

ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

Fourth Report — “The Department of Environment and Conservation’s Management of Former Pastoral Leases” — Tabling

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton) [9.59 am]: I present for tabling the fourth report of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, “The Department of Environment and Conservation’s Management of Former Pastoral Leases”.

[See papers 2422 and 2423.]

Dr M.D. NAHAN: In 1997 the Gascoyne–Murchison rangeland strategy was established to address a serious economic downturn in the pastoral industry. The GMS steering group found that the rangelands environment was generally in poor condition and recognised the need for some land in the rangelands to be set aside to form a representative area for conservation purposes. The convergence of these two aims—the downturn and lack of sustainability of the pastoral lease industry generally and the need for an expansion of the conservation estate—led to the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the predecessor of DEC, being given the task of purchasing pastoral leases and rehabilitating these former pastoral leases back towards a natural state and eventually converting them to conservation estate.

Since 1998 the Department of Environment and Conservation has spent around \$13 million, with funds primarily provided by the commonwealth, to purchase 32 whole and 28 part–pastoral lease properties. These purchases combined to total 6.1 million hectares, or about two per cent, of the state’s landmass. It is a big area. Although the policies of DEC to purchase and manage these leases were not assessed by the committee, the evidence presented to the committee supports the policies. Indeed, the purchases were, in general, supported by the pastoral industry. The issue examined in this inquiry was DEC’s management of these leases, specifically whether it appropriately managed the transition from pastoral lease to conservation estate, whether it adequately managed feral animals and plants on new properties, and whether it worked constructively with adjacent leaseholders. The committee decided to undertake this inquiry because of the increasing body of evidence and complaints that all was not well with DEC’s management of its former pastoral leases and that DEC’s actions were having an adverse impact on adjacent pastoral leaseholders. The committee also recognised that the commonwealth and state governments had invested substantial funds in the purchase of these leases, and the transfer of the pastoral leases to the conservation estate is a major tool in improving the sustainability of the pastoral industry.

In carrying out the inquiry, it became clear to the committee that many pastoral leaseholders and properties are struggling and that the industry as a whole faces major challenges, challenges that go to the sustainability and, indeed, continued viability of this industry. Notwithstanding the importance of the sustainability of the pastoral industry, the committee kept to its terms of reference and restricted its consideration to the management of DEC’s former pastoral leases and its impact on adjacent properties. The Liberal–National government established the Southern Rangelands Pastoral Advisory Group to examine the sustainability of the industry. It recently completed its “Review of the Economic and Ecological Sustainability of Pastoralism in the Southern Rangelands of Western Australia”. I urge members and the wider community to read this report; it deals with an important issue. Although the pastoral industry is a shadow of its former self, it remains a vital industry. Most importantly, it manages nine million hectares, or 36 per cent, of the state’s area. If the industry fails or falters, which is a real risk in some areas, there is no other obvious commercial use of that land and its management would obviously fall on the state, with huge costs. It is an important industry and improving its sustainability is vital.

What did the committee find? First and most fundamentally, the committee found a cultural gulf between DEC and the pastoralists. It is as if they live on different planets. To a degree, this is understandable. The cultural differences between DEC officers and pastoralists are wide. DEC officers are university educated, conservation focused, and appropriately so, on fixed salaries with superannuation, and, by the standards of pastoralists, on pretty high incomes. They live in Perth or adjacent city centres and they drive nice vehicles supplied by DEC. In contrast, pastoral leaseholders are generally knockabout types, focused on trying to make a business in a difficult environment, dependent on the success of their business for income, which sometimes is hard, and generally on low incomes. They confront a huge range of threats that they have no control over whatsoever. Importantly, a lot of the capital in these areas, whether it is a car or fences, is clapped out. Differences in management perspective are to be expected. DEC’s task is to convert these properties from pastoral leases to conservation estates, which includes eliminating stock, reducing or eliminating native and feral animals and eliminating man-made water supplies and the infrastructure built up by former pastoral leaseholders. It has converting to a conservation estate and conservation as its focus, and appropriately so. On the other hand, pastoral leaseholders must focus on expanding their stock, feeding stock, getting feed in often drought-prone areas, maintaining water, eliminating

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feral animals and reducing native animals. They have different management objectives. However, DEC also has a number of other objectives. One of the reasons it purchased this land was to help the sustainability of the pastoral industry. It has a conservation goal, but it has a wider goal of helping the sustainability of the industry. Also, it has to recognise that its actions impact on its neighbours, controlling feral animals requires cooperation amongst landholders and funding is required for joint action. Funding is very short in the bush. To manage joint tasks, we need people on the properties. One of the most outstanding things for me is the size of these properties and the lack of people. Many of them are 400 000 hectares with two people managing them. When people are pulled off an adjacent pastoral lease, it substantially reduces the population in that area, and people are key. DEC's purchases were motivated by the sustainability of the industry, and we must recognise this.

DEC recognised the need for a good neighbour policy. In fact, about three or four years ago it put in place a good neighbour policy. One of the major findings of this report is that, even though the intent was there and the recognition of the need was there, in many cases it simply was not followed through. This failure of the good neighbour policy manifested itself in many ways. I would like to go through some of these, not all. One of the directives of the Gascoyne–Murchison strategy was that when DEC purchased these lands, it would sit down with its neighbours and say that DEC is going to purchase this land, some of which is important for the conservation estate and some of which may be better used for pastoralists and to aid the sustainability of adjacent pastoral leaseholders; in other words, “you take what you get”. In some cases, it did this. It purchased a number of part-leases and it did trade and sell some of the leases to adjacent property owners. This was more the exception than the rule. Basically, DEC appears to have gone in there, bought the leases and tried to control them all itself. We did not assess it in full but there was a large amount of feedback that many of the pastoralists had approached DEC, tried to get some of the leases and were knocked back. Right from the start, it set off a bad relationship between DEC and its adjacent pastoral leaseholders. I think this has permeated through the system. One of the overriding issues was that DEC systematically failed to communicate its activities with its neighbours. Indeed, a common refrain from the pastoralists was that they had no idea what DEC was doing about feral animal control, firebreaks and road maintenance. Given the communication services and the lack of people in those areas, communication and cooperation is absolutely vital if these leases are to be managed. This complaint was heard over and again. One of the reasons for this is that DEC officers are really fly in, fly out people. They do not live in the area but live in Geraldton or Kalgoorlie and they come in irregularly and unnoticed, often to look at their estates, and do not communicate with adjacent pastoralists. When the areas were closed, many of them did not leave caretakers on site. They are outsiders, not communicating.

DEC often failed to coordinate its pest, animal and weed control problems on its former pastoral leases with the zone control authorities and pastoralists. As a result, feral animal populations are too high. When officers from the Department of Environment and Conservation go in, they quite rightly cull the stock. The department culls feral animals down to a level that it sees fit, then pulls everything out, but it closes down water sources that are the key to animal stocks. Sometimes there are natural water sources. Sometimes it does not close all the water areas, and its properties have become at times a haven for feral pests and stocking levels, which then infiltrate and infest adjacent properties. This needs to be coordinated. There was clear evidence of DEC failing to do so.

One of the biggest issues in not all but some of the pastoral regions is the large growth in the dog population. This is an aspect of the cultural divide between DEC and pastoral leases. DEC does not need, from a conservation perspective, to have a very low standing stock of dogs. Dogs, particularly the dingoes, are in part natural. When pests and stocks are culled, dogs disappear in numbers. DEC is not trying to raise sheep or cattle for income, so it does not care, but the dogs are an absolute plague on the pastoral leases. It is quite clear that DEC has not invested adequately as a good neighbour in dog control.

We received many complaints that DEC does not allow adjacent property leaseholders reasonable access to its properties to chase and cull pests. In the farming community, neighbours must be allowed, if they are chasing pest and feral animals, to go across the property and shoot them or eliminate them. It is commonsense and good neighbour practice. We received many complaints that this simply was not allowed; some reasons related to whether a leaseholder had an adequate pest control licence and what-not. There was a fight about the level of licence for culling. But commonsense does not seem to prevail in this area.

The committee found that one reason for DEC's lack of adherence to a good neighbour policy is that some DEC officers, even at a high level, believe that the pastoralists are part of the problem, not part of the solution; that pastoralists have spoiled the environment and cannot be relied on to bring it back and improve it. They seem not to understand that history. Even though the pastoral regions and many pastoral leases have been overstocked and the environment depleted by overstocking, much of this through history was forced on pastoral leases by the laws that required them to have minimum stocking rates. There has also, in the rest of the community, been a generational change in the pastoral industry. Pastoralists now recognise the need for environmental sustainability and recognise that pastoralist areas have been degraded, and are putting efforts into improving it.

One of the areas the committee visited was Wooleen station. We met a young man, David Pollock, and his partner Frances Jones. At their own cost, they destocked their pastoral lease. Whilst destocking, they put in great effort to bring it back to a more sustainable state. They were doing that at a huge cost. I got the impression, through the committee hearings, that DEC did not recognise or try to help the growing environmental sustainability awareness of the pastoral leaseholders. To be honest, DEC has a conservation role, but if we are to improve the sustainability of 90 million hectares of pastoral leases, it will not be DEC that does it; it will be the pastoral leaseholders. In this state we need to tap into the pastoral leaseholders to augment and to assist their inherent drive for sustainability.

Another impediment to the good neighbour policy and to effective management is that DEC simply does not invest enough money in the management of these properties. Over the years they spend, out of their budget, about 34c a hectare on management. That money is meant to cover not only initial adjustments such as destocking, water source removal, culling of feral animals, removal of buildings and building new fences, but also ongoing maintenance of the lease, including caretaker fees, baiting feral animals, rehabilitation and road maintenance. As a result of inadequate funding, DEC looks to cut corners and avoid expenditure at all points. For example, DEC fails to pay local government rates or provide matching funds to the zone control authorities. As a result, DEC's purchase of the leasehold has resulted in a loss of funds to the community and the loss of funds for overall collective feral pest management. DEC fails to provide adequate funding for pest management on its own properties, and the hiring of doggers. DEC has also failed to provide funding for caretakers on many of its properties; indeed, few ex-leases have caretakers. Even when DEC provides funding, the caretakers are often funded on the cheap. Payments are not made with cash income or with the purchase of assets, but usually with food and petrol vouchers, diesel for the generators and subsidies for the phones. This results in DEC reducing the number of people on the land and having inadequate coverage. People simply do not have the incentive and capability to manage or even look after or monitor the properties.

One of the strangest things that I identified is that DEC has also at times failed to appropriately manage in a humane manner the culling of animals. The committee found examples of animals being allowed to congregate in search of water and die en masse in a manner that is simply unacceptable. Although I think these instances were oversights and probably caused by inadequate funding and a lack of local staff, they were outcomes at odds with DEC's conservation goals and values. DEC admitted to the underfunding. When asked why; it came up with the rationale, which is probably right, that, "Governments easily give us money to purchase assets but they do not give us money to manage those assets. The tactic we took, and the tactic many people take, is we take the money for the assets. When the problems of lack of management come to the knowledge of governments, they give us money for management." In other words, DEC went out and bought a lot of land that it knew it could not adequately manage given the funding available. That might be a good bureaucratic policy but I do not think it is justified. It is not justified going forward. The task of DEC is to not only purchase the assets but also say, "Give us adequate money for management." Besides, DEC has a big budget.

The committee found a number of other problems with DEC's management of former pastoral leases. One of the issues was the exclusion of prospectors and another was a lack of preservation of heritage buildings and infrastructure. I hope some of my colleagues on the committee reiterate these points. The committee made 19 recommendations; this one I would like to emphasise —

The Department of Environment and Conservation not acquire any more pastoral leases until it has addressed and implemented the opportunities for improved management ...

In other words, DEC should manage what it has. Let us improve those areas before any more are purchased. DEC should put its moneys into management rather than into purchasing more assets. To be fair to DEC, it has no plans to purchase more assets. Recommendation 7 states —

The Department of Environment and Conservation allocate appropriate resources to competently manage its former pastoral lease properties in a manner consistent with its conservation objectives ...

In other words, DEC should put its efforts into managing these things and develop a good neighbour policy.

Importantly, we recommended that DEC pay, and the government match, an amount equivalent to the agriculture protection rates to the zone control authorities. In other words, pay the rates and make a contribution to the joint management of feral pests. That is being a good neighbour. In the context of a good neighbour policy, the committee recommended that DEC coordinate its pest management and weed control programs on its leases with the zone control authorities—that is, work with neighbours to control its own pests as well as joint pests.

Although the committee found deficiencies in DEC's management, it was heartened by not only DEC's cooperation in the inquiry—its officers attended many times and very readily—but also its apparent readiness to address the deficiencies in its management when identified.

I trust the committee's report will serve as a valuable tool in guiding the Department of Environment and Conservation to improve its management and guardianship of its former pastoral leases, and improve its relationship with its neighbours. I trust it will add another tool and source of information to the government to address the importance that low levels of sustainability in the pastoralist industry cause. In ending, I would like to thank the committee members for their participation and thank the research officers.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington) [10.20 am]: I rise to speak on this report as well. First, I start by thanking the committee staff, particularly our research officer, Kristy Bryden, who, because we had been allocated another inquiry, had to carry the principal load of doing our work for us. We really appreciate the effort that she went to. I also acknowledge Dr Loraine Abernethie's contribution to the report and that of our new principal research officer, Mr Tim Hughes, as well, and again thank the members of the committee, who, despite different perspectives on these issues, actually came to a very similar view in the end.

We are talking about six per cent of the area that was formerly allocated to the pastoral industry, so we are talking about a quite small portion of those lands. It was very striking when we went to the Murchison and out past Wiluna that these were areas that once upon a time carried millions of sheep and thousands of people, and now they have thousands of cattle and hundreds of people. These really are lands in transition. The process of moving some of these lands onto the Department of Environment and Conservation estate is part of that transition. My colleague the member for Riverton was very right when he said that there is a cultural gap between pastoralists and DEC. That was most clearly demonstrated on the issue of the lease adjustment process, which was part of the Gascoyne–Murchison strategy. The pastoralists had a very strong view. They put it to us, and I have to accept the position they put, that they felt disappointed by the failure to have more lease changes at the time of the GMS. Of course, one of the problems that DEC raised was that at the time of the GMS many of the pastoralists who wanted to take on additional parts of the lease did not have the money to purchase the lease. They were then left in a position of being the only willing purchaser of these lands. They also pointed out that, for whatever reason, once the land had been transferred to their control it could not then be further transferred to a pastoralist. There was perhaps some misunderstanding all round, and not just on the part of the pastoralists, about how that lease adjustment process might have come up with different outcomes. As the member for Riverton says, DEC does not have any plans at the moment to make further purchases of leases. DEC makes the point that when it reviews its estate, it says that what it is particularly missing in the pastoral lands are riverine landscapes, but it does not currently have any plans to purchase additional leases. If that process were to happen again, I think that there would need to be a procedure to allow the transfer of lands after the purchase of the lease by the government, because at the moment they have to be done at the same time. If a pastoralist was not in a position to participate at that moment, then it was lost.

We heard on a number of occasions about people who had good experiences with a lease adjustment and on other occasions about people who had had bad experiences. In this area there tends to be a concentration on failures, which is sad, because there are so many successes. We have dealt quite extensively with the dewatering process problems on Earahedy station. DEC's management of that process is indefensible. We cannot look at what happened with the dams on Earahedy station and say that the process was managed well. DEC fesses up and says that it stuffed up. However, DEC did the dewatering process in many other places where it worked. It is important to understand aspects of artificial waters. If artificial waters are not removed, there is no point in transferring the lands to DEC management, because the artificial waters allowed feral animals and rangeland native animals to breed above the carrying capacity of the local country. That is because there is more water, and water is the big limiting factor in those areas. If more water is available, there will be more animals; if less water is available, there will be fewer animals. I will come back to talk about that in a moment. There were also a lot of issues raised with us that related to unallocated crown land. Now that DEC is responsible for UCL, many of the issues that pastoralists raised were about not the former pastoral leases, but DEC's management of UCL. There were also issues raised with us about the future lease adjustments in 2015 that again do not relate to the issues of the DEC-managed former pastoral leases.

I want now to head off and deal with another issue that has been raised, and that is the question of the cultural gap. In my view, there needs to be more discussion and interaction between DEC staff and their neighbours. On a number of occasions pastoralists said that they did not know what was happening on neighbouring former pastoral leases. There could be something simple, such as a Facebook page, on each of the former pastoral leases that DEC staff could update, literally from their mobile phones, as they are doing work each day, so people would know that on that day they were getting rid of pests and weeds in one area and that on the next day they would be doing research. If there was more knowledge, there would be better understanding between each side. The other aspect of that is that when we were having the group discussion with pastoralists at Wooleen, one of the pastoralists asked why the DEC staff did not drop a newspaper in when they came around. It is just something simple like that.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: Or a fresh loaf of bread.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Or a fresh loaf of bread, the member for Kalgoorlie interjects. The pastoralists are very isolated, as the member for Riverton has said. These are massive properties. There can be two people on 400 000 hectares. They do not get a newspaper until it is a week old, so it would be nice when the DEC staff visit for them just to throw out a newspaper for the pastoralists when they have finished with it.

There was also a lot of talk about mining companies taking over pastoral leases. I believe it is an issue that needs its own examination because, as I am sure the member for Kalgoorlie is aware, particularly in the goldfields many of the pastoral leases are effectively not in operation now. I am not criticising the mining companies at all for this, because it is fine by me, but the mining companies are taking those lands to hold for mining access, which is fine. Now mining companies are managing these pastoral leases effectively for conservation. We do not really have a clear picture of what is happening there. Another thing I would say is that I think there needs to be an examination of licensing requirements to ensure that there is not an artificial licensing issue preventing pastoralists doing contract work for DEC, because I think the more that DEC uses its neighbours to do work, the better the relationship. We met many pastoralists who had good relationships with their DEC neighbours, but they were probably the ones with better engagement.

I quickly turn to the question of artificial waters. Wooleen station, with David Pollock and Frances Jones, was a remarkable visit. I think the family had been without stock for 18 months at the time we visited. The work that family is doing to try to use their financial capital to rebuild the natural capital they have on the ground was remarkable. No more stunning observation could be made than to drive from Granite Peak station, which is an operating cattle station, to Lorna Glen, which is considered the jewel in the crown by DEC. The level of difference between those two properties is amazing. Lorna Glen is not lush, but it has extensive vegetation, a sustainable level of animals and a large, pest-free enclosure to where they are, I understand, after two false starts, bringing animals from Dirk Hartog Island to restock small native animals. There is also a change in the floodplain and all those great things that have happened there. Granite Peak has been worked for 100 years and is having problems. It is understandable that pastoralists look across the boundary and say that DEC has taken some of the best land out of pastoral production. I can understand that. However, this is an important part of the process of preserving our state's environment for future generations. I would never have visited Lorna Glen had I not been on this committee. On a visit to Lorna Glen, one can see what can be achieved by the work that DEC is doing.

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough) [10.29 am]: I also rise to speak to this report. Like the member for Cannington, I will start by thanking my fellow committee members, and the secretariat—Kristy Bryden, Dr Loraine Abernethie and Tim Hughes.

We had a most interesting time during this inquiry. We visited places such as Mt Magnet, Kalgoorlie, the former leases of Muggon, Earahedy and Lorna Glen, and the working stations of Wooleen and Granite Peak. Many of the contributors to this report travelled long distances to explain their perspectives and went to a lot of trouble preparing their submissions. Both the effort made by those contributors and the hospitality that we received in our travels throughout the inquiry were very much appreciated.

The Gascoyne–Murchison rangelands strategy started in 1997 and provided both an exit strategy for unsustainable businesses and the opportunity for the Department of Environment and Conservation to acquire a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. A total of \$13.45 million from both state and commonwealth governments was put into purchasing these leases between 1998 and 2004, when the funding finished.

There is no doubt in my mind that the poor relationships between the pastoralists and DEC started with the purchase process. The concept appeared to be to purchase representative ecosystems. However, in practice the actions of DEC appear to have been viewed as opportunistic to the extent that some pastoralists termed DEC as being quite predatory in its behaviour. It did appear that the scheme had not been effectively researched and implemented in some cases. In some cases the problem purchases do not appear to have been strategic, and it is likely that DEC could have had better representative access to more ecosystem types if there had been a greater willingness to negotiate with pastoralists.

There were also opportunities that were not explored or progressed to work with pastoralists to conserve areas of their leases. Other initiatives of DEC similar to its Land for Wildlife scheme, for instance, were not explored as an opportunity in the rangelands. This may have given pastoralists the necessary support to quarantine particular spots of biodiversity from grazing on their leases without the need for DEC to purchase those areas. Indeed, this would appear to be very compatible with DEC's objectives, as many of the representative ecosystem types and other systems not suitable for grazing or of little economic benefit to pastoralists are to be found on rocky outcrops. Most astonishingly no comprehensive business plans were put in place for the purchase and future management of these leases. Indeed, the funding allocated to the management of these leases is woefully inadequate.

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Like the member for Riverton, I believe this is more a matter of prioritisation, rather than a general lack of funding to the department. When questioned on this, the Director General of the Department of Environment and Conservation, Mr Keiran McNamara, stated in evidence—as the report reads—that a management plan budget —

...would be desirable, but the history of conservation in Australia generally, and in Western Australia, has been that governments have acquired lands and created reserves generally without a management budget in advance, and those things are addressed subsequently and gradually. There are some exceptions to that. ... But as a general rule, there has not been a budget increase in advance of the acquisition of land for conservation.

This is an alarming statement by a government department. I worry about the implications that this might have for the federal government's marine parks policy if we are also entering into a marine parks strategy in a similar fashion and not looking at a future funding arrangement for management. The approach is very clearly flawed. In my view it is a key reason for the management issues on the former pastoral leases and the other unallocated crown land that DEC manages.

The main emerging issue, I have to say, is the culture of DEC and the breakdown in communication with its neighbours. The DEC officers we met were in the main extremely enthusiastic conservationists and were cooperative. However, there appears to be a refusal to recognise the issues they have with communication and the lack of cooperation with their neighbours; and their ignorance of the breakdown in communication is often amplified by a perceived air of indifference to the pastoralists.

The culture of DEC was probably best described in a more informal conversation I had with a senior DEC officer on a visit to Lorna Glen when the officer expressed the view that it was neither ecologically, economically nor socially responsible to continue pastoralism. This attitude, while not formally expressed by DEC, appears to underlie the attitude of DEC when dealing with neighbouring pastoralists. There emerged an apparent inability of DEC to recognise that, although the conservation objective of the department is noble and valid, the objectives of the pastoralists are equally valid. There was also no recognition from DEC that the acquisition of these leases has had negative economic and social impacts on the rangelands and the Murchison region.

The member for Riverton referred to the contribution of pastoralists to the shire responsibilities of both fire control and road management, and that DEC's exemption to rates puts an unfair cost burden on neighbouring properties in many instances. There is also a contribution to the de-population of these areas that cannot be underestimated. There is an inability to find volunteers for fire services and councillor positions, and the opportunities for community development are severely diminished as the pool of people shrinks.

We were provided with enough examples of behaviour of DEC officials that could be construed as unneighbourly and in contravention of the spirit of the good neighbour policy. In some instances the relationships were described by pastoralists as bordering on bullying. The good neighbour policy for DEC states —

... staff will take the initiative to establish and maintain ... positive relationships with neighbours, local communities and peak industry and community groups.

It was clear that the neighbours of DEC were not experiencing this kind of initiative in most instances. There are definitely instances of DEC having very good relationships with pastoralists, and also instances of some pastoralists not assisting DEC in forming workable relationships. But my view is that, as a government agency, the onus is really on the Department of Environment and Conservation to make an extra effort, as it has an objective on behalf of the ratepayers and taxpayers of Western Australia to achieve the policy objectives of the department.

It was very clear that if DEC chose to partner with pastoralists, it could more effectively and economically achieve its conservation outcomes and also allow its neighbours to achieve their economic outcomes. Many neighbours have compatible conservation objectives. We met Dave Pollock and Frances Jones from Woolen Station. They were working very hard on conservation and restoration, and felt that there was a general lack of recognition from DEC for the work that they were trying to do. These are all communication issues, and I think a little recognition would go a long way.

There is also a failure of DEC to utilise the many years of experience and expertise available to it from former pastoral lessees. For example, Mr Wardle of Dirk Hartog Island has 30 years' experience on that land and continues to remain living on freehold land on the island. He offered his assistance and an inspection service as manager of the DEC estate on the island for two days a week, including pest management. However, DEC was unwilling to work with this option and instead proposed to fly DEC staff to the island to perform the same tasks

two days a week. That is not an effective spend of public money. DEC could easily have relied on Mr Wardle's extensive experience of working in that area.

There was little observance from DEC, as I said previously, of the pastoralists' own conservation objectives. It seems to me that if they got together and worked together on a combined conservation objective, so much more could be achieved. It is a two-way street. The pastoralists in certain areas have some work to do as well.

There are some other issues. The member for Cannington touched on the regulatory issues that basically prohibit the neighbouring properties of DEC to assist in the management of feral pests. DEC demands a high level of certification for its own workers for baiting and shooting than would ordinarily be expected, and does not allow neighbours to cull or bait animals unless they meet DEC's stringent requirements. DEC is quite intractable on this issue. The particular levels of training are completely impractical to obtain, given the isolated nature of the rangelands.

In conclusion, I think there is a tremendous tourism potential in this area. It is a beautiful, captivating area. Clearly, the policy is working in conserving some nature estates. I did really enjoy my time there. I would like to pay particular thanks to David Pollock and Frances Jones from Wooleen Station, and also the pastoralists who made the journey to Wooleen to convey their views to the committee. The hospitality in that area was exceptional and was surpassed only by the breathtaking beauty of the rangelands. The future of that area is quite promising. I commend the report to the house.

MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston) [10.40 am]: In contrast to my colleagues, I will thank the staff first. Without their great assistance, this report would not be in such great shape. Thank you very much, Loraine Abernethie, who is not in the chamber now, but whose early work—she left the committee halfway through its inquiry—was exceptional. Thank you very much, Tim Hughes, who took over from Loraine, and thank you to Kristy Bryden.

What I saw as the main issue seemed to involve personalities, which was not dealt with in the early stages. That led to gaps in communication between the Department of Environment and Conservation and station owners. This was very evident, when one person—we will not name him—came into the town as though he was riding a black stallion and sat above everyone; he turned up only once or twice a year and dished out orders. The communication between him and his staff about what they wanted the station owners to do was far removed from reality. Although they were miles from anywhere, such were the personality differences between two people at one station that they did not talk. I will not name them for obvious reasons. There were only half a dozen of us in a meeting and two people in the room did not talk to each other. That was an example of the depth of the problem. As has been mentioned, when people are driving through those areas, a small gesture such as dropping off a newspaper and popping in to ask how things are going would go a long way towards healing some of the problems among our station communities.

I must say that issues varied from the top of the state, through the centre to the Murchison areas, but I can say that, without exception, we met some very different characters, to say the least, and they contributed to some of the highlights of the tour. Some of the language used dated back to what would have been used in the 1900s and could not be repeated in our world at this end! In saying that, the major issue is firmly the problems with wild dogs. Previous speakers have talked about funding and I acknowledge their remarks about the shortage of funding, but I will not go into that in depth now.

What concerned me was the committee's focus on wild dogs and not on the problem of invasive weeds. When we asked about a species of tree or weed, we were told that they were imported. They were not at the top of the wish list. We have at least started to deal with the dog problem, and I hope they will get on top of it. However, if we do not deal with the issue of weeds now, in 100 years' time the problem will be worse and we will ask: why did we not deal with it earlier? That is of great concern to me because some of the weeds are invasive. They are not eaten by stock but they look good because they are nice and bright and green. Do not dare ask me what they are called, because I do not know. However, the environmental portfolio should look at carrying out some sort of study on the impact of these weeds. Perhaps they are having a positive impact; I do not know. Their negative impact is not something we want to hear about in another 20 or 30 years' time.

Further to that is the issue of water sources. I understand why DEC closed some of those water sources, but what has been forgotten along the way—on this I differ from the views of my colleagues a little, without dissenting as such—is that some of the artificial water sources should be maintained because over the 100 years of their existence, an ecosystem has been built up around them. These water sources have probably been sustaining flora and fauna that could have been lost when the area was overgrazed in earlier times. Some of those water points should be maintained for that reason alone. They may assist also with the relocation of endangered animal species or of plants that are endangered due to grazing in other areas. That would provide a small, certain ecosystem. Another reason some of those water sources should remain on the maps is perhaps to assist tourists

travelling in four-wheel-drive vehicles who are not always adequately equipped for some of the drives they take through those areas. In fact, I met a German couple who had got off a plane in Perth and hired a four-wheel-drive with a GPS, and were relying on the accuracy of their maps. Many of those water sources have been removed. If we are not careful in the way we manage the removal of these so-called water spots from maps—some of which have been removed from the areas by DEC and others—we will have a disaster of another sort, although it will probably be considered only a short-term disaster. I believe lives could be lost through either no drinking water being available or there being not enough water to help put out a local fire. I am not referring to one of the big rangeland fires. We should keep some of those water sources and have them clearly marked on the maps. The proliferation of feral animals around water spots can be managed by keeping the animals away from the water so that feral goats and camels cannot continue to breed in those areas. They are a couple of different issues we need to look at. Their resolution still requires good communication and working through the system so that all areas know what is going on.

It was disappointing to see that some parts of the land were degraded to such an extent that it will take probably another 20 years before they are restored. As a previous speaker said, the jewel in the crown, Lorna Glen Station, showed that over a 10-year period, to some degree, the land can be returned to its original state. Anyone who travels up the coastal highway and sees some of the areas that were overstocked in the 1950s when wool prices were high, and thinks that nothing will ever grow again, should look at Lorna Glen and the growth of both the understorey and the top storey there. We have to keep working at it.

The issue of the dogs was probably the motivation for this inquiry. As much as some people say there is not, there is a problem there and it must be worked on. We should remember that a dogger's hours are not from nine till five. They live and breathe their work, and sometimes do not even wash the smell of dogs from themselves. It is a specialised but poorly paid job. I make a plea for dogging rates to be increased sufficiently to at least keep the doggers in the job. Dogging is something they have grown up with while they have lived and worked the land. It is a specialised job that is not treated as such. It is not just a matter of someone saying, "I want to go and shoot a couple of dogs", and heading off to do so; it does not work that way. We need those people with those specialist skills. One person we spoke to was having difficulty getting a gun licence. No shame on him, but he said, "I can't read and write, yet I'm supposed fill out a form on a computer." That just does not work. We must include those people in the process so they can work and use their skills to help solve this problem.

I reiterate that if we do not fund these areas, we will have long-term problems. We cannot expect DEC to manage the huge area of rangelands with a very small amount of money. Their task involves not only the wild dog issue but also the management of biodiversity. I was very pleased to see that some of the station owners had picked up the cudgel on this issue and were identifying the type of land they were on. They were adamant about the types of land that should or should not be saved. In their own way, they are conservationists at heart. They were able to tell us the land types, and they work the land according to the type of land they lease. I very much thank them and everyone else who contributed. This inquiry was certainly different from many of the others that have been conducted. Some of the characters we met were amazing. I thank very much also the station owners themselves, especially those who played host to us.

MR J.E. McGRATH (South Perth) [10.50 am]: On 29 December 2009, *The West Australian* published some graphic photographs of a feral goat searching for water inside a rubbish-strewn homestead on a station near Paynes Find. The accompanying story by journalist Sarah Quinton carried the headline "Back-to-nature stations raise pastoralists' anger". As I hold up the photos that appeared in *The West Australian*, I assure members that they are quite disturbing. Of greater concern at the time was the fact that these photos were not taken on private property. We are aware of instances in which people who have mistreated animals on private property have been on the receiving end of action by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The mistreatment of animals illustrated in *The West Australian* photos happened on land that was under the control of a state government department. It was the first many of us knew about the problem in the pastoral rangelands of Western Australia that was the subject of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee inquiry. Like other members of the committee, I thought it was an interesting inquiry. As a city member, it gave me great insight into the range of issues facing pastoralists in our state. I commend the work of the chairman and the other members of the committee. I thank the committee staff—Dr Loraine Abernethie, who is not here today, and Kristy Bryden and Tim Hughes who are sitting in the gallery—for the diligent work they did on the inquiry.

There would not be many Australian adults who are not aware of the significant role that the pastoral industry has played in our state for more than a century. It is an industry that has fluctuated from flourishing to struggling. Many families made lucrative livelihoods as pastoralists back in the days when pastoral properties had an amazing number of stock. I am told that in the 1930s Bidgemia Station at Gascoyne Junction ran 100 000 head of sheep, and that in the 1970s Brickhouse Station near Carnarvon ran 20 000 sheep and 1 000 head of cattle. Since that time there has been a decline in stock numbers, which can be attributed to a lack of rainfall and land degradation. The degradation of the land was one of the reasons that the strategy was introduced in the late

1990s. Station owners have been forced to send stock to feedlots. We spoke to some station owners who have had to de-stock. Other members talked about the station that has gone down the tourism path.

In the 1990s, the landscape of the rangelands changed to some extent when the Department of Environment and Conservation starting buying up leases under the Gascoyne–Murchison strategy, which has already been talked about. The idea was to create a natural reserve system of biodiversity for the rangelands. It was resourced by the commonwealth government with some funding—about \$13 million all told—from the state government. As the chairman mentioned, DEC has purchased 32 whole and 28 part former pastoral lease properties. As the chairman said in his report, the committee is supportive of what DEC is doing to develop a comprehensive, adequate and representative conservation reserve system in Western Australia. The station owners with whom we spoke understand and appreciate that a lot of the degradation has been caused by overstocking. We visited some of the properties. As other members have said, Lorna Glen Station is the jewel in the crown. The contrast between a property with an existing pastoral lease and Lorna Glen Station is amazing. One can see how much good work has been done there.

Getting back to the article in *The West Australian*, it referred to emaciated horses that had been left to die on DEC-controlled stations. The evidence heard by the committee made it clear that there have been problems with the implementation of the strategy. The biggest problem has been the manner in which DEC has removed artificial water. Evidence suggests a failure to coordinate culling with the removal of water sources. As a result, the committee was shown a compelling video of bleating and crying animals who were trapped in the mud and dying. They obviously had to be put down. The committee believes that there was no excuse for that. It should have been handled better. To its credit, DEC admitted that it had made mistakes, but it does not expect those mistakes to be made in the future.

Some problems cannot be attributed to DEC. DEC removes feral goats because they are detrimental to the land, but many station owners are now using them as part of their commercial operations because they now represent quite a lucrative market. Neighbouring pastoralists should become more involved in the culling process when water sources are shut down. Indeed, DEC and the pastoralists should work together.

Another problem that pastoralists raised with the committee concerns DEC shutting down water sources on their land. The land is so vast that it cannot be fenced off; indeed, it would be far too expensive to do so. In some cases feral goats have been known to break through fences. When DEC shuts down water sources, feral pests move onto the pastoral lease properties, which causes problems for the pastoralists. Another issue raised with the committee was the lack of cooperation between DEC and neighbouring pastoralists, an issue that was also mentioned by other members. There has been a failure by the department, although not in all cases, to apply the principles of the good neighbour policy, which was introduced in 2007. I am told that when the Gascoyne–Murchison strategy was put in place, it was not DEC’s intention to take over all whole leases, but to take over part leases and to allow neighbouring pastoralists to use part of that land for commercial purposes. In that way, there should have been some sort of integration. Unfortunately, that has not happened. There is a feeling among many pastoralists that their expertise has been disregarded. The pastoralists who have been operating the land for many years could make a valuable contribution if there was more of a collaborative effort between them and DEC. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

The member for Collie–Preston mentioned the problem of wild dogs. Living in the city as we do, we cannot comprehend what a huge issue that is. I understand that this year the government allocated a couple of million dollars to help address the problem. The pastoralists told us that that is not enough. Many thousands of wild dogs are ravaging sheep stocks—so much so that pastoralists have been forced to move from sheep to cattle.

The committee found that there is a need for suitably qualified caretakers. My personal view is that DEC should make greater use of neighbouring pastoralists. There should be some arrangement whereby the pastoralists look after neighbouring properties on behalf of DEC and, in return, use some of that DEC-owned land for their own commercial use whilst helping to regenerate a property that has been so denuded. The point should be made that pastoralists are still the cheapest guardians of the rangelands.

The committee endorses the aims of the strategy to restore the biodiversity of the rangelands. However, our findings seek a more collaborative approach between DEC and pastoralists. The pastoralists we met are a genuine bunch of people. They understand that they and their predecessors have caused problems on the land over the years, and they understand the need to regenerate the rangelands. They want to work in collaboration with DEC and the government. They would like to see more funding in the fight against the feral pests that ravage the rangelands. I hope that the pastoral industry has a future. I hope that it gets the rain that it needs. If weather patterns turn around, these properties could become viable again. In the meantime, many of these people are turning to tourism. The government should be trying to help the pastoralists remain as viable as possible. With the world’s population continuing to grow, we must ensure the viability of food production.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY - Thursday, 19 August 2010]

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Dr Mike Nahan; Mr Bill Johnston; Mrs Liza Harvey; Mr Mick Murray; Mr John McGrath

I thank all those involved in the inquiry. I thank the pastoralists for the hospitality they showed members of the committee and for their contributions to the inquiry.