

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND
CONSERVATION'S MANAGEMENT OF FORMER PASTORAL LEASES**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
MONDAY, 17 MAY 2010**

SESSION ONE

Members

Dr M.D. Nahan (Chairman)
Mr W.J. Johnston (Deputy Chairman)
Mr M.P. Murray
Mrs L.M. Harvey
Mr J.E. McGrath

Hearing commenced at 9.07 am

THOMPSON, MR TIM DENNIS
Project Manager, Invasive Species,
Department of Agriculture and Food,
examined:

CHILCOTT, DR CHRIS
Regional Manager, Rangelands,
Department of Agriculture and Food,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the Department of Environment and Conservation's management of former pastoral leases. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference. I am Mike Nahan, the Chair, the member for Riverton. To my right is Bill Johnston, the Deputy Chair. To my left I have Liza Harvey and John McGrath. Mick Murray will hopefully be here soon. The Economics and Industry Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal procedure of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to the proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing. Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. Before we proceed, I have a few questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions about giving evidence today?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you based in Kalgoorlie?

Dr Chilcott: No; I am based in South Perth.

Mr Thompson: I am based in Bunbury, formerly Kalgoorlie.

The CHAIRMAN: When are you moving from South Perth? This is the member for South Perth.

Dr Chilcott: I am not; but out to Murdoch, do you mean?

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Actually, you are now in the Town of Victoria Park.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your submission to the inquiry. Together with the information you provide today, your submission will form part of the evidence to this inquiry and may be made public. Are there any amendments that you would like to make to your submission?

Dr Chilcott: No.

The CHAIRMAN: We have a series of questions to ask you today, but before we do, do you wish to provide the committee with any additional information or make an opening statement to the hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Could you briefly describe your department's involvement with the conversion of management of DEC's land that was former pastoral leases?

Dr Chilcott: I believe the department was the lead agency with the Gascoyne–Murchison strategy. Part of that activity was the conversion of leases into conservation estate. Since then, once they are allocated to DEC, apart from some of the biosecurity issues, we do not have much to do with their management. Our management is in the pastoral areas so we would work with pastoralists and other agricultural industries in those areas. Our interest ends at that border between unallocated crown land and conservation estates.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the department's role now with the pastoral lessees and their leases?

Dr Chilcott: With the lessees?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Dr Chilcott: We take an industry development role. We work on activities related to the cattle beef, goat livestock industries in general, assist with activities such as diversification. If people were looking to undertake activities such as irrigated agriculture, we would I suppose move them onto things like small-scale tourism activities, that sort of stuff; but we would not take a lead role in that ourselves. Beyond that, we also work with Aboriginal pastoralists more intensely across the whole of the rangelands. Then we have biosecurity as our lead agency, so taking into account invasive species management in partnership with the zone control authorities, which are soon to become recognised biosecurity groups. That would be our main role with pastoral activities. We also have a market development focus—activities beyond Western Australia and domestic markets, that sort of stuff.

The CHAIRMAN: What are the department's responsibilities in relation to the management of pest animals and weeds?

Dr Chilcott: Tim is a biosecurity expert. He is today!

Mr Thompson: The Department of Agriculture and Food works under the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976. Our staff implement control programs or work with landholders to implement control programs. In the rangelands, we have a ratings system. Each landholder, as you are probably fully aware, is rated on the unimproved value of the land. These funds are put into what we call the declared plant–animal trust fund, which is separated out to each of the five pastoral ZCAs. We work with those ZCAs and other stakeholders—for example the Department of Water and the Department of Environment and Conservation—to set up control progress based on the priorities of those people in the area. In the Kimberley, for example, the priorities are donkeys and feral pigs; whereas in Kalgoorlie the priorities are wild dogs. We aim to have a controlled program which covers across that nil-tenure approach—so all stakeholders in that area. The department of agriculture's role is to not implement the actual program but to coordinate it. Landholders do the work themselves—make the baits et cetera. We organise tenders, contracts and stuff for the plane, as a lot of bait goes out by plane; and for meat, and support the process that way. Is that enough information?

The CHAIRMAN: Do you get involved with DEC on DEC's land for pest control with former DEC pastoral leases?

Mr Thompson: Under our legislation it does not matter whether it is a pastoral lease, a townsite in town—our act applies across all lands. We aim to have the same control applied on DEC-managed land as what we would on pastoral land. DEC sit at the table when we develop our plans and negotiate what we are going to do in that area. Obviously they are constricted by the amount of funds they have, otherwise they would like to do a lot more, particularly in the Gascoyne–Murchison, and Kalgoorlie. They report back to us on what they have done at those ZCA meetings. We do not sit down with them and say, “Here's a direction notice. You need to do this on your land.” It comes under what is happening under the ZCA.

The CHAIRMAN: Do they help fund the ZCA?

Mr Thompson: Yes

The CHAIRMAN: They make a contribution?

Mr Thompson: That is right.

The CHAIRMAN: Then they do their own baiting, aerial or otherwise?

Mr Thompson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: In addition?

Mr Thompson: They do it as part of the ZCA's program. When the ZCA does a baiting program, DEC will do a baiting program. Sometimes we might buy the meat bulk as one lot, and they will contribute to that. We will just invoice them. Other times they will buy it themselves. We are encouraging, particularly in Kalgoorlie, to take more ownership. In the past we have done a lot of the work for them, when we had more resources. As we have got less resources ourselves, we have taken more of a coordination role rather than a doing role. We have encouraged them to take on more ownership and manage their own control programs themselves

The CHAIRMAN: I understand there is a levy put on pastoral leaseholders that contribute to this. We have been told that DEC does not make a contribution to that.

Mr Thompson: No. Once a pastoral lease is put into the jurisdiction of DEC, the declared pest rate that used to be applied at least ceases. We do not collect a rate for the ZCA from those ex-pastoral leases.

The CHAIRMAN: DEC does not contribute to the ZCA for the past?

Mr Thompson: Not in that way. However, they do have a budget which they contribute to the control programs.

The CHAIRMAN: But so do the pastoral lessees. The pastoral leaseholders have a budget of their own. First they contribute to the pool —

Mr Thompson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: I think that is matched by the state.

Mr Thompson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Then they do their own work, too.

Mr Thompson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: DEC does not contribute to the pool.

Mr Thompson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Therefore it does not get matching funds.

Mr Thompson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: It does its own work.

Mr Thompson: That is right.

The CHAIRMAN: That is what we have been led to believe.

Dr Chilcott: That is right. The state matches the pastoral lease funds and then DEC has their own programs.

The CHAIRMAN: When DEC takes over a pastoral lease, there are less funds for pest control?

Mr Thompson: You could say that.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Going back, you mentioned that you do not direct DEC to undertake particular management activities on the former leases on the property that they own. If you established that there was a weed or a feral animal or some kind of pest problem on one of the leases not owned by DEC, as in private ownership, would you issue them with a notice or a direction to manage a problem?

Mr Thompson: Yes; depending on the severity of the weed or the pest. I should correct myself there. There are some DEC-owned leases or sections of crown estate where we have given DEC instruction to control declared weeds, for example Bathurst burr, in certain situations where it is a high priority. Based on the priority set by the ZCA, if ZCA tell us that a certain plant is a high priority and it is on three or four pastoral leases, we will provide those three or four pastoral leases with an instruction to get rid of that plant. We would do the same if it was a DEC estate.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Could I ask a general question: how serious do you think the feral animal problem is to Western Australia, across the board?

Dr Chilcott: There are certainly pockets of feral animal problems that are emerging. There have always been issues around the management of feral animals. Obviously, given the title, you would prefer not to have them at all. At the moment the emerging one has been around camels. They come from far into the desert, a way away from any sort of pastoral boundary. There has been some recent allocation from the commonwealth government, through Caring for our Country, for the management of those. In general, there are ongoing concerns about feral animal management across the rangelands.

[9.20 am]

Mr J.E. McGRATH: You do not seem too concerned about it. We were told that is a real serious problem that is heading our way. Pastoralists tell us that the camels are on their way. People in other areas tell us about the wild dogs that are growing in numbers and people have had to get out of sheep because of that. Is it a big problem or not?

Dr Chilcott: It is a big problem. It is probably not the only problem we have in the southern rangelands. The markets for the sheep that have been predated by wild dogs are a bigger issue. One of the reasons there has not been a large investment from pastoralists in wild dog control is that the animals they are producing have not had a great value. It is a combination of things. If you had a better market for the animals, there would be more incentive to control and obviously there would be more money to invest back into wild dog control. It is a predominant problem in the southern rangelands. Generally, we are concerned.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Just going back to issuing orders for weed management or pest control, how many orders would you have issued over the past couple of years to Department of Environment properties? In the context of that, how many orders would you issue generally anyway?

Mr Thompson: I could not give you that information off the top of my head.

Dr Chilcott: It would not be very many. The majority of our work is collaborative. ZCAs are setting out their priorities. It would be rare to issue directives, otherwise we would know it off the top of our heads. We could find out what that was and give you an accurate number.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: If possible, could you get back to us with that? What time period would we need?

Dr Chilcott: We could find out today. It would not be very high. Clearly, if you got to that point, your planning and collaborative work has not worked so that would be by far the last step.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: People often raise with us the question of feral animals but very rarely pest weeds. Do you want to make any comment about the relative problems with pest weeds?

Mr Thompson: A lot of the weeds that were declared in the Goldfields 30 years ago were declared for reasons such as wool contamination and tainting of meat. Not a lot of sheep are left in the Goldfields. There are no wool scouring plants left in WA. The drivers for why those plants are declared have changed a bit. We sat down with the ZCAs and asked whether they would like to review these weeds and whether they were a threat to their businesses. They said they were not and they would have a look at them. They accepted that these weeds are probably there. They are not having a major impact on their businesses. They said, "Let's not wave the big stick at people and make people control these weeds." If the ZCAs set that precedent, it is very difficult for us as a department to go to DEC and say, "You need to clean up all the weeds on your property but on the other side of the fence you do not have to. That is the general theme. There is another weed in the Carnarvon area called mesquite which is more of an environmental threat than any of the weeds in the Goldfields. We are trying to encourage the ZCA up there to put more investment into that and encourage landholders to take on more ownership to do more control work.

Dr Chilcott: The high priority weeds across the whole of the rangelands, which is from the Kimberley to the Nullarbor, would probably be rubber vine, mesquites and the invasive acacia species. They can spread quite quickly and be environmentally destructive as well as impacting on production systems. As Tim pointed out, the ones that were priorities a while ago are not as much now. There is also containment as opposed to control. There is still the ability to completely eliminate some of the new weeds in the north. We would emphasise our work in that area as opposed to trying to control something that is fairly widespread now.

Mr Thompson: Those landholders in the Goldfields are still required to contain those weeds. There is still a quarantine protocol in place there. They have to clean the animals before they leave et cetera. We still manage the risk. It is a win-win for them. They do not want to spend thousands of dollars spraying weeds that are not impacting on their business.

The CHAIRMAN: When the Agriculture Protection Board Act 1950 is repealed, the APB will cease to exist. The committee understands that the Biosecurity Council was established under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act. Could you please explain the function of the Biosecurity Council and any way that it will differ from the APB in its roles and responsibilities?

Dr Chilcott: I can give a general overview. It will have a broader scope than previously. It will take in fisheries and other parts of the biosecurity control across the state. I believe it still maintains the rating system.

The CHAIRMAN: Fisheries too?

Dr Chilcott: Its scope goes broader than just agriculture. It maintains the rating system. There are some changes in the way declared species are managed. Apart from that, the role in agriculture in pastoral areas will not change much. For us operationally there will be a change in the way we operate with the zone control authorities to the recognised biosecurity groups. They will take more ownership of the activities, or more responsibility if you like. The department used to chair the committee and now we will not; we will be part of the committees but we will not be chairing them.

The CHAIRMAN: In the past the APB was very focused on these leases being run as pastoral or commercial and had minimum stock at certain times.

Dr Chilcott: That was the Pastoral Lands Board.

The CHAIRMAN: We hear over and over again that these things have often been exceedingly overstocked. Their capacity to raise animals in terms of the environment is greatly diminished. That was partly due to the economics of the business and partly due to the requirements of the leases. Has that mentality changed significantly, both in the regulatory sense and with the leaseholders?

Dr Chilcott: The same conditions exist. There is a requirement under the act to establish what the safe or present caring capacity of a lease should be. The managers have the ability to modify stock rates accordingly. There are some unique situations. For example, if you were to de-stock, which would be seen as a good management outcome in the middle of a dry season, you are required to write to the Pastoral Lands Board and ask for permission to do that. That would not seem to be contemporary management. People would want to have the ability to stock and de-stock as they like. There are still some hangovers from past legislation that could be corrected. In the southern rangelands about 40 to 45 per cent of the area is considered in poor condition. That is historic poor management. The unfortunate thing is that it probably takes 30 years to see the expression of bad animal management in land management and accordingly it will take quite a long time for there to be any recovery at all. In a lot of those areas what you see now is probably what we will have for quite a long period. Unless there is some innovative management or a complete reduction in stocking levels, there will probably not be a recovery in those areas for a while. The impact of that is reduced ability to carry animals and be profitable.

The CHAIRMAN: If you need to de-stock or approach that, how do you make a quid?

Dr Chilcott: You do not, not from that enterprise at least.

The CHAIRMAN: You have to get out of pastoralism to a great extent and do something else.

Dr Chilcott: Or wait until it rains.

The CHAIRMAN: Even if it rains, you say it will take 30 years to recover.

Dr Chilcott: That is right. That is the dilemma. From our history of dry seasons and droughts, we have learnt that if people maintain stock and buy in feed, the inevitable outcome is increased degradation and further losses, so there is a compounding effect. You are better off getting rid of stock today and either getting into another enterprise or finding something else to do for that period as opposed to trying to maintain stock and have cash flow. Ultimately, it will cost you more than the animals are worth.

The CHAIRMAN: You are eating away your capital.

Dr Chilcott: That is right. Unfortunately, it is not unique to Western Australia. It has been well documented through the rangelands of the world.

The CHAIRMAN: Is Argentina having the same problem?

Dr Chilcott: It rains a bit more there. Areas in the west of Argentina have similar issues.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Your department's submission says that DEC's management is insufficiently resourced to prevent the cross-border impacts on existing pastoral leases. Could you explain this a bit more and maybe provide some specific examples.

Dr Chilcott: I will leave the specific examples to Tim. If there were more resources and more funds, I imagine they would be able to prioritise the management at the boundary between unallocated crown land or conservation reserves and a pastoral lease or a farm.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: By that do you mean fencing? What sort of management do you mean?

Dr Chilcott: It would be a combination of fencing, baiting if it was for dogs, and culling and other activities for feral camels and that sort of stuff. There is an extraordinarily large boundary between them and the pastoral leases. There would be a need to prioritise where you could do that. I cannot imagine you could afford to manage the whole lot. More funds, if allocated in the right location, would have a greater impact.

[9.30 am]

Conversely though, the pastoralists would then have to match those activities on their side of the fence to be truly effective. If you put a buffer of five or 10 kilometres for feral animals or weeds and you do not do it on the other side of the fence, then you would not have any impact at all; hence our emphasis on collaboration through the ZCAs.

Mr Thompson: The first thing that comes to mind is that in Kalgoorlie they are putting out two and a half thousand baits per 100 000 hectares. Even baiting across all the pastoral leases, if you apply that same principle to what is happening in the DEC lands, it is considerably lower; and they have not got any more resources to increase that. They are putting out something like 1 000 baits per 100 000 hectares pro rata—if that is the right term—in crown land while the pastoralists are putting out two and a half thousand. Ian Keeley, who is out there, would like to put out exactly what the ZCAs put out, but he does not have the resources. It is as simple as that.

The CHAIRMAN: What about doggers in that area? Do they have the same rate of doggers working as do the leaseholders?

Mr Thompson: That is probably a difficult one to answer without looking at maps and stuff like that. The ZCA fund three part-time doggers to provide a 15-kay buffer around small stock properties, which is implementing the wild dog policy, and DEC funds one dogger full time plus some aerial baiting and some on-ground baiting. Absolutely, they could have —

The CHAIRMAN: They have one dogger for all their properties, including non-lease UCL?

Mr Thompson: Yes. And they probably have some of their own staff doing some work supporting the baiting program. There is no question that they could do with more resources, and if they had them they would be able to do a better job. That is basically what it comes down to.

Dr Chilcott: It is probably worth mentioning that recently there was state funding for an additional eight doggers across the south of the state, which you may already know.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: But the ZCA in Kalgoorlie chose not to engage a dogger out of those funds?

Mr Thompson: That decision has not been finally made. You are probably picking up on the Agriculture Protection Board conference the other day?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, we were at that.

Mr Thompson: That is not final. Basically, it is either one dogger or the equivalent in baits. If you said one dogger costs \$90 000, and baits are 50 cents each, you can have 180 000 baits. What do you think is the best value? A lot of people think that doggers are the be-all and end-all. I have worked with a lot of doggers, being in Kalgoorlie for seven prior to going to Bunbury and we had 20 doggers come through that area, and probably only a handful was any good. I do not know if that should go on the public record, but I will be honest with you. Everyone thinks the saving grace is doggers. It is not. The reality is that dogging is very labour intensive and very resource hungry. Putting out baits achieves a far better return. The ZCAs have realised that and put about \$60 000 or \$70 000 into three or four dogging groups, but have increased their investment into baits because they get better return for it. Unless you can provide a dogger for every two or three properties, spreading a dogger across 10 or 12 properties is a waste of resources—they cannot do the work.

The CHAIRMAN: If this is the case, then one dogger for all DEC lands is a drop of water in a desert?

Mr Thompson: Absolutely.

Dr Chilcott: Unless you can prioritise, and that would be the challenge for them in the planning; that is, how do you prioritise eight doggers across the whole of the southern rangeland, which is an issue for the ZCAs as well?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: How do you measure the effectiveness of your programs? You are saying that you get a better return on investment for baiting, as opposed to dogging. At least with a dogger you get pelts so that you know there are carcasses out there. How do you know that the baiting program is working?

Mr Thompson: That is a very good point and a good question. It is something that we are encouraging the ZCAs to sit down and to work out ways to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. In the past, you are right, everyone has said that unless you can hold a dog up and say it is dead, it is not working. I have challenged the ZCAs recently saying they cannot afford to have doggers—unless they want to put their rate up and provide a dogger for every two or three properties. I have said that they can do that if they like, but naturally they do not want to do that because of the situation with their industry at the moment. Probably the best value for money, which is probably a better way of putting it, is it to do the baiting. I have asked them to consider how they know they have been successful and what are some of the things that will tell them that. For example, you cannot have goats, if you have dogs. If there is an increase in goat numbers on some properties—you can measure that—that is probably a good indicator that your program has been effective.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: And stock losses?

Mr Thompson: Yes, but it comes back to their management. My staff and I can collect the information and put it together and present it to them in a meaningful format, but they have to give us the information. If they are not managing their leases in a fashion that we can capture the information, it makes it very difficult.

Dr Chilcott: There is no formal evaluation of effectiveness. I suppose the way you would do it is to see if the symptoms disappear. There are many reasons why that can happen, and hopefully that is through some of the baiting and dogging activities but it could also be the change in kangaroo numbers as well, which means there are fewer dogs. At the moment, the effectiveness is in terms of the volume of baits that are put out and how widespread they are. There would rarely have been a more formal evaluational study into the effects that is having.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: On the issue of doggers, some of the feedback the committee has been getting is that pastoralists are constrained from shooting across boundaries. They might see dogs, camels and other feral animals on Department of Environment and Conservation properties, but because of this layer of regulation that says they need to have a particular level of pest control licensing, or whatever, they are not permitted to go on to DEC properties to shoot those animals. I know you are saying that doggers are resource hungry, but if you have a pastoralist with a rifle on a boundary fence, who could potentially be doing the work of a dogger in an opportunistic way, do you think that would have impact on the effectiveness of keeping these animals under control?

Mr Thompson: Of wild dogs?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Wild dogs specifically, but also camels.

Dr Chilcott: I am not sure what the regulation is that stops them shooting something across the fence, apart from the obvious safety issues of doing that. It would be rare to imagine that they would then go further into unallocated crown land to control the animals. We have animal welfare concerns in terms of people banging off at camels. When we control, it is a double shot, and that is controlled to ensure that the animal is dead and there are no animal welfare concerns.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you describe that?

Dr Chilcott: I have not been there, but if it is from an aerial shooting platform, we ensure that the animals are shot twice and that they are dead—obviously. We do not want them to be injured and not dead. I was going to say half dead, but that makes no sense!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Does your department have control of the reduction of feral pests?

Dr Chilcott: No, usually it is in combination with DEC or whomever. At the moment we are doing it with the commonwealth and we are taking on some feral camel control. Recently we did some work in the Pilbara, which is on the boundary between the unallocated crown land and pastoral land. They probably would have shot 1 500 to 2 000 camels from helicopters, and they would do that in a particular manner.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: They worked under your control or your jurisdiction?

Dr Chilcott: Yes, and funds came from the Caring for our Country fund that is being run through Alice Springs. It is a national program and there is a national code of practice on the way that it operates.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you use the same protocol for the dogs that you shoot? Would you double shoot?

Dr Chilcott: I am not sure what the protocols are for dogs.

Mr Thompson: Shooting dogs is very inefficient and I should say that it is very opportunistic. If someone sees a dog, they will shoot it. Some landholders shoot 50 or 60 dogs a year out there, but it is very opportunistic. You would not put it down as a main source of control, I guess.

The CHAIRMAN: I am looking at the animal welfare issue here. That has been raised repeatedly to the committee. I am trying to get an idea about this. We are out there culling animals and the standards by which we cull them are important to another issue that we will raise later with you. Dogs are pretty hard. They are pretty quick and it is hard to get a double shot into a dog, unless you get them good the first time.

Mr Thompson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You try and you have certain standards to try to hit the dog and make sure it is dead.

Mr Thompson: Absolutely, there is a certain calibre specified in those codes of practice, which are available—I think they are the national code of practice for the humane destruction of pest animals. There is a national website, which I can email to the committee if it would like it. There will be a certain calibre, which is meant to be used for every single pest animal. It will probably explain where it needs to be hit—in the head or the chest area. My experience is that most times, if you hit a dog with a decent-sized calibre, it stays dead.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I will follow up on this. It was put to us by one person when we were in Kalgoorlie that the dog problem started in the 1990s when there was a change to the approach to pest animals. It was put to us that up until then the management of the pest animals was seen as a responsibility of the state, effectively, and in the 1990s it went to a more user-pays approach. Some farmers and pastoralists worked hard on pest animals and some did not. Do you have a reaction to that comment?

[9.40 am]

Dr Chilcott: I do not know the history pre-1990s. It would seem that the current system is appropriate for the management on pastoral properties that you have a collaborative approach that is co-funded by the state. There has been a reduced investment, because there have been reduced returns on the properties, and it would be my general feeling that if they had product—sheep, lambs or wool—that was worth infinitely more maybe that what it was worth in the nineties—I am not sure—then people would invest more in protecting them. I do not think that they do not protect them out of malice; it is an economic fact that it is difficult to see that as a good return on investment.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: We also had described to us two stations on the Nullarbor that effectively are totally fenced, and whilst most people have said to us that if you have troubles with dogs, get

out of sheep, these people are still running sheep. The report was that they are effectively controlling on their own lands and by fencing totally they are not getting an infestation.

Dr Chilcott: Barrier fencing would work if it was combined with still-control measures. You need to be vigilant, because dogs will still get in.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: This was described to us as barrier fencing plus their own dog working on their own country, but effectively not worrying about what was outside their barrier fencing.

Dr Chilcott: My only concern would be the return on investment. If you are running a marginal operation and you have made previous investment in the fence and you can maintain it, that would work. It would seem to make sense that that would work. There are alternative control measures. People are looking at things like Maremma sheepdogs, which are effectively a guard dog that comes in and creates its patch and keeps other dogs out. Combinations of activities have been successful, if people are vigilant. My only experience of successful integrated control was in Queensland where people were running a niche sheep market for a particular type of wool. It was well within their interests to have a fence and guard dogs, and they were also baiting on the boundary with their neighbours. There are ways of doing it; it would depend on your return on investment.

The CHAIRMAN: Let us talk about goats. Are they a pest or a resource?

Dr Chilcott: If goats are in the pastoral areas, they are a resource—if they are managed. If they are in unallocated crown land, they are a pest.

The CHAIRMAN: It has been indicated to us that DEC believes they are basically a pest, even on pastoral leases. Opportunistically, the pastoral leaseholders have taken advantage of them and managed them because they can make a quid out of them. You do not have to do too much stock handling but they do a bit of damage to the flora. I can understand why pastoralists want them—there is no alternative. But if they want them, they keep them at a standing stock that might be degrading the land even further.

Dr Chilcott: The department invests some money—not a lot—into the goat industry development, so we have an interest in seeing a viable goat industry probably beyond what currently is effectively a wild harvest operation where the animals are harvested and put on to a depot and then they are either exported or sent to abattoirs. There is not much in terms of breeding or controlled mating at the moment, and hence very little animal husbandry associated with that.

The CHAIRMAN: They are low maintenance, which allows the pastoral leaseholder to have just a couple on the pastoral lease.

Dr Chilcott: Our obvious interest would be to see that become a more sophisticated industry that is not reliant on wild harvest and hence we would see a differentiation between pest and managed stock. Generally, though, they are a browser not a grazer.

The CHAIRMAN: I know that, I raised goats as a kid. You cannot fence them and they kill bush quite a bit.

Dr Chilcott: There are real concerns obviously that if you have uncontrolled grazing of a browser, they would eat everything that was remaining. They have an incredible survival strategy.

The CHAIRMAN: They climb trees.

Dr Chilcott: There is a risk that there will be a natural progression to desertification by having an increased goat population. In reality, uncontrolled they are a pest and certainly would have impacts that would degrade the rangelands.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: On the DEC properties would you encourage some sort of program where the neighbouring pastoralists would go in and roundup the goats and get them on to the properties and get them out to market?

Dr Chilcott: Our preference in the past is that we have undertaken control measures with DEC. We have undertaken aerial shooting of goats because it has not been effective to rely on neighbouring properties to go in and access the stock. A lot of the DEC properties do not have good access and certainly do not have the infrastructure for mustering goats. They are not easy to muster. In combination, that might work, but the preference is to go in and control them and so we would cull them, which would be the most effective way.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: If the DEC properties are shutting off the water would not that lead to the goats migrating over to the pastoral leases or do you think they would still find pockets of water up in the hills?

Dr Chilcott: There would be some pockets of water, but I imagine they would take off. If there was no water there, they would move into areas where there was water. As a way of managing the goat population, turning off the water would be very effective.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: That leads to the obvious question, which has been raised with us. Do you think DEC's program of shutting off water has been done in a proper way and has been effective?

Dr Chilcott: I am not sure in what sense you mean "proper". If you were looking to reduce the population of feral animals, that is what you would do. Certainly, if your outcome was to have a conservation reserve and thus reduce the grazing pressure, turning off water is what you would do.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: There would be no other way of doing it?

Dr Chilcott: Turning off water and then controlling animals would be the way you would do it. If you maintain the waters, then you would maintain grazing pressure. I could only imagine that would be the logic behind that.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Just to follow up on the goats. I understand that the Department of Agriculture and Food—or whatever it was in its previous life—conducted a statewide feral goat eradication program, but this ended 2002. I understand that from some information that the Department of Environment and Conservation has provided to us. Why was the program discontinued?

Dr Chilcott: I think at that time—hopefully I will be corrected if I am wrong—but there was a change in the category and if these animals were on pastoral areas they could be considered managed stock. It would seem to not make sense to then have a statewide feral control program. We still worked with DEC in managing feral goats on their properties until recently. That ended, not because of a change in philosophy around goats, it was that we had an accident. We are reviewing that program at the moment.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: An accident?

Dr Chilcott: A helicopter and a plane hit each other during a control operation.

The CHAIRMAN: That was in isolated territory was it not?

Dr Chilcott: It was in the Kennedy Ranges. On DEC's land we still undertake control activities.

The CHAIRMAN: On the goats again, when you manage these properties or where the Pastoral Lands Board manages and says you have to have a minimum stocking level, do you take the goat population into consideration?

Dr Chilcott: The potential stocking rates are set on —

The CHAIRMAN: Livestock?

Dr Chilcott: Yes, in terms of cattle units or dry sheep equivalents. The potential assumes good condition and full infrastructure. It is not a management tool, it is essentially setting a potential for the land's capacity, if you like.

[9.50 am]

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Getting back to the water management policy whereby the water is shut down, there have been documented events where there are animal welfare issues around that practice. Under the Animal Welfare Act, I believe a DAF officer can be appointed as a general inspector.

Dr Chilcott: Yes they are.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Were DAF officers involved in any of those situations on properties that involved animal welfare issues?

Dr Chilcott: Not that I know of, but I can check. If they were in the Goldfields, we can check with the officer in our Kalgoorlie office as to whether they went out there, but I did not think so.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: What is the procedure ordinarily; would DEC consult one of those officers on animal welfare issues or is the expectation that on DEC-owned land they would have a caretaker who would understand it? Is there any policy around that or an MOU between DEC and DAF?

Dr Chilcott: Not in terms of animal welfare. We do not hold the animal welfare legislation; it is with the Department of Local Government and the other part of its title. There is an MOU between the department and local government in terms of general inspection wherever there is deemed to be an animal welfare concern. In general, that has been for us because of our realms in pastoral areas. General inspectors are required usually to go out to pastoral stations. I do not know of anyone going out to DEC stations as a general inspector. I might check that.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. DEC buys this land with the aim of turning it into a conservation estate. DEC takes it over and then de-waters and keeps people and livestock off. My understanding is they pull most of the water out. They often cull kangaroos and ferals and what not. Sometimes they put in fencing, and I think that is its long-term policy. DEC leaves it there and the aim is for the land to go back to some sort of original state. Do you think it will go back to some state without intensive human management and, if that is done, will it add significantly to the conservation estate?

Dr Chilcott: I have no facts, but my assumption as an ecologist is that that would happen. There would be a new SD estate formed, which would be a former grazed landscape that has been destocked and it would come back to some realm of conservation reserve that would reflect the fact that it is not being grazed. In itself that would be a good outcome because there would be potentially a rather large patch of land that is not being grazed in an area that otherwise might be grazed.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think in this process people are need on the land, such as a caretaker on each property, to look over and address issues?

Dr Chilcott: It could not hurt. There is a whole bunch of unallocated crown land in the middle of Western Australia that is unmanned, if you like. Given it is surrounded by other stations, certainly there would be other reasons why you may want to maintain a station on which there are not necessarily conservation outcomes.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Are you aware of any efforts by pastoralists to look at degraded areas of their leases and manage areas for conservation and rehabilitation within the patrol leases?

Dr Chilcott: Not off the top. But Bush Heritage Australia and a few other groups have purchased leases, obviously with the outcome that they will be more conservation minded in their management. However, they maintain them as pastoral leases so they are still required to maintain infrastructure and livestock as part of that. They have not gone to convert them through a covenant. I think there have been covenants on pastoral leases for high-value conservation areas, but that is a DEC issue, not ours.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the big pictures is the sustainability of these leases. That is one reason DEC went into purchase more leases. I think you said 40 per cent —

Dr Chilcott: Approximately.

The CHAIRMAN: That is a very high percentage. The reason the number of pests is up is because they are not making enough money to warrant shifting to lower value crops. They are trying to make a quid from pests such as goats. What about the future of this; how can you maintain a vast area—and it is vast—on a declining economic base?

Dr Chilcott: I will limit my remarks to pastoral areas. There is clearly a need to diversify the economic base. Low-level tourism has been seen in the past to be one option for doing that. I think that was encouraged through other strategies in the past. Where there is water and suitable land we look at things like irrigated agriculture. Certainly around Wiluna at the moment we are working with one pastoralist on planting biofuels. The classification for them is “areas that were previously severely degraded and eroded”. That seems to be working quite well. They are getting great yields, but certainly not enough to maintain a family business; nonetheless, it is diversification. There is talk about activity such as stewardship payments where we look at a change in lease conditions and the former pastoralist, if you like, manages it for the greater good. Where they have been successful in other parts of Australia, is where there has been an over-cleared landscape where it can be seen that there is significant value in maintaining something that is quite precious, if you like. There is greater value in doing that, but if you have a large pastoral lease, it is not necessarily unique given you are surrounded by other large pastoral leases. The ability to use stewardship payments is challenging in these areas.

The CHAIRMAN: It would be. Has anyone done work on that?

Dr Chilcott: We have started looking at some of the philosophies and policy barriers behind that, only to the point of some internal research. It was a recommendation out of the Southern Rangelands Pastoral Advisory Group report that we would at some stage start to look at whether there was an ability to use stewardship or a modified approach to maintaining some base out there.

The CHAIRMAN: It is very hard.

Dr Chilcott: It is challenging. I think if the price of wool and sheep went up, we would be having different dynamics.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: My understanding of the biofuels is that the preferred plants are actually declared weeds in certain areas.

Dr Chilcott: Some are.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Does that place some kind of constraint on where you might be able to have biofuel under agriculture on leases if there is a potential for it to spread as a declared weed to other areas?

Dr Chilcott: The highest potential that we are trialling at the moment is Moringa, which I do not think is declared; it is certainly not something we would encourage to be planted in the Kimberley or near a creek bed. It likes water. Obviously, if there is water it will spread. Where we are planting at the moment is effectively 200 or less millimetre rainfall area, and it survives only because of irrigation. We obviously have buffers around it to make sure it does not spread. If it spreads, it would be a miracle because it does need water to survive.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: It would be a miracle, but it would also be a problem.

Dr Chilcott: Of course. That is why we would not put it in the Kimberley and certainly not look at putting it in areas where there is high rainfall.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have a closing statement?

Dr Chilcott: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the

transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it is deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission—you are going to provide a few points that we indicated—for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 9.58 am