



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

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

(Reference: [Inquiry into ACT Budget 2021-22](#))

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2021

**Acting secretary to the committee:
Dr F Scott (Ph: 620 75498)**

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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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.34 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

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

Rutledge, Mr Geoffrey, Deputy Director-General; Sustainability and the Built Environment; Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction

Jans, Ms Edwina, Acting Senior Director, ACT Heritage; Environment, Heritage and Water

THE CHAIR: I declare open the fourth and final online public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity into the ACT budget for 2021-22. The proceedings today will be hearing from the Minister for the Environment and Heritage.

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 our city and this region.

I understand that witnesses have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you each confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Walker: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

THE CHAIR: The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and are being webstreamed and broadcast live. When taking a question on notice, it would be helpful if you would use the words, "I will take that question on notice."

Minister, thank you for providing written opening statements which the committee requested in lieu of an oral opening statement. We will now begin with questions.

Minister, the budget papers outline the need to prepare an air quality strategy for the ACT in response to concerns raised around bushfire smoke. Will this include overall air quality, including pollen and woodfire heater smoke, and what are the time frames for this?

Ms Vassarotti: I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privilege statement.

We are in the final stages of preparing an air quality strategy. The original intention of

the strategy was specifically to look at bushfire smoke, in response to a motion by Mr Rattenbury in the last Assembly. Unfortunately, that was delayed due to COVID-19 issues last year.

When we looked at this, we had a really good consideration about the scope of the strategy and what was appropriate for this particular strategy. There are a whole range of air quality issues. In discussions with colleagues, we decided to broaden the strategy in looking at both issues of bushfire smoke and woodfire smoke. We are going to be looking at some of the other key elements, such as pollens, in relation to issues such as climate adaption. We wanted to take a slightly different perspective with some of those issues. Issues such as transport pollution will be dealt with in relation to some of the work that we are doing in terms of reducing carbon emissions. The issue of pollen is part of a broader climate adaption piece of work.

The strategy will primarily be looking at the impacts of bushfire smoke and woodfire smoke. We will be looking at outdoor air quality and also picking up some of the issues of indoor air quality, particularly given the impacts of the bushfire smoke incident we had through 2019-20. We are in the final stages of that process. Our commitment was to release this at the same time as the next bushfire season, which is imminent. We are working to finalise that strategy now and we hope that it will be coming out very soon.

It will cover off some of the issues that have been looked at in relation to some of the inquiries around the bushfire incident. EPSDD have been working very closely with Health in relation to some of the issues, because they fit in a number of different areas, and they work with other agencies, including ESA, given the issues around bushfire smoke.

That is broadly what the strategy will cover and what the time frame is. I will just ask if any of the officials feel that it is worth providing some additional information. No? Great.

THE CHAIR: Will the strategy include the monitoring of air quality? In one of the other hearings, I asked a question about the number of air quality stations in the ACT. The Weston Creek Community Council has raised the issue that there is no air quality monitoring station in Weston Creek or the Molonglo Valley, which have a different air situation from that of Tuggeranong, for example. Is there scope in the strategy to recognise different parts of Canberra and different experiences of air quality?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes; absolutely it will be covering off the issue of monitoring. We have some obligations under our national regulation to provide regular monitoring. We have three monitors at the moment. There is some interesting research going on in terms of the different types of monitors, including some low-cost monitors. Mr Walker might be able to provide a bit more detail on that. There will absolutely be scope to look at that, particularly around some technological changes and what we might be able to do in the future.

This is a strategy and a framework. Our approach has been that there will be a number of action plans in different areas. This will be very much a living document. There are issues around air quality, particularly in the wood smoke area. This is an area where

there is quite a bit of community conversation. There is a difference of views within the community on how we should respond to this issue. We have some different tools that we can use in newer suburbs versus older suburbs. The strategy will be the commencement of a process. There will be opportunities, particularly as new technology comes along, where we might be able to look at some different things.

Mr Walker, are we able to provide some more information about future opportunities around expanding monitoring?

Mr Walker: Yes. The minister has highlighted the development of the strategy and the inclusion of key action plans associated with that. One of the key components of the strategy is mitigating bushfire smoke and/or monitoring bushfire smoke. While that is particularly challenging in a wildfire context, during prescribed burning activities it is all about preparedness and designing the fuel reduction burning processes to mitigate smoke coming over the city. That is a key component of the strategy and a key work that the Parks and Conservation Service will undertake.

In terms of particular monitoring regimens, this is a focus of ACT Health. They have a range of sensors that are being trialled and will continue to be trialled and rolled out in different parts of the territory. That is what the strategy and action plans are about—identifying those key opportunities and then rolling out the best solution for the particular part of the ACT.

MR BRADDOCK: Will that strategy include an indoor air quality standard? If so, what sort of time frame might we be looking for in developing such a standard?

Ms Vassarotti: As I noted, Mr Braddock, we are finalising the strategy at the moment, so it is a bit hard to rule what is in and what is out. Certainly, indoor air quality is discussed within the strategy.

I might look to officials as to whether that is something we can take on notice or whether, because we are going through the final phases of the strategy, it is something where we can provide a briefing as we finalise the strategy. It is really imminent, Mr Braddock.

Mr Rutledge: It is very close to public release; it is going through final government consideration. We can probably provide a briefing shortly after it is released. As the minister said, it is a matter of days and weeks; you will find out quickly—rather than pre-empting those government considerations today with the committee.

MR BRADDOCK: Fair enough; thank you.

Could you give me an overview of the current weed and invasive species situation here in the ACT? Mr Walker gave me a bit of insight yesterday, but I am keen to know the current state—whether the threat is increasing under climate change and whether you have the resources to adequately respond to that.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, definitely. Particularly with the current weather pattern, the La Nina weather pattern, you would have noticed as you drive around the city that it is beautiful and green, which is fantastic, but it has created an incredibly fertile area for

weeds, as well as the plants that we need to grow.

This has been an issue that we have been managing for a while. There really is a need for us to get out early, because what we know about weeds is that if we do not get onto it early, this becomes a much more expensive and difficult problem to deal with down the track.

In terms of the resources, you would have noticed in the February budget that there were some significant resources provided, I think about \$600,000, in order to respond to some of the immediate issues. In this budget, you would have seen that, over the forward estimates, almost \$3 million has been provided to respond to this issue.

One of the exciting things that we are going to do in relation to this is pull together a rapid response team. This team will be able to respond to invasive weed management. It is tenure blind: it does not matter if it is on a rural lease, on Parks and Conservation Service land or on TCCS land, we will have a group of people who are able to rapidly be deployed and respond to the issue.

This is an issue that is very resource intensive. We are always looking at ways that we can enhance our resources in this area. It is an area where we have had good engagement with the commonwealth; we have been able to work with the commonwealth as a partner in this work. ACT government resources will be supplemented by commonwealth funding.

I might just look to Mr Rutledge to see if he wants to add anything.

Mr Rutledge: Thanks, Minister. The final part of the question from Mr Braddock was about how life is likely to change under a changing climate. We absolutely expect our weed profile to change under climate change. At the moment, as the minister said, there is a lot of water and probably the wettest conditions we have had for at least a decade. But this is just the weather pattern. The climate of 2030 will be very different. We expect to see more invasive species and even a change in those invasive species over time.

The whole-of-government climate change adaptation work which the minister has already referred to, about how we change our operations to deal with our new invasive species, and our new and increased invasive species, is a key element of that. But we have great local research done by our own research team in conservation research. As the government is the largest landholder as well, we are able to build that evolving research and current research into our practice. So there has been a good investment from the ACT government.

I will also say hats off to the commonwealth. We got over \$400,000 from the commonwealth government to help us, post-bushfire, to deal with invasive weeds.

After this weather pattern finishes—probably this year—we expect the challenges of weeds to continue but it will be a different challenge to the one that we have been experiencing last summer and this summer.

MR BRADDOCK: Is it a challenge that the \$2.9 million over the course of this

budget is sufficient to meet?

Mr Rutledge: The government has responded quite quickly to this weather pattern, and we will continue to work with our colleagues across government to deliver against the challenges ahead. Doing it in a way where the whole of government looks at our ongoing climate change adaptation allows the government to make those decisions, to move resources accordingly as the risk increases or decreases.

As I said, last summer and this summer, during this weather pattern, the government has responded. In future years, as the threat level changes, I am sure that government resourcing will change to meet those changes.

Ms Vassarotti: The other thing I would note is that this is also an area where it is important to work with our partners and work out ways in which we can deploy other resources. We are supporting a weeds forum in November, where we will bring together our conservation environmental volunteers and rural leaseholders and talk through some of the issues and ways that we can work better with those groups.

Throughout this last period, we have been able to provide funding through rural grants. That was particularly focused on invasive species in terms of ways that we can support work to manage weeds on people's properties. There have been some really good conversations with rural leaseholders in relation to ways that we might be able to coordinate that kind of resource investment a bit differently.

They are some of the opportunities that have arisen from discussions with the groups that are involved in this area. There will probably be opportunities into the future about how we deploy some of our resources as well. Again, that will be an ongoing conversation.

Mr Walker: Mr Braddock, I would add to the comments from the minister and Mr Rutledge that the strategy for managing weeds in the ACT—in fact, across the country—is about jumping quickly on new and emerging weeds or invasive species. That is a key strategy and an important strategy. If we can get in front of the problem and eradicate new and emerging weeds from the ACT, it means that we do not have the long legacy of those weeds like we see with the persistent weed species across the territory. That is a key strategy, and that is why we have developed a biosecurity response team, so that we can jump on those new weeds when they come into the territory.

MR BRADDOCK: Are we monitoring enough to make sure that we are aware when those new species enter the territory?

Mr Walker: Yes. We have a very good collective group of citizen scientists and experts across the territory. As I mentioned in the water briefing yesterday, our Nature Mapper is a key tool for collecting weed information and information about infestations and new occurrences. It has been highly successful over the last 12 months, and when we have had reports of new weeds or new species coming into the territory, we have been able to jump on those quickly. We had some 21 new and emerging biosecurity threats over the last 12 months. That network of community, and our expertise with our ecologists and our staff, has meant that we have been able

to jump on things such as khapra beetles as a good example of a commonwealth and ACT government response.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: As we have discovered with COVID, we are an island within New South Wales. In terms of dealing with invasive weeds, what is the relationship with the New South Wales government like in terms of the alert system? How closely do we work with them on this issue?

Mr Walker: There is a very strong network of biosecurity people across the country—not only in New South Wales and across the border, but nationally. We are alerted to biosecurity risks, weeds and other biosecurity threats nationally and when there is an immediate threat nearby. Those occurrences are reported to us routinely, and there is a national and coordinated response through the biosecurity sector.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, given that the ACT Greens policy is to reduce the use of glyphosate, how does the government reconcile undertaking adequate weed management?

Ms Vassarotti: It is a good question, and it has been raised in a couple of committee hearings. It is a really interesting balance of how we ensure that we are looking after our invasive species, as well as reducing glyphosate in particular, although there are other pesticides as well. Because it has been an area of interest, we have had some good briefings in terms of some exciting research that has been happening, particularly within parks and cons. TCCS has also been doing some work in this area. We are working within the framework of national regulation in some of this area.

I might ask officials, probably Mr Walker, to talk through some of the work that is happening at the moment. It was really interesting for me, Ms Castley, that between getting a written brief and a verbal briefing in terms of the use of other insecticides, they found an alternative to a particular insecticide that had been used for elms, I think. There is a very active discussion about trying to reduce it and find alternative uses.

One of the challenges with glyphosate is that there are not a lot of alternatives that are able to eradicate. But you can look at concentrations and things like that, or use it in a way where you are able to reduce its use over time. They are the sorts of examples I will ask Mr Walker to speak to.

There is some really good work happening in terms of the reduction of glyphosate and other pesticides and insecticides. It is an area where there is more work to be done and is also an area where there is some opportunity for us to talk to the community about some of the innovative ways that we can reduce usage, both as land managers ourselves and within the community.

That is some of the work that we will be rolling out in the next little while. There is real community interest. It is one of the reasons why we will be hosting the weed forum in November, to bring together the range of people that are working in this area to identify other ways that we can do the reduction.

I will ask Mr Walker to talk about some of the work that is already happening in terms of the reduction.

Mr Walker: Ms Castley, you are right. It is a good question about the reduction and use of chemicals in the environment. As an environment directorate, we are very committed to reducing that.

Going to some of the strategies around weeds, I would start by saying that glyphosate is an important tool and we do not have anything that we can replace it with. That being said, we use a range of integrated tools to deliver weed management. What I mean by that is that we use some chemical spray; we use hand pulling or hand removal; we will use fire; we will use steam management. There is a range of different techniques that are used across our weed management regimen to reduce the risk of weeds.

It also goes back to the point I made earlier to Mr Braddock: that if we can get on these species as they emerge, we are not using the same amount of chemical or the same treatment. If we can get onto the weeds early, we are reducing the amount of chemical and action required for those particular species.

We do use a range of techniques. They have been demonstrated to be highly successful. I refer you to our website, where there is a very detailed dashboard. Our team record in real time, showing the work effort around our weed management. You can see and interrogate which particular weeds are controlled, where they are in the territory, and the scale by which they are controlled. It has proved to be a very useful way of sharing information and making sure that we can record that information, going forward.

You will note that this year in our reporting we have included risks associated with invasive species in our annual reporting. That is built on the very strong foundation of our ability to collect the information and to undertake the control mechanisms. We are particularly excited to be joining with Landcare in the weeds forum in November, where we will be able to showcase more explicitly some of the work in and around the invasive species and weed area.

Ms Vassarotti: If people are particularly interested in this, I think that is an open forum, so people are more than welcome to come along as observers. Ms Castley, if you have a particular interest, I think you can come along. It will be a really good way to see some of the work that is happening. That is an invitation to you.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you, Minister. My concern is that it was a policy commitment; I am interested in how you will be measuring it to prove to the people that voted for you that you have reduced the use. I understand that there is steam, and that all sounds very good, but I am interested in the actual metrics—how you are going to prove to people that you have reduced the use.

Ms Vassarotti: As Mr Walker said, there are quite significant monitoring tools and a lot of work happening. I am very confident that we will be able to demonstrate the commitment to this issue while recognising some of the challenges. You are very

welcome to come along to the forum to get a better understanding of some of the work that is happening. It is an area of community interest, and we will be keen to talk with the community about the work that is happening to reduce the use of glyphosate.

MS CASTLEY: In February's budget, you allocated more than \$15 million towards output 2.1 in terms of controlled recurrent payments. In this budget, the actual spend was around \$12 million. I am wondering why there was an underspend. What happened?

Ms Vassarotti: Can you provide a bit more detail, Ms Castley, in terms of the output? This might go across a number of ministerial portfolios.

MS CASTLEY: I am referring to the 2020-21 budget, page 17. Then budget paper E for this budget, 2021-22, page 17. I see that there is almost \$23 million allocated for this budget, which is a huge jump from \$15 million when there was an underspend. I am just wondering if someone can talk me through the figures.

Mr Rutledge: I do not have the 2020-21 budget in front of me, but I have this year's budget, so I will talk you through it as best I can. There have been a couple of challenges this year. Budget papers generally are difficult to read, for all of us, and they are written for different purposes. But a unique challenge in this calendar year is that, because we had the budget after the end of the financial year and we also had a February supplementary appropriation for the last financial year, getting the reconciliation through the budget documents is a bit difficult to convey. The other thing I would add is that now that we are post the last financial year, we are actually reporting the interim outcome, which is the financial statements of the previous financial year, in this year's budget. So we have had a few unprecedented challenges this year.

I think you are referring to the allocation between output 2.1 and output 2.2. I think that we have just had a shift of resources. The environment portfolio takes account of both the environment, heritage and water elements of the directorate and the parks and conservation parts of the directorate. In lining up our programs with ministerial responsibilities, we have shifted some funds from environment output 2.1 and output 2.2. I think that is the shift that you are pointing at. It was not actually an underspend in either of those areas; it is a shift between those two output classes.

If that is not the answer, Ms Castley, perhaps you can put the question on notice and I can do a reconciliation for you. But there has not been a significant underspend. I think it is a shifting between the two subclasses within that output class that you are asking about.

MS CASTLEY: Okay, yes. If you could take that on notice, that would be great. There is output 2.1, budgeted payments—what the actual payments were with that one. Also, there is the increase, to \$23 million, if you could talk to me about that.

Mr Rutledge: We will have to take that on notice, because I am trying to reconcile your question with the papers in front of me and I am not able to do that.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, I am surprised that you do not know a bit about your budget.

I am wondering how that is since it goes across a few different directorates. I think that I asked this question in another hearing. How does that work?

THE CHAIR: Ms Castley.

MS CASTLEY: Chair, Mr Braddock had three supplementaries earlier. This is only my second.

THE CHAIR: You just had two there, but a commentary is not needed.

MS CASTLEY: It is a question.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, a supplementary?

MR CAIN: Yes, I have a supplementary on that point. Minister, it is disappointing that there is not a clear explanation in answer to Ms Castley's question. The budget papers are publicly available to the community. Surely it should be a priority that these do not need an explanation that cannot be given at the time by your most senior executives. It is disappointing that there does not seem to be real transparency about what has happened with those millions of dollars.

THE CHAIR: Is this a question, Mr Cain?

Ms Vassarotti: I would say that that is not a question. Mr Rutledge provided a whole range of information about some particular challenges with some reconciliation. There is absolute transparency about the budget; we provide a high level of detail. I feel that it is unfair commentary.

MR CAIN: Chair, there is a question. That was a bit of a preamble. My question, Minister, is: why are your budget papers not clear in explaining what happens to multiple millions of dollars?

Mr Rutledge: Mr Cain, I think the answer is that it remained in the output class, but it changed between the subclasses of 2.1 and 2.2. I think that is the answer to the question. I do not think there is too much more to be said.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Rutledge.

MR CAIN: Perhaps it could be clearer, going forward.

MS CASTLEY: I still ask the minister responsible why she is—

THE CHAIR: Ms Castley! It is not your turn. Mr Cain, a substantive question, please.

MR CAIN: Earlier in the week, I asked Minister Cheyne about the draft ACT Environment Protection Authority environment protection guidelines for construction and land development in the ACT of October 2019. Neither she nor her officials at the time said they were aware of this document but that it was a policy document that belonged in your department. Minister, are you aware of this document?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, and we are happy to give you some further information about it. I will ask Mr Walker to talk about it. It is a guide. It is guidelines that have been subject to consultation. The draft guidelines are on the website. They are currently being finalised. I will ask Mr Walker if he wants to provide some more information about this document.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

Mr Walker: Thanks, Minister. The existing guidelines remain in place. We have a suite of guidelines that are in play and are used by the Environment Protection Authority. These new guidelines have been drafted and have gone through a community consultation process. We are in the final stages of consolidating the information to inform those new guidelines.

MR CAIN: When do you expect this to be finalised?

Mr Walker: As you may appreciate, Mr Cain, we have been in a situation where we have had COVID restrictions and a range of issues, giving rise to an inability to communicate because of the health emergency. The government has prioritised communications associated with COVID. We are in the process of finalising those guidelines, and we expect them to be released in early 2022.

MR CAIN: Thank you. I also said to Minister Cheyne that I was interested in whether the draft guidelines were produced under a contract arrangement or within the department and the estimated cost of producing the guidelines. You might take that on notice?

Mr Rutledge: Mr Cain, we have a small team of environment protection policy officers. We have three FTEs that are assigned to working on environment protection policy. They work with industry and across other jurisdictions to ensure that our environment protection policies are up to date and, where they need to be, consistent with other jurisdictions. When they need tailoring to our local conditions, particularly our local pollution threats and our local industries, they make those subsequent changes. We have three FTEs. Going to the cost of this guideline over any other guidelines, we have a full work program for our three FTEs; it is just part of their core business.

To ensure that we had additional industry input or technical expertise for this, we did put out a small consultancy, I think in the order of \$25,000, to inform our staff in-house to develop those guidelines.

MR CAIN: Thank you. I would be interested in an estimated total cost.

THE CHAIR: No, Mr Cain. Mr Cain, you have had multiple supplementaries. Members, I remind you that you get a substantive question and a supplementary. If you are really lucky, you get an extra supplementary. Please keep the questions concise, with no commentary—and at most a two-part question.

My substantive question is this. There is a major issue with munge in the wombat population in the ACT. I see that kangaroos get some funding in the budget. What is

happening with the wombats, and what is the government doing to address mange?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question; it is a really important one and I appreciate your interest in this issue. The issue of wombat mange is a distressing issue. Quite a bit of work has been happening on the issue of wombat mange. Again, Mr Walker can talk to some of the specifics of the work that has been happening.

An internal wombat mange group has been working in relation to some of the key issues. We have also been working with partners in the community in relation to this issue, and with some of our local wildlife groups, as well as some research partners, including the University of Tasmania.

In relation to the specific question around funding through this budget, what I can tell you, which is really exciting, is that as part of the increased funding for our environment grants, we have been able to provide three separate grants to groups that are working in the area of wombat mange, including the University of Tasmania and the wombat group of ACT Wildlife, to support some of the projects that are currently running. So some specific funding has been provided, but I will look to Mr Walker to provide some detail about that work.

Mr Walker: We are doing quite a bit of work in the wombat mange space. Firstly, we have set up an internal working group that has our experts—our ecologists, our scientists—looking at strategies and approaches to combat wombat mange. That means collaborating across a range of states, because it is not only the ACT that has problems with wombat mange. The University of Tasmania, as the minister has mentioned, is one of those key partners. So we have some significant work happening in that space.

We have also set up an external reference group involving ACT Wildlife and individuals who have a particular passion about supporting wombats and caring for wombats through what is a horrible mange condition that they get. As the minister highlighted, we have been able to provide some grants to those groups to help deliver on that.

We currently have some trials underway around the particular use of a chemical known to treat wombat mange. That is quite ground-breaking in terms of its application. One of the challenges in working with wildlife is about how you get a treatment onto a wombat. We are currently using paintball guns to deliver the treatment. We are testing that process. We are being innovative in our approach with the particular challenge of wombat mange.

As the minister has highlighted, we have a range of people, a range of groups, set up to help us and support us in that work. That is a really positive way of combating it, recognising that while government has a strong hand in this space, it is about the community working together to combat this issue.

MR BRADDOCK: I want to ask about threatened species and get an update on what the government is doing to help protect the threatened species here in the ACT.

Ms Vassarotti: The ACT can be proud of the work we are doing around threatened

species. There is a range of specific programs that are running. They are supported by really strong evidence. It was great to put in place the new expert scientific committee that have just started their new term to support the work.

We have a range of specific programs. You would be well aware of the fabulous work that is happening out at Mulligans Flat as a real sanctuary for some of our threatened species, including bettongs, and a range of other areas; the work that is happening in grasslands, in supporting those important ecological communities; and some of the work that is happening in Namadgi and Tidbinbilla, particularly around issues such as looking after insurance populations.

We have some really exciting news in this space in terms of a new facility that we opened up a few months ago around earless dragons. I do not want to steal Mr Walker's thunder—and thunder is probably the right word, given the fact that we are talking about dragons—about how some of that research is going, so I might ask him to talk about some of that work and some hot off the press, exciting news about some of the success of those programs.

Mr Walker: Yes, we have got some good news, but I might just take a step back. Ecological communities in the territory, particularly grasslands, are threatened nationally. Only about 10 per cent of them remain across the country. They are particularly at risk from things like weeds; invasive species, as we mentioned earlier; and development. Having no trees and a flat ground means that they are useful for grazing and a whole lot of other purposes. Those threats have seen grassland communities disappear—and the fauna associated with those communities.

Grassland earless dragons are a good example. Earlier this year, Minister Vassarotti and Minister Gentleman announced \$2.1 million for a facility for the recovery of those particular grassland earless dragons. This is really good for us. We now have a facility where we can partner with Melbourne Zoo and colleagues across government to create an insurance population of grassland earless dragons.

It is with great pleasure that I am able to announce that we have had a number of eggs laid, and this week we have seen a number of dragons hatch. We now have five dragons that have hatched from our facility. We have 29 eggs currently. We are seeing the result of the investment in creating the infrastructure of the facility in now having five dragons hatch. That sounds pretty cool. These dragons are about three-quarters of a gram in size, very small, and we will look to release them into the wild in a year or so.

What we have done, and this is very hot off the press, is name the first dragon Rory in honour of Rory Keenan, who was a colleague at Melbourne Zoo who has been instrumental in helping us to breed these animals and get these animals bred. This is quite a fabulous step in terms of species conservation for the territory. It builds on our work with bettongs, rock wallabies and corroboree frogs. As I said, that is hot off the press.

Ms Vassarotti: This is also an area where there is fantastic collaboration across jurisdictions. The commonwealth has been a partner, and we are doing work with a range of threatened and endangered species. We are leading some of that work, some

of the national processes. Mr Walker, do you want to provide a bit more detail about some of those specific programs?

Mr Walker: Thank you, Minister. We are partnering with the commonwealth. We are leading the recovery work nationally and coordinating the national recovery for one of the icons of the territory, the gang-gang cockatoo. That national coordination, with the support from the commonwealth, is seeing us lead a national program and then targeting specific actions in the territory to improve support for gang-gang cockatoos. In addition to that, again partnering with the commonwealth, programs with the rock wallabies are a very big piece of work that we are doing.

They are the benefits of partnering with the commonwealth and partnering with the community. We are particularly excited to be leading the gang-gang recovery work nationally.

Mr Braddock, I would also highlight that recently, while people were in lockdown, ecologists identified a new species for the territory, the Bathurst copper butterfly, listed as vulnerable. It was found in Namadgi National Park. Again, working with the commonwealth, we will start to develop an action plan around how we can conserve that particular species.

Going to some very exciting news that is continuing, as the minister and you yourself are aware, Mulligans Flat continues to be our premier conservation threatened species recovery space. In partnership with the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust and the ANU, we are continuing to restore and rehabilitate these significant grasslands and woodlands. That has seen us recover a number of species, including bettongs and smoky mice. We are looking at some bush stone-curlews coming back into the sanctuary, as well as some predator species like quolls. We currently have quolls, but they are a different species. We are looking at some trials in the coming year around quoll recovery.

MR BRADDOCK: What about the striped legless lizards? How is that going?

Mr Walker: Striped legless lizards occupy the same type of habitat, so it is about grassland areas. One of the things that I did not mention about the grassland conservation is that our ecologists have been leading the way in defining the sorts of grassland habitat and how we manage grassland habitats.

If you are managing for a particular species, you need to manage your grass height. Think of your backyard. If you are a keen lawn bowler, you want nice flat, very lean grass. If you are a bit of a lazy gardener like me, you do not mind the grass being a bit high. Think of that in the context of a native grassland. Some species require very low grass; other species require high grass. Therefore, you need to manage your native grasslands for the particular objectives associated with the species of interest. Our ecologists have been leading the national approach around what level of grass suits each species. That is a long introduction to striped legless lizards, but it is important to understand that they occupy the same sorts of habitat.

With our legless lizard work, we continue to monitor and identify where legless lizards are. That is part of the work we have been doing at our offset sites in and

around Kenny. Unfortunately, our monitoring is showing that the numbers are present but have not changed over time. We are looking at salvaging some of the legless lizards from that site and putting them into more favourable habitat in the coming months. In fact, we have that work currently underway.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question about the dragon. How confident are we that when we release them to the wild they will go okay? Have they had a crack out there yet?

Mr Walker: One of the challenges with all threatened species is that you are dealing with small numbers. As we know, small animals in particular—lizards, small weight range mammals—are susceptible to fox or cat predation or other impacts.

Part of the strategy in any release of a threatened species is that when you are releasing them, you have created an environment where it will be successful. One of the great things about Mulligans Flat is that we have worked out some clever strategies to help species survive. That means initially establishing some small enclosures that keep our threatened species in and allow them to adjust to their new environment, their new home. It also helps reduce the impact of foxes or cats.

In the case of dragons, we will deploy a similar sort of approach. We will put some enclosures out and use them as the home base for these species to effectively migrate out into their habitat. We will also make sure that any other risks—foxes, cats or disturbance—are minimised.

That is why it is important that we have such an extensive protected area network. Seventy per cent of the ACT is in parks and reserves. That is a large area of opportunity for us. We have some very good grasslands that will help look after these animals. While they are growing and while we are keeping them in their nice safe houses, we will be out in the field undertaking pest animal control, making sure that the habitat is suitable and providing and identifying the places where the habitat will provide the best chance of these species surviving.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you.

Minister, in the budget outlook, on page 315, it talks about funding for the EPA. We noticed that it has dropped by a quarter since the last budget, quite significantly. I am wondering why you have reduced it.

Ms Vassarotti: The EPA reports to Minister Cheyne; it does not report to me. It sits outside my portfolio. Unfortunately, that is not a question I would be able to answer.

MS CASTLEY: In budget paper E for 2020-21, on page 12, one of the objectives was to incorporate traditional knowledge into land management practices through Ngunnawal rangers. At page 29 of the budget, you have allocated \$701,000 for this program. However, going to the objective and budget line, I cannot see it in this budget. I am wondering if you can update us on the status of the program and where the funding has gone.

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I am sorry to do this to you, Ms Castley, but the Ngunnawal rangers operate primarily through Parks and Conservation. We also have a ranger operating in another part of government; it actually sits across different portfolios.

However, I am happy for us to provide some information to you regarding the broader work that we are doing in terms of how we incorporate traditional knowledge into our land management practice. It is something on which we have been doing some really fantastic work, and it is work that we want to continue to elevate.

Certainly, through the Caring for Country Committee, which is co-chaired by Mr Walker in his conservator role, there are a range of policy areas where we are looking to draw on that knowledge base in the future, particularly around the Cultural Heritage Management Plan. Mr Walker will be able to provide some detail about what is happening.

Mr Walker: Thanks, Ms Castley, for the question. It is an area in which we have been investing heavily, in terms of our staff time and activity. The parliamentary agreement talks to employing multiple positions and roles to build capacity. Across the directorate, approximately four per cent of our staff identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including in different roles.

Recently, we have recruited three new positions. There is a new position in another portfolio—water space. We have a water policy officer who will deal with cultural flows and cultural connections to water. We have appointed a Ngunnawal man to our conservation research and evaluation team, to bring traditional ecological knowledge into the Western science space and to facilitate engagement through our science and conservation research team. We have another person starting in our natural resource management area; they have not yet started. We currently have a number of recruitment actions in play as well.

What all of that signals is that we are building a very strong relationship with our traditional custodians. The Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee is the guiding voice for us in that space. They are providing direction to us on how we look after country and recognise country, and the values from a traditional custodian perspective.

That includes areas of work around cultural burning—having clear objectives defined and established by Ngunnawal people. It means looking at, for example, when we reintroduce a baby dragon, it being an opportunity for Ngunnawal people to welcome that dragon back onto country. We have done that on a number of occasions for other threatened species. It is like an acknowledgement of country; it is welcoming back these species that have been lost. That is something that has grabbed the community's interest, as you would imagine.

You will also see that in one of our pieces of strategy, the Mulligans strategy; we are looking to improve and enhance the ecological systems in Mulligans. We have worked very closely with the Ngunnawal community on the right language and the right messaging in that space.

There are a number of other cross-environment, heritage and water activities that are

undertaken jointly with the traditional custodians. We will continue to highlight those through various events that are coming up, particularly with the opening of a new reserve at Namarag, which is Ngunnawal for “wattle”. That again provides a great demonstration of our relationship with the Ngunnawal community.

We also have some procurement commitments in terms of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. As a directorate we are continuing to pursue that. That means supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses to achieve outcomes from their perspective.

Yesterday we met with the representatives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, and continue to build a strong working relationship with the elected body and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. It is an area in which we have taken some very good steps, and I look forward to updating the committee in the future.

Mr Ponton: In relation to the procurement activities, traditionally the procurement that we have undertaken in terms of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander companies has been in the environment space, in the caring for country parks space. But we have an active program to broaden that much more, in terms of the broader aspects of the economy, so that it is not just focused on those.

For example, we recently engaged an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled legal firm to provide some input into some other policy work in another part of the organisation. We are wanting to expand our procurement and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled companies, not just in those areas that you might expect, which is in the land management space, but much more broadly. There is a lot that those companies can offer to the ACT public service and our directorate.

MS CASTLEY: Mr Walker, you said four per cent of your people are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. How big is it—four per cent of what? Do we have a number? How big is the area?

Mr Walker: With respect to our total workforce for the directorate, four per cent of the staff in the directorate are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. We have outlined a target that talks to 10 per cent of our staff being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, which is quite an aspirational target. I hope Mr Geoffrey Rutledge will be able to give an update on the total FTE, to help give some context to that, while I find the additional detail.

Mr Ponton: Before Mr Rutledge does, could I add that, with that 10 per cent, again, we want to be really aspirational there. The ACT public service as a whole has a target of two per cent. We are at four per cent, and we want to get to that 10 per cent. We also want to make sure that that participation is vertical throughout the organisation. Again, traditionally, we have seen some entry-level positions, but I am quite pleased to say that we have people in all areas of the organisation who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, including in our executive, which is fantastic.

Mr Rutledge: It is 23 staff of a headcount of 730—23 staff across the organisation. As Mr Ponton said, they are at all levels, including our executive team.

MR CAIN: Minister, I have a question regarding the announcement of the loss of mature native trees key threatening process under the Nature Conservation Act. This was something that was initiated by the previous Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Minister Gentleman, in 2018. As you are aware, the Nature Conservation Act requires that, for a listed threatened species, a draft threat abatement plan be prepared and that it be circulated for public comment before being finalised. The 2019-20 EPSDD annual report states that action plans have been drafted for the loss of mature trees key threatening process, as well as for other species. Has this draft action plan been circulated for public comment, as required?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Cain, for the question. Certainly, a draft action plan is being finalised. Again I will defer to Mr Walker in terms of the process and where we are up to. As you would be well aware, in the last 12 months we have seen some significant disruptions, coming off the back of the last public health emergency and this public health emergency, which have significantly impacted our ability to do consultation outside public health messaging.

Mr Walker, could you talk to where we are up to in terms of the process? Again, it is a little bit like the air quality strategy; we are very close to finalising this process.

Mr Walker: We have prepared a draft action plan for loss of mature trees. Our action plans cover both threatened species and threats to the environment. As you may also be aware, Mr Cain, there is work going on under the Tree Protection Act. That process is currently also going through cabinet.

We have done our work to produce the mature tree action plan, and we are using, and have utilised, the new lidar data, which enables us to look across the territory and to have greater awareness of the types of mature trees that we have. The lidar data provides spatial information at a very detailed level, and that gives us an ability to understand where large mature trees are. The latest lidar data has only recently become available, and we have incorporated that into the new action plan that will go out for public consultation.

Relating it back to the Tree Protection Act, that process is also live, so we will certainly see a new tree protection bill come forward. That will then enable us to move forward with the action plan for mature trees. We want to make sure that we have good alignment with both of those pieces of work, to give the best clarity for the community around how we conserve trees in the territory, both in the urban landscape and more broadly, recognising the importance of mature trees, both live ones and dead ones, which is around hollow production.

In my role as the conservator, it is about recognising the importance of mature trees that are hollow bearing, and which provide important habitat for a range of bird species that utilise those hollows. I am very pleased that we are making some good headway with those plans and we are bringing a number of things together at the same time. I am looking forward to its release in the new year.

MR CAIN: Since 1 October 2018, how many mature native trees have been removed on ACT public land via planning approvals?

Mr Ponton: That might be a question for the planning portfolio.

MR CAIN: You suggest, or you know, Mr Ponton?

Mr Ponton: What was that, Mr Cain?

MR CAIN: Do you actually know that is where that information is contained?

Mr Ponton: It would be a question for the planning portfolio, given that it relates to development approvals.

MR CAIN: Lastly, has any work been undertaken to—

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, you have had—

MR CAIN: Given that my supplementary was not able to be answered, I think I deserve a first supplementary.

THE CHAIR: All right, a quick one.

MR CAIN: Has any work been undertaken to operationalise tree survey reports that accompany development applications, in line with the requirements of the draft action plan?

Ms Vassarotti: Again, that is about planning processes. My understanding is that that would be a question for the planning portfolio. I would ask Mr Ponton to confirm that.

Mr Ponton: Yes, I would agree.

MR CAIN: Tree survey reports do not sit in any way with your department?

Mr Ponton: Keeping in mind that the planning portfolio and environment are within the directorate, as I understand it, the nature of the question is in relation to the planning processes, Mr Cain. Therefore it is appropriately directed to the planning portfolio. I understand those hearings are next week.

MS CASTLEY: The question does refer to the draft action plan.

Ms Vassarotti: But it asks what the planning process does with those plans, so it is not a question that we can answer.

THE CHAIR: I have a substantive question in relation to injured wildlife. We heard from ACT Wildlife on the community day. They said that currently there is no record kept in the ACT of injured wildlife brought to vets around the territory. Do you feel that there is a need to start recording the wildlife that is injured on our roads, primarily, going forward?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question. It is not something that has been raised with me at this point. So it is not something that I have discussed with the directorate.

Certainly we are very aware of the great work that happens with Wildlife ACT, and that was one of the reasons why we were again really delighted, through this budget, to be able to provide some ongoing funding to support that very important work that they do in terms of supporting injured wildlife. I know that they do have a range of relationships with vets that support them in this work.

I would look to officials in terms of whether this is an issue from a directorate level. We have had conversations with Wildlife ACT and they have progressed. I have engaged with Wildlife ACT very regularly. It is not something that they have raised with me directly but they may have done it at a departmental level.

Mr Walker: As the minister has highlighted, there has been an investment provided in this budget of \$103,000 to ACT Wildlife. That is really to support them in managing the impact of injured wildlife, being road issues or other related issues, including manning their hotline and the like. Obviously we are in discussions regularly with ACT Wildlife, and the issue of recording data and information has not come through from them in this current form.

However, it is something that we can certainly discuss with ACT Wildlife and look at the information that is collected by vets and by ACT Wildlife and start to put some numbers around that and give some guidance around the sorts of issues that we are dealing with in relation to injured wildlife.

Dr Paterson, as you are aware, there are lots of kangaroo and car collisions in the territory and that does form a significant amount of the work that we undertake, where necessary, with ACT Wildlife. We have got very good data and information on that impact. That is available online and you can basically see where, across the territory, those impacts are occurring. But that is, I guess, the level of the type of reporting that we currently have.

THE CHAIR: I am not sure whether this is a question for you or for planning or a different part of the government, but in terms of the Molonglo Valley, for example, a new greenfield area, what consideration is given to the wildlife in the development of roads and planning in these new areas, and wildlife corridors, that type of thing?

Mr Ponton: Can I just jump in there? I was just going to say that that is a key planning consideration but of course we take the advice from the Conservator, Flora and Fauna, Mr Walker, as part of that process.

THE CHAIR: Mr Walker, how involved are you in that process in terms of this issue?

Ms Vassarotti: It looks like Mr Walker—

THE CHAIR: Maybe we will come back to that later.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question in terms of the four-year grants which community groups are very grateful for. I was just trying to understand what the impacts or implications for government from that policy shift are. Are your administrative overheads reduced? How does it work for you as a government?

Ms Vassarotti: I will ask officials to reflect on that element of it. I think the key thing that happens with the ability to provide ongoing, stable funding is that there is a really key benefit for the community in terms of being able to plan and of being able to be strategic in their work. But it also really assists government in terms of us really being able to, again, engage at a strategic level.

From my perspective, it also does shift the terms of the partnership. It is really difficult as a partner when you are always on tenterhooks and not really sure whether or not you will be able to engage in a couple of months. For me, I think it does really shift the whole relationship and I think that that has significant benefits not just for the community organisations and not just for the government, but also for the community as a whole.

One of the announcements that I made this week was the establishment of a biodiversity forum, which is co-chaired by Mr Walker in his conservator role and the Conservation Council, as the next step in that in terms of really recognising the importance of community environmental volunteers as a key partner in the work that we are doing around biodiversity environment protection. We could not do the work that we need to do without the investment of community environmental volunteers. It is absolutely a really important signal in terms of the nature of the relationship that we provide them with that ongoing funding.

I think that, while there are potentially some operational efficiencies and effectiveness that I will ask officials to comment on, what it does is it just changes the nature of the relationship and delivers us all some strategic benefits that go way beyond operational efficiency. But I will pass to Mr Rutledge.

Mr Rutledge: I think you are absolutely right. What it does is just change the mindset of the relationship to a strategic relationship. Actually, the admin stays roughly the same, to be honest, because we are still acquitting a grant on an annual basis. With, I suppose, the nervousness that the minister referred to that comes from the community towards the end of their grant and then seeking reassurances, is alleviated. But we are still administering a grant.

To take a simple step back, I think the yearly funding provided by the ACT government was, as it turns out, in a vain hope that the commonwealth government would reinstate funding that they had defunded some years ago. I think now what the government has done through this commitment, through the parliamentary and governing agreement, is actually just, I suppose, provide the certainty that the community groups desperately needed and that has shifted the mindset of the relationship.

We will still administer the grants and check in and apply the same level of contract management we would otherwise. What we do is we just take out a lot of friction at that end of year/start of the new financial year. The key beneficiary is actually letting the community groups continue to do the work that they do and it takes a bit of friction out on us. But I do not think the admin saving is going to be a tangible one, but a mindset one, which I think is probably tangible in itself.

Ms Vassarotti: Just to build on that too, the other thing that we are also looking at is the administration of our grants programs as well with the environment grants, and there are a number of streams of those grants as well. Again, we are just looking at how we can streamline those, primarily in terms of taking administrative burden off our community partners, just to make sure that they are aligned, they are clear that people do not need to do double the work to try and scatter their chances across a range of different grants programs so that we could be really clear about which sorts of programs should be supported in which sorts of grants but also that the things that we are asking are similar, so that they are not having to do a completely different thing if they are applying for multiple grants.

It is pretty good, but there are probably some opportunities to do that more because again, particularly when we are providing funding support, we want the focus absolutely to be on delivering environmental outcomes for the community and them not feeling that they need to be tied up in knots, writing a million grant applications.

The fact that we have been able to provide ongoing grants means that there is not that same pressure to put in project grants just to keep the organisation going but to be really focused on projects that will deliver great environmental projects; the grants that are supported have always had incredible efficacy but there is that pressure on to have grants that actually support the works that these organisations do.

I think those two things coming together will be really important in terms of operational efficiency and effectiveness, not just for government but for community as well.

MR BRADDOCK: How will that work? In 3½ years time will that mean all groups will suddenly have to come back and be applying for their next four-year lot of funding or is it going to be a feast-or-famine model? How is that going to work?

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly at this point it is a four-year funding agreement. We will certainly be keen to work with organisations in terms of what the next stage of support would be, but I think the benefit of this process is that we are not having it for three months every year. It is a conversation that we should be starting now for what happens in four years. I do not know if officials have any additional comments to make.

Mr Walker: The good advantage of having a commitment over the four years means that we can plan and actually think through the range of options available to community going forward. So it does give us that strength to, I guess, progress work in a longer time frame. Working in the environment space is where we need to focus in a longer term sense rather than just this hand-to-mouth annual cycle. That is a very, very positive step.

The other part of grants is our grant relationship with the commonwealth. It was highlighted that what we have seen here is a shift where the territory is supporting our catchment groups from what was previously Landcare funding going to catchment groups. That being said, the commonwealth is now focused on delivering particular grants that are targeting outcomes and particular conservation work.

Our natural resource management team has actually been highly successful in securing approximately \$2 million this financial year for particular high-priority conservation objectives and outcomes that the commonwealth has identified. That resource then goes directly to support both our operations as a directorate but also rural landholders and community. So we are really bringing in new investment from the commonwealth as well to deliver substantial conservation outcomes.

Mr Braddock, we can certainly provide an update to you and other members on the various grants and opportunities that are occurring across the commonwealth space.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, on page 35 of the budget paper it says that there was \$126,000 of the environment grant money that was rolled into this budget from February. I am just wondering how much was initially allocated for the grant and what happened to the \$126,000 last time.

Ms Vassarotti: The 2020-21 grant was for \$200,000 and we have increased that to \$300,000 from 2021-22. There have not been any grants rolled over. There may have been milestones in terms of where the grants were being allocated, and that would probably be what has happened. But again I will just ask Mr Rutledge to confirm.

Mr Rutledge: Yes, that is right. Grants have been awarded but not yet acquitted, or delivered, to the groups. Then we have had new money in this budget. Actually no, we will talk about heritage later. They were grants that were announced and awarded but the community groups had not yet signed up for them.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, it has been fully allocated.

MS CASTLEY: What percentage of applications are successful?

Ms Vassarotti: It is a really good question and it is one of the reasons why we are really keen to increase the funding level for grants because it had not actually been increased since it started, I think, in the 1990s. My understanding—again I will seek clarification that my understanding is correct—is that they have been significantly oversubscribed. It was something in the realm of 400 per cent. We could have increased the allocated money by 400 per cent.

There were a significant number of grants that were not successful. And this was one of the really fantastic things that we were able to do, particularly around the additional funding for this year. We did not have to go back out and ask for a new grant funding round for new projects, because there were a number of very important worthy projects that we would have funded if we had additional resourcing. With the additional resourcing, we were able to do that.

But I will ask officials just to confirm the success rate, I suppose, in terms of the grants and the date.

Mr Walker: Thank you, minister.

Mr Rutledge: Sorry, Mr Walker, before I pass to you, sorry, the additional funding was in the environment grants and there were another 11 projects already that were

seen to be meritorious in the previous round that were not successful because of the oversubscription. The minister, I think last week, wrote to those 11 additional environmental grants. As the minister said, they had already applied, it had been oversubscribed, they were found to be meritorious and then this is additional funding provided in this budget. I think probably for the community groups involved, it was in record time in that I think the budget was announced on the Thursday and I think minister let them know of their success later in that week. It was good. Sorry, Mr Walker, to cut in on you there.

Mr Walker: Nothing further, thank you, Mr Rutledge.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, budget statements E show that there is a total of \$158-ish-million of controlled recurrent payments in the budget and that this looks to fall by 20 per cent over the next three years. Why are you reducing the funding for EPSDD?

Mr Rutledge: Going back to your earlier question with the 12 and the 23, I have now got before me the numbers you were referring to. You were at the top of the page on page 17. The \$157.568 million to \$92.804 million, I think, are the numbers you are looking at there. I will talk you through that number and then I will take you through the rest of the output classes.

What we saw last financial year was a large expenditure and asset transfer of our Healthy Waterways projects. In fact, \$56 million of projects were transferred from EPSDD to TCCS. We talked a bit about that in water. As you know, the Healthy Waterways project over time was about a \$75 million project. It was delivered by EPSDD and then it was transferred to TCCS.

In the last financial year we saw large payments from the commonwealth because that was jointly funded with the commonwealth. There were large payments the commonwealth expended on the conclusion of a number of projects that were then passed onto TCCS. That is that big chunky figure that we saw there.

As we spoke in the water portfolio earlier in the week, the ACT government, with our commonwealth government funding, is supporting a lower level of investigation and some work around Yerrabi pond but we are nowhere near the end of large projects that we saw in the last financial year. That is really a one-off expense that we will only recognise in the 2020-21 year.

If you go below those numbers where we have controlled recurrent payments, there were \$72.5 million last year, and \$76 million this year. That does show that there is an increase of expenditure in the environment portfolio around the \$3½ million mark. So there has been an increase in the environment portfolio.

That said, if we keep following the controlled recurrent payments—and this is where we had the \$12 million you asked about earlier—then there is \$58 million in Parks and Conservations, \$2 million in heritage. In the last year we did not have a separate output class for water. Because of the change in portfolios we have got a separate output class for water. There was a change between output classes 1 and 2, and that was the requesting referred to earlier. We have also tried to separate it, perhaps for the

purpose of a greater understanding and transparency of the water portfolio, and that is a new output class in 2.4.

If we look at the output class as a whole, the total cost, heavily influenced by the transfer of \$57 million or \$58 million worth of assets, under the controlled recurrent payments it shows that, with all the ins and outs of finishing budget initiatives and new budget initiatives, the environment portfolio as a whole is up around \$3.5 million.

MS CASTLEY: Mr Rutledge, you are very knowledgeable, I am sure the minister is grateful since she is unable to answer the budget questions.

Ms Vassarotti: Chair, could the question be asked without commentary, given the question was answered by officials fairly well. It would be appreciated if the commentary is kept to a minimum, particularly when it is really quite unfounded.

Mr Ponton: If I may also just note that, in terms of the financial statements of the directorate, that is completely appropriate for Mr Rutledge, as the head of our corporate, to be answering.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Ponton.

Mr Ponton: And they do relate to the directorate's financial statements.

MR CAIN: Minister, in the 2021-22 budget there is \$2.7 million allocated on new trees to try to reach the election target of 30 per cent by 2045. I reference budget outlook page 216. I have a series of short questions.

THE CHAIR: Just keep your questions succinct.

MR CAIN: That is exactly what I said. Are the trees your government is purchasing seeds or saplings?

Ms Vassarotti: I will just note that the tree planting program does actually sit with the TCCS portfolio. Certainly the conservator is providing advice in terms of the trees, in terms of that planting program. I am not sure if, from an environment portfolio, we can add anything to this question. The tree planting program does sit within TCCS. I think again this is a question that needs to be directed to them.

MR CAIN: In the 2019-20 budget there was no money allocated to prevent, eradicate and undertake containment of invasive plants, animals and diseases. In the 2020-21 budget \$620,000 was allocated for biosecurity response to La Nina weather patterns. In this budget you have allocated almost \$3 million for the next four years to manage invasive species. I can give you the page references for all that. But my question is: why did the government wait till the La Nina weather patterns to start allocating money to manage invasive species rather than carrying out these operations as a preventative measure each year?

Ms Vassarotti: I do not think that that is actually correct. I think that the management of invasive weeds is part of the general operations of the directorate, particularly through the Parks and Conservation Service. However, the funding that has been

provided both in the last budget and this budget is additional funding to specifically respond to the threats that we are seeing through the La Nina pattern. This is on top of the work that happens across a range of directorates, not only Parks and Conservation Services. It would be happening within the land manager budget at TCCS as well.

What we are actually seeing is a specific appropriation around additional funding to respond to specific threats. Again I will look to officials if there is further detail in relation to that. But it is not that there was not invasive species management happening. It is part of general operations. There is always significant management occurring. But this is an additional investment because of the specific issues that are being felt at this point in time. But again I will ask officials to provide some additional info.

Mr Rutledge: You are absolutely right on that. As I have responded to the question Mr Braddock asked, the government will change its resourcing profile to meet the challenges. We have got a difficult challenge at the moment around La Nina, last summer and this summer, as spoken about earlier. But we have core funding both in our directorate, Environment, Parks and Conservation, and also in TCCS. Part of our grant process is also to support development of weed species management. I think what we saw in the recent funding is recognising, as said, the weather conditions of last year and this year, and emerging threats.

As we have spoken about earlier today, that tender-neutral rapid response team is again, responding to what is coming, and that is the new approach. That is the additional measures announced in the budget. But it would be remiss to think that there was no work done prior to 2019-20.

MR CAIN: And the KPI for this program?

Mr Walker: The KPIs are now listed in the annual report, and that will be something that will be reported on going forward in this space. That is a change that you will see in this year's annual report, that we now have a performance measure focusing on the control of invasive species and with a target of output to be achieved.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, where can we get a list of what are considered invasive plants, animals and diseases?

Ms Vassarotti: I would really point you to the fantastic resources that are on the EPSDD website. There is some really useful material in terms of invasive species. Again I think we have talked about some of the really useful tools that are in place in terms of the mapping exercise where not just government but also citizen scientists can actually point to where work is happening in managing some of those invasive species.

I am not sure if officials have specifics. I am sure we will be able to provide you with some specific links to where the information is but it is very comprehensive on the website.

MS CASTLEY: Does this include the new invasive species that you mentioned earlier?

Mr Walker: Yes, the website provides up-to-date and current information including our strategy for invasive species management. We highlighted earlier the great opportunity the weeds forum coming up in November will make. There will be a range of pieces of material coming out of that forum and that seminar. That will build on what is already on the website but if you have particular interests we can certainly arrange to provide you with specific information or specific links to go to and find that information easily.

THE CHAIR: My substantive question, minister, is: could you speak to the programs that are in place to support urban agriculture for individuals and businesses in the community?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much for the question. We have identified that there is important work to be done in the agriculture space, and I think earlier this year I did highlight the fact that we will be working on a new agriculture policy that has not been updated for some time. We have commenced the early work for this strategy, and this will be looking at agriculture in a broad sense, particularly the opportunities around urban agriculture as well from a food production perspective, from a climate perspective, from a biodiversity perspective, how we can support our pollinators and native wildlife—all of those kinds of things.

As I have said, the work has started but we are in early phases. We are absolutely engaging with some of our key stakeholders. Again I might ask officials to speak to what some of those early pieces of work are. But we are looking at quite rapidly getting together a discussion paper to frame some of the questions and to try to identify the opportunities. We will be going out to a range of stakeholders shortly because we are really keen to get this piece of work happening. There are really great opportunities.

From my perspective, there are probably a few objectives: obviously the issue around climate adaptation and ensuring that food security is really important. But there is also the issue around how we create cool spaces in our city and that we support community-based engagement. There is a significant interest, particularly in the urban agriculture space with people engaging in community-based gardening, and also how we can really look at how we support pollinators and the like.

It is probably Mr Walker again to talk about where we are up to with that first stage of the work.

Mr Walker: We are in the process of going through some detailed analysis around what we are referring to as our food and fibre strategy, really trying to make a broad statement that our objects here and our focus of this strategy are in both a rural agricultural context and—as the minister has highlighted, picking up the urban space as well, talking about pollinators—how can we create a food system in the territory that is climate resilient, provides healthy food to the ACT community and is sustainable in the long term. We are really trying to look at a range of different and innovative approaches around food and fibre and what sorts of innovation can we put in place in the territory.

A discussion paper will come out in November which will be the community and key stakeholders' opportunity to engage in a conversation about what they see as opportunities for food and fibre in the territory or for innovative research. The territory has had a long history—and the CSIRO is an example—of providing innovative research to support agriculture not here in the territory per se but across the country. So we will continue to look at how can the ACT continue to provide that sort of support to the rest of the country but also here tackling key food opportunities for community and opportunities for rural landholders to develop a novel agriculture sector that benefits all Canberrans.

It is new work for us. We have had to work to put some new people into this space and get some focus in this area to drive our new food and fibre strategy for the government. It is early days in that piece of work.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about changes to the appropriation on page 33 of budget statements E. Maintaining accountability and transparency of government has some negative figures against that line item. I was just wondering if someone can explain to me what has happened there.

Mr Rutledge: Page 33?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes, about two thirds of the way down. It is called maintaining accountability and transparency of government?

Mr Rutledge: That was an initiative of the government some years ago and that was around improving our open government across government. There was supplementation provided to all agencies to assist them to make changes for freedom of information as the legislation had changed.

Now some of those functions are actually being centralised to be handled within CMTEDD, in effect. Money previously allocated to all the directorates is now being centralised because it is being managed centrally. That is around the ICT systems largely to make not only FOI requests but the proactive release of documents available to all members of the community. Previously money allocated to the line agencies has now moved back into CMTEDD.

MR BRADDOCK: I hope there will be no reduction in the accountability and transparency of EPSDD

Mr Rutledge: No, we will just centralise our ICT costs. That is what is happening there.

MS CASTLEY: In this budget and February's budget, minister, you claimed that you were going to consolidate existing biosecurity legislation into a new biosecurity bill. That is in budget paper E, page 12, for 2020-21, page 10 of the current budget. Can you provide us an update on the status of this bill? When can we expect it?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, you are absolutely right. We are working on consolidating the requirements around biosecurity into a single act. That is a process that is happening. I would ask, is it Mr Walker again, to provide an update on the work.

Mr Walker: The biosecurity bill brings together existing legislation, mainly our pest animal legislation, the Pest Plants and Animals Act, into a consolidated piece of legislation. It also seeks to align broadly with New South Wales and our colleagues across the country. Many other jurisdictions have taken that step to transition from the sorts of acts that we currently have into a broader package that brings together and integrates those two pieces of work. In terms of timing, we have still got quite a bit of work to do in that space. And we look to bring some information forward in the new calendar year and start that discussion more broadly with government.

MR CAIN: In the 2021-22 budget you have allocated more than \$3 million in forward estimates, including \$800,000 approximately this year, to enhance Franklin Nature Reserve. That is budget outlook page 174. Could you break down please the \$800,000 and what it is being spent on?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question. This is really in terms of who manages these offset sites, which is an obligation under the EPBC Act, and is protecting some of these key threatened ecological communities. It is a really important piece of work. This funding will ensure that those reserves will be cared for and maintained.

I will ask officials to go through the specifics of the funding but it is primarily around supporting ranger staff to look after that reserve, as well as to provide some infrastructure to support that area. Because these are threatened ecological communities there will be a need for some ongoing research to ensure the health and protection of some of the species. But I am not sure which official is able to talk to this.

Mr Rutledge: I will just add to that a bit. This is partly in the environment portfolio and partly in the parks and land management portfolio in our parks and conservation service. But as the minister said, what we expect is that we will have three full-time rangers out there as well, which is the parks and cons portfolio. This portfolio will have someone in our environmental offsets team and also our biodiversity policy team to do some of the research behind what we are doing out there.

What we will see on the ground is a new reserve, which is fantastic. But it is a new offset which will become a reserve of the Franklin Grasslands. That requires not only just land management for the purposes of conservation and recreation and managing that but also detailed reporting back to the commonwealth under our requirements under our offsets requirements.

The next stage that I think the community will see that—and this funding will also help us with the final sketch plans for the area—is when we will be taking a landscape plan out to the community and do some community engagement around that. That is about managing, as I say, the different uses that people will want, as well as the conservation research, plus our commonwealth commitment.

This is a new initiative over the four years. It is part infrastructure, part policy work, part reporting, and then full-time officers to manage the reserve.

MR CAIN: What particular infrastructure?

Mr Rutledge: Just signs, way-finding. When you are managing a park, even the way-finding and signs is a good way to start—and paths. What that means is that, when you are managing a reserve you want people to visit the reserve but you do not want them in the ecological or the sensitive areas.

Once you get the landscape plan, you look at that. This is where community engagement has a role to play, and our ecologists have a role to play, to try and work out how people can get through the park, have a nice experience, but not trample over some of our threatened species. That is a bit of a balancing act. What we know when we are managing any park is, if we do not put in paths or any sort of way of finding out, people will make their own way and they will create water hazards, they will create challenges to our threatened species. That is the sort of thing there.

One unique thing in the Franklin Grasslands is that there are actually two big, large piles of soil from previous work, I suppose previous residential work, clean fill or fill, on site. There is also some infrastructure work about pulling that out, checking out the quality underneath and then working out what level of remediation is required. So there is a bit of development.

It is interesting, when you talk about development of a nature park, it is exactly that: the development of the nature parks that we can do to have somewhere where people want to visit, whilst maintaining the conservation values. I think, for the residents, the next time they will see anything is that landscape plan that we will probably have out towards the end of this calendar year.

MR CAIN: And perhaps enhancement of a reserve?

Mr Rutledge: Yes.

MS CASTLEY: Will any of the money be used for volunteer activities?

Mr Rutledge: Of this specific money, there is no specific money that will be allocated. But as you know, when we manage any of our parks we involve volunteers along the way. And this will be a new opportunity. Again this will come out of that consultation, environment grants. And we will involve them. But out of this specific bucket, there is no direct allocation. But I expect we will see volunteers.

Mr Walker, do you want to add anything?

Mr Walker: Yes. Ms Castley, you are very well aware of the Friends of Grasslands. The Friends of Grasslands have been instrumental in securing, I guess, and identifying work in Franklin Grassland. The name will be going forward, as I highlighted earlier, through our relationship with traditional custodians, Budjan Galindji. That will be the name and is the name of Franklin Grassland. Nadjung Mada is the name of the Kenny site. Both have now been provided with Ngunnawal names. And they will be the names that go forward.

Mr Rutledge has highlighted both the biodiversity conservation work, which is a requirement associated with the Environment Protection (Biodiversity Conservation)

Act, and also the asset work will be about the landscape planning and making sure that those important sites for striped legless lizards, golden sun moths, are conserved and protected, while showcasing those values to the community. That means signage and interpretive information. These sorts of grasslands sites are difficult to communicate to people unless you are familiar with them. The expertise of Friends of Grasslands in helping sell, tell, the story of these sites is really important.

In many other jurisdictions, particularly on the outskirts of large urban centres, these sites become particularly important for telling that story about the importance of nature, the importance of biodiversity.

THE CHAIR: Since they are in my electorate I am looking forward to it. We have just reached 11.30 now; so we might switch over to put different hats on as Minister for Heritage. We have everyone here who needs to be here for this part of the hearing. We will move straight into questions again.

Minister, the budget supports activities of the National Trust and the Heritage Council. Can you outline the priorities and programs of the National Trust and to what extent they work collaboratively with the ACT Heritage Council?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question. Yes, as part of the funding allocation through the February budget, we were able to provide funding to the National Trust, which is a really significant community-based organisation that is working to protect the heritage of the ACT. We certainly see the National Trust as a key partner in our work.

The Heritage Council operates as an independent body that is at arm's length from government. I cannot speak on behalf of the council in terms of the engagement they have had with the National Trust. Certainly, from a government perspective, we work very closely with the trust in terms of proactive, shared priorities about how we protect the ACT's heritage.

They are a key collaborator in some of the work that we do, particularly around activities such as the heritage festival, which is one of our key opportunities to highlight the really important elements of heritage in the ACT. I will ask Mr Walker whether there is additional information from an operational perspective that we can share in relation to the work between government and the National Trust.

Mr Walker: Funding has been provided to the National Trust to support their endeavours and activities during the course of the year. That is a program that we have kicked off this year. We have an MOU and an agreement with the trust to deliver particular works and activities. This funding is really supporting the trust in maintaining its function and its ability to deliver the sort of work that the trust undertakes as part of its routine business.

MR BRADDOCK: My question goes to the upgrade of the Heritage Council database. I would be interested in getting a bit more detail about that particular project, its time frames and what it hopes to achieve.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Braddock, for the question. It is a really important

project. Certainly, there is a lot of community feedback, and even internal recognition, that the current website and database around the Heritage Register in particular is very clunky and very difficult to navigate. We have seen this as a really important project. As is the case with all IT projects, they are never simple and they do need significant thought to go in at the beginning of the process, to ensure that we deliver the outcomes that we are trying to get through the process. I will ask Mr Walker to give an update in terms of where the project is up to at the moment.

Mr Walker: You have picked up on the key things, Minister. The heritage database ability to search, ability to link to standard websites, is not functioning in the way that we need it to. That means people such as us, planners and heritage experts have trouble accessing that information.

The design phase is really important to understand, and that is the phase that we are in at the moment—what design we need for a heritage database, and how to use it to collect and store information so that it can be retrieved in the future. We have appointed a project manager who is guiding us in this space and we also have some consultants on board, Nous Group, who will be engaged, and are engaged, to connect with key stakeholders and to help develop the heritage database.

As you would appreciate, ICT-type systems do require some expertise. We have brought in some expertise to help with that and to manage the initial stage, which is the design. Once that design and the key needs of the system have been established, we will step into stage 2, which will see us come back to government for, effectively, the build costs of the database. That is where we are up to with the heritage database, Mr Braddock.

MS CASTLEY: Mr Walker mentioned Nous. Is this a Canberra-based company? Is the project manager associated with them or are they a separate project manager?

Mr Walker: We have a separate project manager. The project manager is within the directorate and has been employed explicitly to do so, and is not connected to Nous. The Nous consulting company operates out of Canberra and we are utilising their expertise here in Canberra.

MS CASTLEY: So they are a larger, non-Canberra—

Mr Walker: They are a larger firm, yes.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, under the heritage accountability indicators in budget statements E, at page 27, EPSDD did not meet the target to send application advice within the 15-day referral. I believe this is one of their KPIs. What effect does this have on business?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Castley, for the question. This is an indicator that we did not fully meet over the last 12 months. There are a number of reasons for this, particularly around complexity. I will ask Ms Jans to speak to it. In terms of the impacts, within the unit there is an assessment of the applications that come in and how to mitigate some of those impacts. I will ask Ms Jans to talk to the detail about that and how that is minimised to ensure that it does not impact substantially on the

work of the heritage unit.

Ms Jans: ACT Heritage certainly prioritises the responsibilities to get advice for development applications. We do that absolutely to ensure that the protection of the ACT heritage is paramount. Whilst that KPI was not able to be fully met, we certainly do an assessment when those development applications come in to make sure that we prioritise those applications where there are known heritage values and where there are potential risks of diminishing the ACT's heritage.

MS CASTLEY: What is the average waiting time for a development application?

Mr Ponton: Ms Castley, that would be a question for the planning hearings next week. If the question is about the average time taken to process a development application, that is definitely a planning hearing issue.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you, Mr Ponton. Can someone explain to me the breakdown of what you are responsible for, Minister Vassarotti, and—

Ms Vassarotti: Absolutely. I am not responsible for planning. In terms of planning applications, that is a responsibility of the independent planning authority. Certainly, under development applications there is a requirement for different applications to get advice from authorities such as the Heritage Council or the conservator. But it does primarily sit under the planning rules, so that is where the responsibility lies. I am not sure whether Mr Ponton has any additional information to provide in relation to that breakdown of responsibilities.

Mr Ponton: I think you have covered that well, Minister. The only extra point I would make is one of clarification. The advice of the Heritage Council is an input into the planning process. As the minister said, the independent planning authority will make decisions against requirements under the act and the Territory Plan, and give consideration to various other inputs. In terms of the independent planning authority, that is a statutory position. The planning authority is the chief planning executive, and that is a position that I hold, and I can deal with this in the hearing on Thursday of next week.

MS CASTLEY: In light of my heritage question, Mr Ponton, you are not able to help me with the answer today?

Mr Ponton: Given that this is an environment hearing; I can give you the answers with the relevant officials at the hearing next week, with the minister for planning.

THE CHAIR: I am not 100 per cent sure if this falls under your remit: in respect of the Melbourne and Sydney buildings, the City Precinct Renewal Program includes a project to continue to revitalise these buildings. Is that a question for you, Minister?

Ms Vassarotti: It is probably a question for the City Renewal Authority. We can probably provide a little bit of information in regard to the heritage status of those buildings and the fact that they are heritage-listed buildings that are required to have a conservation plan attached to those. Any work that occurs in relation to some of the funding that is provided around the city renewal program would have to happen in

line with any conservation plan, and the Heritage Council is enlivened in terms of ensuring that that occurs. Ms Jans, is there any additional information that you can provide in relation to how that process works from a heritage perspective?

Ms Jans: That is correct, Minister. The conservation management plan which is with council at the moment will inform all works to the place, including what the City Renewal Authority would like to do, as well as building owners and tenants.

MR BRADDOCK: Coming back to Ms Castley's question about the inability to meet that indicator, what is the plan to be able to get the Heritage Council's performance back up to that 90 per cent target?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much for that question. It is certainly something that we have been discussing internally as well. The current view is that there is work that can be done in terms of looking at how those applications are processed. We will be able to meet that indicator. I am not sure whether officials have any additional information to provide in relation to that. Certainly, our intention is to ensure that that does occur into the future.

Mr Rutledge: Yes, I think there are a couple of things, and you referred to one. Mr Braddock, I think we need to endeavour to make the 90 per cent. Ms Jans has already outlined how they are applying a triage process to ensure that DAs that are referred are looked after. The database and an ICT upgrade could assist in this. The other thing, though—and we can talk about this a little bit more in planning next week—is the ability of our referring entities, be they the Heritage Council or the Conservator, is really dependent on the quality of the application coming forward from the proponent. If the application coming forward from the proponent has a clear outline of how they have done the pre-work in considering heritage outcomes and heritage values, then that can have a really big impact on the timeliness of our ability to respond.

If the proponent puts forward poor-quality or not-thought-through applications, and then it comes to the Heritage Unit and we have to do all of the research, or we have to go back to the proponent, that has a big impact as well. So it is not all in our inability to respond; there is some onus on the proponent to put forward high-quality applications to assist. To end where the minister started, we are doing our best and we are looking for what more we can do, but there is an onus on proponents to do better as well; it is not all us.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a supplementary question. What would be the proportion of applications that require you to obtain further information or clarification from the proponent?

Mr Rutledge: It would depend on the complexity. I would not want to hazard a guess at a number. And I would not want to single out any proponent for that. What I am saying is that, yes, the higher the quality of the work done prior to the application being lodged, the easier it is for us to assess the heritage values and the heritage impacts of that DA.

Mr Walker: And Mr Braddock, I would add to your point that complexity plays a large part here as well. So you can have relatively straight-forward "simple" heritage

considerations—and I say “simple” in inverted commas—through to quite complex multi-dimensional heritage assessments that require lots of different considerations. So it is not one-size-fits-all. And as the minister and Ms Jans have highlighted, this is about trying to triage and work through those that we can as quickly as we can. And we will focus on continuing to do that.

MS CASTLEY: How many people are working in the department assessing the applications?

Ms Vassarotti: Are you asking a question about the size of the Heritage Unit? Is that the question that you are asking, Ms Castley?

MS CASTLEY: Yes. How big is the team of people that are assessing the applications?

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the heritage elements of the assessment?

MS CASTLEY: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: The Heritage Unit is a small team. I think it is a team of three. Hold on; I am looking at Ms Jans to clarify. It is a small team. They do an incredible amount of work, given the work that they do, but they do it with a high level of professionalism. It would be fantastic to see you at some of the Heritage Festival events, because it really is a bit of an un-tarnished gem in our events program that we will hopefully be able to do next year. Ms Jans, are you able to confirm the size of the team?

Ms Jans: As you would appreciate, FTE comes and goes. At the moment the Heritage Branch is around 15 FTE. However, with regard to our advice and approvals areas, it is four at the moment, and we are able sometimes to supplement that with short non-ongoing contracts at particularly busy times.

MS CASTLEY: In budget statements E, page 35, \$402,000 in heritage grants has been rolled over from last year’s budget to this one. Can you chat me through that, please?

Ms Vassarotti: I assume that this is exactly the same issue that we had with the environment grants. In relation to the heritage grant program for the last financial year it has been fully allocated but it will no doubt be an issue of acquittal. I will just look to officials to confirm that that is the case.

Mr Rutledge: Yes, that is correct, Minister. This is, I suppose, another victim of the COVID-19 health pandemic in that both the community groups and ourselves have not been able to focus and acquit. But as the minister said, the grants have been allocated. The grants have been announced and now we go through the paperwork of signing those grants and deeds. And we work through those with the individual grant applicants.

The other thing I will say just quickly on this point is that with respect to the heritage grants the recipients do an inordinate amount of work often for very small grants. And

sometimes, yes, getting all of them out the door with the various players—often they are sole players—takes some time. But we will work through that as part of Ms Jans' team, so we will rectify that pretty quickly, I expect.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you. I have a supplementary question. How many grants are there for this year and how many applications do you get for the grants?

Ms Vassarotti: We might need to take that question on notice. I am not sure if we have the details. Are you asking for the number of applications and the number of awardees?

MS CASTLEY: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: I am not sure, Ms Jans, if you have that information to hand. We can certainly take that on notice. It is, again, a very valued grants program that we have quite significant—

Ms Jans: Minister, I can provide some data on that if that is helpful.

MS CASTLEY: Wonderful.

Ms Jans: It is a very competitive process, obviously. The heritage grants consist of a number of different programs and projects. In the individual and community grants program we received 31 applications and 18 were recommended to be supported and given money this year.

MS CASTLEY: And was that the only section for grants?

Ms Jans: No; the grants also fund the annual Heritage Festival. There is an emergency fund as well, and we also have the Heritage Advisory Service, which is a free community service for building owners or potential building owners. And the grants fund funds all of those programs.

Mr Rutledge: Just to add to that, the emergency fund—which sounds exciting, doesn't it, Ms Castley?—is not very exciting. It is a tiny pot of money so that if we see an imminent threat or a very quick maintenance upgrade to assist with heritage values—an application might come forward; we might identify it or it might come from the community—we are sometimes able to do small repair jobs. Before you think we have ambulances of heritage officers out there, small repair jobs when we see an immediate need is what that is for.

MS CASTLEY: All right, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I have a substantive question on the Heritage Festival. Last year it looks as if there were lots of events, and I am wondering if you can talk more about the plans for this year's Heritage Festival and if it is adequately funded to run all the events that you want to.

Ms Vassarotti: I would love to speak about the Heritage Festival because, as I said, we always get very excited. We are expecting to be able to hold the Heritage Festival

in April next year. I think that is the date. Early planning has occurred for that. We have a theme for next year which will be the theme of curiosity. As we are all emerging from this very challenging period, I think that is very apt.

At this stage it is around engaging with stakeholders and encouraging people to think about events that they might be able to support as part of the festival. We work with a range of our community partners. We are really keen to see a wide range of activities. There are some events and activities that come up every year. It is fantastic that our partners in Parks and Conservation, for instance, highlight a number of our natural heritage sites.

We are really keen, next year, to see even more heritage events that focus on First Nations issues. That was a really significant and well-attended part of the program this year around. But I think one of the beauties of the festival is that it covers so many different themes. Certainly I learnt a lot by going to events—not enough events, but there just was not enough time to go to the number of events that I would have liked to. Ms Jans, I am not sure if you had anything else to add in relation to the work that has occurred to date around preparing for next year’s festival?

Ms Jans: Yes, we are full steam ahead with the planning for our Curiosity Festival. It will include a number of different activities. Every year we try to make sure that there are different activities to attract Canberra and, in particular, regional audiences. We are working with our community organisations on a kids’ week of activities because next year the festival will contain the school holidays, so we feel that that is a really good process. We are also working with a heritage hotel partner and trying to build those tourism and economic links. So we will be working with Visit Canberra and various other directorates around supporting that, coming out of COVID.

MS CASTLEY: Just going back to the heritage website, the database, I note that you mention we are in the discovery phase. Are we on track and are we on track for finishing in June 2023?

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly our intention is to deliver in the timeframe. With respect to this discovery phase, I think it is really important that we put some resources into that. Our experience of ICT projects is that getting this part of the process right is our best indicator for making sure that the program is delivered within the time and the budget that we have set aside. Do officials have any additional things to add in relation to that?

Mr Rutledge: My hope, Ms Castley, is that the discovery phase finds us at a point where there is an off-the-shelf solution, and we are able to install it and we are ready to go. Actually, that is absolutely our preference. If it turns out that we have some unique need that we have not been able to satisfy through this, then I think we will have to go back to government, and you will see that in future reconciliations. But certainly this discovery phase, as the minister said, is about us learning more about our own business processes and how we can get improvements and then hopefully identifying some off-the-shelf software so that we can just get cracking. That is our intention, so we will see how we go.

MS CASTLEY: I have a supplementary question. In the project management plan,

how much time was allocated for the discovery phase?

Mr Rutledge: The first project took us through to the June 2023, and that was under the premise that we were going to head down a bespoke solution. Now, having considered it more within government, we are really pressuring for an off-the-shelf solution.

Ms Jans: It is much easier.

Mr Rutledge: We are hoping, and so we will spend a little bit more time. I suppose the project plan has been changed a little bit. It took us a little bit longer to get a project manager on board but now we are trying to reset it to try and get an off-the-shelf solution to meet that deadline that you mentioned. So there has been a bit of shift but the deadline has not shifted.

MS CASTLEY: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity, I would like to thank Minister Vassarotti and all officials for your attendance today. You will be sent a draft of the Hansard transcript for correction of minor errors. If you took any questions on notice, you have five days to respond to those questions to the committee secretary. Today's hearings are finished.

The committee adjourned at 12.00 pm.