry, that was not the question. There were independent animal

welfare assessments of kangaroo culling conducted in 2013, 2015 and 2017. There has not been one since. Will this include that?

Mr Burkevics: I can answer that one, minister, if you like?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, answer that one. Sorry, I was not clear what you were referring to.

Mr Burkevics: It is a slightly different issue. The review that is being undertaken of the eastern grey kangaroo controlled native species plan is a statutory requirement of the conservator. Professor Legge has been engaged to undertake that review, and we have written to stakeholders to invite their participation and contribution to that review. I thank them for the time that they will no doubt give up at a compressed time of year.

The matter that you refer to, Mr Cocks, is indeed an important part of the transparency of the kangaroo management program to ensure that, certainly, the way the operations are delivered are being done in accordance with the national code. I think at hearings—it might have been at estimates earlier this year—we reported that we were engaging an independent vet to participate in the 2023 audit. That has occurred. We have a report before us that we are considering, and as soon as the right time comes we will be releasing that report to the public to ensure that ongoing transparency, as we have done for years past.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned, and we have discussed this before, the kangaroos around the grasses, and protecting and promoting grasslands. Are there audits done of our nature reserves on the different types of grasses that we have? Do we look to promote growth through nature reserves not around the culling sites but more generally?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, there are definitely a whole range of condition reports that occur—there are quite a number of them. In some areas we have obligations under the EPBC Act; we are doing the state of the environment report at the moment. I might look to Dr Cooney to provide some detail in terms of that significant work that does occur in relation to assessing the health of our ecosystems across the city.

Dr Cooney: We run an integrated herbage mass monitoring program which looks at a number of indicators of vegetation condition across our reserves, including grass height, percentage need of cover, floristics, the number of species present, the amount of bare ground, and so forth. That is reported on in a number of ways. For offsets, there is reporting to the commonwealth. We also have the Conservation Effectiveness Monitoring Program which carries out ecosystem assessments for each ecosystem on a rolling cycle of four to five years. We have published one of those for grasslands in the past, and that is a holistic look at all that data to tell us about the condition of those reserves. The woodlands one is currently under development and then will be doing another grasslands one. That is one of the key ways for us to understand those impacts.

We also proposed and had accepted new accountability indicators. That will be prepared for the current financial year, at the end of this year, and two of those look at vegetation condition, drawing on that data. That will now be reported annually.

THE CHAIR: When you have that grasslands assessment, or for the previous one, are there action points—replanting or introduction of other native species in areas that maybe did not have as much native species? Are there actions taken out of those reports?

Dr Cooney: Yes. In fact, there is a whole other grasslands action plan and grasslands strategy as well. We are just coming up to 10 years of having a grasslands strategy and a natural temperate grasslands action plan. The report is almost ready to be released and that includes all of that information that you are talking about—what kinds of restoration actions have been done, their impact, and so forth.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, we ran an environmental voluntarism inquiry sometime back and it made quite a lot of really useful recommendations. Can you give me an update on where government is up to in implementing those?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Clay, for the question. It is really important to start this part of the conversation by recognising the incredible contribution that environmental volunteers make to protecting, conserving and enhancing our environment. We, as a government, really recognise that we could not actually do the work that we do or protect the environmental values that we have without that significant contribution.

That inquiry that you refer to, Ms Clay, has been a really significant inquiry in terms of providing really good guidance to government about how we can improve the experience of environmental volunteers and ensure that we can really demonstrate our commitment to the partnership. Significant work is occurring, and I will look to my officials to talk about some of the specific work that is happening. Before doing that, I want to particularly recognise the work that we are doing to ensure, for some of the key groups, such as the catchment groups, with the key role that they play as peak organisations, that we provide ongoing financial support. It has been really good to be able to ensure that we do provide them with more stable funding over the period. Perhaps I could ask officials to talk a little bit about the progress of some of the recommendations. That would be great.

Mr Burkevics: Yes. Thank you, Minister, and thanks, Ms Clay, for the question. Reaffirming the minister's remarks, we cannot thank the volunteers of Canberra enough for the work that they do. I think the minister was there on the weekend, celebrating 20 years of the work of Friends of Mount Majura and the work that they have done to rehabilitate an old race track. That was slightly before I was born. There are a couple of things.

At a higher level—and I will talk more specifically about some of the achievements under the volunteer inquiry—the first thing is that those ongoing relationships with our volunteer entities is so important. As an Environment, Heritage and Water team, we have made a systematic approach to engage with the heads of volunteer organisations around every six months, between the engagements that we normally have. I, the Conservator Liaison, Dr Cooney, Mr Glennon, Mr Alegria and his team

meet and discuss any matters that the volunteer groups wish to raise with us, and, likewise, we can seek their assistance. Friends of Grasslands and ACT Wildlife are just a couple of the groups that we are meeting with regularly. We also have the Biodiversity Conservation Forum where we have an expanded membership, including Transport Canberra and City Services officials, which is engaging with volunteers at a very high level.

We have established a high-level steering committee. An understandable area of frustration with the volunteers is parts of government that are not as well-engaged as they should be, so there is now a permanent and standing steering committee or engagement committee for volunteering matters that strengthens the great relationship that we have always had with Transport Canberra and City Services. That meets regularly and provides an opportunity to enhance a single experience with government, and we are seeing some great results and feedback there.

MS CLAY: Is that the Biodiversity Conservation Forum or is that is a different one?

Mr Burkevics: No—that is a different one. This is more internal to government to ensure that different parts of government that are discussing volunteering matters and are engaging with volunteers are engaged, coordinated and deconflicted in those approaches. That is a standing feature. For Mr Glennon’s team, there were a number of recommendations in the volunteer inquiry around enhanced veterinarian assistance. Those engagements have been occurring and are on the right pathway, in accordance with the government response to achieve what is required there.

It is a massive achievement and thank you to the team that organised it and all the volunteers that attended. We held—the minister was there—a wonderful volunteering conference to again really hone the priorities for the volunteers. Parks and Conservation are finalising an important body of work for the volunteers around risk assessments and the use of power tools. That is nearing completion within the statutory processes that we have to comply with around workplace health and safety et cetera. We were really pleased to see how Parks have engaged in coordinating that body of work. The fingers on the triggers are ready for chainsaws—no, not chainsaws but certainly whipper snippers. My understanding is that is heading on a very supportive path to enhance the work of volunteers.

We are having conversations with volunteers around the grant programs. There is significant investment by government around the grant programs and how they can be best allocated and refined to suit the potentially changing needs of our volunteer organisations. As we receive feedback, we will have conversations with the minister around further enhancements that can be made to that. Those are some minor examples between the matters that are brought to our attention at the BCF meeting and conversations. I meet regularly with most of the volunteer organisations, and again I cannot thank them enough for the work they do.

MS CLAY: Yes. That is right. I might follow up on the power tools. This is the one that comes up the most frequently, I think. It goes to power tools and also chemicals. Are both aspects being covered in the work that you do?

Mr Burkevics: I might have to ask Mr Alegria from the Parks and Conservation

Service to address the issue of chemicals. The focus, from my understanding, has been on finalising the risk assessment around the use of power tools, but I certainly know that chemicals are considered. That one I think is a little bit trickier, noting some of the higher level workplace health and safety considerations—the PPE and the use of the chemicals in reserves. There are our endeavours, as an organisation, to go as herbicide-light as we possibly can. I think we have already spoken about the wonderful mower that we have. I am happy to give you another five-minute rundown but I will not.

MS CLAY: I think the reason chemicals came up is that they are both in the same problem area, which is that volunteers feel that they have to do a lot of very heavy weed removal and feel that they have to do that without the use of modern tools, and many of them simply do not have the physical strength. The power tools will help, but, if the government does not want volunteers using chemicals, the other approach to that would be to provide more resources for weed management by government officials so that the volunteers would not have to do it.

Mr Burkevics: Maybe to use the committee's time wisely, I am very happy to take that on notice and come back—

THE CHAIR: Take that on notice. That would be great. Thank you.

Mr Burkevics: Through the course of the next hour perhaps, we might get a helpful update and be able to update that for you, but I am happy to take it on notice.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cocks.

MR COCKS: Thank you. It was relatively recently revealed that culled kangaroos are being butchered into dog baits to be injected with 1080 and kangaroo skins are being tanned. I am interested in what the arrangements are around this and whether there are any commercial uses of culled animals.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Cocks, for the question. I would put on the record that this was not a recent revelation. This is information that has actually been provided on the government website for many years—the facts of how we use some of the carcasses. This is certainly not a commercial operation. This has actually been in response to discussions in relation to how we might ethically use carcasses that result from the program. I do not know if people would recall, but, a couple of years ago, we were working in partnership with a research organisation in Tasmania in terms of providing some of the carcasses to support a research program around Tasmanian devils. Unfortunately, just because of operational issues, we were unable to continue that, but we have continued to look at ways in which we can ethically use the carcasses from that program.

While there was reporting that this was a recent revelation, certainly, in the spirit of our ongoing commitment to transparency and accountability, that information has been in the public domain for many years. Certainly elements, such as the use of skins, have been in direct response to feedback and requests from our First Nations Ngunnawal traditional custodians. I might look again to Mr Burkevics to provide some details about that.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. Mr Cocks, a quick Google search would indicate that government has been on the record about the use of culled kangaroos for other matters for a long while. This is an important practice. One the messages we regularly get from the community is that they do not want to see the culled kangaroos wasted. The utilisation of the carcasses is done with utmost respect and dignity and in accordance with very strict butchering arrangements. I might hand over to Mr Glennon to provide a few more specifics. But, of course, there is the butchering not only for programs such as dog baiting but also for making the culled kangaroos available for cultural purposes to the Ngunnawal community. That is also a very important part of that program and we respect that. Mr Glennon, would you like to talk more about the process?

Mr Glennon: Thanks very much. That has been summed up fairly well. The program has been running for a long time. We try to do it discretely. It is obviously something that you do not want in the public's face, if you know what I mean. We have tried to use the carcasses wherever we can to minimise waste and that sort of thing. Our baiting programs are not big programs, so they do not take up a lot of the carcasses, but we use them where we can. I am not sure if there is much more I can add to that, but I am happy to take any specific questions.

Ms Vassarotti: I would just underline the fact that this is in no way commercial use. This is about utilisation for fairly low-level use. It is a real mischaracterisation to suggest that this is for commercial use.

MR COCKS: Okay. None of the products are sold commercially?

Ms Vassarotti: No.

Mr Glennon: No; they are not.

MR COCKS: Going back to the point around 1080, there has been a fair bit of discussion around the cruel way to die that 1080 brings. Do you have any concerns about the animal welfare ramifications of 1080 bait for its intended targets as well as native wildlife?

Ms Vassarotti: I would not have suggested this is a supplementary question. I think it is quite a new—

MR COCKS: I started by pointing out that culled kangaroos are being butchered into dog baits to be injected with 1080.

Ms Vassarotti: Alright. Again, quite significant advice has been provided in relation to the use of 1080, which is used very sparingly. We have certainly addressed this committee around some of the issues. Some of the challenges that we have in terms of 1080 include that it is a product that is very species-specific and means that we are not seeing the impact on particularly native species. Quite a lot of work has been done to try to identify alternatives. The 1080 program is not something that we do extensively, but I might look to the conservator to provide any more detail. I just reflect that we have spent a lot of time with this committee talking about this issue and there is

nothing new to—

Mr Burkevics: All I could add, Mr Cocks, is that 1080 is an approved chemical under national frameworks. It is a very effective chemical. We, of course, have looked at other chemicals and trialled other chemicals, such as HOGGONE, and we continue to use those chemicals where appropriate. To sum up, 1080 is an approved national chemical for baiting programs.

MR COCKS: Finally on this line of questioning, under the government's program are baby kangaroos, joeys, who have been clubbed used to produce baits and fur products?

Ms Vassarotti: I might look to officials to see if—

Mr Burkevics: Mr Cocks, I certainly understand the nature of the question. Out of respect for the professional people that do a difficult task, I like to use the word “euthanise” when that activity is undertaken, in accordance with the national code. But, no.

THE CHAIR: I have a substantive. On the EPSDD environment website is quite a substantial section on red gum dieback. It seems that a lot of work was done in the 2010-17 time frame. There does not seem to be much more post 2017 on the website. I am wondering how that work progresses. Is it still an issue that we are seeing? How are we trying to address it?

Ms Vassarotti: Dr Cooney is probably best placed to provide an update in terms of that program.

Dr Cooney: We are continuing to work on the issue. It continues to be a priority. The work that was done was a very large analysis, trying to understand the drivers, but the results, while they did implicate climate change and lack of burning, in some cases it was not entirely conclusive. We have long-term monitoring going on which will continue to, over time, help us understand the large-scale causes of that, but at the moment we are running a project aimed at testing whether some specific interventions could be useful in halting dieback for priority trees. This is based on work that has been effective elsewhere. It is actually quite weird. It is about adding large amounts of sugar around the tree. We are also trialling mulch. I am little hazy on the details, but I understand that the effect of the sugar is to reduce nitrogen in the soil, which then makes the leaves less tasty to the little siloed insects that are the proximate cause of dieback.

THE CHAIR: Fascinating.

Dr Cooney: Given a year or two, we will have some results on that.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, can you give me an update on the latest activities under the Connecting Nature, Connecting People program?

Ms Vassarotti: For sure. Thank you very much for the question. The Connecting Nature, Connecting People program is a really significant initiative by ACT government that is looking at how we engage with our urban environment, particularly looking at issues of biodiversity loss and habitat fragmentation and particularly looking at climate change. We are conscious that this program will be really important, particularly as we look at the issues of urban consolidation as well as issues such as the right to a healthy environment. We see this program as a really significant contribution to responding to some of the important policy priorities for government.

In terms of what has been happening over recent time, the projects include the restoration and the protection of 20 identified urban open spaces. We have identified all the projects now. A number of trial sites were identified and we have been engaging with the community to identify the rest of the sites. There are many more than 20 sites. We would like to do a lot more, but this is the first 20. Engagement with community partners has commenced in relation to that.

You will have seen some of the outcomes from the Connecting Nature, Connecting People program in terms of some of the planning work that has occurred. That program informed some of the development of the district mapping, particularly around the blue-green network. We had ecologists and researchers that were embedded into the planning team to support that work. That is a really significant contribution.

There is also the development of the *Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide*. That has been one of the outcomes of the program, as well as supporting the guidelines with evidence based urban habitat connectivity tools to support our management of that area. We have seen the expansion and the improvement of the Canberra Nature Map platform, which again is a really important way that we capture the environmental values across the landscape, and citizen scientists are contributing to that.

It has provided us with the opportunity to connect really closely with the Ngunnawal community to support some of the work that we are doing. Some of those particular projects and spaces that we have identified will have specific First Nation's elements to the work, supporting work across government in terms of how we really address connectivity. It has reframed the way we think about our really precious patches, in terms of a remnant, but we are trying to look at how these particular patches are connected and how wildlife and other species can move through the urban landscape. We are still at the beginning of that process, but we think there has been some really significant progress made in this 12-month period. Have I missed anything?

Mr Burkevics: Minister, I think you have summed it up extremely well. It is a real achievement by the team and the community in delivering this project under tight time frames. It is a year and a half into it, but the *Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide* is complete and integrated as part of the new planning frameworks and is being applied.

Of course, as the minister announced, we are consulting on Sullivans Creek at the moment. I think it has further energised that partnership approach with community—

the importance of restoring degraded or important sites. That work is ongoing, and that is in addition to further work that is happening in our parks and reserves area following further government investment in this budget, and there is prioritisation of three sites. It is working really well in an integrated way with our existing reserve network. I call it the artery network and the connectivity network between our parks and reserves. And there was the support to the nature mapping tool. I have certainly seen a terrific achievement on the original objectives of that program.

MR COCKS: I would like to turn to heritage. In particular, the 2022-23 round of funding for the ACT Heritage Grants Program included \$120,000 for the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival. My understanding was that the heritage festival was an ACT government event staffed by ACT government employees. Am I incorrect in that assumption?

Ms Vassarotti: I think this is more in terms of recording, in terms of the way that we categorise funding for both the heritage festival and the community-facing grants. It is categorised under the one funding bucket. The heritage festival is a festival where administration and promotion are supported by the ACT government. Obviously, a large number of community partners are involved in the festival. I am trying to remember how many organisations were involved, but the administration around the festival is done by government. That is the way it has been reported, from my understanding, for a number of years. It sits under that bucket of money, particularly because it is underpinned by community partnership.

MR COCKS: Be that as it may, it is listed as a grant, so it looks like—unless you can correct me—that the ACT government is effectively awarding a grant to itself.

Ms Vassarotti: Because I am not involved in the administration or the presentation—it is not a grant that is provided to government.

MR COCKS: It is funded under the ACT Heritage Grants Program, according to the annual report.

Mr Jeffress: You are right: there is a component of the grant that is provided to the ACT heritage festival. That funding is used to promote community groups' events and to run their programs throughout the festival. It has been reported publicly on our website that we have provided that funding for that purpose for some time, so it is not a recent change. It has been occurring in that way for a number of years.

MR COCKS: Indeed, and over the past three years it looks like the ACT heritage festival funding has gone from \$70,000 to \$120,000 and from representing 18.6 per cent of the total available funding under the grant program to 31 per cent of that funding. Is heritage festival funding judged and awarded under the same conditions that nominations by individuals and community groups are subject to for the rest of the funding? Is there an application process and an independent assessment?

Mr Jeffress: If you look on our website, under "Heritage Grants", you will see that the proposed funding for this financial year is \$80,000 for the festival. That is what—

MR COCKS: On page 134 of the annual report it states: “Canberra and Region Heritage Festival—\$120,000”. Is that incorrect?

Mr Jeffress: That is for last year. I was referring to this year’s proposed expenditure for 2023-24.

MR COCKS: The numbers I was asking about were for 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, where it rose from \$70,000 to \$120,000 and where it went from 18.6 per cent of available grant funding to 31 per cent.

Ms Vassarotti: We might need to take on notice why there was an increase in funding for the heritage festival, because I am a little bit unclear about why. There might be something in terms of the reporting from one year to the other that has been captured in that. Certainly, the work that is done to support the festival has not particularly shifted from year to year, so we might need to take that on notice. I cannot provide an explanation of what that is. It is potentially a thing about reporting in different years.

MR COCKS: I am still very interested to know whether that funding is judged and awarded under the same conditions that nominations for other projects are subject to.

Ms Vassarotti: I am struggling a little bit to understand the nature of the question. The support for the heritage funding is actually a fairly standard process that happens within government. I recognise there is potentially some confusion in terms of the fact that the presentation uses the language of a grant. Again, we might need to take some of that on notice.

MR COCKS: So maybe I can—

Ms Vassarotti: It is a standard activity that has been conducted by government over a number of years to support a really important festival.

MR COCKS: Yes; I am well aware of that. I will make my question as simple as I can. I assume that for most of the projects here there is an application process that is assessed by the government, and a decision is made about awarding that funding. Does the same process and the same condition apply to this \$120,000 amount?

Ms Vassarotti: No, except there are components of it—such as I know that we commission artwork and we commission advertising. That goes through the standard procurement processes. Again, I might move to officials.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. As the minister indicated, if there is further information that we need to provide on notice we are happy to do so. I think it is important to say that there are three criteria under the heritage grants program. The heritage festival is under the large-scale events program. On the circumstances of how a limited number of applications are assessed, we can provide further information, but I think it is important to note that the heritage festival is about supporting community groups and promoting the work that they do in support of heritage in the ACT.

The heritage festival was cancelled for one year during COVID. We have seen an increase in interest in the heritage festival, thanks to good advocacy, as well. That

may explain why there has been a growth for that year, because we have seen so much greater interest and willingness to participate and, as a result, a demand on resources for the heritage festival.

Mr Ponton: There is also a distinction between a partnership grant and a community grant, so I think the best solution here is for us to, as we said, take on notice the detail of the question. We will come back and we will step out the differences between the partnership and community, and the criteria and processes for you, Mr Cocks.

MR COCKS: That would be useful. Perhaps you can also provide on notice the list of recipients of the different categories of funding.

Mr Ponton: Yes.

MR COCKS: It looks like this only goes into one grouping, one category, in the annual report currently.

Mr Ponton: We can take that on notice.

MR COCKS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Okay, I will move to a substantive question. This one is a bit of a pain point: snakes. Part of the motion was looking at the registration of venomous snakes for educational purposes. In the response, Minister, you mention that this would be contrary to the Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. The code is an NHMRC code and, going through that code, it is for research purposes specifically. You have to go through ethics councils—a whole very clear process to care for these animals and use them for research.

It also says that an NHMRC code has been adopted under the Animal Welfare Act, but, again, the Animal Welfare Act does not speak to holding animals or registering animals for education purposes. So I guess my question is: why was this not able to be considered?—because at the moment the snake catchers are either bringing in snakes from South Australia or New South Wales, which has biodiversity and animal welfare issues, or getting them from the reptile zoo here, which causes a whole heap of other issues, such as logistical issues and issues with the zoos and the snake carers, and for the welfare of the snakes that are being constantly transported around the community.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. Thanks, Dr Paterson, for the question. I will primarily defer to the conservator because this is an issue that actually sits fairly and squarely under the Nature Conservation Act. I am not actually the decisionmaker around this; it is the conservator that has made this determination at this time. I think it is fair to reflect—and we really hope to convey this—that this is an area where there is a recognition that there are some issues and there is a need for some conversation.

I think one of the challenges that we find is that we certainly look across a range of wildlife. When we are looking at some of these registrations, we are primarily looking at the ownership of native wildlife. Certainly across a range of other wildlife, we do not routinely enable people to own possums, kangaroos or echidnas. So we really need to think through the ongoing implications of it. I guess one of the other

reflections that I would make is that I think we also need to look at the implications—“unintended consequences” is probably too strong a term—of shifting significantly, particularly given that I am very aware of some of the really important education work. We have people in the ACT providing education work to ensure that we have snake handlers that are trained and able to support animal-human interactions. And this is where some of these issues have emerged. But we also know that we have been looking at requests to do things like display venomous snakes and those tourism-facing types of events, and we need to consider whether or not we actually feel that that is meeting an educational purpose.

I think these are really quite important issues for us to engage with and reflect on, and it is not easy. That is why it is taking some time, but I will look to the conservator to provide some additional reflections on why the response is as it is, and reflect on some of the potential conversations moving forward.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister, and thanks, Dr Paterson. As the minister has indicated, the decision around the granting of licences for native wildlife matters is, under the Nature Conservation Act, a matter for the conservator. There were, of course, conservator guidelines previously established, which guide the conservator’s decision-making in relation to these matters.

I think it is important to note, from a venomous snake care and welfare perspective, that there are a couple of different perspectives. I think the first one is around the care over 48 hours. As a result of the consultations, certainly on the keeping of venomous snakes for extended periods, there would seem to be some conflicting opinions on whether that was appropriate. Certainly I think there is a legitimate concern, and from my perspective as the conservator a native animal deserves to be either in the wild or under care until it can get back to the wild. And that would be very consistent with the government’s position in relation to travelling zoos, for example, and those sorts of frameworks.

Following the motion, the minister advised that there would be some further work about increasing the flexibility of that 48-hour period. Work on that has commenced and I think we have advised all the snake handlers that we will be working through a process with the conservator’s guidelines to look at what extenuating circumstances might exist that might allow the conservator, or delegate of the conservator, to issue a licence that allows for the care. We acknowledge there may be circumstances where a snake handler attends to an injured snake, and we want to ensure that, as a native animal, that snake is seen by a veterinarian—a qualified person—as soon as possible. If the veterinarian says that it is not appropriate—because of injury or care needs—to return that snake to the wild, there may be circumstances that a snake handler is well equipped to deal with that situation. But, of course, we want to work through that and ensure that there is very solid evidence for the granting of a licence, which would occur under the conservator’s signature. We are very pleased to be engaging with our snake-handling community to look at the ways that the circumstances that may occur can be managed.

I am led to believe that, perhaps because of their great work, the occurrence of injuries to snakes is pretty low. On most occasions when they attend to a snake they can release it to the wild quickly, and within that 48-hour period, unless there is some sort

of extenuating circumstance.

THE CHAIR: Just under education, though—say, holding snakes for education—the sorts of codes that were referenced in the minister’s speech are not to do with education. They are for the scientific use of animals. Also, the Animal Welfare Act does not speak to educational purposes for holding these animals or mention snakes at all. Again, I put the question that there are concerns raised around the welfare of the animals currently, in the current context, and if we are not addressing that or changing that, I am concerned for the welfare of these snakes. There might be a better way of doing this. Are there any grounds to continue this work and to continue to look at it?—because this is a different context to zoos and, as you said, the tourist business. This is really about important education for the community but also to train other snake handlers.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes; although I would say that the education cause has been put to us in a range of contexts, but it is certainly not something that we do with other wildlife—essentially enable ownership—but I will talk to the conservator.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. As per the minister’s remarks to the motion in the Assembly, they did indicate that there is always opportunity for further work with regard to all licensing issues. I would not say that some of the issues raised by snake handlers are unusual. There are all of our licence recipients. From the last briefing there were over 3,000 licences that our licensing and compliance team issued. We regularly encounter circumstances that might require further consideration of the policy that guides the conservator’s decision-making on the issuing of a licence, and, absolutely, we look forward to the ongoing engagement with the snake handlers about their matters of interest.

From a conservator’s perspective I note, again, that there is conflicting opinion on whether it is appropriate to use live venomous snakes for education purposes. I am conscious of that, because, of course, the use of any venomous animal carries risk. I am happy for conversations to continue, but I think the sense that I get in consultations within government—with police and emergency services—is that there would be some nervousness around the keeping of a venomous animal for extended purposes, particularly the use of that venomous animal for an education purpose.

It is something that I would probably prefer not occur—that venomous snakes not be used for live education purposes where the public is around. I think it just increases the risk. And, of course, there are other laws that start to kick in with regard to workplace health and safety, et cetera, where I think I would need very strong evidence to be comfortable in issuing a licence for that circumstance.

THE CHAIR: I have a final question. Part of the issue that keeps coming up is that there are people who do catch these snakes all across Canberra. They are all volunteers. They have day jobs, and the workload is very significant in the number of call-outs for snakes, particularly through certain seasons. I am wondering: if the government had a snake catcher within government, that might lead to educational opportunities that could be run from within government—like we have at our wildlife sanctuaries and things—where snakes could be kept, and, under government protection, an education could be run. Maybe there is some way of doing it like that.

Mr Burkevics: I can certainly say that I know our comms team within EPSDD has no shortage of animal and wildlife matters to communicate to the public, including risks of snakes and how best to behave around snakes and respect snakes in their native environment. I am aware that there have been a range of communications on that issue as we enter warmer weather and we see greater movements of snakes. So, absolutely, the communications around informing Canberrans about our native wildlife—how to protect it and how to respect it in its own habitat—remains a really important part of the work that collectively occurs across EPSDD and the great work of the comms team.

Ms Vassarotti: What I will say is that there not a proposal on the table currently in terms of changing the approach to moderating and mediating interactions between native wildlife, particularly snakes, and humans. I have certainly had discussions, as well, in terms of bringing a function like that into government. There are obviously some significant issues around that, and part of what we are responding to is different expectations in terms of snake-human interactions and what the community might expect in terms of how we manage those interactions while living in the Bush Capital. I think there is a variety of expectations about what you might do, and often a snake's environment is a human's environment. Certainly, I have had conversations such as that, but there are no proposals on the table currently to shift the current practice.

Mr Burkevics: Thank you, Minister. Dr Paterson, just to address a point you made earlier, my understanding is that all of the licensed snake catchers in the ACT do it for commercial purposes, so it is a business.

THE CHAIR: Just to cover their costs, though. It is literally to cover their costs.

Mr Burkevics: Yes.

THE CHAIR: It is 50 bucks or something—a call-out for a snake.

Mr Burkevics: Yes. So I think it is fair to say that, in accordance with other work happening across government to reduce red tape and support business, anything that I can do within the constraints and considerations that I have to support snake catching businesses to do their important work and work within the community, then I will absolutely consider it within the statutory parameters that I have to work within.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Clay.

MS CLAY: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I have seen a bit of work being done to re-introduce endangered flora and fauna in some of our areas. Can you update me on some of the recent activities for that?

Ms Vassarotti: This is a really important body of work. I might ask Dr Cooney to come to the table to talk about some of the really important work that is happening in terms of threatened species re-introduction. I note that probably, in some instance in terms of the operationalisation of this, I am potentially straying slightly out of my admin arrangements, given that quite a lot of the work happens operationally through Parks and Conservation. But, yes, there is some significant work happening across a

range of species.

A couple of nights ago, I was at Mulligans Flat and Goorooyarroo late at night, providing assistance to the release of bettongs into the new part of the reserve as part of this process of reintroducing species that were endemic in the community but which have not been in the landscape for over 80 years. That was a pretty exciting piece of work, and the work at Mulligans Flat is a joint project between ACT government, the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust and the ANU. It is reflective of the way we try to engage with the threatened species work in terms of doing it in partnership and connecting it with work that is happening across jurisdictions, which is really exciting.

I think we have talked before about the work of supporting one of our critically endangered species—my favourite endangered species—the Canberra earless dragon. That is work that is happening at Tidbinbilla around a breeding population, and looking at how we can potentially reintroduce that species. There is some work and research happening down in Tidbinbilla in terms of the breeding population, and looking at being able to reintroduce that into the landscape.

In terms of some of the other species, we have been doing some really fantastic work that I was able to witness upfront, in working with partners such as the Australian National Botanic Gardens on the seed bank program, and working to cultivate and propagate new species such as the small purple pea. That was propagated at the botanic gardens, and I was really lucky to be involved in some of the replanting of that species across different locations in the ACT. That is just my diary of the fabulous things I got to do.

Dr Cooney: I could not quite hear. Was it about a general update on reintroduction?

MS CLAY: Just some of the recent activities and the recent focus that we are taking in our prioritisation on reintroducing endangered fauna and flora.

Dr Cooney: That was a great summary. We obviously do not like having to resort to reintroduction. It is a sort of last option. It tends to get expensive and complex with uncertain results. But sometimes we just have to if we want to conserve the species. So we try to intervene before that point.

We do have, as the minister said, a number of successful programs running, both to breed species *ex situ*, so out of their native environment, at Tidbinbilla or in the Botanic Gardens, and then to reintroduce them. Through the Mulligans work, we are also partnering with organisations in other states and territories so that we can manage as a meta population with those fenced sanctuaries where animals are going to need moving on, which is a really important evolution of that program and the way we think about that.

One of the big programs we have running is Northern Corroboree Frog, and that is a really exciting story. The Northern Corroboree Frog—like around two-thirds of amphibians worldwide—was hit some years ago by chytrid fungus, which is the main threat to frogs and toads worldwide. They are now, we think, absent from the actual home range in the bogs and fens in the uplands. But, working with the ANU, who lead

this project, we have actually reintroduced them outside of their native range at a lowlands site, where they are surviving. They have survived there for two years now. It is a really exciting program. You have probably seen them. They are incredibly beautiful little black and gold frogs. So that is really exciting.

One of the others is the small purple pea. We are replanting it. It is a lovely little pea plant related to things like hardenbergia, which a lot of people are familiar with, which should be in many of our reserves. It is going to be reintroduced to four reserves. Three of them are planted out already. All of them have survived so far. All the plants are doing well. Lots of them have actually flowered and produced seed; so they should be reproducing. We will be following them up in the coming years making sure they are okay.

MS CLAY: Generally speaking, Minister, you said it is more effective but it would also be much cheaper, wouldn't it, to preserve the habitat and preserve the species and manage the areas well for weeds and pest incursions rather than have to reintroduce and repopulate after problems?

Ms Vassarotti: Absolutely. That is really where we should be providing our focus. When we are getting to the point of looking at reintroduction of species, it is much more expensive. So it is important to protect habitat in particular. One of the really interesting things about many of our threatened species is that they actually survive and thrive in these very important ecosystems that we are custodian of. Putting a lot of focus on our native temperate grasslands and our grassy woodlands is the best thing that we can do for our endangered wildlife. If we have good, healthy ecosystems, the native species that call them home will do so much better. That has been a real focus in terms of ensuring that we are doing everything that we can to protect habitat.

This again goes to the importance of the connectivity work, because it is not only about protecting habitat but also about ensuring that we are not fragmenting habitat as well. There has been significant work in ensuring that, when proponents are putting forward proposals that look at fragmenting habitat, we are really clear about the potential impacts on native species around those types of proposals.

MR COCKS: The Heritage Council accepted a heritage listing nomination for Urambi Village in February 2017. Can you explain why we still do not have a decision on that?

Ms Vassarotti: Mr Cocks, thank you very much for the question. How the Heritage Council and Heritage Unit have to be able to work through the registration process has been an issue of some discussion, and we know that there has been a significant backlog in registrations. In a general sense, we have seen a reduction in the number of registrations, as the Heritage Council has aimed to work through those registrations—but we have more registrations that come in as well.

There is a particular issue—and, again, this is in more general terms—in that a number of historical applications have needed to be assessed and there is a significant lack of information that is part of that nomination, which has made it hard to progress. That is a particular issue that we have been engaging with through the review in terms of how we deal with that issue—particularly the pre-2003 nominations. I will go to

officials in terms of the specifics of the registration that you speak of. But we are looking at how we manage that. That has been an issue that we have been engaging in through the consultation in how we move forward on that. Mr Jeffress, is there any specifics you can provide on that nomination?

Mr Jeffress: In relation to heritage register nominations, we have a backlog of nominations that currently sits at around 78. The Heritage Council holds the delegation to make decisions around moving a registration along the process from being nominated to provisional and, considering our backlog, we need to prioritise what we are working on.

The council, as you are probably aware, has made a number of recent decisions around provisional registrations, but the Urambi one has not come up yet. I suppose that comes back to our prioritisation. We do that on the grounds of imminent threat to a site, thematic representations—so is the nomination already from a thematic perspective represented on the register?—and what the pressures are for development in that area. It is unfortunate that Urambi has not been assessed yet; however, it is in that backlog and we are working as quickly as we can with council.

Ms Vassarotti: I would just note also that there have been additional resources invested into the work of the Heritage Council. I note the work of the committee of inquiry, which has touched on the issue of resourcing. That is under active discussion within government both in terms of the government review as well as the inquiry review with regard to resourcing for the heritage function.

MR COCKS: I also understand that the current state of this decision means that there are limitations and restrictions on what homeowners in Urambi Village can do to their properties in relation to improvements, renovations and that sort of thing. Can you explain what those limitations are?

Mr Jeffress: There is a range of avenues where residents in that situation could get advice. One of the key services we provide is the Heritage Advisory Service. That is where people can get initial free advice from a consultant around what they can and cannot do on their property. They can also obviously approach the Heritage Unit, and we can provide advice on what someone could do in those specific situations. I suppose that would be the general way we would manage that.

MR COCKS: But, to help my understanding, could you please explain what restrictions would apply to a homeowner in this situation where there was a nomination in 2017? We are now a long way down the track, and it seems like homeowners are not able to renovate or improve their homes.

Mr Jeffress: I do not think we are in a position where people cannot progress any maintenance on their houses. I think they can get advice through the services that I referred to as to what they can and cannot do. I cannot discuss the specifics as I am not across the specifics of the actual values that have been nominated. I would need to take that aspect on notice.

MR COCKS: Yes; that would be useful. I understand that one of the members of the Heritage Council is actually a resident of Urambi Village. Is this a conflict of interest

that has been raised? How is it being handled?

Ms Vassarotti: I am not aware of this issue. Mr Burkevics may be able to address this.

Mr Burkevics: This would fall under standard council process. When this matter would come to council, that member would declare it and we would follow normal conflicts-of-interest procedures. The directorate has clear advice. The council will follow that advice as to how we manage conflicts of interest. But, as the matter actually has not come to council yet for a decision, I suppose we would wait for that time.

MR COCKS: It essentially sounds like what you have just said is that you will manage the conflict of interest by managing the conflict of interest. Can you provide any more detail around how it will be managed other than being declared? Or will it not be looked at until a meeting?

Mr Burkevics: The directorate and the ACT government have very strict conflict-of-interest arrangements. When that matter comes up for council deliberations and discussions—like any matter that comes before council—there is a standing declaration of interests. I think it is a very routine matter to manage conflicts of interest. Of course, without the detail of what the conflict of interest would be—and it is not appropriate to talk here in any detail—I can assure you, Mr Cocks, that there are very rigorous conflict-of-interest arrangements that apply to heritage decision-making.

Ms Vassarotti: I would also note that we have undertaken significant induction processes with this council, and issues such as conflict are covered in those processes. It is the reality of us living as people in a community that potential and actual conflicts of interest may arise and, in managing those, there are very standard procedures around this. We can provide you with the government's conflict-of-interest policy.

MR COCKS: That would be useful, but has this particular conflict of interest been raised through those induction processes or appointment process?

Mr Burkevics: We might need to take that on notice. I do not think we have got the specifics before us, Mr Cocks.

MR COCKS: Thank you.

Ms Vassarotti: I would note that we probably would not expect a member of council to anticipate a range of things. There could be circumstances where people may not—

MR COCKS: You would not expect someone you are appointing to the Heritage Council to be aware that they are living in a property with this situation—that this is the situation with their house they are living in?

Ms Vassarotti: But it is not even an issue that has come to council.

MR COCKS: But you would not expect the person living in that property to be aware?

Ms Vassarotti: We will take the question on notice, Mr Cocks, around the conflict-of-interest policy as well as the standard process for providing advice around conflict of interest.

Mr Burkevics: I would just reaffirm that every employee, statutory office holder and an appointee to a council has specific responsibilities around their conflict-of-interest matters. As I mentioned, there are very strong frameworks, policies and procedures that apply, and it is up to each individual to apply those.

MR COCKS: Thank you.

Mr Burkevics: Chair, I have some information on chemicals.

MS CLAY: Great; thank you.

Mr Burkevics: I acknowledge the diligence of the Parks and Conservation Service to provide that. Across ParkCare, the volunteers are allowed to use five chemicals. There are five chemicals that they can apply. In using those chemicals in a spray capacity, they must possess their ChemCERT 3 qualification, which is a qualification that is offered by the Parks and Conservation Service at no cost. Once those volunteers have completed that training, there is PPE and the equipment required to deliver that safety and guidance from the local rangers to not spray the wrong thing which is offered. There are very, very effective processes for volunteers to be able to use chemicals on reserves.

As I mentioned earlier, the Strategic Volunteer Coordination and Steering Committee, I hope, will address that the approach that is being applied is different to that that Transport Canberra are applying to their urban ParkCare volunteers, who are only permitted to use one chemical. Whilst it is not appropriate for me to discuss the history of that, I think what we are seeing is, because we are strongly engaged with Transport Canberra and City Services and we have the necessary enhancements to governance arrangements, a bit like power tools, it is something that we can now work together on so we have a consistent position across all of our volunteers. Of course, those that do not have their ChemCERT qualification can use a cut-and-dab technique. There are still provisions there, but less than if you have got your ChemCERT 3.

MS CLAY: Thank you, Mr Burkevics. That is great. I am aware that cut and dab was used for a long time. Is that five chemical ChemCERT procedure that is available to the PCS volunteers once they have done their certification a recent change or has that been the case for a while?

Mr Burkevics: I am advised that it is not a recent change.

MS CLAY: So maybe the gap that I was hearing about was the TCCS and the rangers.

Mr Burkevics: It might be TCCS, yes. Noting that we are discussing it, I think it is absolutely an agenda item for the Strategic Volunteer Coordination Group to start to look into and over time chip away at potential inconsistencies in policy and practice in

our volunteer management arrangements.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

Mr Burkevics: And, just to confirm, you are happy to consider that question on notice closed or—

MS CLAY: Yes. That one is now answered. Thank you.

Mr Burkevics: Okay; thank you very much.

MR COCKS: A number of times today we have talked about or you have referenced the traditional custodians, and there is a strategic objective on page 55. I notice the annual report and the discussion today have only specifically mentioned Ngunnawal people. Given the government had to apologise to the Ngambri people about their exclusion, is there a reason this annual report continues to do this?

Ms Vassarotti: The annual report and our discussion today reflect the government protocol which recognises Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of this local area. We do recognise other families that might have connection to the region but, in line with the Supreme Court settlement, that is the protocol of the ACT government and reflected in the annual report.

MR COCKS: Will you be doing anything to try and engage with people with a connection to country other than the Ngunnawal people? The measures against that seem to be very specific.

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly through processes such as the heritage review we have been engaging across the local community, particularly with registered Aboriginal organisations and the like. The issue of traditional custodianship is a challenging one and we are working really closely with other areas of government, including the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, in relation to how we progress the discussion of traditional custodians here in the ACT. We are very hopeful that, through things such as the work that is happening around the heritage review, we will be able to progress this issue.

I am very aware of work that is being community led, such as the progression of native title claims, that is really engaging on this issue of traditional custodianship within the ACT. I think it is really appropriate that it is community led. We are really hopeful that that will provide a framework and a foundation for government to be able to engage in this issue.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Minister Vassarotti and officials for appearing today and thank the Broadcasting and Hansard team for their support. If there are any questions on notice taken, could you please get those answers to the committee secretariat within five working days of receipt. Today's committee hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 12.01 pm.