



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL  
TERRITORY**

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

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

**Members:**

**DR M PATERSON (Chair)  
MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)  
MS L CASTLEY**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**FRIDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2022**

**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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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 9.31 am.**

Appearances:

Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

Lewis, Dr Sophie, Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

Gardner, Mrs Miranda, Assistant Director

Leon, Dr Connie, Project Officer

**THE CHAIR:** I declare open the first public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity inquiry into annual and financial reports for 2020-21. In the proceedings today we will be hearing from the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, and the Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the lands of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today and watching today's event live.

In our first session we will hear from the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment. On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome and thank Dr Sophie Lewis and officials for appearing today. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could each of you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

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

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

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

**THE CHAIR:** I remind you that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes, and webstreamed and broadcast live. When taking a question on notice, it would be helpful to use the words: "I will take that as a question on notice." This will help the committee and Hansard. We will not invite an opening statement; we will go straight to questions.

Commissioner, I note your active engagement online. I think we can often all be at fault for preaching to the converted, at the risk of putting it bluntly, but I wonder how your office is seeking to reach out, particularly through online platforms, to engage with new audiences around environmental causes and actions and tackling climate change.

**Dr Lewis:** Something that the office has considered over the last year is how we reach a greater variety of demographics across Canberra and ensure that they have access to environmental information, as well as access to nature. We do have various social media accounts on different platforms—Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Again,

those are the kinds of platforms that are often used by people who are already quite proficient with environmental information and actively seeking that information. Although we have increased our follower numbers and the volume of material that we are posting to those, they do not necessarily reach a large section of the Canberra community.

We have attempted to provide additional information to specific groups through different means. Over that period we launched our Environment for Kids and Environment for Youth state of the environment websites, which are particularly targeting children and young people. That is part of a more concerted program to engage with and hear the voices of children and young people. That has been hampered, obviously, by COVID disruptions.

We have had a program where we have engaged young advisers in Canberra colleges to work directly with the office. We think that has been successful in providing information and hearing from children and young people.

We also have a series of events that we run throughout the year, where possible, where it is safe to do so in the COVID environment, to hear from women in the Canberra community. They are not exclusively for attendance by women but they are to elevate women's voices. They are attended, generally, by a large variety of women across various ages and who are perhaps new to the space of being specifically interested in promoting and improving our environment.

That is just a taste of some of the activities that we have been running and the ways that we have engaged, against that backdrop of continuous COVID disruptions. If you would like any further information on any of those, I would gladly provide that to you.

**THE CHAIR:** I think I have asked this question before: what about engaging with older people in the community? Young people are pretty engaged in environmental issues and it is of great interest to them. What about your messaging and targeting of older people in the community?

**Dr Lewis:** Again, that is one that we have considered more explicitly since you last asked that question—not just focusing on children and young people but also access to environmental information throughout our lives. One of the key ways that we have tried to undertake that is through our recent environment volunteer report. That is focused on those who are already deeply passionate about and spend time focused on improving environmental values. But we do know that a large amount of that work is undertaken by people who have sufficient time, and there is a tendency for our volunteers to be in the older age brackets. I will hand over to Miranda, who can give you a little run-down of what that project was and how that engaged with that older group.

**Mrs Gardner:** The volunteer environment report that we worked on last year was designed to provide information about the variety of volunteering programs that we have in the ACT. A very important component of our volunteers is retired people, unsurprisingly, given that they tend to have a bit more time on their hands. We reached out through all of the volunteer networks that exist in the ACT, through both government and community groups, in compiling that report. We then specifically

went out and met with people and had actual conversations with them, so it was much more personal, direct contact, rather than everything being done online. We have showcased a number of older environmental volunteers on the website in that report, including one man in his 90s who still goes out and volunteers every week.

That provides a really good overview of all of the different types of volunteering opportunities which are available to all ages in the ACT. I think it is a really good showcase of how age is no barrier to being really proactive around environmental engagement. The case studies that we have included there clearly demonstrate that.

**MS CLAY:** Commissioner, I was interested in your November report on scope 3 climate emissions. What response have you received so far from government on that report and what response would you like to see on that report?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, that is correct; in November we delivered our scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions investigation to Minister Vassarotti. That was tabled in November. We are awaiting the formal government response to our recommendations in that report. There is a six-month time frame for delivery, so we are still some months from expecting the formal response to those 12 recommendations that we outlined in that report.

My hope would be that all of those are accepted and implemented, but we will have to wait and see how those are received. We have had significant engagement with stakeholders since that was delivered. We have offered briefings to various organisations. Several of those are scheduled. We have provided briefings to Icon Water, the Housing Industry Association and various key stakeholders who represent sectors that have a large scope 3 greenhouse gas emission footprint for ACT accounts.

**MS CLAY:** That report found that we have quite mature work in Canberra on scope 1 and scope 2 emissions, we have a very well-structured inventory that follows global accounting guidelines and we have quite far advanced policy and legislation; we are tracking well on that. But scope 3 is brand new for us. That report found that our scope 3 emissions are 16 times higher than our scope 1 and scope 2 emissions; is that right?

**Dr Lewis:** I would have to do the conversion in terms of 16 per cent higher, but we did find that 94 per cent of our total emissions in the ACT fell into the scope 3 tranche. By way of background for the rest of the committee, in case they have not had a chance to review the whole report, because it is quite lengthy, the standard international framework for reporting on greenhouse gas emissions includes only scope 1 and scope 2 emissions. That is the standard UN framework convention approach to accounting and pledging reductions in our greenhouse gas emissions target. When you hear a jurisdiction say, “We’re going to hit net zero by 2045,” or by 2050 or 2060, they are scope 1 and scope 2 emissions.

Our report looked into the composition and quantity of greenhouse gas emissions that are being released because of activities in the ACT but generated from activities outside the ACT. With our consumption and services in the ACT, what is the carbon footprint of that? We found that 94 per cent of the total greenhouse gas emissions for the ACT came from scope 3. We have highly ambitious targets for scope 1 reduction,

with our 2045 net zero target, and our interim ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We know that we also reduced scope 2 emissions to zero in 2020. So we have world-leading targets for scope 1 and scope 2. Like other jurisdictions, we had not considered what our scope 3 greenhouse gas footprint is, until this report was directed by Minister Rattenbury. We found, when we looked into these accounts, that most of the emissions that are occurring from the ACT fall into this scope 3 category, rather than into our scope 1.

**MS CASTLEY:** I have a couple of questions about the urban lakes and ponds land management plan. On pages 7 and 14 of the 2020-21 annual report, you referred to a special report called the state of the lakes and waterways investigation report. Can you explain to me when it started and when this work was first requested?

**Dr Lewis:** We are quite excited about this investigation, as this is the next one that will be delivered from my office. This was directed by Minister Vassarotti 12 months ago. This directed us to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the state of the lakes and waterways in the ACT. That includes Lake Burley Griffin, Lake Ginninderra and Lake Tuggeranong, their receiving waterways, our urban ponds and wetlands. It is to look at the water quality, and the various values of those water bodies in terms of biodiversity, economic value and recreational values. It is also to look at the management and policies that support the health of those waterways and how effective those are.

That was directed to my office a year ago, with a time frame for delivery of March 2022. Due to significant disruptions because of lockdown, COVID and various other external factors, we have been unable to meet that deadline, and that is now scheduled for delivery in May 2022.

**MS CASTLEY:** What is the process for the special report? Is there community consultation? If so, I cannot see that listed in the report. Can you talk to me about who you spoke with for the report?

**Dr Lewis:** I cannot go into specifics because we have not finalised that report. I can tell you a little bit about the process that we have undertaken. That has involved consultation with various stakeholders within government and external to government. That has been quite a lengthy process. We also have two consultancies for that report. One is with the University of Canberra, who have undertaken the bulk of the technical analysis, because this is a very data-heavy report looking into water quality, contaminants and pollutants throughout the catchment. We also have a report that was delivered that looks at a more comprehensive policy review.

In terms of community consultation, we have not had a significant period of community consultation for this report, for two considered reasons. We did look at that in the early stages of scoping the report. One of them is because of the very limited time frame that we had for delivering the report; the other is because that work has been undertaken very thoroughly to date, and we have all of that information publicly accessible and available for us to use.

**MS CASTLEY:** Is this report required under legislation or is it just for information, for the ACT? At what point did it become the urban lakes and ponds land

management plan, rather than the report?

**Dr Lewis:** I may have misunderstood your question in the first place. We are not responsible for the management plan. We are tasked with delivering a special report under our legislation, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment Act. Minister Vassarotti directed us, under that legislation, to undertake a special report and investigation into the state of the lakes and waterways in the ACT, and that has its own terms of reference.

Those are two separate documents. One is the management plan and the other is a special report under our legislation. It follows on, to some degree, from two previous reports from my office. One was the 2019 *State of the Environment Report*, which had a recommendation that this work was required. The other was a previous report from my office looking into the state of the lakes in the ACT. But that was focused primarily on Lake Burley Griffin and did not look at the catchment level. That report is now 10 years old.

**MS LAWDER:** I want to follow up on your report. Can you explain in what ways the COVID disruption has delayed the delivery of that report?

**Dr Lewis:** From mid-August there was a period of 12 weeks of lockdown for the ACT, as I am sure the committee would be aware. My team has seven staff members. At that time one of them was in the later stages of pregnancy. There were five children under the age of seven amongst that small number of team members. So there was a small team balancing remote learning and 12 weeks of childcare lockdowns, where no child care was available to our team, while working from home. That is nearly three months of a 12-month deadline which was focused on the most critical operations of the office.

From December, several of our consultants contracted COVID and were unable to deliver on agreed time frames in contracts that we had procured with them. In January there was a significant storm in the Belconnen area which directly affected both team members and consultants. When you total up those disruptions amongst our team, and also factor in how they impacted groups that we were working with to obtain information from areas of government that were necessary for compiling this report, you can see the compounding impacts on deadlines.

**MS LAWDER:** Does your office get consulted in the development of the Canberra urban lakes and ponds land management plan?

**Mrs Gardner:** I do not believe we were consulted directly on it, no.

**Dr Lewis:** That was my understanding too.

**MS LAWDER:** When you release your special report on the waterways, will it include a list of organisations consulted in the development of your report?

**Dr Lewis:** I cannot really speak to the final product because we are still in the process of developing that. Usually, we would detail who we consult, but it would not necessarily be a comprehensive list of every group or agency within government.

I cannot really answer that with certainty at this stage, as we are still drafting that report, and it would not be possible for me to pre-empt what is included in the final product.

**THE CHAIR:** My question is on recommendation 16 of your *Implementation Status Report on ACT Government's Climate Change Policy*. I note that you include cycling amongst women and girls as an issue in the report. I was interested and encouraged to see that, because research shows that cycling participation really drops off for girls. Women have much lower cycling rates than men. What is being done to encourage cycling for teenage girls, to have that cohort continue to stay on their bikes?

**Dr Lewis:** Can you reiterate what recommendation number that was?

**THE CHAIR:** It was recommendation 16, that the transport sector is a contributor to climate change—

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, I am familiar with that. I will have to take that question on notice because I do not have a comprehensive understanding right now of what has been done from government. I am aware that there are still big gaps in how we specifically address the needs of women in embracing active transport, but I do not have an answer for you right now.

**THE CHAIR:** No problem; thank you very much.

**MS CLAY:** Commissioner, I am looking up the recommendation number because I do not have it in my notes, but you might have it off the top of your head. I am interested in your recommendation about the social cost of carbon. EPSDD has been identified as the lead agency on that, and I am looking forward to asking Minister Rattenbury some questions about it next week. It is recommendation 12. We have it listed that, with the social cost of carbon, we want to do further engagement, and we are apparently quite well advanced on programs and activities under that. Have you been tracking that progress? Are you satisfied with the progress on that social cost of carbon work?

**Dr Lewis:** Again, is this from the implementation status report, or are you talking about the *State of the Environment Report*?

**MS CLAY:** The implementation status report. I will look for a page number reference while you are speaking.

**Dr Lewis:** We are tracking all recommendations and we have responses to information provided by government in our annual report. Again, I will take that implementation status report question on notice.

**MS LAWDER:** There was an earlier question about education materials and there was an indication that COVID had had a big impact on that. Do you monitor how many times materials are downloaded from your site? What has been the usage or downloads of those education materials?

**Dr Lewis:** We do monitor our social media and website activity—engagement with

individual social media posts, and website hits. Our analytics are not particularly sophisticated. I do not believe that we have yet done an analysis of the Environment for Kids and Environment for Youth websites. That is because we wanted to give them sufficient time to be implemented and used in schools. When we launched them, that was in the COVID lockdown period. After that, term 4 was a mix of remote and in-classroom learning. We are only now coming to the time when we would expect some involved uptake of those into schools. We are planning to look more specifically at the analytics around those children's websites and how they are used, probably towards the end of this term or coming into next term.

We have had informal feedback, and we have had information relayed to us from educators on how their children engaged with those materials. Those qualitative pieces of information coming in have been really useful, and feedback from teachers about what could be improved has been implemented where possible.

**THE CHAIR:** You spoke, in answer to the first question, about how you are engaging college students as well. Can you speak more about that?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes. That was a pilot program that we ran at Lake Ginninderra. It involved a small group of college students who self-selected for partnering with the office. We worked with them to provide opportunities to see what the office was doing, as well as contributing their voices to our work program, where it aligned with those students' interests.

One particular student provided her thoughts about how the strategic bushfire management plan for the ACT could better incorporate environmental values, in addition to its overarching focus on preserving human life and built infrastructure. She also provided thoughts to the office around the implementation of water-sensitive urban design into school infrastructure, which was included to some degree in our submission on school infrastructure to the Legislative Assembly inquiry. That student has since informed me that she has commenced an undergraduate environmental engineering program at the University of New South Wales Canberra. We are really pleased that she is able to take the learnings and contributions from our office into her university work.

**THE CHAIR:** Fantastic. Is that something that you will look to do again—engaging students?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, absolutely. That is a really effective way not only to provide a useful program to students but also to have their voices heard in our work. That program did have some issues that were not just because of COVID. We would like to set that up so that it provides more formal benefits to students in terms of their course credits. That involves working closely with teachers and educators. That has not been possible, given their additional workloads throughout 2021. We hope that, towards the later part of this year, we will be able to look at doing that in more than one school and perhaps create linkages across environmental networks within schools.

**THE CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you very much for your time today. On behalf of the ECCB committee, thank you for your attendance. You will be sent a draft of the Hansard transcript for correction of minor errors. If you took questions on notice,

please provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days of receipt of the uncorrected proof transcript. If members wish to lodge questions on notice, please get them to the secretary within five working days of today's hearing.

Appearances:

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

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

Ponton, Mr Ben, Director-General

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

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

Jans, Ms Edwina, Senior Director, ACT Heritage

**THE CHAIR:** We will continue with the second session of today's hearing and hear from the Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage. On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome and thank Minister Vassarotti and officials for appearing here today. There are a few housekeeping matters to draw your attention to. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and webstreamed and broadcast live.

When taking a question on notice, it would be helpful to use the words: "I will take that as a question on notice." I understand that you have been afforded a copy of the privilege statement. Can I confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications? Great. That looked like a lot of thumbs up. We are not inviting an opening statement, so we will proceed straight to questions. We will just see what members' questions are in relation to both portfolios at the same time, rather than separating them.

Minister, I asked a question last time about wombats and mange. I was just wondering if you can give us an update on the status of this issue in the ACT.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Some really good work has been happening in terms of wombat mange. I think we spoke last time about the fact that we had an internal working group working on this issue and we were working with stakeholders in this area as well.

One of the other things that I can report back on—and I will get officials to speak to exactly what is happening in some of those groups—and one of the additional exciting things that have happened in this space is that last year we were able to announce a couple of grants to some of the rescue groups, as well as the University of Tasmania, to look at some specific treatments and to be able to support that work. We are really focusing on this area at the moment, and it is an area in which I think we are making some significant progress. I might just ask Mr Walker if he could provide a bit of additional information regarding the specifics of that.

**Mr Walker:** Following on from Minister Vassarotti, working groups, stakeholder groups, have been meeting routinely and are continuing to work also with the University of Tasmania in relation to understanding the best way to deliver Bravecto.

That has included a novel approach, which we are just in the process of securing, of effectively using what is known as a paintball gun. That will be used to deploy the treatment to wombats so that we can deliver that treatment to them remotely, without having to get close and capture the animal, which is obviously time consuming and difficult. We are in the process of and have just agreed on the licensing conditions with the AFP for use of the paintball gun.

**THE CHAIR:** Are you able to outline how some of the grants were given and how those projects are progressing?

**Mr Walker:** The grants are certainly assisting a number of parties that are really looking after and caring for wombats with mange. That has been a major support for particular groups caring for and looking after our wombats. It has also helped us with some of the discussions and progress. While it sounds a relatively simple exercise of deploying a paintball gun to shoot the wombats and deliver the treatment, there is actually a bit of trial and error in that process, how best to deploy it. Working with the community, we have been able to assess that and look at those options and have now progressed to making that an activity that will occur this year.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, you have recently commissioned some work and started some consultation on a food and fibre strategy, which interests me. It is a fairly new piece of work. What are you hoping to achieve through this process and what is your moral stance and your timing on it?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you for the question. The food and fibre in the capital strategy is something that we are really excited about. It has probably been two decades since we have had an agriculture policy. We thought that it was a really important time to have a look at this issue of agriculture and urban agriculture, particularly in light of some of the challenges that we know that we will face with climate change. We know that we are dealing with a drier and hotter climate and we wanted to really look at what were the issues in relation to food and fibre.

Given our experience over the last few months in terms of food supply issues, I think that we all discovered how important our local producers were. We were seeing some of the larger supermarket shelves empty, whereas our local producers had a lot more food. What we are trying to do is really look at what the opportunities are.

This is about not just our rural leaseholders, although it will certainly look at some of the opportunities around agriculture in our area, but also the opportunities around urban agriculture as well. Absolutely, we are looking at this in terms of increasing our food resilience, in terms of better production, but we also recognise that there are a whole lot of additional things that come from engaging on this issue, particularly community connection. We are looking at how we can ensure that we are really utilising the fantastic diversity of our community, through our multicultural communities and the knowledge that we can learn from our First Nations knowledge holders.

There is a lot of work to be done. We are at the beginning of the process. We have a discussion paper that has been out since before December. We have been doing significant, targeted stakeholder discussions on this issue, as well as some

public-facing opportunities through a survey. We have got the discussion paper up on the YourSay website at the moment.

What we will do is have a look at all the submissions that we are getting in relation to that and really look at what the next steps are. We would hope that we would be able to identify what additional things we can do as a government. It might be around some regulatory changes; it might be around providing particular support. We will certainly be looking at some of our mechanisms, such as our environment grants, for instance, and whether or not there are opportunities to support some of this work in a way that really leads to the biodiversity and environmental outcomes that we wish to develop.

But what we are really looking to do, as part of this work, is to develop a framework and a strategy to support the work, moving forward. While there will be some specific initiatives, this is really about setting a policy direction. I will again ask if Mr Walker has anything to add to that.

**Mr Walker:** Ms Clay, I think one of your questions was also about timing and how that would roll out during the year. We will endeavour to have the draft plan out for consultation in August and then the final plan completed by the end of the year. As the minister has highlighted, this early engagement is really about seeking ideas and thoughts. There has been quite a lot of community engagement already in that space, meeting with key stakeholders. We have had some 150 people look at our site over the last few days. That has been, I guess, as a result of some additional media that the minister and the directorate have done.

That is really starting to drive interest, and that interest ranges from food and fibre production through to innovative approaches and, as the minister has highlighted, covering both the urban and rural landscape. That is really important because people are understanding how they can provide food opportunities, how they can support food security. With the COVID situation, that has just become more pronounced. People in the ACT are very excited about how they can contribute to that work.

**MS CLAY:** Do we have a really good sense of, or do we have any kind of measurement of, how much food production is going on right now, including the backyard and informal food production? Is that likely to be part of this work?

**Mr Walker:** Certainly not in terms of the informal food production in the backyard. We know that a large volume of our food—and it will always be quite a large volume—comes from outside the territory. Ninety-odd per cent of our leafy greens, for example, come out of Sydney. While we will try to look at ways to reduce that sort of proportion, this strategy is about opening up ideas, trying to identify how we respond to a changing climate and how we build in some adaptation to that. I guess that is the intent of this strategy: to really bring down that reliance outside the capital region.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think you raised a good point, Ms Clay, about what we know or do not know. There was some really useful work that happened, I think at the University of Canberra. There was a 2012 report that tried to identify what some of the key data was. That might be one of the outcomes of the strategy: the ways in which we might

be able to find out more particularly what is happening in informal settings.

**MS CLAY:** Do you think you might look at some of the different methods of food production such as vertical food production and some of those—I do not want to say “industrialised”—different ways to grow food? Is this work likely to look at all the different ways of growing food and which ones are suitable for Canberra?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Absolutely. We are really keen to explore what the different opportunities are, what our key drivers are for this and what we are going to achieve. When we look at vertical gardening, one of the issues with that is that it is quite intensive in terms of water use. I think we do need to look at what some of our key drivers may be.

If you look at a community garden, it is probably not going to be a high-yield producing activity but what we are getting are really important outcomes in relation to social connection and people mixing and learning. There are absolutely opportunities to support more commercial opportunities.

One of the things that we have identified is that there might be opportunities for localised manufacturing of food. We are looking at whether there are opportunities that we can support, as a government, around more commercialisation. The utilisation of land might be something that we would need to do. We certainly will look at the opportunities, but I think we also need to look at our particular context, what we are trying to achieve and what some of the constraints will be. Things like water will be a constraint on what we might be able to do in this local context.

**MS CASTLEY:** With regard to bushfire recovery, it is my understanding that there are large areas of Tidbinbilla and Namadgi that are still damaged from the 2020 bushfire. What work is being done to improve and hasten the bushfire recovery in these areas?

**Ms Vassarotti:** This is a question that probably goes across a couple of portfolios, and I recognise the work that happens through the parks and conservation area that sits within Minister Gentleman’s portfolio. There is certainly significant work that has been happening around bushfire recovery, and in a moment I will ask Mr Walker to provide some of the details of that.

This has been a really good process in terms of our ability to work with the commonwealth. The commonwealth has supported some significant bushfire recovery activities, really focused on infrastructure. I think one of the exciting things that we have seen in the work of this sector is what is termed “building back better”. It is really looking at some of the critical infrastructure that sits within national parks and putting it back in such a way that it is going to be much more resilient during extreme weather events such as bushfires, because we know that these are going to be more prevalent. I look to Mr Rutledge for some of the details of that work.

**Mr Rutledge:** As Minister Vassarotti said, this is largely in Minister Gentleman’s portfolio but, for the interest of the committee, you are right, Ms Castley; there is still a lot of work to be done. We have been blessed with a lot of rain through the La Nina of the last couple of summers. Whilst it is great, in that we would not wish the

alternative, it has made some of the access and some of the recovery work take a little longer, and it is a little harder than we would have liked. The rain has also encouraged a number of invasive species. So it is not without its own challenges.

The commonwealth has come to the party recently. It has announced \$6.5 million worth of grants to help us with that recovery. That will roll out over the next two years. As the minister said, our focus has been on “building back better”, making sure our trails are more accessible, making sure our water crossings are good for both fire trail and recreational use, in some areas, and also looking after the ecology of the fish and making sure the rivers run well. We are progressing well with the work, but I think we still have another two years work at least before we will be able to say that we are on the path to recovery. Then there is probably another 20, 30 or 40 years work for the environment to catch up to where it was.

**Mr Walker:** I was fortunate to be in Namadgi yesterday afternoon. The regrowth and vegetation recovery is remarkable, attributed primarily to the significant rain that we have had. We have seen really good recovery of the vegetation. That will be a great asset for us into the future but will also pose some particular challenges as that vegetation matures. Ecologically speaking, we have done some significant work. Mr Rutledge highlighted some work around pest management, in particular, some weed control. After a fire we get a flush of weeds, and significant work was undertaken to mitigate the impacts of those weeds.

Samba deer in the Alps were also a focus for us. We did some particular aerial control, using technology that we have not used before, infrared-based technology, to target in on samba deer. Our teams across the organisation and our conservation research and evaluation team were instrumental in providing the assessment and the modelling. Our Parks and Conservation Service were out there doing the work to remove those deer. We have got many camera arrays, as they are referred to, set up in Namadgi to monitor the park for things like deer or other animals. As I said, yesterday we were out there talking to the team that were resetting those. They will be active for the next three to six months, collecting further information to really target our management intervention.

**MS CASTLEY:** I noted in the report that there has been a significant decrease in customer satisfaction with the management of the protected areas. How will this be prioritised, moving forward? What are the Labor-Greens government doing to improve this lack of happiness with the park?

**Mr Walker:** This reporting period obviously coincides with when we had significant events—fires and floods—and we had the parks closed at points in time. I would highlight that, again, this is a question for the Parks and Conservation Service and Minister Gentleman’s portfolio. Visitor satisfaction will wax and wane, depending on the circumstances in the territory. Having the park closed for periods has seen that dip. Obviously, as the year unfolds in front of us, the parks are progressively being opened. Most areas are now open and accessible for people. That will see an increase in that satisfaction.

It is important to note that satisfaction is not just about people’s perception of the park; it is also about how they are feeling within the broader landscape. Lots of things

influence visitor satisfaction, visitor perception. Our parks have gone through some renovations—new tracks, new trails and visitors centres being refurbished—but we are also challenged by conditions. More rain creates more erosion and issues across the parks as well, so it does wax and wane a little bit.

**MS CASTLEY:** Do you know of any consultation that the government has done with the education businesses that use the parks? For some, their livelihood depends on being able to access the park and enjoy that environment. Do you know of any efforts by the government to boost business and get it back in there after the bushfire recovery?

**Mr Walker:** Nature-based tourism is a key focus of the government. We continue to look at opportunities to support a range of businesses and encourage businesses to establish and operate across the protected area network in the ACT. We have done some work recently to look at establishing and developing a commercial business framework, a commercial nature-based tourism framework. Fortunately, as Mr Rutledge has highlighted, we have secured some funding to help facilitate that, through the Black Summer grant. That will actually help to improve the relationship with traditional custodians, other businesses and other parties who are interested in operating and developing businesses across our parks network.

**MS LAWDER:** In relation to education and other providers—Outward Bound, for example, and even perhaps Birrigai school—when will they be able to resume their normal activities? Do you have any idea?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will ask Mr Walker to respond to that. The key issue in terms of any of these activities is that it will be based on the health advice that comes from the Chief Health Officer. That is the key issue that is driving access or otherwise to particular facilities. Certainly, from the perspective of the service, I think everyone is standing ready as soon as health advice enables that to happen.

**Mr Walker:** There is no impediment to those entities operating in the park currently. The opportunities are there and we continue to support and participate in activities, depending on those particular businesses' needs or desires. We would always be encouraging those businesses, or those education providers, to engage and discuss the opportunities with the directorate. Again, they can access the park; the parks are open and are free for people. Obviously, there are some—Tidbinbilla being a case in point—that we have a fee structure around. That has also been, at various points, waived over the annual report period because of those closures and other activities.

**MS LAWDER:** So the blockage might be more from schools not taking excursions, rather than them not being allowed into the national parks? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr Walker:** There is no impediment to people accessing the parks. We continue to offer access for everyone into the parks. During COVID, Canberra Nature Park has been remarkable in its provision of nature-based experiences and nature-based health outcomes. People have used our parks excessively. We saw the greatest number of people visiting Canberra Nature Park, in particular during the COVID lockdown periods, for respite—the ability to get outside, breathe some fresh air and go for a

walk. It has been, I guess, one of the blessings that we have here in the ACT that we have such an extensive network of natural environments for people to enjoy and appreciate. They were able to take the opportunity, during COVID, to get outside and go for a walk with a friend, obviously in a COVID-safe fashion.

**MS LAWDER:** Bluetts Block in Denman Prospect has been marked for future development. There seems to be significant community concern about developing that area, given its ecological values. Where is the government at with the possibility of granting Bluetts Block reserve status, and if that is not happening, why not?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Absolutely this is an issue that sits within the planning minister's purview. You are right that there has been lots of discussion around elements of the Denman Prospect deferred area. It is much loved and there are great citizen scientists that sit out there. I might ask Mr Ponton to share what he can, given that it does sit within the planning minister's purview.

**Mr Ponton:** As Minister Vassarotti pointed out, the work that is currently being undertaken in relation to the land known as Bluetts Block is being done through the planning portfolio. But, having said that, we are working very closely, of course, with our colleagues in the environment part of the directorate in terms of scoping, the necessary studies and the like, to fully understand the environmental values of that land.

I might note that people refer to the land known as Bluetts Block. I think people have a different perspective of what that land actually entails. There is Bluetts Block and there is Blewitts Block. Part of the work we have been doing in terms of the community interest is to understand exactly where that community interest is. Separate to that, of course, we are working through the environmental values. That is part of the broader western edge work being done through the planning portfolio, which we talked about at some length in yesterday's hearings.

**MS LAWDER:** Is there any time frame for when these sorts of decisions might be made?

**Mr Ponton:** At this point in time I would not want to put a time frame on that, simply because we are working through understanding those environmental values. We will need to brief government; so at this point I would not want to put a time frame on it.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, I know you personally campaigned on the platform of protecting Bluetts Block. What influence are you having on the minister responsible so that you can provide residents and other groups in the area with some sort of certainty about the future of the area?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Certainly I have been out to Bluetts Block. It is a very beautiful place. I know that great citizen science has happened in relation to that. In relation to my role in government, I think it is about supporting the environment area of the directorate and the conservator in particular. I think there is strong agreement by everyone that we need to do the formal environmental assessments. I think that will be a key element. Again, that sits within the planning area, but I know that the environment area of the portfolio is working on that. I think that doing those formal

environment assessments is really important, and we will be able to draw on the citizen science that has happened to date. Mr Walker might want to add something.

**Mr Walker:** From the evidence base and the ecological information that we have gathered from our community members, there is strong recognition of those areas referred to as Bluetts Block for their important woodland community and associated bird species. We know that our ornithologist groups here in the territory have a very strong collection of information associated with Bluetts Block. It contains very significant endangered box-gum woodlands and also some orchids. As the minister has highlighted, there are some good ecological values.

Recently, through our survey work, we have also picked up some antechinus and some common dunnarts, which are, despite the name “common” dunnarts, not that common across the ACT and Canberra Nature Park. They are not very often seen or present in that space—noting that they are not endangered or threatened but are of particular interest, given the paucity of those species across the ACT.

**THE CHAIR:** There is significant community interest in this and there is quite a bit of anxiety in the community around what is going to be the outcome of these studies. Can you give us some assurances that the community will be consulted and kept in the loop in terms of the progress and time frames?

**Ms Vassarotti:** As you rightly point out, there is significant community interest. As Mr Ponton mentioned, a variety of discussions are happening. There is some discussion that is happening in relation to a block that sits within the Denman Prospect area, as well as within the strategic assessment process, which is a broader process.

Certainly, from where I sit and the work that I can do, we have recently established a new forum that brings together conservation groups. I think the formal title of that group is the biodiversity and environment forum. That is one particular forum where we are ensuring that there is really good connection into government. I know that these are issues that are of particular interest to that group. There is work that is happening through the environment and planning forum as well, which is a forum that looks at both planning and environment issues.

There are certainly some formal processes that are running, as well as the statutory requirements that will be necessary for those particular processes. From my perspective, I think it is about encouraging the community to get involved in those processes and ensuring that they are well informed and they know what is coming up and when.

I recognise that it is a bit confusing from a community perspective. Even when people started talking about these things, we needed to understand exactly the different elements that people were talking about when they were talking about Bluetts Block. We certainly have a role to support the community in engaging on the particular issues when we look into those issues. In terms of the environment portfolio, they are some of the key forums that we will be looking at. Again, I will just ask for some additional info from officials.

**Mr Walker:** In addition to what the minister has referred to, the conservator has a statutory function to provide advice to the planning authority. There are a number of gateways by which information flows through to the planning process, which involves the conservator providing information and advice to the planning authority. The community also has the ability, through the conservator, to provide input into the planning group.

The minister referred to the biodiversity conservation forum. That group is meeting every two months and talking about key biodiversity conservation issues for the territory and what activities and work are being undertaken in that space. I mentioned COG earlier. COG has just released a significant report on birds across the ACT. That report details a monitoring regime of bird species and their importance across the ACT. That report, I believe, is available on the COG website.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I note the really positive, exciting work that is happening within the directorate, particularly looking at the issues of connectivity and the work that we are supporting in terms of threatened species. Gang-gangs is one in particular. These will all be important parts of the evidence base as we look at these issues as well.

We welcome and encourage community engagement on this issue; it is really important. Our citizen scientists are important in bolstering the effort that happens within government in relation to this. It is something to be welcomed. While we have to go through formal assessments in order to work out exactly what we are doing, this is a really important conversation that we should be happy to have with the community.

**THE CHAIR:** Just for the record, I understand that you are welcoming and supportive of community voices, but proactive consultation and engagement on this one would be really good, because it is an important issue.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I absolutely agree with you on that, Dr Paterson. We will be looking at those opportunities to ensure that the community is well informed about how to best engage in those processes.

**MS CLAY:** We had an extensive conversation about the western edge investigation in yesterday's planning committee hearing. A number of questions from Mr Cain and Mr Parton about the western edge investigations touched on the environmental assessments for Bluetts Block. Those questions were really aimed at land pressures; they were aimed at how many blocks will be released for development. We have seen coverage of that in today's paper, so there is obviously a lot of pressure coming from different areas about land use. How important do you think it is that western edge investigations and the assessments for Bluetts Block take a really careful environmental appraisal, rather than simply taking some pragmatic view of land release?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Again, I will look to Mr Ponton, because this goes to the planning area. In terms of the way we work through these processes, the environmental assessment is the first assessment that is done. I think that is a key point in identifying what the environmental values are and working through our obligations under national environment protection laws, as well as local environment protection laws, in order to

identify, in the strategic area, what are the key environmental values that we need to protect. That is the first assessment that we do.

It is really important that we do that, that we identify the things that we need to protect, before we start that discussion about things such as how many blocks we will get out of it. That would be my prefacing comment. Mr Ponton may wish to add something.

**Mr Ponton:** Thank you, Minister; that was a great summary. As I reflect on the conversation at the hearing yesterday, I spent quite some time talking about exactly the things that Minister Vassarotti is talking about now—that is, the importance of working through the environmental work in a logical and systematic way to make sure that we understand all of the values. Ms Clay, you might recall that I posed a question back, regarding those questions to me in relation to how many blocks of land we will have. I posed the question back: how much land will go into reserve?

Part of the work that we are currently doing through the planning portfolio is about understanding exactly what the values are. Once we understand those values—because there will be varying elements in terms of how important the values are; we will work with the conservator and Mr Walker’s team more broadly in relation to understanding all of that—and we can set aside certain parts for reserve, we can start having the other conversations around servicing. As we start to work our way through, we will end up at a point of understanding how much land is even available for development.

It certainly will not be the current western edge study area; I can assure you of that. We already know—and I think we all know in this room, even without doing the studies—that there are clearly environmental values in that area. It is about going through and making sure that we have the evidence to support all of that so that we can then make recommendations to government in relation to those values.

I need to reinforce what the minister said and reflect on what I said yesterday. This is not about moving towards doing this study just to get to the point of land development; it is about understanding all of the inputs and what land will actually be available, if any—I am sure there will be some—for residential development or commercial or community land development. It is important that we understand all of the values.

**Mr Walker:** Just to add to the evidence base, as the minister said, and as Mr Ponton has highlighted, this is about gathering evidence. We already know some of that information and have some good base information to start these discussions, to inform and continue to drive investigations into these areas before decisions are made.

With respect to a couple of the stand-out things—and it is no surprise to people here—grasslands and woodlands on the western edge are of significance, as they are across other parts of the ACT, as are the species that inhabit those areas. If we think about the types of species that inhabit grasslands then we will need to think about how they are looked after and conserved; likewise, our grassy woodlands.

We know and we can predict what sorts of information will come forward. We will

build, with the planning team, the approach that looks to conserve and protect those particularly important species. Things like the golden sun moth are a good example, and pink-tailed worm-lizards—those sorts of things that are known to us to be threatened species.

Bird species are also particularly significant—the superb parrot and the little eagle. We have some great studies around those species that help us to understand their movements, their tracking. The little eagle study shows little eagles going up into the Northern Territory, down into Melbourne, residing in different parts of Australia, but originating from the ACT. There is some great material and a great evidence base to build on and inform the sort of work that is proposed to go on in the western edge. Those things are part of the package of work that is considered, going forward.

**Mr Ponton:** In relation to the work that has been done in the planning space, there are a range of things. Planning looks at so many different things. For example, it is not just looking at that land that might need to be set aside for reserves; the minister, with his other portfolio responsibilities, will be looking at agricultural values. All of those things will need to be considered. Of course, there are engineering considerations. As we move through, there will be transport considerations. Planning looks at so many different things. We need to, as I said, do all of that work in a logical and systematic way, to get to the point of understanding the values, so that we can then make a series of recommendations to government.

**THE CHAIR:** My question is in relation to heritage. In relation to the heritage grants, the largest heritage grant of \$35,000 has gone to a private individual for a private dwelling. There is another private individual grant there as well, for \$20,000. Given that these are very significant grants, who is the private individual and why are they not disclosed?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thanks, Dr Paterson, for the question. I will ask Ms Jans to provide some detail on this issue. Heritage grants are really important grants that work to protect heritage in the ACT. The reality with our heritage in the ACT is that it is not all owned by government. There are a range of assets that sit with the ACT government, the commonwealth government, organisations, institutions and private individuals. We are seeking, with the heritage grants, to support a range of people to take on their role as custodians of our precious history and get that balance right, particularly for very special and unique buildings that might be one of a kind and that need some love and care. The grants are structured in that way.

I will look to Ms Jans to provide some specific information around those grants that have been awarded to private individuals. It would probably be useful, through that conversation, to give a little bit of detail about the assessment process that we go through in relation to the heritage grants. It goes through an independent panel and it is at arm's length from the minister, in making those assessments.

**Ms Jans:** Thank you for the question. As the minister said, the heritage grants exist to support a range of different community groups and individuals to protect our heritage. That often includes conservation works on private dwellings when they are either identified within the heritage precincts or add to the character of a place. These works are often costly, and they are supported by a range of different assessment criteria that

we look for. These are co-funding arrangements, and we make that very clear to all applicants in this particular category.

Those conservation works are intended to make sure that, whilst those places are in private ownership, they are of community amenity as well, and they add to the nature of our city and the livability of our city and our heritage precinct. They are for particular heritage-registered places. I will not talk about the individuals, for privacy reasons. I can tell you that most of the works that get approved are on the exterior of the building, for the reasons that I have just explained—the fact that they are supporting the whole precinct and therefore the benefit of the whole community for those heritage places.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you detail the scrutiny of those grants and how the decision is made to award those grants to private individuals?

**Ms Jans:** Yes, I can. There is a panel of heritage experts within the ACT heritage team. They are archaeologists and conservation experts. We also draw on our heritage advisory service. All owners of heritage places within the ACT have access to that heritage advisory service; it is a free service run by government. We also use it to support the urgency, the relevance and the balancing of conservation works versus routine maintenance for assessing those grants. We are looking to that heritage architecture firm to give us expert advice on what those works are, and the methodology. That is quite a lengthy process, and it is very rigorous.

Our advice and approvals team look at those conservation works, the scope of works, and make an assessment about the relevance and appropriateness of the particular methodologies, treatments and materials that are being assessed, before we actually award the grant. We have a midyear report for that so that we can determine whether those works are going ahead in accordance with the deed—the scope of works and the special conditions in the deed. There is an annual report as well. Those deeds are also set up with milestone payments so that we can make sure that those works are being carried out in accordance with the agreement that those individuals have with government for the money.

**THE CHAIR:** Are you able to table, without tabling the individual names, the co-funding arrangements with those two projects and what they are actually about?

**Ms Jans:** Yes; I can take that question on notice.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, last year I was really happy when the Assembly passed my motion on animal-friendly netting, as one simple way that we can protect our wildlife a bit better. I want to get an update on where you are up to with implementing that and how the consultation is going with stakeholders.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Ms Clay, thank you very much for the question. As I indicated in the Assembly, we welcomed the motion that you put forward. It was really useful to look at how we can protect our native wildlife, particularly the grey-headed flying foxes. It is really important.

We are looking at a range of options. Initially, a key element of this will be looking at

community education and public awareness raising. We are working closely with our colleagues in TCCS in relation to what public information would be important to put out into the public domain. It is about seeing that our urban wildlife rangers, our rural services and other relevant staff have good information and can support that public awareness work.

In relation to working towards legislative reform, we will be doing some significant stakeholder engagement. We will be looking at how we work with media partners. We have already talked about the food and fibre strategy. We think that there is a connection with the food and fibre strategy in how we support people who might be looking at urban agriculture and growing fruit trees et cetera, to ensure that if they are looking at netting they are using products that are much more animal friendly. We are also looking at how we engage with retailers in the community. I will ask Mr Walker to provide a bit more detail about the steps, particularly as we move towards legislative reform in this area.

**Mr Walker:** Obviously, it is important for grey-headed flying foxes and their ongoing conservation, as they are a threatened species nationally and within the territory. We know that they have camps in and around the lake. That forms the basis of key conservation measures, in partnership with the National Capital Authority.

In relation to the ACT, we are in the process of preparing a native species conservation plan for the species. That will be released and delivered this year. In addition to that, we are working with our partners in ACT Wildlife, who support injured wildlife across the territory. We have made available some grant opportunities for ACT Wildlife in recent budget announcements to help with wildlife care when we have injured wildlife.

We are currently exploring with ACT Wildlife how we can provide support for them to educate people, when they go to houses or have bats come in to them that are caught in netting. We see that as an opportunity to introduce exchange-based programs to test whether there is an appetite or interest from the community in exchanging nets, particularly when the bats are present and active in the ACT. That is the remit of work that we have underway and will continue to do in the course of this year.

**MS CASTLEY:** I have a question about the Veolia waste incinerator that is being set up, I believe, in Woodlawn, Goulburn. What engagement have you had with the New South Wales government about this proposal?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Personally, I have not had any involvement, Ms Castley, because it is a waste proposal. That is something that is being managed primarily through Minister Steel's portfolio.

**MS CASTLEY:** Given the potential for long-term pollution, what is your position on it? Could you talk about that from an environment perspective.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Again, waste management is something that sits within Minister Steel's portfolio. The ACT government has a clear position on particular waste management strategies, such as incineration. It is something that sits within Minister

Steel's portfolio. We have a clear range of policy positions on waste management within the territory.

**MS CASTLEY:** I understand. I know that one of the Greens' principles listed on your website is that clean air is a universal right. I suppose I am concerned, from an environment perspective, and I am wondering what your thoughts on this are.

**Ms Vassarotti:** As I said, within the territory we have a really clear policy that we do not support incineration as a waste management strategy. That is something that is very clear. Within my portfolio responsibility, air quality is something that we are absolutely focused on, and doing significant work on, in relation to how we support clean air. I absolutely understand the concerns; we would share them. That is why we have a really clear policy, particularly around the incineration of waste within the territory. There is a very clear ACT government policy on that issue.

**MS LAWDER:** With regard to, for example, the EPA and clean air generally, is there a process or has the ACT government already made a submission regarding the Veolia waste incinerator at Woodlawn and the potential effects on the ACT?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is not my understanding. It would go through Minister Steel. If that was requested, there could be some support from the EPA, but to my knowledge, no. It is probably one we that could take on notice, in terms of confirming that. Again, the EPA sits within Minister Steel's portfolio, or Minister Rattenbury's portfolio, but we can take it on notice to check whether something has been submitted.

**MS LAWDER:** I have a heritage question. It is with respect to the historic huts in Namadgi, and the ACT government's refusal to rebuild some of those huts that were damaged in the bushfires. Why can't we restore those huts as a priority?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. I note that the huts are actually assets of the Parks and Conservation Service, so that sits within Minister Gentleman's portfolio. Mr Walker will be able to talk about the work that was taken on board by the Parks and Conservation Service, as the asset owners, which included some significant heritage assessment and a recommendation. I will ask Mr Walker to talk about that.

**Mr Walker:** The huts certainly do have heritage value. Unfortunately, the fire did impact those huts dramatically. In the context of the huts being burnt and impacted by the fire, they were assessed as to whether it was appropriate to rebuild or promote their heritage through other means.

The fact that they have been destroyed means there is little value in rebuilding them for their heritage value; that has been lost. However, the significance of the site remains, and that will be interpreted. That does not mean that the huts will not be rebuilt; they just will not have the heritage significance of being a heritage hut. Our Parks and Conservation Service team are working with various stakeholders that have a particular interest in huts to look at options for creating a new hut nearby or on an adjacent site, to provide the same amenity, the same service, that those huts were providing previously.

That is a piece of work that our Parks and Conservation Service is really focused on, with our key stakeholders. That type of approach is identical to what happens in other jurisdictions. If the heritage fabric is lost, typically, hut associations and the park agencies work together to rebuild or create new huts, using similar techniques and similar sorts of materials, but they lose that strong heritage existence or recognition in that space. That is the advice that has come through from the independent Heritage Council. We have followed that advice and we continue to look at opportunities for the new huts to be established in Namadgi.

**MS LAWDER:** You mentioned not just the huts but the sites; how would it work to rebuild it nearby? Doesn't it impact the heritage value of the site itself as well?

**Mr Walker:** It is a question of proximity and where it would be placed. With respect to what would typically happen to recognise the site, it might be a sign; it might be some interpretative material that would recognise the heritage fabric, and the heritage connection to that place. We would put that sort of material right at the site, and a new hut would be created in the vicinity, nearby or potentially even in a new location that is more amenable to the visitor experience and opportunity across Namadgi.

**MS LAWDER:** To be honest, I am not exactly sure what might be left of some of those huts, but if there were some viable remains, might they be treated in the same way as the one near the Namadgi visitors centre, whose name escapes me at the moment? There is a shelter built over some of the remains, and some interpretative signs. Is that what might happen with the other huts?

**Mr Walker:** They are options that are worth considering. Certainly, in terms of trying to protect the heritage fabric, whatever remains, there are multiple approaches. Creating a shelter over the top of it is a possibility. With these particular huts, there are examples of similar heritage huts that are still intact. People have the ability to see and understand that heritage. In this case, that sort of arrangement may not be what we go forward with, but they are certainly considerations, and they are used in multiple other jurisdictions as well to try and keep what heritage remains intact.

**MS LAWDER:** Why is it that New South Wales have committed to rebuilding almost all of their historic huts that were damaged in the bushfires? How is it that the approach is so different between the ACT and New South Wales?

**Mr Walker:** The approach is not different; we go through effectively the same process. New South Wales have many huts. Their huts provide significant visitor services. Their huts are for camping and various overnight opportunities for people, or for people just to get out of the weather. If they are heritage huts, they go through that heritage assessment, just as we have done.

New South Wales, like we are doing, then make a decision on how to build a new hut in, or adjacent to, those huts that have been impacted. Like us, they engage with those key hut associations as to what is the best way to build these new huts that represent and tell a story that reminds us of our past and the significant contribution that graziers and others have made across the alps. New South Wales and Victoria are dealing with significantly more huts than we have. They have certainly been proactive and have secured ongoing investment for that work from their various jurisdictions

and the commonwealth.

**THE CHAIR:** My substantive is related to EPSDD training and it is around the very low completion rates. I understand that some of the courses were added to learning frameworks later in the year, but not all of them. A lot of them were online courses, so I do not see how COVID could have particularly impacted that. There is a 23 per cent completion rate under “Effectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees”. That is a priority, yet there is such low engagement and completion.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will look to Mr Rutledge to provide some detail, given that it is corporate services and it sits across a number of portfolios.

**Mr Rutledge:** What you see there is quite right; those numbers do appear low. There have been a number of online and new courses. One of our newer courses is to effectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. As you see, only a few of our staff have done that, but that is not the sole course that we have done. That is the course that we ran in this financial year. We absolutely have a priority of welcoming, attracting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Part of that toolbox is to ensure that our managers are able to effectively support those staff members.

This is an online training course. Some of our staff, our managers, would previously have done other courses on this but have not attempted this course. We, as an executive team, executive leaders, attended a two-day course. That was our whole directorate, including the executive members of the City Renewal Authority and the Suburban Land Agency. There are different tools in the toolbox. I think that in this financial year we will put an additional push on that. I will do some further investigation myself, Dr Paterson, because that is not as high as we would like. But I do not want it to be seen as the sole tool that we are using to try to promote and support our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

We have had some success in this space. About four per cent of our staff now are Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. We have targeted programs at the university level for university students, through the Ngunnawal rangers. Just before the end of last year we ran what we called our Yuuma induction program, which was for seven new Aboriginal staff. That was the first time we had run that induction program. It was so that those staff members working right across the directorate could have an early network. It was also a symbol not just to those staff but to the rest of the community, hopefully, and also our community within EPSDD, that we are making lots of efforts to be a culturally safe organisation. I hope that next time you read an annual report you and I will both see a different number.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Two of the highly recommended courses—I note they are not essential courses—are remote working essentials and leading teams remotely. Given that this is the 2020-21 financial year, these would have been offered to people prior to the significant lockdown we had last year. There are only 20 completions of the managing teams remotely course. Why was that not a priority at that time for staff to engage in?

**Mr Rutledge:** That is not the only course that is run. When COVID first hit, in the

first lockdown, we were directing our staff and our managers to privately run courses. You will recall that there were a lot of webinars through different private organisations. Many of our staff did those courses, and we did a bit of in-house training as well. We all went into the next one thinking, “That’s all over,” but then we thought we had better systematise it. That is why we brought in these two courses: remote working essentials and leading teams remotely. That was so that we could have, I suppose, a better handle on what people were doing.

We get a lot of feedback. Over the whole of the pandemic we have continued to update our website every time we see a new resource. We have quite a comprehensive website. We have updated it over time as different information and courses have come online in response to manager and staff feedback. What we have there is what we have within our learning management system, which we monitor; we monitor the bookings. But, again, that is not the only professional development that we offer. We control the in gate and the out gate, but we encourage our staff, and staff have been taking up other opportunities outside our set courses.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, for a long time we have had a real lack of funding in our environmental grants area. You have actually made quite a lot of changes in this area in the last year, which is great to see. That whole field has needed a lot more funding, significantly higher funds. It has needed longer term funding and it has needed a more streamlined grants system. Can you just run us through the changes you have made and also what review you think still needs to be made so that we are looking after our land properly and getting the best value out of all of the volunteers who work for us?

**Ms Vassarotti:** As you know, we have been looking at our environment grants. They are a really important way to support environmental volunteer organisations, in particular, to do project-based work. We know that they are highly valued. We were aware that there had not been an increase in the value of environment grants for some time, so it is fantastic that we have been able to put in some additional grant funding and increase that value significantly.

We are just about to announce our next round of environment grants. As part of that we have looked at the process to ensure that it really is working well for our community organisations. I was getting significant feedback about the fact that the application process was quite onerous—the acquittal process was quite onerous as well—and there were opportunities for us to look at how we could make it easier for the community. Again, I look to officials to provide a bit of detail in relation to that.

We have looked at our application process and we have halved the number of pages, which hopefully will be welcomed by our community partners. We have also looked at the acquittal process in particular. We have looked at what evidence can be provided in relation to the fact that works have been done. Obviously, this is public money, so we need to make sure that it is accountable and we are very confident that it has been spent on the things that people said it would be spent on. We are looking at ways that we can demonstrate that through things like photographs, rather than other things that people have said have been really difficult.

I will look to officials to confirm the total value of grants that we will be putting out for this financial year. We are looking at the general environment grants and our

nature in the city grants. We will be looking at some of our priority areas—as I think I have already noted—for potential opportunities to support food and fibre in the capital, particularly in a way that supports our environmental and biodiversity outcomes, and, in the areas that we are particularly interested in, looking at how we can support First Nations knowledge of the environment. That will be a priority in this grant round.

**Mr Walker:** As the minister has highlighted, we have gone through a review and have really streamlined the information and process for the community, including the online tools that enable people to apply for grants. That has included some new guidelines that have been produced, significantly reducing the bureaucracy associated with those guidelines and making the grant rounds quite clear. We have an environmental grants stream within the overall program, to the value of \$280,000 for the year ahead. The nature in the city grants stream is about the urban biodiversity space and looking at opportunities for rewilding and connections across the urban footprint. There is a small stream around environmental volunteer group assistance that is really about trying to support the groups with particular needs that they have in terms of their administration.

The acquittal process is one area that the community have also told us they are keen to see become easier and less onerous. Acknowledging that we still have to acquit grants and do that appropriately within the context of government, we have certainly looked at ways where information can be provided around the acquittals. That has all been described in the new guidelines that will be released when the minister announces the new grants and the grant program imminently.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Ms Clay, you said that lots of projects are longer term, so I just want to make sure that I answer that element of the question. We look at environment grants as project based. We are absolutely happy to look at projects that are milestones and might build on work that has happened before. The issue of funding certainty is a really important one. We have tried to respond in relation to the support that we provide to our catchment groups and ACT Wildlife.

As you would be aware, we have now committed to a longer term funding cycle in relation to that, just to ensure that those organisations have stability in their funding and are able to plan and respond to these opportunities that are more project based. The work that we have done to provide the stable funding that we have and the environment grants with more funding will see enhanced environmental outcomes for our community. It really honours the incredible investment that our community puts into protecting and enhancing the place that we get to call home.

**Mr Walker:** The key priorities for the environmental grants for the year ahead include enhancing ecological conditioning and connectivity, particularly of our threatened grasslands and woodlands; connecting people with nature—nature-based health opportunities; nature-based education opportunities; improving universal access; citizen science; and rewilding Canberra, which is establishing biodiverse plantings in the urban footprint, controlling invasive species in the urban area and enhancing our corridors in that space.

Two more key priorities relate to caring for country and promoting and supporting

Ngunnawal traditional custodians in the telling of their story and, in addition, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who call Canberra home being given the opportunity to talk about their culture and their connection. We acknowledge that there are differences between Ngunnawal and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here in the ACT.

The final priority for us is building on the discussion earlier around the food and fibre space, looking at innovative approaches for food and fibre and that relationship to the environment, and how we demonstrate, through a grant offering, good food and fibre outcomes and good environmental outcomes. That is really the flavour of the grants that we will have available. I do not think I am letting the proverbial environment grant out of the bag, but we will be launching and announcing the grants on Monday.

**MS CLAY:** I am so glad that you are letting grants out of bags and not cats out of bags! We have heard today that there is quite a lot of work caused by La Nina with respect to invasive weeds. I know that managing woody weeds and some of that really heavy work with weeds is an ongoing problem for our volunteers, who do not have the tools or the training or the certification. They simply do not have what they need to be able to manage that. How are we supporting the volunteer work to make sure that we are keeping those invasive species down? Have you got the resources you need to do that? It might be that it is not grants; it might be that it is rangers or something else.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Ms Clay, thank you for the question. I think it is a really important question, particularly given that we are dealing with the impacts of La Nina, which is seeing significant growth of invasive weeds. It is a really important thing and we rely on our environmental workforce as well as the significant investment that we have in our paid workforce, particularly through things such as the establishment of our rapid response team, in relation to invasive species.

In terms of getting those connections right, the work that is happening within our paid workforce and the volunteer workforce is really important. It was fantastic last year. There was a really useful forum which brought together a whole range of stakeholders to talk about the issues of how we support work on weeds across different tenures and how we really support our environment volunteer workforce.

Some of the investments that have been made in some of the ParkCare rangers et cetera are aimed at trying to support good connections and ensure that our environment volunteers have the supports they need to do the work that they think is really important. Some of the really good opportunities are in looking at the alternatives to the use of pesticides and other work. I will ask Mr Walker to talk about some of the new investments and how we have been engaging with our environment volunteers, or what we might be able to do in the future, as we look at some of these different ways of managing weeds and invasive species.

**Mr Walker:** There were two parts to your question about volunteers and their involvement in invasive species management. We are very proud of and, I guess, enthusiastic about our work with volunteers. The range of activities and work that is undertaken and supported through EPSDD and other parts of government is substantial.

Having worked in multiple jurisdictions, I would say that is probably the best product that there is in Australia, particularly the ParkCare group. I will refer you to the annual report for some of the details around ParkCare and the various programs that that arrangement has made. We have direct support for things like ParkCare and we have successfully put on staff to support more and more ParkCare groups. Most recently, we have established a ParkCare ranger in the north, to support growing numbers of park carers across the ACT. We also support the three catchment groups through some additional funding and their volunteer contributions.

Likewise, FrogWatch and Waterwatch are some other key programs that we support. We have a very strong network of volunteers, and we facilitate and engage with them to deliver on multiple things, including—perhaps it is not one of their favourites!—pulling weeds and weed control across the ACT. With the La Nina event, we know that that is a big issue.

We have recently put on five biosecurity rapid response officers. Their job is to tackle new and emerging weeds before they become established. We really want to get ahead of the curve here and we know that by going hard, going early, we have the best economic, social and environmental outcomes. We know what will happen if we do not do this. We have seen that, over the last 50 years—this has come out of some recent research—the Australian economy has spent over \$400 billion in trying to control invasive species. So our early intervention is really trying to get in front of that.

I will use African lovegrass as a simple example. Large areas across the territory have African lovegrass. If we had nipped that in the bud early on, we would have saved the agriculture sector, the economy and the environment from that invasive species. So this new group of people are really about trying to get in early, hard, to eradicate those new things that emerge, particularly under the influence of climate change. They then hand over that responsibility to the land manager.

Our land managers, with our volunteers, are an ongoing group of resources—whether that be farmers, Parks and Conservation rangers or Transport Canberra and City Services rangers taking on that ongoing role. The key role for the community today is in managing invasive species. Yes, of course, they can pull them, or undertake weed control using a range of different integrated approaches, but the key role that we are really reaching out to community on now is in early spotting and identification of new things that are coming up and encouraging community to get in touch with us about those new incursions so that we can eradicate them.

With the high level of expertise across our staff and, more importantly, across the ACT community, we are seeing the community saying, “I think there is such and such weed there, or such and such pest animal there,” and we are able to then go and investigate, understand if it is a significant threat and eradicate it, or put in processes to manage it subsequently. It is a hand-in-glove approach, where we all have a significant role to play in how we respond to the increasing biosecurity incursions into the territory.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MS LAWDER:** I note that we have talked about the approach to biodiversity from weeds. We have had in the past serrated tussock, African lovegrass, Chilean fireweed and many others. You just said that going hard and going early is the best way to eradicate the new and emerging invasive species. Are you basically admitting that it is too late for some of the other ones and that we did not do enough to manage them early on?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think the reality is that we have a range of invasive species that we need to manage and, depending on where we are at in relation to those invasive species, there will be different management strategies. We have a key focus at the moment—particularly given the fact that our climate is changing but we are also managing the impacts of La Nina—on making sure that we are not seeing any significant new invasive species take hold. That is certainly one of the key reasons that we have invested significantly in relation to this rapid response team that will bolster the investment that has already happened across many years. It is the bread and butter of many of our landowners to respond to the issues of invasive species. Again, I might look to Mr Walker to provide a bit more detail.

**Mr Walker:** Thanks, Ms Lawder. Very good question. I think what we are saying here is that the best approach to eradicate species before they become established is through rapid and early intervention. Where species have become established, our approach switches to the key values that may be impacted by those particular species. In areas that have highly threatened species or particular threatened values, we would focus our energy and effort there to contain those invasive species, keep them away from those areas. That forms the basis of that second tier of strategy. We ask: how do we protect key areas, whether they be for agriculture purposes or for biodiversity? Then we have areas where their higher value would be treated, and that forms the focus.

The third part is that we know that we have a large number of weeds or pest animals where we are trying to contain the spread. The approach there is really a containment one. When we see them jump over the line, so to speak—it is not always that simple—we move to control them outside of that infested area, and then progressively, over time, we bring that in.

**MS LAWDER:** How is it different now that you are doing rapid response? Are you saying, basically, that you did not do rapid response before?

**Mr Walker:** I am saying we have new investments to really target that, and we have an active community that is helping us do that. That is, I guess, the great step forward that we have made. We still have staff doing that. What we are highlighting here is that, with the onset of climate change, we need to invest more, and we have.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** I have a question about koalas. We know that they were recently listed as endangered species in several states and territories, including the ACT. I am just wondering, given that we do have 70 per cent of the ACT as protected parks and reserves, why are koalas endangered here? Do we not have many of them?

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really good question. The listing of koalas as endangered was a national process that looked at koalas down the east coast of Australia, focusing primarily on Queensland, New South Wales and the ACT. Currently in the ACT we do not have any resident populations of koalas that we know of, but koalas have been spotted, primarily coming over the New South Wales border in Namadgi. There has been some really good work happening with First Nations custodians on a monitoring program in relation to that.

As you know, with 70 per cent of our land mass in reserves, we are really well placed to protect koala habitat, because all of the habitat is already in reserves. Across the nation, the biggest threat to koalas is loss of habitat. In other jurisdictions that is under threat from development. So we are in a really good place. We do have a captive population in Tidbinbilla, but in terms of our understanding, while many decades ago there may have been koalas in this region, we have not actually had resident wild koala populations for many decades. I will just ask officials if I have missed anything.

**Mr Walker:** No; the minister has covered it exceptionally well. For the ACT, we have the odd koala that walks into the territory here and there, but we do not have resident populations, despite us having a large area of the ACT in reserves. That is a really good thing, obviously, but in the context of koalas we do not have that population. I would highlight that we have been a contributor to the national recovery program and support the listing that was announced the other day. Across Australia we have different populations of koalas. A significant number were impacted by the fire events, and that has really triggered the listing at the commonwealth level.

In Victoria, koalas have actually been breeding extremely well, and a large number of relocations have occurred with koalas in the Victorian context. Founder populations have been established from Phillip Island through to Mount Eccles, to Framlingham and to other sites across Victoria. So koalas, in some parts of the country, are in good shape and in other parts they have been impacted by fires and loss of habitat.

**MS CASTLEY:** In Victoria they are moving them around. What are we doing actively? What is your government doing to get a population happening here in Canberra?

**Mr Walker:** There is no active intervention to bring koalas into the territory. As the minister has highlighted, we have a monitoring program occurring with the Ngunnawal community, just to keep an eye out if koalas are coming into the territory. The fact that we are well vegetated and have good places for koalas to live is a good thing, and if they come in and decide to set up home then we will certainly welcome them and open our doors.

**MS CASTLEY:** In the annual report it talks about protecting the endangered species funding initiative. Where is that money being pointed to?

**Mr Rutledge:** Sorry, Ms Castley, what is the reference in the annual report?

**MS CASTLEY:** Page 186, I believe, if I have got my notes here right—protecting endangered species funding.

**Mr Rutledge:** We will just take one moment, Ms Castley.

**MS CASTLEY:** I am happy if you want to take that on notice, just to provide some detail around it.

**Mr Rutledge:** Ms Castley, to keep the committee running, why don't we take that on notice and we will get back to you on that one.

**MS CASTLEY:** Thank you.

**Ms Vassarotti:** It points to the fact that there is a range of threatened species work that is operating, primarily through the work that happens at Tidbinbilla, as well as Mulligans Flat. I know that we have talked in the past about programs such as the earless dragon enclosure that we established in Tidbinbilla. There is extensive work happening in Mulligans Flat in terms of supporting the reintroduction of species such as bettongs and quolls. We will certainly check the programs that are specifically targeted through that funding, but there are a range of research activities that have been operating, particularly around threatened species that are unique and precious to this local environment.

**Mr Rutledge:** Off the top of my head, I think it is the brush-tailed rock wallaby that has that particular funding. But, as I said, to keep the committee moving we will get back to you on that specific question.

**MS CASTLEY:** Thank you.

**MS LAWDER:** Just on that, do we have an action plan under the Nature Conservation Act for koalas? If so, will that be updated, given the recent listing as endangered, or has it already been updated? Or, if we do not have an action plan, why not?

**Ms Vassarotti:** We do not have an action plan under the Nature Conservation Act, primarily because we do not have koalas in the ACT. With the triggering of the national listing, a national action plan will be developed federally. I just signed off on correspondence back to Minister Ley this morning that said that we will absolutely be collaborating with that national action plan. But, given the fact that we do not have a wild koala population in the ACT, contributing to that national action plan has been deemed to be the appropriate response.

**Mr Walker:** Our action plans, both at the commonwealth level and at the jurisdictional level, are complementary. So it is not a significant issue if jurisdictions do or do not have action plans, because they will be effectively the same suite of actions that would be undertaken nationally or at a jurisdictional level.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, I wonder if you have any information on the woodland learning centre in Throsby? Do you have any update on the building progress?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is something that cuts across a couple of portfolios, and I will look to officials for a formal update on that project. I was out at the site just before

Christmas, and it was really coming along well. This is a project that has been impacted by some of the issues that are facing the construction industry—COVID and also material issues—but it is on track to be opened in the first part of this year. Again, I will just look to officials, who are able to comment on that.

**Mr Walker:** The facility will be opened in April. That is our plan. As you would appreciate, a couple of things have meant that the building of the facility has taken longer than anticipated. COVID and the wet weather that we have had have meant that the facility has taken a little longer to get built. The centre is—what is the right term here?—at lock-up stage. The plaster has been applied and it has been painted. The floors have been polished and the kitchens added. It is looking very good. We are at the stage where it is pretty much done. The key component that is left undone is the landscaping, parking facilities and those types of things. It has a good reflection of traditional custodians and recognition of them through that space.

I am very excited that early this year, in April, we will be looking to open the new learning centre, in partnership with the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust, who are the owners of the building, with Odonata. A private entity has also supported that, with the ANU, and the ANU is providing support for the learning centre in terms of running education programs through the learning centre. We also have an opportunity where we will be talking about a long-term strategy for Mulligans Flat around the threatened species work. That strategy has been on the YourSay website. We will look to open the learning centre and we will formally launch the strategy at that time.

**Ms Vassarotti:** We really encourage committee members to come out to the centre when it is open. It is going to be an absolutely fantastic asset and a really great contribution to conservation education. It is very exciting.

**THE CHAIR:** In the annual report, at Conservator for Flora and Fauna, under “tree protection”, it says there were 452 applications denied for tree-damaging activities. My question is: do you think there needs to be more community education around the trees in our suburbs and what constitutes a dangerous tree or a tree that may need to be removed, to reduce the number of applications that are unsuccessful?

**Ms Vassarotti:** I will look to Mr Walker, in his role as the independent conservator, to talk to some of these issues, but I think it would be worth providing a few reflections. I think our relationship with our urban trees and how we protect our urban trees is a really significant issue. As a government, we have been doing quite a lot of work in relation to looking at our urban forest, providing lidar data to support our tree canopy targets. Also, enabling the community to have a tool so that they can see where our trees are and where we might need to protect our trees is really important.

I would agree. I think we need a much bigger community conversation. As a government, we are looking at our tree protection laws and whether or not they are adequately doing the job of protecting our urban tree canopy. It is a good opportunity for us, as we work through that review process, to start community education and community conversation about our trees, about how we protect our trees, and about the role of government and the role of private citizens. I think that is a really important conversation. I will look to Mr Walker, as the conservator, for information on the specifics of that role.

**Mr Walker:** In my capacity as conservator I have a role under the Tree Protection Act, and the services that are provided are through Transport Canberra and City Services. We have a good working relationship and they assist in doing the assessments. What is important to note is that there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for information—some 19 per cent increase; a significant number. There were 2,570 requests for advice and information around the Tree Protection Act, and it continues to grow. I think that, with people being at home during COVID, probably some of those things are coming to light.

In all of the discussions that we are having with people about trees in the ACT, we continue to highlight the importance of trees for a number of reasons—for biodiversity but also for the cooling effect that they provide to the ACT. One of the features that has occurred this year is the development of a new online app that enables individuals and individual houses, or right down to the block level, to assess their canopy cover. Individuals can do that, or you could look at the total canopy cover for your district or for the whole ACT. As the minister highlighted, that is using lidar data. We are currently sitting on 22 per cent canopy cover for the ACT.

It is important to note that trees do go through a rigorous process. We have a tree advisory panel that provides advice to me, as the conservator. That advisory panel is made up of expert arborists who assess the trees that require activity or removal. We go through a laborious process with the individuals to explain why a tree can or cannot be removed.

**THE CHAIR:** I think we have run out of time. If members have questions, they should provide them to the secretary within five working days of today's hearing. If any questions were taken on notice by officials, they have five working days, on receipt of the uncorrected proof transcript, to provide that to the committee secretary. On behalf of the ECCB committee, I would like to thank you, Minister Vassarotti and officials, for your attendance today and for a very informative session. Thank you.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thank you very much.

**The committee adjourned at 11.51 am.**