



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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

(Reference: [Inquiry into annual and financial reports 2019-2020
and ACT budget 2020-2021](#))

Members:

DR M PATERSON (Chair)
MR A BRADDOCK (Deputy Chair)
MS L CASTLEY

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 2 MARCH 2021

Secretary to the committee:
Ms A Westgate (Ph: 620 53886)

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

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Privilege statement

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.30 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

Rutledge, Mr Geoffrey, Deputy Director-General, Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction

Walker, Mr Ian, Executive Branch Manager, Environment, Heritage and Water and Conservator of Flora and Fauna

THE CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity on the annual and financial reports 2019-20 and estimates 2020-21.

The proceedings will examine the annual reports, expenditure proposals and revenue estimates for the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate in relation to budget statements E and for the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.

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

Today's proceedings are recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses could use the words "I will take that as a question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcripts.

In our first session today, we will hear from the Minister for the Environment and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. The provision of false and misleading evidence is a serious matter. All participants today are reminded of this. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

THE CHAIR: As we are not inviting opening statements at this point, we will now proceed to questions.

Minister, in a lot of annual reports and environment reports, one of the main recommendations is in relation to data management infrastructure and cross-portfolio

communication. I am wondering what is being done to address this recurring recommendation.

Ms Vassarotti: I might ask officials to talk about some of the data management work that is happening.

Mr Rutledge: This issue of data management is a difficult one for all environment agencies, including our own. Whilst there are often recommendations that we could do better, I think we are doing very well.

ACTmapi is probably a leading example of where we have geospatial data across multiple layers: there is a biodiversity layer, fire risk layer, conservation layer, land management layer and land tenure layer. Unfortunately for many, it is not very accessible to the community; it is quite opaque to use until you become a better user. We are trying to put as much effort as possible into that.

Let me give some examples of how we are getting real-time uploading of data. When we are out in the field doing weeding, we pull out an iPad or equivalent and just tap on where that is. That logs in back at the ranch to say, “This is where we weeded today.” That sort of monitoring means that when we are out in the field, we are doing work where it needs to be done.

The other thing you raised was talking across agencies. That is one of the benefits of having the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate. A lot of our interfaces are all in one building or all in one organisation. It is the little things. There is even the new office block: TCCS and the other land agencies are in the office block; it means that having a meeting and getting people together is a lot easier.

There are opportunities for improvement, but if you compare us to other environment agencies around the country, I think you will see that we are doing very well, especially with that geospatial mapping.

MR BRADDOCK: I have some questions about changes to appropriations in the budget. I will start on page 29. It talks about the cessation of “Better services in your community—managing native wildlife”. Why has the program ceased?

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I will ask officials to talk through that.

Mr Walker: I have read the privilege statement.

The better services to the environment program was a budget bid a number of years ago. It is a continuing program in terms of the work and activities we undertake. This particular bid relates to kangaroo management and how we manage kangaroo and control activities associated with car and kangaroo collisions. That work is ongoing. We continue to do that work in an ongoing capacity; it has just shifted from being an initiative-based program to being an ongoing recurrent program.

MR BRADDOCK: It also talks about urban renewal in Kenny. I thought that that was a little pre-emptive, given that Kenny has not been built yet. Why is that the case?

Mr Walker: Could you provide a little more clarity on that question.

MR BRADDOCK: It is on page 30. There is a budget line item “Urban renewal in Kenny”. Given the state of Kenny at the moment, I am wondering why it is being renewed?

Mr Rutledge: Mr Braddock, that is not for this portfolio.

MR BRADDOCK: My apologies.

Mr Rutledge: For your assistance, I can say that that is just preparing. It is not urban renewal; it is just being handled by the urban renewal section within our directorate. It is just doing some early studies and due diligence. The labelling is not for urban renewal; it is just being handled by our urban renewal branch.

MR BRADDOCK: That makes a bit more sense.

Mr Ponton: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

As Mr Rutledge said, the urban renewal team has, through a restructure, been renamed the development and implementation team. It does all the early works, early studies, in relation to getting land ready for development. That is what appears there. It is more of a terminology issue than anything else.

MR BRADDOCK: On page 33 of the budget, it talks about clean catchments and clean waterways where the funding is only identified for the 2020-21 financial year. I want to check if there is going to be any follow-on work with that when it comes to an end at the end of this financial year.

Mr Walker: This is a continuing program of work around the healthy waterways program. Previously there was a \$93 million investment delivering 20 infrastructure projects across the ACT. That was a partnership between the ACT government and the commonwealth, predominantly funded by the commonwealth. The million dollars that we have this financial year are continuing that work. In the parliamentary and governing agreement, you will also see commitment to continue that work into the future. That will be part of future budget considerations.

MS CASTLEY: On the healthy waterways program, there are 20 stormwater assets. This says that this was all completed in June 2019. It has been controversial in some areas. What has been the community feedback?

Mr Walker: If I can comment on this piece of work, it is something that now sits in Minister Rattenbury’s portfolio; it is a water-related activity.

In response to your particular question as to the assets that we work on and provide as part of the healthy waterways program, we undertake a number of things in that space.

There is community involvement through our H2OK program, which is about how we communicate and engage with the community and empower the community to take action. The message is that it is only running down the stormwater drain. It is an

important message and change process within government.

That is one part of our healthy waterways program. The other part relates to how we, in partnership with TCCS, clean and manage the gross pollutant traps. The healthy waterways projects and the assets that have been installed are about doing two things. They are about reducing large pollutants. Think bottles and rubbish at gross level. The gross pollutant traps catch them before they get into the system and into the lakes. Those gross pollutant traps require cleaning and routine maintenance over time.

The other part of the work that is being done is to stop the phosphorus and other types of nutrients entering the system. That is through plantings. The water flows through a series of plants; the nutrients are absorbed through that process, preventing nutrients entering the lake. Those nutrients are what, in turn, with warm weather and still conditions, result in blue-green algae outbreaks. So that is an important part of the process of how we manage our clean catchments across the territory and it relates back to the healthy waterways program that we started a number of years ago and are continuing. It now sits within Minister Rattenbury's portfolio.

Mr Rutledge: This committee will have an opportunity to talk about that on Thursday afternoon. I am sure that we will talk about blue-green algae then.

MS CASTLEY: I also have a question about Springbank Rise in Casey. There is a real eyesore of a building right next to one of the assets. I am wondering who manages that stuff. Are you aware that there is a building that is being lived in and graffitied right on the water there?

Mr Rutledge: Ms Castley, maybe we can do this on Thursday?

MS CASTLEY: Yes. On page 191 of the annual report, it talks about the directorate staff health and wellbeing program, including the launch of a healthy breakfast program and an eight-week staff boot camp. It says that four staff have received a seated massage. Yoga is on site twice a week, with 20 staff participating, and 12 staff have attended an Anytime Fitness information session. Apparently 287 staff have accessed this health and wellbeing reimbursement program. How many full-time staff are there in the directorate?

Mr Rutledge: We have about 660 full-time equivalents at any one time and we have a rough headcount of 700 staff. What we have, though, is a very diverse workforce. We have our conservation research people. They are scientists. Some of them will be field based; some of them will be in the office. We have what we would normally think of as bureaucrats behind desks; and then we have rangers and, as I said, field workers.

For a smallish organisation with a 700 headcount, we have a very diverse risk profile when it comes to workplace health and safety. When we try to put together a workplace health and safety program, it has to include everything about the safe use of chainsaws and also safe mental health, mental wellbeing, when you are in a high stress environment.

One of the programs is a reimbursement program. It is not uncommon across government agencies and similar employers that people are able to choose a health

and wellbeing program and then get reimbursed up to \$100 in any FBT year, any one year.

Some people might do smoking cessation; some people might get a gym membership; some are runners or get a new bike. We are trying to say that a healthier person coming to work is a healthier person at work. We are quite broad in that. It requires presentation of a receipt, and the delegate—normally their manager—must think that it is a worthwhile health or wellbeing activity. That is what the reimbursement program is.

Separately, we have done a number of other programs. In the last 12 months, in a COVID environment, we have had to really try and personalise our wellbeing activities. Previously, in this reporting period, we would have onsite yoga, stretching, seated massage and some of those other things, but we have had to move to people managing their health and wellbeing at home. That includes staying connected to work—making sure people have a safe work environment and we are not seeing back injuries or stress injuries.

There is another thing we have seen, and we have constantly monitored this. There is a sort of mental disconnection when you leave the home and go to the workplace and, at the end of the day, some sort of debriefing time on the way back. When you are working from home, a lot of people are logging onto work a lot earlier and then logging off a lot later. It is trying to manage that.

We have done a number of surveys throughout the COVID period—we are not back to normal yet. We are finding that roughly 68 per cent of people find that they are able to turn off. We have done a lot of things about how you turn off at the end of the workday and how you separate your work-life balance. When you compare it to where we are across the service, I think that we are doing okay, but we need to run a diverse set of programs because we have such a diverse workforce.

MS CASTLEY: How much was the program worth for 287 staff?

Mr Rutledge: I will take that question on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Do we know how much money was allocated to other health and wellbeing programs?

Mr Rutledge: Again, I am happy to take that on notice and put together a breakdown of our expenditure on workplace health and wellbeing.

MS CASTLEY: You are saying that this happens across other agencies. It seems a lot of money or a lot of effort if only 287 staff take it up. Are you encouraging more staff to take it up or do you think it would be better just left?

Mr Rutledge: Ensuring that our staff are healthy and have good wellbeing is a big priority for us. We are getting more sophisticated, particularly around mental health. We have appointed an executive champion of mental health. We had a whole-of-staff stand-up, a virtual stand-up, where our executive mental health champion took people through the elements of that.

We are encouraging it. Some are universal opportunities, like the stand-up that I talked about. There is a universal opportunity in the \$100 rebate. Some are more bespoke. Some are mandatory training: you cannot handle a chainsaw unless you have done the chainsaw training. Some are hard-end health and wellbeing activities and some are the softer ones. We would always encourage people. That is why we make such a diverse set of opportunities available. We hope that we are looking after every individual.

MS CASTLEY: So you believe that it is money well spent and it is making an actual difference to your work group?

Mr Rutledge: I think it is making a difference. Our injury data is relatively low compared to other agencies with similar risk profiles. The stress of working from home has seen some minor indications of both additional stress and additional soft tissue damage through not having the correct set-up at home. As soon as we see those blips in the injury data—or even the non-injury data, leading to injury—we feed that back in and see if we can do something different.

MS CASTLEY: Do you think that the average Canberran would feel that massages at your desk are a good use of the directorate's money?

Mr Rutledge: Yes, when you look at the number of people that are based at a workplace and based at a desk who end up requiring physio. If early intervention, such as a seated massage on occasion, prevents long-term physiotherapy, I think that it is a good investment.

MS LAWDER: I want to get an update on the healthy waterways project—how much was spent in total and what analysis there has been of the success and outcomes.

Mr Rutledge: Ms Lawder, the healthy waterways program is for Minister Rattenbury; it is going to be on Thursday afternoon. Mr Walker answered a preliminary question, but we look forward to talking about healthy waterways on Thursday.

MS LAWDER: Does that also apply to generally removing sediment from the lakes?

Mr Rutledge: Yes.

MS LAWDER: What portfolio is that?

Mr Rutledge: That is in the water portfolio. It is the same committee, but it is on Thursday afternoon.

THE CHAIR: Minister, I am interested in our relationship with New South Wales, going forward, given that we are basically an island within New South Wales in terms of resource management. With challenges such as brumbies coming into Namadgi and with your recent comments on the environment assurance commissioner at the federal level, I am wondering what your thoughts are on the idea of a national standard and how that will go towards improving our work with New South Wales. What challenges are present there?

Ms Vassarotti: You are talking about the proposed environmental standards under the EPBC Act?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: I will probably look to officials to provide a bit of detail in relation to some of the key relationships that we manage currently. Particularly around issues such as natural resource management, there are really strong relationships. Brumby management is a good example. The management of brumbies is through a management plan. Clearly, potential incursion across the border is an issue, and at a working level there are regular conversations around how to manage that.

In relation to how we look at our national environmental protection laws, particularly how we look at matters of national environmental protection, this issue of strong national environmental standards is part of a very active conversation at the moment and something that Graeme Samuel, in this final report on the review of the EPBC Act, talked about quite extensively. It was seen as a key reform that needs to happen.

The ACT has always been of the view that these are an important step forward as long as there are strong national environmental standards. Having consistency across how we manage matters of national environmental significance, in particular, is really important and sets the framework for discussions on a bilateral level.

I see this as a step forward. It is pleasing to see that the New South Wales environment minister has talked about the importance of national environment standards; that is a really positive thing. At a ministerial level, working together through the national ministers meetings is an important set of relationships to ensure that we get national consistency across a whole range of issues from biosecurity to the management of invasive pests et cetera.

That would be my view. I do not know if officials have anything to add in relation to some of the current relationships around the management of species.

Mr Walker: As you have highlighted, we are surrounded by New South Wales, so our relationship with New South Wales is particularly important. There is a range of areas within the environment portfolio where we have strong and continuing relationships. I will highlight those in a second. At the whole of ACT government level, we have an MOU with New South Wales that also looks to how we partner and work with New South Wales on a range of activities.

Dropping down into the detail of the environment portfolio, as the minister has highlighted, we have good relationships with New South Wales in the biosecurity space. That means both weeds and invasive animals, and includes biosecurity outbreaks like the khapra beetle outbreak that we had last year. We have a strong working relationship as to how we manage those biosecurity outbreaks at a national level, with multiple committees and groups forming to respond and react to those.

It goes right down to simple activities in adjacent land. For the parks estate within the ACT and New South Wales, for the control of weeds, we share people resources in

those things. We use the expertise that is developed in New South Wales. Often, the larger jurisdictions provide us with the extra lift of knowledge, experience and investment that they have in New South Wales or Victoria to help with those sorts of activities.

That is the biosecurity space. In the fire management area, again we have good relationships with our colleagues in New South Wales and a sharing arrangement with New South Wales to manage fuel loads and to respond to fire events. Those sorts of relationships with our New South Wales colleagues are extremely good.

The last point, which also sits with Minister Rattenbury, is around the water relationship. We have a strong relationship with our New South Wales colleagues in relation to water and how we manage water across the border.

They are the sorts of activities and programs that we jointly share and jointly deliver because of the intimate relationship with New South Wales and our colleagues there.

Our relationship with the people is also important. We have many staff who are New South Wales based who come into the ACT. We are very conscious of the regional contribution that we make for both the ACT and New South Wales.

MS CASTLEY: You mentioned feral horses. Have we seen any since the bushfires in Namadgi or other ACT national parks?

Mr Walker: If it is okay, Minister, I will respond to that. First, we released a horse strategy for managing horses in the ACT. That horse strategy articulated the need for the control of any horses that came into the ACT. We have a no-horse policy, in effect. That means we have extensive monitoring programs in our parks and reserves to detect any movement of horses. We have had some occurrences of horses coming into the ACT. They have moved back out of the ACT as well. At this stage, we have not had to take any specific actions to deal with horses, because they have moved out.

We also have a number of neighbouring properties within the ACT that we are working with in terms of managing their stock and their horses. There are a couple of different levels of horse management in the ACT.

MS CASTLEY: How do you control that? Do you muster them if there has been no culling?

Mr Walker: There has been no culling in that sort of requirement; in this case, they moved out of their own accord. We have not had to intervene with anything specific.

MS CASTLEY: There have been no helicopters used or anything like that in the last 12 to 18 months?

Mr Walker: In relation to managing pest species like horses and deer, we use helicopters to do surveillance work. We used helicopters during the course of the Orroral Valley fire recovery effort, to get access to those areas. As you may appreciate, when a landscape is burnt, it enables feral animals, in particular, to move through the landscape easily; the vegetation does not block their movement. So across

fire-impacted areas, we do see influxes of animals like horses, deer and foxes that can move through the landscape more effectively. That is why, as part of our fire recovery program, we have put in extensive work to try and mitigate the impacts of things like deer, foxes and those sorts of animals that threaten key species in the landscape.

MS CASTLEY: Would you use helicopters in areas that have not been bushfire affected?

Mr Walker: Yes. Helicopters are used routinely for the management of pest species across Australia. The ACT is no different. Last year we used helicopters for the control of deer. It is a common practice across most jurisdictions—I think all jurisdictions—in the country.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about air quality standards, particularly after the bushfires. I am also interested in indoor air quality, in terms of how we ensure that people have a healthy environment where they live.

Ms Vassarotti: In relation to the environment portfolio, the responsibility is around making sure that we are implementing the national standards that are set, and that is around outdoor air quality. It is something that is monitored by ACT Health, and EPA also has a role. Certainly, there is some work around air quality happening at the moment that is being led by ACT Health, rather than EPSDD. I am not sure that there is any further information that we can provide.

MR BRADDOCK: Is that work by Health tied to indoor air quality? Should I be directing the questions to them?

Ms Vassarotti: It is probably worth asking the question, yes. It is the work that followed on from a motion in the Assembly in 2019 looking at the issue of air quality. A letter was presented in the Assembly in the last sittings in relation to that. They should be able to provide some further information.

Mr Ponton: In terms of work happening nationally in the building standards area, Minister Vassarotti's sustainable building and construction portfolio, there is work happening through the Building Codes Board looking at buildings, and looking back and reflecting on the events of 2019-20. As I said, that is not in this session. Certainly, I can assure you that work is happening at the national level in relation to buildings.

THE CHAIR: With countries like China that have very poor air quality for most of the year, are we looking to countries like that in terms of how they manage it, and engaging with Health around air quality?

Ms Vassarotti: This is a conversation that has been happening nationally. There are a whole lot of reflections that have been made. Certainly, national standards do try to reflect the very best evidence in relation to what are healthy limits. We certainly know, through the bushfire period, that the air quality that we experienced was way in excess of what we would see as conducive to health. Again, that work is primarily sitting within ACT Health in terms of what we need to look at.

Mr Walker: Environment protection policy does work nationally. With the national

standards that we have for air quality, the ACT is clearly under those for the majority of the year. It is only when we have these major events like a bushfire that we have significant issues around air quality.

It is worth highlighting your point about other jurisdictions and other places in the world. In the main, the ACT is far below any concerns about air quality. As I said, it is only when we have these major events that there is a problem. We also do not have the industry that many other jurisdictions have. With the nitrogen oxides and sulfur oxides that are more problematic, we do not have those sorts of industries in the territory. Again, our standards and our levels are well below what is set nationally.

THE CHAIR: In terms of pollen in the air, we have quite high readings of that at times. How does the environment directorate engage with that in terms of what is planted, and with regard to weeds? What species of plant is responsible for the pollen? Do you engage with Health on that?

Ms Vassarotti: It is a really interesting reflection. The issue of pollen has probably grown in prominence over recent times. Again, it is one of the useful reasons why Health is leading it, in terms of getting an understanding of what some of the issues are. Absolutely, it will inform the work of EPSDD, moving forward. We are still learning about some of the impacts. We also know that the impacts of climate change will probably increase this issue, so it is an issue that we absolutely need to be alive and active to.

Mr Walker: Yes, the pollen issues are, again, a health-related issue, so they are predominantly done through the Health Directorate and health entities. We have seen an increase in pollen and pollen issues for the community. Working with our colleagues in TCCS, we are looking at the types of vegetation and trees that are planted in the ACT as part of our work associated with achieving a 30 per cent canopy cover for the territory. That work is about planting trees or increasing green infrastructure. That will include what species give the best reduction in heat and achieve the best biodiversity outcomes, and looking at how we can mitigate pollen-related impacts for the community. It is about species selection at the time of planting and over the next decade, as we progress tree planting across the territory.

Ms Vassarotti: I also note that it is about a balance, particularly around biodiversity. We also want to ensure that we have biodiversity corridors, encouraging pollinators. It is really about bringing together these different elements of the picture.

Mr Walker: I would also add a comment about wood heaters. During winter the directorate has taken substantial steps, and every year there is a campaign to remind people about how to use wood heaters. We also have a program of phasing out wood heaters across the territory. That recognises that wood heaters produce smoke, but they also increase air quality risks during winter.

MR BRADDOCK: On wood heaters, I know we have the program to subsidise the removal of them, but, essentially, they can still be freely installed. Hence, we are not actually reducing; hopefully, we are removing some and the numbers as a whole across the ACT will go down. What are we doing to reduce the amount of wood heaters in the ACT?

Mr Ponton: It is more in the planning and land management space, but for the assistance of the committee, I will mention that we are including in new crown leases in new areas effectively a prohibition on installing new wood heaters. It is possible under the crown lease provisions to apply for installation. Ordinarily, such a change would be exempt, but it does require a development approval. In doing that, it does put a proponent through a significant number of hurdles to justify why they need the wood heater. In terms of the last five to 10 years, there would be a handful that have been approved, because of those provisions in the crown lease.

Mr Rutledge: As Mr Ponton said, in some areas, because of their topography, wood heaters are not available. Dunlop, east O'Malley and Whitlam, for example, were picked up through those planning restrictions.

The Wood Heater Replacement Program is really looking at pre-2000 wood heaters. The modern wood heater has a much better filtration system than an older one. We are trying to remove the old wood heaters. If they replace them with new wood heaters and they burn correctly, there would still be pollution but they would not be of the same ilk as if they were burning rubbish in their backyard in an old wood heater.

Regulating firewood in the territory is something that we do. We have registered firewood suppliers. In that way, the wood is sustainably sourced, it is cured and it is ready for burning. The replacement program, as I said, is really focused on removing those older ones, before environmental standards came in.

With those measures in place, as Mr Walker said, there are still a few evenings in the winter, in Tuggeranong particularly, where the smoke settles in the valley. That is where we will ramp up both our social media and our paid media under “burn right tonight”, which ensures, for those people that have wood heaters as their primary source, that they burn correctly. For those that do not have it as their primary source of heating, maybe on those evenings they can use their other sources of heating. It is about encouraging that.

That is what we are doing, but it is localised. We have taken action, as Mr Ponton said, in the planning space. We have taken action regarding behavioural change. There are still evenings when, if you are in the valley, you will notice it but in other parts of Canberra you will not notice it.

MS CASTLEY: Did you say Whitlam, O'Malley and somewhere else?

Mr Rutledge: Dunlop.

MS CASTLEY: If someone lives in one of those suburbs and wanted to pop in a wood fire, that is when they have to go through this level of control, the process to—

Mr Rutledge: Correct, yes.

MS CASTLEY: Page 78 of the annual report talks about straws—we get a paper straw everywhere we go now—and the re-usable coffee cup scheme. How much money has been spent on that scheme, and can you tell me a bit more about it?

Ms Vassarotti: This is getting a little bit boring: it is not us. It is Minister Steel.

MS CASTLEY: Why does this come under Minister Steel?

Ms Vassarotti: Minister Steel has waste management as part of his portfolio responsibilities. Is there any information that we can provide?

Mr Rutledge: We have been helping with that program in our Actsmart climate change program. With regard to where you are headed, I will take it on notice and get back to you.

MS CASTLEY: Great. Page 28 of budget paper E talks about volunteers caring for our environment. \$475,000 has been allocated in 2020-21 for volunteer activation, getting more people, more activities and caring for nature. There is no funding for 2021-22, 2022-23 and so on. Why is there no funding for the following years? Don't we still want volunteers?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, absolutely; we do want volunteers. Certainly, in the parliamentary and governing agreement there is a strong commitment to environmental volunteers. One of the key things that I am really focused on is how we develop a process whereby we do have stable funding sources for our environmental volunteers. We are not quite there yet. Certainly, due to the unusual nature of the development of the budgets this year, we did make an allocation for this financial year. We will be looking at how we deliver stable and secure funding for environmental volunteers as part of future budget processes.

MS CASTLEY: It is not just a one-year recruitment activity; it is obviously continued—

Ms Vassarotti: We certainly recognise the significant value that we get from environmental volunteers. We have thousands of volunteers working in our very precious natural environments who deliver huge value to the community. We certainly want to encourage that and ensure that the work continues.

There are a range of programs. Soon we will be releasing details around environmental grants; that is another way that we can support our environmental volunteers. There is a range of programs, and we would see a very strong future for environmental volunteers.

MS CASTLEY: What was the \$475,000? How did that get spent?

Ms Vassarotti: It was allocated to the three catchment groups and ACT Wildlife. It is Ginninderra Catchment Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group and Molonglo Catchment Group.

MS CASTLEY: With those catchment groups, it was said that there was \$210,000 for core funding for those groups, but it did not show up in the budget. Did they actually get their \$210,000?

Ms Vassarotti: That is part of that allocation. They were provided with \$125,000 each in this financial year, except for ACT Wildlife; they had \$100,000 that will be distributed before the end of this financial year. Through other programs, including the Waterwatch program, other funding has been distributed to those groups as well.

Mr Walker: We have worked with our catchment groups, our volunteer groups, under the guise of our nature conservation strategy. Our nature conservation strategy has a key strategy about connecting people with the environment and with nature. We have a range of volunteer groups and organisations—our Waterwatch groups, our catchment groups, as the minister mentioned, Wildlife ACT and ParkCare groups. All of those community groups are out on the ground doing work, Landcare et cetera. We fund those, as the minister highlighted, through the three catchment groups, to the amount identified.

In addition to those funded allocations, community groups are able to access our environmental grants programs. We have run environmental grants over the last decade. Those grants programs are substantially taken up by conservation groups, often auspiced by these three catchment groups. There is a range of funding that flows from the ACT government through our grants program.

The third way that we support these catchment groups, these community groups, to deliver conservation work is through direct engagement or direct contract. They might be small, \$10,000 projects to facilitate particular outcomes that we are looking for, and we will partner with the community to do that.

The reason why that is such a powerful tool for us is that we have so many people within the territory that have exceptional expertise and knowledge about the environment, and we want to capitalise on those individuals and those people. It becomes a very powerful way of getting more work done efficiently and effectively, while also giving people access to the environment, giving them the opportunity to bring new people in and promote what it means to be stewards of the environment in the ACT.

It is one of our best approaches to mitigate issues such as weeds, monitoring of threatened species, monitoring of plants and animals generally. There is a very good network of people. We would not be where we are today without that network of thousands of people delivering work on the ground.

MS CASTLEY: It is in the parliamentary agreement, so you can guarantee that that \$475,000 will be an ongoing amount for volunteers in future budgets, to help with the catchment groups?

Ms Vassarotti: Budget processes are budget processes, yes.

MR BRADDOCK: You referred to volunteer groups and engagement with them, which is fantastic. There seems to be a bias built into the grant process whereby it is towards the more established, long-term groups versus the nascent groups. For example, for the Friends of Yerrabi Pond, which is starting to be established in my electorate, there could be government assistance or funding to assist them to get off the ground.

Mr Walker: That is a good follow-up question. New emerging groups often do not have ABNs or the various requirements to enable funding to go directly to them. Many groups are auspiced by existing groups. So, while there may appear to be a favouring of funding going to, say, particular catchment groups, that is often going down directly to the smaller, newer groups that have not got their ABNs, their insurance or those other elements covered. The catchment groups are able to auspice those groups to deliver the work.

There is an opening there for those new and emerging groups to engage with those catchment groups and Landcare across the ACT. I should point out that Landcare is the peak body for catchment conservation-based groups in the ACT—Landcare ACT. Obviously, there is a national program as well. That is a peak body that provides people and new groups with entree into how to engage and where to go with particular community groups.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, you were talking about stable and secure funding for community groups. Can you please describe what that looks like? What are you aiming to achieve with that?

Ms Vassarotti: We are aiming to achieve stable and secure funding. That is a process that we need to work through with government. We recognise the value of environmental volunteers and what they are delivering, and supporting the professionals that are working across our land management agencies.

Certainly, there is a conversation across the not-for-profit sector around what that looks like. I think that it is about us working with our government colleagues in terms of having some stability, and recognising what is required in order to deliver that value to the territory.

Mr Walker: Over the last three years, we have been progressively improving the investment with our catchment groups and building towards a more sustainable future for those groups. We now have secure funding for our Waterwatch program. Our Waterwatch citizen science groups undertake our catchment health improvement program and produce a report every year on water quality across the ACT. We might touch on that with Minister Rattenbury's office as well. That program has now been normalised and has received ongoing funding.

In addition to that, we have been working with all of the community groups and catchment groups on how they can make themselves more sustainable. It is often not just about government providing resources; it is about how these catchment groups can look for other avenues, look for alternative approaches to fund their ongoing engagement with and delivery of outstanding work.

History is also worth noting. These catchment groups were initially funded through the commonwealth program, associated with Landcare. Those commonwealth funds have been redirected to other priorities. There has been a shift at that commonwealth level in terms of how those groups were funded historically. The ACT, in recognising the importance of those groups, is continuing to support them and has done over at least the last half-a-dozen years.

THE CHAIR: The nature conservation strategy reports 51 milestones completed, with 51 to go. Is that just for the 2019 year or is that for the end of the strategy?

Mr Walker: The nature conservation strategy is a long-term strategy, out to 2023, off the top of my head.

Mr Rutledge: Yes.

Mr Walker: That strategy has a series of implementation plans to support it as well. It is out to the end of the strategy, not just the 2019 timetable.

THE CHAIR: Given that it is only halfway through the milestones, yet there are only two years to go—

MS CASTLEY: Is it on track?

THE CHAIR: Yes, is it on track? How do we get back on track?

Mr Walker: The strategy is on track. Many of the actions that we have undertaken to date are the larger, more complicated actions. I will give you an example. The ACT woodland strategy was identified through nature conservation as a strategy and a piece of work that was required. We have taken substantial steps and released that last year.

Our work with nature conservation and the strategies is ongoing. We have implemented and are implementing the programs that are outlined in that. We are on track to finish within the time frame. It should be noted that our environment changes, so our priorities shift. That is a feature of the environmental space. Last year we had a major fire. Our focus and our resources shifted to respond to that fire event. That changes outcomes in terms of our strategy. Do we think that we will see more fires, more floods and more events in response to climate change? Yes, we will; so our strategies and plans need to be adaptable and change with those changing circumstances. To answer your question, we are on track and we will complete the necessary works.

MR BRADDOCK: With the 30 per cent urban tree canopy coverage, does any responsibility for that lie within the environment portfolio?

Mr Walker: In terms of supporting the climate change part of EPSDD, and Transport Canberra and City Services, in terms of their planting, we work closely with our colleagues to, first of all, identify where trees could be planted—therefore the connectivity connections between certain blocks of land. We also identify where areas should not be planted—for example, grasslands.

We are clear, in working with our colleagues, on making sure that we have those biodiversity corridors in place, as planting extends. We also work with TCCS, in their Tree Protection Unit, about what sorts of trees give the best biodiversity outcome, as well as the best canopy cover. We are actively involved across a range of areas to promote biodiversity conservation, alongside the achievement and target of the 30 per

cent canopy cover.

MS CASTLEY: Let us chat about the bushfire management activities. Page 111 of the report reveals that the outcomes have not been achieved in relation to fuel management activities. We are at 79 per cent fuel—

Mr Walker: This is a Parks and Conservation Service land management portfolio issue, about their delivery, so it would be a question for Minister Gentleman. In giving you some context for that, land management activities to reduce fuel load are undertaken based on weather conditions. Our targets are generally met. Where they are not met, we have issues around the availability of what we call a burn window. That means we must have the right weather conditions to allow burning to occur. If it is too wet, you cannot light the fire; if it is too hot, you do not want the fire to get away. A lot of our fuel management activities relate back to appropriate weather conditions to undertake the burning regimes and activities. That gives a bit of a sense of where that is. That question can best be taken to Minister Gentleman.

THE CHAIR: We will take a 15-minute break.

Hearing suspended from 10.27 to 10.42 am.

THE CHAIR: We might reconvene. I will start with a substantive question. I am approached by a lot of constituents in Molonglo Valley concerned about the environmental impact of the steadily growing population out there—the environmental impact of all the building and the people. I am just wondering what is being done and what has been considered—like wildlife corridors and what you were saying about biodiversity corridors. What is happening, taking that into consideration?

Ms Vassarotti: In relation to the work that Environment does in supporting the land managers, in a planning context we are looking at issues such as green space and issues around planting certain wildlife corridors. That is a key consideration. Certainly, as population moves in some of those demands change. So I think that I will ask officials to talk about some of the specifics, particularly in relation to Molonglo.

Mr Ponton: I will just make some opening remarks and then I will hand over, perhaps, to Mr Walker. As the minister said, in terms of the planning for Molonglo, that is a key consideration. We look at a range of aspects, including density and infrastructure, and we look at land that ought to be set aside for reserves and land that ought to be set aside for more general types of recreation. It is a key component of the planning exercise.

Mr Walker may wish to talk a little bit more about exactly what we have done in Molonglo because there are substantial amounts of land that have been set aside for a conservation reserve and that will be managed by the Parks and Conservation Service. In answering that question we will be mindful of the fact that the Parks and Conservation Service is within the land management portfolio, but we can talk about the principles that we have applied and the work that we propose to do. So, Mr Walker, I will hand over to you.

Mr Walker: Thank you, Mr Ponton. I will start at the macro level. About 70 per cent

of the ACT is in protected areas. The International Union for Conservation of Nature at the international level describes achieving a target of 15 per cent of areas within conservation reserves. So the ACT as a whole is well in excess of the global targets set by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, so we are in a very good starting place.

In relation to the Molonglo area, we do have the Molonglo plan. That has come about through the EPBC Act and matters of national environmental significance. So there have been areas identified in the Molonglo area that have high values from an ecological perspective, and include species that are listed nationally and within the ACT. That plan defines the areas that are protected and set aside, where development will not occur. As Mr Ponton said, that relates explicitly to the strategic planning work that the directorate undertakes.

The next point, the plan associated with the matters of national environmental significance, highlights how we protect those areas and those sorts of areas that will be protected. Namarag, which is a Ngunnawal name, is an area that is part of that process which we are currently looking to protect and ensure that the values are protected. In this case, we have also engaged the traditional custodians to start to tell their story and their connection to country as part of the development of that area. Those sorts of works, including sites for people to come and look at and areas for nature-based experiences, are fundamental to how we look after and provide opportunities for people. Those areas are also identified in key corridors. So as you highlighted, they are linking other patches of the environment across the ACT. That planning work, at the forefront, has really led to a very good outcome for the Molonglo area in the development of a new reserve at Namarag.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about the wellbeing indicators, because environment and climate is an indicator. I am interested in how we are going to implement that as part of our annual reports and our budgeting cycles. I would be interested in your views on that.

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly, my understanding is that the budget, moving forward, will reflect wellbeing indicators. Certainly they will be a key criteria that we look at in terms of the budgeting process and through annual report work. Quite a lot of work has been done within the directorate in terms of looking at wellbeing indicators and how they will reflect on the work and the reporting work into the future.

Mr Ponton: Thank you, Minister. I might ask Mr Walker to comment on this further because he has been the executive representative on the whole of government working group to make sure that we are in a really good place to implement the wellbeing indicators in terms of our business case development and budget reporting. Mr Walker has also been working as our representative to coordinate input into what the wellbeing indicators ought to be. So, that said, I might hand over to Mr Walker.

Mr Walker: Thank you, Mr Ponton. The wellbeing framework has set the ACT on a new path in terms of its development of the 12 domains listed in the wellbeing framework. In the environment and climate change domains, we have done a number of pieces of work building on our existing data to inform the sorts of information and measures that would be included in the environment and climate change domain. We

are using information that we currently have, and we are also thinking about the future, asking, “What sorts of information should we collect for the future?” So one of the key processes that we are working through at the moment within government is how we imbed the information across government. The release of websites and information will be forthcoming to enable the community to see how we are measuring and presenting the wellbeing information.

The sorts of information that you will see coming forward in those areas, and the sorts of measures that we have put in place or are proposing to put in place for the climate change wellbeing area, relate to things that we are currently doing. The 30 per cent tree canopy cover will be a good example of the sorts of measures that will be in the wellbeing framework. Likewise, in the environment space we will be talking about the health of the environment—so, health of the threatened species that we have, the vegetation that we have and our water quality. Those sorts of measures will be part of a future release of the wellbeing framework.

MR BRADDOCK: So will we, in the next budget cycle, be able to see that in action?

Mr Walker: It is certainly the intention to move to that in the coming budget cycles and work through that process across government.

Mr Rutledge: If I may say, Mr Braddock—because it ties well with the previous question—access to nature has been seen through the wellbeing process and by talking to the Canberra community. That access to nature is something that is well loved by Canberra citizens. I go back to your earlier question about the Namarag Reserve, where we will have a lot of people moving there. Part of the purpose of setting up the reserve is also to protect the high conservation value areas, because we expect a lot of people to come to that reserve. There is going to be a lot of foot traffic and a lot of recreation. There will be a lot of people from Whitlam and from Molonglo who want to access that.

So it is about building paths so that we direct them away from places of high conservation value but enable them still to enjoy nature. Later this year, with the opening of Namarag, you will see that. It is done in the planning work, so you probably will not see it; you will just see a great access to nature and a nature-based experience, but conservation has driven it so that we keep people away from the places where we have threatened species. People will still be able to access and see the river corridor and see the landscape without treading all over it. There is a fear that sometimes our nature parks get loved to death. So we need to make sure that we push people and visitors in the right spaces so that they get their enjoyment.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question about the failed scheme to reintroduce the eastern bettongs. So, 67 of them were put out into the wild and all of them have perished due to foxes. I am just wondering how much money was spent on the scheme to introduce them into the wild when we know that they are living in captivity at Mulligans Flat and another reserve as well. How much was spent? Why did they go into the wild? Who deemed that necessary and who made that decision?

Mr Walker: Thank you. Bettongs are one of a suite of threatened species that we have across the ACT. There are a range of actions undertaken to try and bring

bettongs back into the wild. The primary focus of our work to date has been breeding them and securing populations at Tidbinbilla and at Mulligans, where they are captive—I should be careful with my language—in large enclosures that are of scale, and therefore open to normal feeding and reproductive processes, but without the threat of predation by foxes and cats. One of the key threats to all small mammals and small bite-sized animals is predation by introduced cats and/or foxes. So our priorities and our work is really about how we stop predation. Our key tools in doing that are large fences and enclosures which are predator free—so, Mulligans and Tidbinbilla.

They are part of programs that are adopted nationally and working in the commonwealth to support those programs. They will be used as our places to breed up populations to increase the species survival in the wild. As part of those sorts of programs, we also need to trial how we can undertake recovery outside of fenced areas. The particular program that you mention was a trial to assess whether our programs outside of fenced areas would work. So before any work and reintroductions occurred, we undertook extensive fox control. That fox control is basically the use of poisoned baits to remove foxes. Then we would see if we could get bettongs released into that landscape and they would survive.

There was good survival initially and then foxes became aware of the bettongs and basically preyed on those animals. It is important that we continue to trial and research the best approaches to species conservation, and that is why we have a multi-pronged approach to managing bettongs in the ACT.

MS CASTLEY: How much have we spent so far on the bettongs?

Mr Walker: I will have to take the question of money on notice, given that it has been a program over a number of years and with different funding streams going into it.

MS CASTLEY: Given that you said that there are a number of species that need to be taken care of and we need to make sure that they are increasing in size and living in the wild—in nature—how did we decide that the bettongs were going to get funding? Who made that decision?

Mr Walker: Decisions around investment come down to a number of different criteria: are there options available for this species to reproduce and can we get successful recovery of the species into the wild? First of all, is it feasible? So that is one of the criteria that is used. One of the other criteria that is used is, is there an ecosystem function that these animals provide that may be missing in the landscape? If you think about pre-fox Australia, bettongs were in the wild. They were digging the soil, they were enabling propagation of other plants to occur, they were consuming and eating fungi and other material and disturbing the soil, creating a space where native vegetation would grow and recover. These sorts of animals that provide this ecosystem function are prioritised above other animals that may not necessarily provide that breadth of ecosystem function.

Importantly, one of the reasons that the bettong is considered a priority is because it has been lost from the ACT landscape over time. So it is about trying to reinstate these animals back into the ACT that were originally here. They are available for us to

do that and their reproductive success at Mulligans is extremely good. You can now go for a walk at Mulligans at night and see a bettong and you can see a quoll. You can see these animals that in mainland Australia just do not exist in the wild.

MS CASTLEY: In light of the fact that putting them into the wild failed, is it worth continuing to put money into it? Can we just keep them in these enclosures? If the foxes are so great, should we just accept that—

Mr Ponton: Mr Walker, I might just pick up on that terminology in terms of it being a failure. We would not think that it is a failure because the intention of the program was to help us understand what management activities might actually assist in the long-term survival. So as you are going through this exercise, it was a research exercise to assist—and we have actually got a whole lot of information and data that will help—should we continue with that program. So I think that saying it is a failure is certainly one view. From our perspective, it was always intended to provide us with information, and it provided us with information.

MS CASTLEY: I think the poor 67 little bettongs that perished would consider it a failure.

Mr Walker: In terms of the work, it is an ongoing piece of work and we have to look at ways in which we can manage predation on animals. We will need to continue to invest in research and continue to invest in evidence-based information to inform our strategies. Just prior to Christmas, Minister Vassarotti released our science plan, and that science plan goes to how we collect evidence about the changes that are occurring in the environment to inform our management action. Our management actions—our strategies—are based on the best available science and evidence, and that also means testing assumptions and seeing what is possible in the landscape. We will continue to explore and research those sorts of things into the future.

We do that in partnership with key universities, so we are not out there on our own doing these things, we have got strong engagement with our organisations and our research partners like ANU, the University of Canberra and CSIRO. So we are using and working with some of the best scientists in the country to improve the environments here in the ACT, and adapt to things that are changing. We know that climate change is impacting on the environment. How do we adapt and how do we respond to those sorts of climate variations and change and what might that look like in the future for wildlife and the environment here in the ACT?

Ms Vassarotti: The other thing that I would note in relation to that is that this work is happening in partnership with other research groups across the country. Some of the research and work that is being done in the ACT is recognised as really significant and part of the contribution to a broader piece of work in terms of how we look at this issue of the loss of species in the Australian context.

THE CHAIR: So, in light of the fact that foxes have killed them all, do you think, Minister, that this is a good use of money to continue with this particular program?

Ms Vassarotti: As the officials have talked about, this was a research project. There was significant evidence that was garnered through the process. In terms of the next

steps, I and officials will look to the researchers and the evidence too see what we have learned from that process and what we should do next in relation to the work around bettongs. Certainly, our key focus continues to be supporting the species in those contained areas, but ongoing work will continue.

Mr Walker: Fox management is a challenge right across the country, so the focus, while we are talking about bettongs, really should be about how we mitigate the issues of foxes and improving fox control in the broader landscape. We will continue to work with our university partners and network across the country as we trial new and innovative ways of managing foxes. There are a range of techniques that are being developed to improve the fox control, and that is the sort of things that we need to continue working on. That is an ongoing and continuing piece of work but it also requires us to give thought to how we improve the species that potentially are released into the wild in the future so that they are more nimble and aware of foxes and/or other predating animals and have built up mechanisms where they can survive when predation does occur. So it is about getting that balance.

MS CASTLEY: I will be interested to see how much they cost.

THE CHAIR: I am interested in invasive weeds. During the spring, the hills were literally purple with Paterson's curse. Going back to your previous answer, Mr Walker, I am wondering about changing weather conditions—La Nina, these types of weather effects and climate change. How are we preparing for weed outbreaks like that? What is happening now? Obviously Paterson's curse is there. With another wet spring, it will be even more prolific. What is being done?

Ms Vassarotti: You are absolutely right. The issue around La Nina did see an explosion in growth, including weeds. It is a particular issue. Some specific funding was provided through the budget, \$626,000, in relation to invasive weed management, recognising some of the incursions. That happened across Namadgi, Tidbinbilla, the Murrumbidgee River corridor, Canberra Nature Park, Googong Foreshores and urban open space.

I might ask Ian to talk about some of the specifics of that but this is an issue and this is why there was a view that we needed to move quickly; because once invasive weed species are established, it is so much more difficult to manage. It was really important that we got on the front foot and responded immediately.

Mr Walker: It is worth highlighting that we have a pest strategy and a biosecurity strategy that inform how we go about managing our weeds and pest animals across the territory. The key focus of our weed management, as the minister has highlighted, is that any new and emerging weeds that pop up for the first time in the ACT are jumped on very quickly, with the intention of eradicating those from the ACT. That is our first line of defence, because as soon as the weeds become established it is a much longer term, ongoing maintenance and management regime to control them. African feathergrass, boxthorn—you name it, there is a whole host of blackberry and those sorts of weeds that we have not been able to jump on before they become established. Our primary focus is those new weeds.

The second strategy in our list of strategies is targeting areas where weeds are having

an impact on conservation value. If there is a particular ecological community or a particular threatened species that the weeds will impact on, then they become the target area for our control and ongoing management.

In the broader context, we have got weeds in the landscape. How do we start to pull back and, I guess, reduce the scale of those? We have an extensive program covering many tens of thousands of hectares of weed control that is undertaken annually and, depending on a given season, as you have highlighted, you will have greater growth of weeds. Our effort and energy in those at those times is greater.

We have a very sophisticated process around collecting that information. Mr Rutledge highlighted earlier in the session data management. This is a great example where we are collecting data in the field. We are spraying the weed, collecting where it is and reporting it through an online GIS-based system. That system is available to the public so that the public can actually go and see where the weeds are and what work has or has not been occurring. Through our match-mapper program it also enables the community to report and communicate where particular values, threatened species, other plants and animals are in the landscape and also report new occurrences of weeds.

Last year we had a significant number of new biosecurity incursions and we were able to jump on those very quickly and eradicate them from the ACT. I guess, from an ACT perspective, we have got a very good system of managing our weeds. The emergence of purple haze on the hills—Paterson’s curse—has a direct relationship to water. Their seed has been and will be in the soil and we will have an ongoing management regime to at least control some of those areas.

Ms Vassarotti: I suppose the only other thing to add in relation to that is that our best chance is not to ensure that we keep evasive species out of the territory. I just highlight that recently we identified a wetland plant which we have listed as a prohibited plant. There were one or two instances of it potentially coming into the ACT. In line with New South Wales, we listed that. I think that is always going to be our best defence, to not have to deal with incursions and to ensure that we keep it out of the territory from the beginning.

MS CASTLEY: What liaisons does the ACT land manager have with the rural leaseholders with regard to Paterson’s curse and African love grass?

Ms Vassarotti: Significant. In relation to land management agreements, a key element is managing species. There is significant work that is undertaken. Again, I defer to Mr Walker to provide you with detail regarding that.

Mr Walker: Certainly. We have land management agreements with our rural leaseholders. They are an agreement between the rural leaseholder and the conservator. They outline where the key values are within the rural lease property. By “values” I mean ecological or other values. It might be cultural. There could be some other type of value that is relevant. We also identify the weeds and we map those, and the agreement that is formed with the rural leaseholder includes a map that shows the particular values and the particular threat. Weeds is the common one. That also includes information about fire management. That relationship is at an agreement

level.

We also have a biosecurity and rural services team that engage routinely with our rural landholders on issues of weed management. How do we improve the sustainability of rural lease properties? How do we support rural leaseholders in adapting to climate change?

ACT NRM is the other group within the directorate that also supports our rural leaseholders. They have worked with the commonwealth to secure commonwealth investment to assist farmers with things like drought planning or building resilience, climate resilience strategies, or improving their sustainability as rural leaseholders and farmers within the territory.

We have got about 159 rural leaseholder families operating in the territory. We are supporting them through those agreements, through a series of on-ground actions and also through rural resilient grants that we have administered. We have worked with the rural landholders over the last few years to provide them some grant funding to tackle things on their property.

MS CASTLEY: What about the roads adjacent to their lease holdings? It is all well and good if they are doing it on their property but the roads are not getting taken care of and the weeds cloud blow on in?

Mr Walker: Our biosecurity and rural services team, as I mentioned, includes our weed management of not only the parks and reserves areas or other public land but also the road reserves. There is a recognition that roads provide access not only for vehicles but are also affected by which weeds enter the landscape as well. There is a recognition of that and the grants currently being rolled out, associated with the \$600,000 that the minister announced, include some funding for particular road control activity.

MS CASTLEY: Page 71 of the annual report talks about Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary. It began in 2019 but, due to the impacts of COVID, further construction has slowed and the decision was made to change from a design and construction procurement method to the appointment of a construction manager. Has the construction manager been appointed and how much are they being paid?

Ms Vassarotti: I will ask officials to talk about the details of it but, certainly, work is progressing on the facility. In fact, I accompanied Mr Braddock out to the facility a little while ago. Certainly, works are in progress but I will ask for some further detail regarding the arrangement.

Mr Walker: The arrangements with the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust is that the government has provided a partnership agreement with the trust who are administering and delivering on the project. This project was delivered by the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust under a grant arrangement with the government. The project manager, contract manger, is therefore working for the Woodlands and Wetlands trust. The building itself is intended to be completed by August this year.

MS CASTLEY: They are on track?

Mr Walker: They are on track, having gone through the COVID changes. Construction is well advanced. When the minister was there we had walls up. Since that time we have got roof scaffolding and other internal fittings—not fittings, that is the wrong word—structures that are in place. As I said, they will be completed, or intend to be completed, by August.

MS CASTLEY: Are we expecting that school groups will go through? What is the learning centre for?

Mr Walker: The Woodlands and Wetlands Trust, in partnership with the government, provide the opportunity for nature-based tourism experiences, and that includes access to the sanctuaries for schoolchildren, for other visitors, particularly trying to pick up on the market that exists at night. As you would know, most of our mammals and other species in Mulligans come out at night-time. It is about how we provide access in a safe, constructive way to give people a sense of what is in our significant woodland areas like Mulligans Flat. The learning centre will be a point of focus for the community and also provide coffee and those sorts of ancillary benefits, as well as providing education for the community of the ACT.

MS CASTLEY: What is the cost of the project?

Mr Walker: I will have to take that question on notice. As I said, the project is being managed by the trust and I do not have that number handy.

MS CASTLEY: Are the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust going to be managing it and running it?

Mr Walker: The building is and will be owned by the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust. It is not an ACT government facility.

THE CHAIR: My next question is on nature parks. We briefly mentioned that before. The numbers of people using the nature parks in the ACT rose significantly over COVID, which is a positive thing. I have two questions. First, what are we doing to proactively encourage people to use the nature parks and keep those numbers high? Second, how are we looking after the health and wellbeing of the nature parks with the increases in numbers?

Ms Vassarotti: Canberra Nature Park is managed by the Parks and Conservation Service. We can provide a bit of context, but it sits within Minister Gentleman's portfolio. I think everyone witnessed a significant increase in the use of all our green spaces, particularly Canberra Nature Park. There was recognition of how important it is and an increased valuing of the landscape. But, as you know, it also saw some additional pressure put on it and some conflict in relation to the use of those spaces. I will ask Mr Walker if he has some specific information.

Mr Walker: Following on from Mr Braddock's question earlier, access to nature, connection to nature, is part of the wellbeing framework and so is fundamental to the ACT. The vast majority of Canberrans live within a kilometre of a nature reserve, so that access is particularly important.

The ACT is not alone in noting the increase in visitation. Across the country, across the world, where people have been in lockdown, when parks have been opened up people have gravitated to those areas for the health and wellbeing benefits that nature provides. The ACT is no different.

In managing the conflict of lots of people and access to those areas, making sure our trails are safe and providing infrastructure to support those areas, the ACT government, at the COVID time, put on people as part of the Jobs for Canberrans process. Those people were employed by the Parks and Conservation Service. As well as our existing staff, they contribute to helping maintain the tracks and trails across the territory and ensuring that people are able to get out and enjoy the parks and reserves. Ongoing and continual work to improve tracks and trails and the visitor experience in our parks and reserves is an aspiration that we have, and we will continue to work with government to secure investment to achieve that.

MS CASTLEY: I have a quick follow-up on Mulligans Flat. You might need to take this on notice. How much will the trust be paid to run it, and what is the cost of a night-time tour?

Mr Walker: The trust does not get paid by the government to run the facility; the trust is established as a not-for-profit organisation, with a board. The board looks after its operations and what it does across the ACT. The Woodlands and Wetlands Trust operates at two primary locations: Jerra wetlands and Mulligans Flat. It provides an educative, nature-based experience for the community. At Mulligans, the partnership we have in place is a three-way partnership between the ACT government, the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust, and ANU, who provide the research and science-based support of the management of significant threatened species in Mulligans Flat.

MS CASTLEY: It is \$55 for a night-time tour. For a family of four, that is a lot of money. Do you think that is a reasonable price? Do we feel people are going to take this up? A party for kids is very expensive. Are we expecting people to pay?

Mr Walker: The good aspect about Mulligans Flat is that anyone can go to Mulligans Flat at any time and enjoy what that environment has. It is used extensively by the community. It has opportunities for people to ride their bike, go for a picnic, go for a walk—to do that during the day or during the night. Access for the community is free at Mulligans. Where you have a tour, you are getting a specialist to give you information about the ecology, the threatened species, the landscape, the cultural history. It is those things that you are purchasing as part of the offer that the trust provides. It is a commercial arrangement that the trust has with its clients and visitors.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what are your thoughts? Is \$350 for a child's party a reasonable expectation for families?

Ms Vassarotti: Mulligans Flat is an educational experience. It is not specifically an activity such as that. We are not looking at a specific recreational activity; this is a specific educational experience. It is certainly supported. A not-for-profit organisation is running that service in a way that means it will be sustainable into the future.

There are many recreational activities for children. Having organised many birthday parties for children, I know that there are many purely recreational experiences that are not comparable to the experience we are talking about here. It is quite a different experience. I would defer to the not-for-profit organisation for the work that has been done. It is trying to contribute in terms of enhancing education and the understanding of a very precious ecosystem in this city, and it is right for it to do that in a way that is self-sustaining so that it is able to provide that service to the community.

THE CHAIR: This is a very broad question and it comes from my perspective of not having worked in government, but what really stood out to me from reading the annual report for this directorate was the number of strategies, indicators, operational management plans and report recommendations. How do you manage this? A lot of them appear to co-exist or be heavily interrelated. How do you manage that as a directorate?

Ms Vassarotti: I will make a couple of introductory remarks, as a relatively new minister who is getting my head around it. I can absolutely understand where that question is coming from. One of the things that has struck me as I have gained an understanding of the portfolio is the interconnection of strategies and plans.

There is a real hierarchy, which Mr Walker talked about. There is the nature conservation plan as an overarching framework. Then you have a range of strategies, such as the woodland strategy and the grassland strategy. Then there is a range of specific activity on the management of particular species and how they are protected.

One of the really useful things I have seen when I have engaged in how the directorate respond to all these things is that they are working in concert with each other and there is a really clear understanding about how one element connects to another. I think about it as a bit of a matrix. If we are looking at a particular ecology and then a species, it is about the activities to support that work. It provides me with a level of comfort that there has been a lot of thought and effort.

As we have talked about in relation to elements such as the science plan, this is a very evidence-based approach. This is not about a particular ranger who walks past something and goes, "I think it is a good idea to do this activity." There is a clear understanding and intentionality about how workers are engaging in the landscape. They are my introductory remarks. I do not know if people have things to add.

Mr Ponton: I might make a few comments; Mr Rutledge may wish to add to them. I have said before that it is no mistake that the directorate has the structure it has in terms of its responsibilities. As director-general, I am very fortunate that we have the responsibilities that we do, because it allows us to make all of those connections. From managing the conservation estate right through to land development, it gives us the opportunity to think about all the various strategies and how they interrelate. As I said, as D-G, I think I am very fortunate.

In terms of managing all of that, yes, it is complex, but we have some really good systems in place in terms of governance. We take governance extremely seriously. There are governance mechanisms in place for each of the individual projects or

strategies. That all then comes through to our executive management board, which monitors progress against each of these items.

In addition to that, we have what is called the city cluster—you will see that reference in the administrative arrangements—where we also connect with other parts of government in terms of strategies that are related to our work, making sure that they are all connected and that we are doing what we need to do to support others in the work that they need to do to deliver and, likewise, others are doing what they need to do to help us deliver.

Yes, it is extremely complex, but we have really good mechanisms in place to make sure that we are across all of that and then in turn provide advice to the minister and government on our delivery of those strategies and projects. Is there anything you would like to add, Mr Rutledge?

Mr Rutledge: No; I think you have covered it. I think the minister had it right. We go from evidence to policy to action, and that is important. And being able to geospatially link everything, going back to where we started today, is important. Because we think about the landscape and we think about the city as a spatial element, we think quite differently from other directorates, who sometimes look at things from an economic angle or something like that. We always think spatially. That way, when we have that framework, we have a hierarchy of policies that means we know why we are there, where the evidence pushes it, and we can say what we are doing and then monitor it back.

Unlike other directorates, we are very technically focused in a planning space but also scientifically focused. We have talked a bit about the science work that we do. We are heavy on evidence. That leads to heavy documentation, but it means that activity on the ground or in the office has a clear hierarchy and a clear purpose.

When you have the opportunity to meet our staff, be they in the office or in the field, you will see—it is not unique to this directorate, but it is fairly unique—that everyone knows what they are here for: to make Canberra city, be it the urban or the natural environment, a better place. You really see that in the staff that we have and the staff that we attract and retain.

Mr Walker: I will add one more comment to that. The planning hierarchy—from legislation through to strategies, plans, and then delivery—is really important. We have that breadth of expertise across the directorate. We have our planning expertise; we have our strategy expertise; and, importantly, we have about 200 staff who are implementing the work on the ground. In broad terms, our planning is at an appropriate scale for the amount of work and operations that occur on the ground. It is important to understand the link between legislation, strategy and plan, and then how it is implemented on the ground. Our team of people are out there day in, day out implementing the work on the ground.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question about the ranger recruitment program. Page 25 highlights a program for 26 new rangers and field officers to tide people over who might have lost work during COVID. It says:

The jobs will ... tide them over for the next few months ...

When did this program begin? Is it still going on? And how much has it cost so far?

Mr Walker: The Chief Minister announced the Jobs for Canberrans program during COVID and looked for ways to boost economic stimulus through employment, particularly for people who were unable to secure payments through other means within government. The process was about temporary employment for those individuals to give them an opportunity to secure some money for their survival during the COVID space.

Those individuals were engaged to deliver on groundworks. As I mentioned earlier, there was track and trail maintenance; they assisted with fire recovery work; they did a range of activities to improve the environment that we have here in the ACT, including a number of fencing-related works, works in the lower Cotter around catchment restoration and a range of other activities.

One of the great things about that group of people was that they came in as quite a diverse group of people with different backgrounds from people we would typically employ, and with different skill sets. That intake of 26 people diversified our workforce and got people thinking about different approaches to working with different people but also undertaking work on the ground.

It will conclude at the end of this financial year. The program continued to roll out and continued to seek investment through the ACT government. We have been fortunate enough to be able to continue that program until the end of the financial year.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, do you think it is a program that you would consider keeping going?

Ms Vassarotti: It was an important program, particularly through the COVID period. As Mr Walker noted, it was a good way of engaging a different group of people. I have come across people who were engaged in the program who have gone on to secure jobs within the parks and cons service, which is fantastic.

This strategy was specifically put in place as a COVID response. We have identified new opportunities for bringing different people in. An exciting one in the budget was the Ngunnawal ranger program. We were able to support six Ngunnawal rangers as part of the commitment in the parliamentary and governing agreement.

We will continue to look at a range of options. We have learnt lots of lessons, particularly in terms of different ways of engaging people and the value of having people coming from slightly different backgrounds.

MS CASTLEY: Of the 26, how many were employed in ongoing work?

Ms Vassarotti: I do not know the direct numbers.

Mr Walker: When vacancies become available, we go through a merit-based process, so the path is not a direct one where it is one in, one out. Individuals will have taken

other employment opportunities when they have become available as well.

MS CASTLEY: Do you know the number?

Mr Walker: I do not know the number. We have good individuals who are looking to continue their employment with the Parks and Conservation Service or within the directorate, and we will continue to provide funding until the end of the financial year to keep them employed.

MS CASTLEY: What happens to them at the end of the year?

Mr Rutledge: It was a temporary measure by government, and it provided temporary employment for some people. As the economy more broadly has been picking up, some of the staff who had temporary roles with us have taken up other opportunities, either in their previous work or as the city continues to open up.

I do not have the figure here, but I know that of the 26, fewer than 10 have stayed with EPSDD specifically. That is not from a lack of opportunities within EPSDD; it is more a reflection of the fact that the city is recovering. It has not recovered fully, but the economy has opened up quite strongly.

As a temporary measure, going to the minister's point, we learned a lot about how to do recruitment—how to recruit quickly from areas where we are not used to recruiting and how to do a targeted recruitment for people who were not able to access JobSeeker. It was very specific. There were overseas students, for example. The people who came and joined us probably had never thought that they were going to be a ranger or a land manager. It was a temporary job for the purpose of trying something new. I do not think the people who joined us thought it was going to be a longer term program. Some of them have turned it into longer term employment, but I think those involved benefited, and we and other agencies benefited from Jobs for Canberrans.

I think the number is less than 10, but I am happy to take that number on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Yes, could you take that on notice—who left, who stayed, how much money they were paid and how much the whole program cost.

Mr Rutledge: The Jobs for Canberrans program, as a whole-of-government initiative, will go through a lessons learned exercise and evaluation, and we will have an input into that. But I am happy to answer the specifics for us.

THE CHAIR: I am interested in the gender breakdown. I would be fascinated to know who is staying on and if it was gendered at all in terms of who you engaged.

Mr Rutledge: Yes.

Mr Walker: Typically, a workforce in the land management space has a male bias to it, from a historical perspective. At least 50 per cent of these people were female; a very high proportion of women were involved in the Jobs for Canberran program. And as I said earlier, there was a degree of diversity in ethnicity in that space as well. We were able to track quite a diverse group of people through Jobs for Canberrans,

which is different from what we have had in the past.

THE CHAIR: Does that kind of learning feed into recruitment strategies, that whatever was different about that recruitment process engaged a more diverse intake?

Mr Walker: It highlights that we can use different approaches to attract different people. The overseas tertiary sector was one of the areas that was challenged during COVID; that provided the opportunity here. It also highlighted that people with extensive qualifications were given some opportunities through this process that in the past they would not necessarily have seen as an opportunity—to go and pull weeds or do track maintenance. It opened up some different approaches and different ways of thinking about attracting good calibre people to the directorate.

Mr Rutledge: Before we leave that, I can give the number we talked about. I thought the number was going to be less than 10, but as of last week 17 of the 26 were still with us.

MS CASTLEY: If you could still take on notice the wage breakdown—

Mr Rutledge: I will still set that out in the answer to the question on notice, but I thought the number was smaller than it is.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, you mentioned the Ngunnawal rangers they brought on for the bushfire recovery team. Are they permanent jobs?

Ms Vassarotti: As part of the budget, we announced the establishment of six Ngunnawal rangers.

MS CASTLEY: So not just for that program?

Ms Vassarotti: It will be a broader program. Once again, we will draw on the lessons learned and integrate them into the work that is happening, particularly within parks and conservation, around Caring for Country and some really significant engagement with local First Nations experts in terms of how that process is run.

Mr Walker: EPSDD has a 10 per cent Aboriginal employment target. Part of the work, as the minister has highlighted, is working with traditional custodians. The parliamentary agreement identifies 10 positions. We have currently secured funding for six positions. We are about to launch the recruitment process for those positions. There will be a merit-based process to appoint them to a range of roles within the directorate. The program will build on the positions that were established as part of the Jobs for Canberrans program.

MS CASTLEY: So they have not yet been brought on?

Mr Walker: Not recruited, no. The funding has been provided for this year. That was recently announced by the minister. We are about to launch the advertising and recruitment process.

MS CASTLEY: The report says that six Ngunnawal rangers have started in the

bushfire recovery team.

Mr Walker: They were part of the Jobs for Canberrans program.

MS CASTLEY: That is my question.

Mr Walker: Those roles are temporary roles that will finish. What we are advertising as part of the new announcement is six ongoing roles.

THE CHAIR: With the substantive roles for the rangers, are there supports put in place to ensure that these are long-term employment propositions?

Mr Walker: Part of the directorate's work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body has been about working through how we attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in particular Ngunnawal people.

We are working extensively with the community to ensure that we have an understanding of their needs and how to mentor and support Aboriginal people within the directorate. We are currently working through the development of an Aboriginal attraction and retention strategy within the directorate. This is particularly important because it talks to how we retain and support Ngunnawal people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, within the workplace and provide a culturally safe environment for them to work in.

We have learnt many lessons through employing and working with traditional custodians, Aboriginal people, including that we need to have those support mechanisms in place to look after them and make sure we have a culturally safe workplace. Our workforce have gone through cultural awareness training. A very high proportion of our staff have gone through that training process to be culturally aware. We have a target that all of our staff go through that cultural awareness training so that we have staff who are capable and competent and who understand the needs and cultural connections, cultural obligations, that traditional custodians have with the land.

As the primary land custodian in the territory, working with the traditional custodians is *prima facie* for us. It is something we must do, and we must support the community. One way of doing that is through employment. The community are very strong on how we get more Ngunnawal people, as the traditional custodians of the land, into employment within the ACT, within the EPSDD directorate.

MS CASTLEY: I want to ask about the radiata pine seedlings. The ACT government is spending \$1 million on the seedlings. Where are they going and what does the contract cover?

Mr Walker: The radiata pines are a pine plantation. Those pines are being planted as part of a program to increase softwood opportunities in the territory. The number and costs are consistent with that scale of operation. I am hoping Geoffrey is going to tell me on which piece of land that was.

Mr Rutledge: No; I am looking at you to say that we will take it on notice. It will

come back via Minister Gentleman; it is under the commercial forestry program.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Short suspension.

Appearances:

Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

Lewis, Dr Sophie, Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

Grimes, Mr Sean, Director, Sustainability, Environmental Assessments and Reporting

THE CHAIR: In this session we welcome the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment and officials to the hearing. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that is on the table. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Dr Lewis: Yes, that is correct.

Mr Grimes: Yes.

THE CHAIR: As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. Mr Braddock, would you like to go first?

MR BRADDOCK: Sure. The *State of the Environment Report* was tabled in the Assembly on 13 February 2020, which, as you know, was after the bushfires raged through half of the ACT; I might be exaggerating there. With that report being finalised, what was the impact of those bushfires? How would that have differed from the report, and do we need to go back and have a look at that again, to see whether it has substantially altered?

Dr Lewis: That is correct. With the *State of the Environment Report*, the reporting period closed prior to the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-20. Obviously, that had a huge impact on the state of the environment here in the ACT, in terms of the area burnt, the impact on biodiversity, and, as we experienced, a period of really poor air quality due to the smoke from bushfires in the region. There is a considerable impact that will be part of the next *State of the Environment Report*. We have also put together some additional information regarding that impact. I will hand over to Sean.

Mr Grimes: As you may or may not be aware, we have a State of the Environment website that we have produced. It came out in August last year. The idea behind that was so that we could update information. We have a little case study on the impacts of the fires. We would assume that, for the next report, when we do more detail, we will have all sorts of things like tolerable fire intervals for plant species, and the possibility of increased water quality impacts. As Sophie mentioned, obviously there are the air quality impacts. We will be doing a lot of detail about those, including looking at the health impacts of the smoke in the ACT. Obviously, there are a lot of flow-on effects from having such a big fire. As EPSDD and other agencies look at that information and do their assessments, they will come to us; then we will put that in our *State of the Environment Report*.

MS CASTLEY: I understand that last year the ACT government made a surprise decision not to roll over the \$900,000 that you were expecting. Obviously, you have

had to make some cutbacks. That is a lot of money. What has been the impact of not getting that \$900,000?

Dr Lewis: In the first part of this financial year, my office learned that the rollover that had accumulated over a period of time, from each financial year, in relation to state of the environment reporting was not going to be received for this financial year. That totalled around \$900,000 which had built up over time.

Our work program for this financial year and beyond included some projects that were deeply affected by that change in revenue received by my office. The main one that we had planned to undertake for this financial year was a significant piece of work relating to Ngunnawal country. The 2019 *State of the Environment Report* began with a recognition of Indigenous knowledge and science and how important that is for environmental management and sustainability, including here in the ACT. That is something that has been recognised in federal state of the environment reporting, and increasingly so after the Black Summer bushfires and the recommendations of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

We had intended to follow on, in the office, from our *State of the Environment Report* and undertake a large piece of work on Indigenous science and knowledge around land, water and fire management, and particularly around establishing an Indigenous seasonal calendar for the ACT on Ngunnawal understandings of the seasonal progression. That is the main piece of work that we will no longer be planning to do this year.

MS CASTLEY: Will the report that is coming out in 2023 be affected as well?

Dr Lewis: The funding is in place for the *State of the Environment Report* to be undertaken. That is one of the key functions of the office. We are yet to have firm advice about what our budget will look like, going forward, but that is the piece of work that we will be delivering in 2023.

MS CASTLEY: You have plans to make the report more interactive for primary kids and things like that, and high school. How much is that costing and will it be done in house? How will schools use this?

Dr Lewis: I am glad you asked me about that because working with children and young people is something that the office is very excited about. One of the important roles of the office is to engage with the community. In terms of the specific costings, we will have to take that question on notice because there are several contracts that make up that piece of work. Most of that work is being conducted in house. Sean is director of environmental reporting and assessments.

We also have a communications officer who is very proficient with communicating to a broad audience, including children and young people, and who also has skills in graphic and visual design. We have had to use external developers for the website. That now comprises an interactive website, which Sean mentioned. Anyone in the community can dig down into the data that underpins the *State of the Environment Report*. That is a resource for everyone to use.

Sitting alongside that, we have packages that educators and high school students can use. That should be going online today. We also have another package for primary school age children that will be rolled out shortly. Again, that is for children in schools and their educators to use as a resource, and it has the appropriate curriculum links. The idea behind that is that, alongside this comprehensive *State of the Environment Report*, with its recommendations regarding the management of the environment, we also have accessible information for people in the Canberra community so that they can feel that that environment is theirs.

MS CASTLEY: How many schools do you anticipate will take this up? Are you going to the schools? Does every school get a flyer or email?

Dr Lewis: Yes—we are anticipating every school in the ACT. We have started by seeking information from various peak bodies and groups, such as the Australian environmental educators. We have worked with Actsmart schools and various schools that we have links with, who have provided some early feedback as to how useful and useable it is for teachers. Once we have the websites launched and the packages ready to go, we hope to engage with all schools who teach at those year levels, whether that is independent, catholic or public schools across the ACT. Ideally, we would like to have that resource accessible to all of them.

MS CASTLEY: I understand that you will be doing an investigation into the impacts that our lifestyles have on the environment and how we can reduce emissions. How will that be conducted and how much will it cost?

Dr Lewis: That refers to our investigation into the ACT's scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions. That was a ministerial direction that came through in August 2020 from our then administering minister, Minister Rattenbury. That is looking at how the scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT contribute to our overall greenhouse gas accounts. These are emissions that are not accounted for in the usual pledges for emissions reductions. They are scope 1 and scope 2 emissions. These relate to other things that are produced outside the ACT—for example, emissions associated with consumer goods or food brought into Canberra.

Obviously, it requires a lot of technical expertise to undertake those accounts. We have two consultants who are working with us on those. One of those contracts has been signed, and that is with a group at the University of New South Wales. That was for, I think, \$78,000. I will have to take the specific amount on notice. That will provide that comprehensive budget of greenhouse gas emissions for the ACT and a sectoral breakdown of where those emissions are from, whether that is construction, household, food or business travel—those kinds of breakdowns.

We also have a second contract that we are looking at undertaking that has not yet been signed. That is to look at the greenhouse gas emissions specifically associated with the ACT government's own operations. While the first contract is looking at that broad footprint, the second one will be looking at what are the emissions associated with the ACT government's operations. That has not been signed yet. I do not have details of the cost, but that would be under the notifiable \$25,000; that is a far smaller piece of work.

THE CHAIR: I understand the interest in educating young people and getting into school programs—that type of thing. But there is a whole older population of the community that needs a lot of education in terms of environmental impacts and understanding what all of the language is, how it impacts and how the actions impact the community. Is there any focus on an older cohort and how we may work with them to make changes in their everyday lives?

Dr Lewis: Yes, absolutely. We do not just see community members as being children and young people. That is just an area where we are trying to develop specific resources, because of the need to talk to that group with specific language. That is why we have these separate websites for children and young people. We have also done a lot of work, as far as possible, with broader members of the community.

It has been particularly difficult during the COVID period, connecting with community members, where we are not able to meet face to face, which has been the traditional means used by my office to engage with the community. We have undertaken webinars, meet and greets and online Q&As, which do tend to attract an older audience.

We have also invested quite heavily in social media through our comms officer. That includes making more targeted materials for different social media platforms, whether it is Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, and understanding that they have different audiences. Although we have these primary and high school age packages, we really do aim to connect with the community and their appreciation of the environment through all ages, not just children.

Mr Grimes: The actual *State of the Environment Report* itself is being revamped from the previous one, which was very difficult for the community to understand. The current one has been written and produced so that you do not need a strong science background. The website that we produced for the SOE, not the youth one, also follows that. We have tried to make it as accessible as possible, whilst meeting our legislative requirement to report on those things.

As Sophie said, a big part of our office's work is to increase communication, so we have lots more infographics and facts that the community can pick up on, or they can go into more detail. As we go on with the website we will get better at it, but we are moving towards much more community-friendly reporting.

THE CHAIR: Your *State of the Environment Report* states that it is provided to the ACT community “to inform, empower and hopefully inspire environmental action”. In what ways are we looking to further inspire and empower the ACT population to take environmental action?

Dr Lewis: That really is through all of our work. One is delivering those core functions around complaints investigations and the delivery of the *State of the Environment Report*. The additional work that we do, in terms of engaging with community groups, individuals and schools, all of the social media, and developing visually interesting material, ideally does inspire people to understand that the issues we are talking about are relevant to them and a part of their lives. We have not found that to be particularly challenging. We find the community members that we talk to

are deeply invested in Canberra's environment. It is a matter of great pride to them that they live in a place surrounded by our beautiful, natural environment, and that is an inspiration to people.

THE CHAIR: Again, going back to the other question, all of the colourful websites, the school programs and the social media are very much targeting a younger cohort. There is a non-Facebook-using older cohort who are not particularly web savvy and who may recognise the environment and the beauty of our area. How do we engage them to make active changes, and educate them to make active changes in their everyday lives?

Dr Lewis: To make older people—

THE CHAIR: Yes, more aware and educated, in terms of driving cars and waste, within their household?

Dr Lewis: That is a really good question in terms of how we make ourselves accessible to everyone. We have certainly done things with how we provide our complaints form, the availability of that, and how we receive written materials. I do not think I necessarily agree that social media is specifically for young people. I certainly do not expect people in the community to be on social media or be proficient, but they are certainly not the age profiles that we see in terms of the work that we do.

I would have to look into it, but I also do not think that behaviour and attitudes are profiled by age in that way, in terms of vehicle use or waste management—that there is a particular issue with older people and trying to instil behavioural change in that group. Connecting with people, when we cannot connect physically, particularly with vulnerable or older people, is a really big issue that we are still grappling with. I do not think we have particular issues in terms of behavioural differences across those generational divides.

Mr Grimes: We make sure that we do not just have the interactive website; we have PDFs. It is probably fair to say that there are lots of older people that might not use the internet, but a lot do. They have access to the interactive website or the standard PDF-type documents. We also have hard copies of our content and, if we get requests, we can send them out. When we run out, we can print some more or we can send them a USB with a PDF, if they have a computer. If they have not, we would print it ourselves and give it to them. So there is that accessibility. But you are right; a lot of the communication tools depend on someone using the web.

We also find that a lot of the groups that are concerned about the ACT environment, whether it is ecology, the grassland groups, Waterwatch or Landcare, are an older generation. I would say that, with the majority of those, apart from some of the school groups that are joining, there are a lot of older people working and volunteering in those areas. They are very active. We certainly get a lot of contact from older people in the community.

THE CHAIR: We have to wrap up now, which is a shame, because we did not get to ask many questions. Is the committee happy to put further questions on notice?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes.

MS CASTLEY: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today.

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

Rutledge, Mr Geoffrey, Deputy Director-General, Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction

Walker, Mr Ian, Executive Branch Manager, Environment, Heritage and Water, and Conservator of Flora and Fauna

Jans, Ms Edwina, Senior Director, ACT Heritage

THE CHAIR: We will resume the hearing. If there are new officials attending, I need to confirm that you are aware of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege. I draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Minister, you are now appearing in your role as Minister for Heritage. On the commitment to the preservation of heritage in the ACT, the audit of heritage sites recommended in the 2015 *State of the Environment Report* has not been undertaken due to funding constraints and workload obligations. I am wondering why that has not happened and whether this is a priority, going forward.

Ms Vassarotti: Audit of heritage—

THE CHAIR: Audit of heritage sites recommended in the 2015 *State of the Environment Report*. It is said that this has not happened due to funding constraints and workload obligations. I am wondering why that has not happened and whether it is a priority, going forward.

Mr Walker: In terms of our focus on heritage and the protection of cultural heritage in the ACT—its protection, conservation and registration—the focus of our team and the focus of ACT Heritage is working through the nominations, the registrations and recording of heritage items across the territory. That is where our focus has been, and we will continue in that vein at this point in time, while acknowledging that there is work to be done in terms of audit and the further clarification of information.

Part of the process of responding to that relates back to the funding commitment in this financial year to improve our heritage database. One of the key tools in understanding where information is relates to being able to pull that information up more clearly and be available to the community. That is a key part of scoping out the work for our heritage database, going forward.

MR BRADDOCK: You talk in your annual report on page 394 about how the Heritage Council is noted to have facilitated a number of important Aboriginal

heritage conservation outcomes. Can you explain what that facilitation looks like? What is the function or role of the Heritage Council in doing that?

Mr Walker: The council has a role in providing independent advice to government on a range of heritage matters. It also provides an important role in communicating with and educating the broader community around cultural heritage matters, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage. The council's role, in terms of facilitating engagement and discussion, is through opportunities in front of media and through things like our heritage festival as key platforms by which we communicate and disseminate information about values and heritage values.

MR BRADDOCK: Is it facilitation, as you would understand it, between the government and small groups of communities?

Mr Walker: In addition to that, we have in the heritage space representative Aboriginal organisations. The Heritage Council, ACT Heritage, work exclusively with those representative Aboriginal organisations to seek and provide guidance on matters relating to Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Ms Vassarotti: One of our real opportunities with the work that we are doing around heritage is placing our cultural heritage in its broadest context and looking at the contributions of First Nations peoples and traditional custodians. That piece of work is something that we will be looking at, moving forward.

We have announced the new Heritage Council appointments today. It is fantastic that we have a number of First Nations peoples that have been appointed, including a Ngunnawal elder, Ms Caroline Hughes. That will provide another opportunity for us to look at how we appropriately recognise, document, celebrate and protect our Aboriginal heritage.

MS CASTLEY: The heritage festival. Last year, obviously, it was postponed in March and then cancelled after running for 38 years. The planning phase was described as well advanced for last year's festival. I am just wondering how much money was spent on the festival before it got cancelled. What was the loss?

Ms Vassarotti: We may have to take that question on notice. We are very excited that we are providing the heritage festival this year. Absolutely, the work that happened last year in the lead-up to the intended heritage council that year will be able to continue forward. I know that some of the work that we have done with local artists we have been able to use for this year's festival. Absolutely, it was really disappointing that we were not able to go forward with the festival last year. Obviously, this was a response and most activities and events here and across the globe had to make that call. It was absolutely disappointing, but certainly all of the work and the assets that were developed in the lead-up to last year's festival will be able to be used for this festival.

MS CASTLEY: So no money was outlaid in any area at the well-advanced planning phase?

Ms Vassarotti: I will ask—

Mr Walker: Any expenditure that was made has been, I guess, value-added in terms of this year. So there were various things around products, designs and those sorts of things established in 2019, but they have been rolled into this year. So that investment is really just carried forward into the new program.

MS CASTLEY: How much money has been allocated to this year's festival?

Ms Jans: I can tell you that. I am just going to pull up that figure. Can I come back to that? Let me just find the right body of information.

Ms Vassarotti: I was just going to say that I think that one of the great things about the heritage festival is that it will not be just government-led activities. One of the great things about it is that it includes a range of events by a whole range of other organisations that have a passion and interest in heritage. So it is really around government facilitating a great festival and promoting the events that are happening. There are resources and investments put forward for a whole lot of people, for a whole lot of organisations, that are celebrating the role of heritage in the community.

Ms Jans: I have the figure now. It is \$72,000.

MS CASTLEY: This year?

Ms Jans: Correct.

THE CHAIR: The number of heritage applications fell in 2019 and rejections of heritage registration applications increased threefold. Why is that happening? Why are these applications being rejected?

Ms Vassarotti: One of the key roles of the Heritage Council or heritage unit is around the application and assessment of heritage items. There is an ebb and flow in relation to things that are brought to attention and brought through application.

Mr Ponton: I will make a few comments and then Mr Walker can jump in. In terms of the rejections, part of the focus of the council has been to get to a decision early. Many of the nominations that are received do not meet the criteria and, rather than have those sit there for an extended period of time, the council has taken the view that, if it is really obvious that they have not met the threshold, we should get to the answer no early. That is why you are seeing that increase in rejections. Mr Walker, did you want to add to that?

Mr Walker: I think it is worth highlighting, perhaps for the committee's benefit, the context around nominations and then registrations, and how that process unfolds so that the committee has a bit of contextual information, because it is often confusing for people. Any person can nominate for a place to be listed on the nomination list. The council, as an independent authority, then looks at that nomination and, as Mr Ponton said, makes a determination about whether it meets the immediate threshold for listing—is it appropriate to be listed? There are some criteria by which the council does that.

Once that nomination has been accepted, further information or evidence is sought from the proponent—and there are other sources of material—for the council to determine whether that nomination goes through to a registration process and becomes a listed heritage-value asset in the territory.

It is important to understand that there is a nomination process. The council accepts or rejects that nomination based on some fundamental criteria. Then the registration is the detail process—what is this about? How does this value contribute to the heritage of the ACT? What is its connection? Why should it be listed? Those sorts of elements are part of the criteria which the council uses to assess it going onto the registration list. It is important to understand those sequences because there are different steps and different criteria used at different points in that process.

THE CHAIR: Given so many rejections, do you think the community awareness of the criteria is sufficient?

Mr Walker: People have a view about heritage from their perspective, and I think that the opportunity for people to nominate and to test whether their particular interest or their value is of significance to the territory is something that the community is empowered to do. I think that is important. The website that we have for ACT Heritage clearly articulates the process by which people can go through that. In terms of how well people understand that, as with all engagements with the community, there could always be improvements. We will continue to look at opportunities for improvement, but the information is available. People can assess that and if an individual believes that it is an important heritage aspect, it goes forward to the Heritage Council.

Mr Ponton: Can I just clarify where you are looking in the annual report? As I understand it, in terms of nominations being dismissed, there were no nominations dismissed. In terms of rejections, that may be in relation to the Heritage Council providing advice on development applications. There were a significant number where the council determined there could be a detrimental impact on heritage. That is then considered by the Planning and Land Authority, amongst a range of other matters. So it could be a terminology issue here, where, I think the rejections that you are referring to are, in fact, comments on development applications as opposed to dismissing nominations.

THE CHAIR: I have one more supplementary question on that. Further to general development applications, there were 369 queries regarding information. Again, do you think that there could be more publicly available information to avoid having so many queries about development applications in relation to heritage?

Mr Ponton: I will put it to Mr Walker, if he has a view.

Mr Walker: It probably goes to the response before. Information is available. People test that information, and the purpose of ACT Heritage as a team is to support people and undertake querying of whether there is heritage significance or heritage value there. That is a function of the service that ACT Heritage provides to the community. The fact that there is a large number is reflective of a large number of developments going through the process.

Ms Vassarotti: The other comment that I would make is that the ability for the community to ask the question and for it to be tested can build community confidence in relation to ensuring that issues, including heritage issues, have been considered when we are looking at new developments. A community understanding that something might be important to preserve is a positive thing. Also, having the ability to test that and have an expert independent assessment of it is a positive thing in relation to people feeling confident that the issues have been examined and that an evidence-based response has been provided.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a series of questions on heritage compliance. I will start by noting that the Heritage Amendment Bill passed in February last year. I want to check how those powers have been utilised under the act. Firstly, has the Heritage Council issued a direction under section 62 to protect the heritage under threat?

Ms Vassarotti: I will defer to my officials.

Mr Walker: I do not believe that that is the case. It is not a power that is used routinely in the protection of heritage assets in the territory.

MR BRADDOCK: Have they had to issue a repair damage direction since the act has been in force?

Mr Walker: There have been repair orders issued. I would have to check on the timing of those, but in the past there have been repair orders issued.

MR BRADDOCK: Is it possible to find out on notice everything that we have done in the past financial year?

Mr Walker: I will take that on notice and come back with some clarity on the exact numbers.

MR BRADDOCK: Have any fines been issued in terms of heritage non-compliance?

Mr Walker: No fines, to my knowledge, have been issued.

MR BRADDOCK: How many complaints have we received about damage to cultural heritage here in the ACT over the past year?

Mr Walker: There is often commentary or complaints received around cultural heritage values across the territory. Those complaints can be quite broad ranging. Complaints are often referred to Access Canberra, the compliance entity that deals with compliance across the territory. In the case of ACT Heritage assets, where any complaints have been received, they have been discussed with the individual and worked through to see what remedial action, or any action, would be required.

MR BRADDOCK: I suppose the question is: are the heritage values being conserved if we are not utilising the compliance tools that have been granted to the council?

Mr Walker: Yes, heritage protection is occurring.

Can I just make a correction: there have been no repair orders issued by the council. That is my error.

The protection of heritage is afforded through a variety of means. Firstly, land managers in the territory have an obligation under the heritage legislation to protect and conserve heritage values. The primary means of doing that is making those land managers, landowners, aware of those values and working with those individuals or organisations to protect those sites. It is proactive engagement around how we conserve and protect heritage values in the territory.

MS CASTLEY: I think I heard you say that there have not been any \$1,000 fines. What about \$5,000 fines to corporations?

Mr Walker: No.

MS CASTLEY: With regard to the heritage applications, page 62 talks about a massive increase in the amount of applications—36 per cent compared to the previous financial year. Over five years, we have had a 107 per cent increase. Why do you think that that spike has occurred?

Ms Vassarotti: I think that speaks to the question asked by Dr Paterson. There will be a range of drivers around that increase in terms of increased public awareness and increased valuing of our cultural heritage. As an evolving city, as our buildings and other assets are ageing, there is a greater recognition of some of the potential heritage values. I do not know if there are other drivers that could be identified.

Mr Walker: I would also suggest that, with people being at home during COVID, there has been a steady increase in the number of applications for different things across government, one of those being through the heritage space. There has certainly been an increase in the number of applications or proposals during that COVID time across a range of areas. The relationship between COVID and that is something that is worth someone doing a PhD or someone in a research context, testing in the future.

Mr Ponton: Dr Paterson, you made a reference to the 369 inquiries. Those inquiries are from people wanting to do work to their homes who, through the exemption criteria, needed to check to see whether there would be a detrimental impact on the property. If there is, it needs to go through a development application process. If not, it remains exempt.

That large number, going to the minister's earlier point, shows that people are understanding what they need to do in making those inquiries. The message is getting out there.

MR BRADDOCK: In terms of the bushfire events of last summer, what damage has happened to cultural heritage from those bushfires and have we been engaging with the Aboriginal community in addressing that damage?

Mr Walker: This is an area for Minister Gentleman to respond to in terms of land management within the context of the heritage space.

As part of the process around the bushfire recovery, we initially undertook a rapid risk assessment piece of work. That risk assessment identified key heritage, environmental and visitor asset values that were impacted by the fire and gave us a sense of priorities for that work. The process identified, from a heritage perspective, key heritage huts that were impacted by the fire; key Aboriginal sites that had, or may have, been impacted by the fire; and a range of stone arrangements and other cultural sites across the landscape.

The recovery team, post that risk assessment work, has been working extensively with RAOs, representative Aboriginal organisations, and the Ngunnawal community to identify key areas of interest to the Aboriginal community. Yankee Hat is a particular example of a site that the community were seeking to better protect from future fire events. We have been working very closely with the community on such processes to better understand their need and put in place appropriate measures to protect significant sites.

Yankee Hat is an interesting case study. During the fire event, we removed the wooden infrastructure around the art site so that it did not burn and therefore impact on the art site. That was removed prior to the fire coming into that area. We are now working with the community, asking, “How do we protect that site into the future?”—knowing there is a range of values both on the site itself and also on the ground. It is a matter of how we provide access to the broader community while protecting those sites. That is a piece of ongoing work.

MS CASTLEY: Is there any chance to go back to the environment?

THE CHAIR: Are you happy to go for another 15 minutes?

Ms Vassarotti: I am in your hands.

MS CASTLEY: I want to go to the zero-emissions grant program on page 176 of the annual report. It says that grants of up to \$25,000 were awarded under a \$550,000 community zero-emissions grants program. Is this us?

Ms Vassarotti: This is Mr Rattenbury.

MS CASTLEY: The e-bike library program?

Ms Vassarotti: That is Mr Rattenbury.

MS CASTLEY: Solar battery storage in homes and small businesses?

Ms Vassarotti: Minister Rattenbury.

Mr Rutledge: Ms Castley, it is for Minister Rattenbury, but on Thursday the Minister for Climate Action is coming in and will talk about the batteries. We will be able to cover that off on Thursday with either the Minister for Climate Action or Minister Rattenbury.

MS CASTLEY: Rural leasehold management?

Ms Vassarotti: That is us.

MS CASTLEY: Does the environment directorate have any involvement in determining the suitability of potential leaseholders or the length of the leases?

Ms Vassarotti: Rural leases are managed through this directorate.

Mr Rutledge: I think there were two questions: whether we look at the rural lessees and then the length of the lease?

MS CASTLEY: Yes.

Mr Rutledge: The length of the lease for rural lessees is a mixture of things. It is done primarily through the planning authority, but one of the considerations, if it is a renewal, is past performance, particularly around land management agreements. That is where we would have a role to play.

We have had some ongoing short-term—say, 25 years—involvement. Land management does inform the way we grant further leases. Beyond Tharwa to Namadgi, probably 10 years ago, many people were provided with 99-year leases.

It depends on the future plans for that piece of land—the conservation values of that piece of land and whether it would be better suited to be a nature park, for example, or whether it is a space for future development or future investigation. Then—it has not yet happened—sometimes there could be consideration of the removal of leasehold if someone is proven to be a poor land manager or the conservation values change.

MS CASTLEY: Who determines whether the activity is appropriate for the area?

Mr Rutledge: Ultimately, the planning authority determines it, but it takes advice.

MS CASTLEY: I have a quick question on managing Canberra nature parks. The annual report says that the Canberra Nature Park draft reserve management plan was to be provided to the minister in December 2020.

Ms Vassarotti: That has not been finalised. We might need to get Ian back to the table. Work on the development of a new plan has been underway for some time.

Mr Walker: Canberra Nature Park and the management of Canberra Nature Park fall within Minister Gentleman's responsibilities. The draft plan was provided to Minister Gentleman and has subsequently been referred to the standing committee for consideration. That has, I believe, occurred.

THE CHAIR: The committee's hearings for today are now adjourned. On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister, statutory officers and officials who have appeared today.

If witnesses have taken any questions on notice today, could they please get the

answers to the committee support office within five working days of receipt of the uncorrected proof. If members wish to lodge questions on notice, please get those to the secretary within five working days of the hearing.

The committee adjourned at 12.35 pm.