

**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, 10 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 10.20 am**FEARN, MR BRIAN WILLIAM****Private Citizen,****examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance here today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist this 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. 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 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 and Hansard is making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents in your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title. If you answer a question, say "yes" rather than nod; they have a hard time recording just nods. Before we proceed with the questions, have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Fearn: Yes, I have.

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

Mr Fearn: Yes, I do.

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

Mr Fearn: If that was in that pack, yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

Mr Fearn: No, I do not.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you please state your name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee today?

Mr Fearn: My name is Brian Fearn. I have been involved as a commercial harvester of kangaroos for something like 35 years. In 1997 we went to New South Wales and did the course that allowed Western Australian shooters to be able to shoot for human consumption. That really started my involvement with a lot of the guys who work in the station country. My wife and I sort of think we are retired, but we wander through quite a bit of that. It is through the exposure to those guys and being invited to visit them that I got involved with the station country.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have a specific capacity or did you just come in as an individual?

Mr Fearn: I retired last year as president of the Professional Shooters Association, but I am really here as a private citizen.

The CHAIRMAN: The information you provide today will form part of the evidence to this inquiry and will be made public. We have a series of questions to ask you today, but before we do, do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Fearn: I have prepared a statement. I think it is being photocopied now. I think there are about four areas that I have concerns about.

The CHAIRMAN: Why do you not go through those, because your perspective is different from that of most people who have given evidence? You can give a summary of those, if you wish.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Do you want your copy back?

Mr Fearn: Yes, if I could. I was hoping they would run off a copy for each of the committee members. You will have to excuse me but I need the paperwork. I flew back from Newman last night at six o'clock and drove to Collie and then hit the road early this morning to come up to appear. The other thing I would like to say to the committee is that, having been a shooter and having worked in the industry for 30 or 40 years, I do have a hearing loss. If you ask me a question and I ask you to repeat it, I am not being rude. That is something else you can relate to.

The CHAIRMAN: What is this issue about hearing in Collie!

Mr Fearn: Is this question pointed or not!

I have run it into four headings. The first one is the environment. Over the past five or six years I have spent a lot of time in the pastoral country. I have seen some degradation and have seen some station homesteads that are not the best. I have spent a lot of time around the north side of Yalgoo, but last year I did a trip to the Kennedy Range, which is north east of Meekatharra, and on the way home we came down from Neds Creek station and came along old station tracks down to Paroo. One of the things that hit me very clearly was that once we left Neds Creek, there was no wildlife. I think in 80 kilometres we saw one goanna. Apparently, the waterholes have been taken out of there. Diamond Wells, which was one of the homesteads, had been bulldozed into a heap. I am really concerned because I am not sure where this is heading. I have environmental concerns. If you take the water out of that country, I think you take the wildlife with it. We saw areas where there were no birds where we had been seeing birds on a regular basis both on the north side, which is Neds Creek, and on the south side, which is Paroo. I have concerns about that.

The other is safety. On Dalgaranga, where I have spent quite a long time, and on Pindathuna, which is not DEC, a lot of the windmills and waterholes were dug in the early years and some of them are very, very deep. Where the windmills have been taken down, there is timber across them, but the wells themselves do not have a hard cover. I have put it in there that I work as a WorkSafe assessor and trainer, and we are all over the place. But one of the things we push very heavily is the duty of care. I believe that either the person who took the wells out or the contractor—I think that would be DEC, which employed them to do that work—have breached their duty of care by the fact that they do not have hard covers on them. I have had reports, and I cannot back it up, that there are dead animals in them that have tried to get to water. I have no photos or concrete evidence on that matter.

The other one that concerns me is the humane practices. In the kangaroo industry, we have worked very hard over the past probably 10 years, sometimes with DEC, to try to make sure that our operations are done to the national standard, which is a requirement of the EU if we are selling into that market. Humane killing forms a major part of that course that we deliver there. Having seen some of animals that have died on some of the stations where the water has been taken out, I am not exactly sure how DEC has escaped a prosecution from the RSPCA on that. Some of them have been horrific deaths.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you seen some yourself?

Mr Fearn: I have, yes. One of the things I saw last year was that the only water on Dalgaranga virtually now is at the homestead. Last year we went up in the middle of summer for a sixty-fifth birthday party—it is not the best place to be—but there were quite a few birds that were dying in that area. When I spoke to the guy who was on it, he said that the problem is that they are travelling that far for water now that they are stressing. There were dead birds—not a lot—on the veranda in the morning after they had tried to get some relief from the heat. That concerns me.

The last one is the financial side of things. I know the stations and I know quite a few of the stations that DEC has bought and there has never been a statement in the paper about where it is going with this. Is it going to buy them all in the Murchison–Gascoyne? I know it is doing some in the eastern Goldfields. I do not know what its budget is. Just as a taxpayer, I am asking where it is going with this. When it finishes with the stations, is it going to start doing some of the freehold land and return it to nature? I really am asking the committee: can we have a statement from DEC about what are the aims and ambitions and how many stations does it want to buy by, say, 2020 or 2030? What is the budget for buying those stations, and what is the budget for the upkeep on some of the homesteads? I will probably just finish on the homesteads. There are some photos that my wife has included of that dam that was built at Dalgaranga from 1917 to 1919 and holds 10 million gallons. There is heritage and effort that has gone into that. I think it was mainly built with a horse and sulky. A huge effort has gone into those homesteads. I am sure that if some of those buildings were in Perth, there would be absolute uproar. I am not saying that DEC should be looking after all the homesteads. I know it has just bought Thundelarra. I am really asking: does it have a budget to look after these stations or is it just going to bulldoze the lot?

[10.30 am]

The other thing is, if DEC walks away, the new expression is that it is going to “decommission” them. If we decommission them—which means taking everybody out—then within about five months, we will want to bulldoze them, because there will be nothing left of any value; it will be terrible. I am really taking this opportunity to try to get some answers—maybe the committee can do that—about what the objectives are, what the outcomes will be and what the unit of measure is in relation to how DEC is performing on that. I am only a layperson, but I am concerned about where it is heading.

The CHAIRMAN: We have a few questions. Is your background as a roo shooter?

Mr Fearn: I did 31 years with Griffin Coal as a welder, but came through the ranks and led the men, so I have some background in addressing groups and that sort of thing, but my main drift in life has been towards the shooting. Up until three years ago we had a thriving export market for human consumption. We lost that.

The CHAIRMAN: How did you lose it?

Mr Fearn: I might get into trouble here!

The CHAIRMAN: You are protected here.

Mr Fearn: Yes. The processor—it cost \$800 a day for a vet, whether he did 20 kangaroos or 200, and it just became too expensive for what he was getting back. Western Australia had a very good record; very low or nil salmonella counts, so purchase into the EU was very good, but it just became too expensive for him to try to run that by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. I have been in there, we have walked classes through there; we have taken them in and explained to them what the processor wants. We run two-day courses at the health department with their help, and Sunday mornings we always took them out to the factory and actually went through with the guys and said, “This is what they want and this is what they don’t want”. Bacteria counts and salmonella counts will knock the product out virtually immediately, but he was belted by overregulation. He could no longer do it because Western Australia does not have the volumes of Queensland.

The CHAIRMAN: And New South Wales.

Mr Fearn: And New South Wales, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the issues that has come up—maybe you can provide some expertise—when we have talked to some of the pastoral leaseholders who have properties adjacent to DEC’s leases is that they have limited access to DEC’s properties, firstly with permission, but also some

kind of DEC requirement for baiting and shooting at a higher level or under a different certification than the pastoral leaseholders need on their own properties. Do you understand that?

Mr Fearn: I do, and if I may speak freely, I am concerned about that. As an assessor and a trainer, I think we are going to finish up training people who would not get a dog in the local pound, in all fairness! Sorry, but some of the guys out there who are dogging now and not being paid at all are the guys we want. If I wanted someone to shoot a load of kangaroos for me, I would not go to the local sporting shop in Perth and ask them if they could give me someone. I would go out there and ask who has done a fair bit of it, and try to do it that way. I understand the criteria for the accredited side of things, and some of those guys who would be really good at dogging will, through either literacy or numeracy challenges, be struggling with that. Under our rules, we can assist them to overcome their academic disadvantages, but we want to get on top of these dogs. I have just come back from Newman, and driving around the main streets, I saw four dogs in the past two days. That is my opinion. They can access the CALM land, and that land will become like a sanctuary zone for the animals that will move from there, because they will be the quiet areas. They will camp there and move out into the station country for food, which will be sheep or whatever else they can get.

The CHAIRMAN: When you talk to pastoral leaseholders, do you get feedback that they are inhibited from going into DEC land to shoot and bait?

Mr Fearn: Yes, but DEC does not seem to have a plan; this is what I hear. DEC does not seem to have a plan that incorporates its neighbours with its own land. This is the feedback I get. If I were a neighbour of CALM or DEC, in the event of fire, I would want to know whether it had standard water points where we could retrieve water for firefighting. I would want to know what its tracks were like and whether they had been maintained. I do not want to be trying to drive in there to put out a fire that is threatening my place and find that all the tracks marked on the maps are gone. If it is going to be a good neighbour, it needs to develop a plan that says, "This is what we're going to do, and we're going to seek the assistance of our neighbours to achieve it".

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: If DEC were to say, "We do have a plan; here's the thousands of kilometres of road that we've maintained," or whatever, how would you respond to it?

Mr Fearn: The measure for me would be to talk to the neighbours. Having appeared in front of the minister on several occasions in relation to the kangaroo industry, we need to go out there and check to see that what we are being fed is actually what is happening. Can I give an example?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Fearn: I went up and had a meeting with the minister about the accreditation of kangaroo shooters, and I heard someone from DEC say, "That's under challenge in the east; you don't have to have accreditation to shoot kangaroos. What they're doing in New South Wales and Queensland is wrong, and it's under challenge". This was in front of the minister; I asked, "Can you give me some data on the challenge?" This was a senior DEC officer. I went home to Collie and got straight on the phone to contacts in Queensland and New South Wales, and there had been no challenge at all. I rang the minister's office the next day and they said, "Yeah, we already know." The point I am trying to make is that what we are being told needs something independent that actually says, "Yeah, that's actually happening," and the neighbour would know. Maybe the local shire would have some idea.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Would you have any suggestions of neighbours that we should talk to?

Mr Fearn: In all fairness, off the top of my head, no, but maybe guys like Mark Halleen from Boolardy station. Take Manfred station or Noongal station, up the top there, they are magnificent homesteads in their own right and they are still under-lease properties, but they are getting pretty run down; there is not the money out there that there was, and I understand that. We need some of the expertise of guys like that. In all fairness, I spoke to Mark Halleen last year, and they are getting

worn down by trying to assist DEC to develop plans, objectives and outcomes that work in their area. His father, David Halleen, was on the committee for a long time, but they have given it away.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: You talk about the homesteads; would you subscribe to a suggestion that maybe you could put some funding through the Heritage Council of WA to give these pastoralists some support to keep the old homesteads in better condition? Given their heritage value to the state, and the tourism potential in years to come, is that something you think that we, as a committee, might look at?

Mr Fearn: Absolutely. I have driven up and down that coastline, chasing fish and crays, and I used to look inland and think, “What a terrible place—I’m never going in there!” But over the past 10 or 12 years, some of the stuff up there is just unbelievable on some of those stations; even old buildings and old machinery. It is just absolutely mind-boggling what those people did in those times. I think we need to protect all of that. If that means that we need to assist the station owners, we need to make sure that the money is doing exactly what the committee and the Heritage Council want it to do.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: With respect to the buildings, there is conflicting information out there as to whether some of these buildings are, in fact, of heritage value. I guess I am interested to know from you, as somebody who goes through those areas, whether you think there is heritage value being lost through not maintaining these homesteads, or is the anxiety around the loss of the homesteads more to do with the fact that we are losing places where people can actually camp, stay and keep an eye on things?

Mr Fearn: I look at some of those homesteads and the way that they are built; Warriendar has walls three feet thick. From my perspective, I look at that and wonder how the guy built it—the time it took and the effort that went into it. A lot of those homesteads are getting run down, no question about that; but I do think it is part of our heritage. Kalgoorlie has the golden quest discovery trail, I think. Can members imagine a trail through the Murchison-Gascoyne region, looking at some of those old station homesteads? I could see people coming from the east to do that. I think there is a wool wagon trail that goes up through Wooleen station. I am saying that baby boomers are supposed to have all this money, but for the older people to be able to go around and have a look at some of those station homesteads and see how they did it in those early years would be just mind-boggling.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: So you are saying that the heritage value of the homesteads is not necessarily how they look, structurally, but more in the very fact that they are there, and what those station owners had to do in the first instance to actually build them in the places that they are in?

Mr Fearn: I believe that; I look at some of them and I am broken-hearted. I imagine that 50 years ago, some of them looked absolute pictures. Dalgarranga station had it accommodation for 30-odd people, and they worked the station. Now there is one bloke and his wife. When my wife and I were travelling up there, the old fellow was travelling the other way. He said that they had had 22 or 23 employees on that station once, and now there was only him and his missus, and they were scratching to make a quid. I do think that there is an opportunity there for some of those station homesteads. I think Thundelarra is a brand-new building; that is not what I am talking about. I am talking about some of the stations that are old. I think a list needs to be gone through by someone independent of DEC, to say, “This one’s worth saving; this one’s not, and this is why,” and from there develop a trail that says to Australians, “Come and have a look at Western Australia’s pastoral heritage”.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Are you aware of any homesteads that have been knocked down by DEC that maybe should have been kept? We have been told that some of them that have been knocked down could not have been kept because they were so run down it would have been too expensive. Are you aware of any that would have been homesteads of some significance and in good enough condition but were just that run down?

[10.45 am]

Mr Fearn: The only one I have seen pushed up into a heap is Diamond Well. I am sorry; I did not see it before, and I think it is too easy to go, “Oh, I’ll bulldoze that because it doesn’t look too good.” Warriedar, I think, would probably be one that needs to be saved, and they were going to bulldoze it—no question about that. I am concerned, and I ask the committee to take on board that, in relation to it, it does need something independent from the people who are buying these stations to address that issue of the homesteads. I am not sure but if the people who buy it say, “It was no good, therefore I’m pushing down it”, I do not think it should be done that way; I think it needs to be independent.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: With these stations out there—I have seen a couple of people who are tenants, I suppose we have worked it to be—what do you think of people actually moving into those houses having X amount that they have to maintain around the homestead block? Do you think most of them could be done that way, or, again, is it back to your select few?

Mr Fearn: I think some of them have gone too far, I really do. I think that some of them will need a front-end loader and a hole. But I think there are some of them out there that could be saved. There are people who travel and just look after stations. To get them to some degree of seeing the next 50 years in will take some work and a budget. But I think it is worth doing, I really do.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: When you say, do you think it would be worthwhile having “caretakers”, like they do with some of the CALM parks?

Mr Fearn: Yes, I think it needs a caretaker and it needs selected mills kept open. That caretaker should be paid a wage, and he can go around, and of the 30 or 40 windmills on a property you might resurrect probably 10. You just keep them open. It is an opportunity to trap and get rid of the ferals but it also means we are acting in a humane way to that country. It is a relief to stop pressures on there and it can get it off, but I think that needs to be incorporated into the basis of station caretakers or people who are prepared to go to that sort of country and look after those stations. But they do need assistance to get them back to where they were, or to at least maintain them for the next 50 years. Other than that, go and bulldoze the lot.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: How big a project would that be, to go back and reopen some of them wells that have been shut down?

Mr Fearn: Like Noondie, Dalgara and Manfred?

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Would they have to bring back windmills and all that sort of stuff. Have a lot of places taken the windmills away or given them away?

Mr Fearn: In all fairness —

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Can it be done though?

Mr Fearn: Yes. In all fairness, most of those windmills are laying there somewhere in the bush. The heads and the towers are there—you probably would need a new pump—yes, most of them are there. Wendy and I were driving round a station and come across probably six or eight windmills dumped.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: While we are on the subject of windmills, you mentioned that you have seen windmills that have been shut down but they have been left uncovered.

Mr Fearn: Yes.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: We have been led to believe that the policy has normally been to cover them. Can you tell us that you have seen them uncovered?

Mr Fearn: When the windmill was on them, they had timber across them. They are like an ironbark; they are a fairly robust sort of a local timber. But, yes, they are there and they are

uncovered all right. That reinforces what I said earlier, which is to be careful of being told something that is not quite right. I can support that if I need to, and I will get photos.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: You are an ex-president of the Professional Shooters Association of Western Australia, and we have been getting conflicting reports as to the ease or difficulty that shooters have in getting work on DEC properties. Can you give us any evidence of problems that shooters have in complying with the regulations to go into DEC properties, or do you know of any issues in that area?

Mr Fearn: Station owners have had a policy over the years that they do not care who shoots them as long as they are dead. This is why I resigned from the Kangaroo Management Advisory Committee, and you may have seen some of it in the paper: we have had groups going through there who are wiping them out, and I mean wiping them out. One truckload came through with 1 200 animals at an average of 12 kilograms. An average of 12 kilograms means that some of them that were shot were eight kilograms, which is disgraceful. I do not believe it sits within the plan that we conform to for the federal government that allows us to quota. It has had a devastating effect on kangaroo numbers, and I have raised the concerns—you can check the minutes—at the committee meetings to the point where I have spoken to David Helene and said, “If I stay here, I’m probably going to do something that I’m going to be really sorry for.” But no-one is listening, in all fairness; go and have a look at the minutes.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Which groups are going through?

Mr Fearn: One of the processes here—that is what has devastated the price; because the skins are so small. There are now three million skins nationally that are under that four square feet. The buyers are not buying them, and then they have checked them out at bargain-basement prices and it has dragged the price of the top skins down.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Would they be going on DEC-owned sites?

Mr Fearn: No, they have been mainly on station country.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The question really is about access to DEC properties, or is there a shooter buffer? Some people tell us you cannot even shoot across the fence, or they are too frightened to shoot across the fence.

Mr Fearn: In all fairness, if you want an honest answer; we shoot across the fence, and we always have. But in saying that, I do not think that there is so much of a problem with the DEC in regard to kangaroos, because they really do need the water. Maybe if you shut that area down, then some of that population will make it out of there. Some of them will stay on the water until they die. There has been clear evidence of that in some photos, but those that make it out of that DEC country will go on to an open. That, again, gets back to what I said to you about trying to develop a policy, that hopefully DEC will not be in charge of, that incorporates a management plan for station owners alongside CALM land.

The CHAIRMAN: But we were told that and provided with, let us say, general data that when DEC buys a property, they put in a management plan. They often keep the previous station owner on for a couple of years, and he or she de-stocks. Then they bring in shooters—particularly with kangaroos—and cull them. The aim of the purchases is to remove the water and bring the standing stock of kangaroos—exotics and natives—down to what would exist before the water was introduced. They state that they go in there and cull; are you hearing otherwise?

Mr Fearn: I have been on the committee for probably, I do not know, 15 years to 18 years, and I do not know anything about that, in all fairness.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: So you do not know of any shooters who have actually been employed by DEC to go onto those properties and cull them when they are actually decommissioning water wells?

Mr Fearn: No, but I can find out; I can put a newsletter out to the members. But, yes, the answer is no.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the issues is that the whole philosophy behind DEC's program is to pull man off, including water, and allow it to go back to nature. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr Fearn: Yes, I have some fairly strong comments. Because once we have done all that land, what are we going to do? Are we going to do the farms, and then are we going to do the suburban; and then are we all going to get on a boat and sail off? Where are we going? I am sorry; that is what I am looking at and that is why I am here. I really want some answers about when they have finished in the Murchison, Gascoyne and the eastern Goldfields, are they going to start in the Kimberley? Where are we going with this? I am asking purely as a citizen.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: DEC would say it is looking for around 15 per cent of the examples of all the different types of environments to be in a reserve—that is what they are saying.

Mr Fearn: That is the first time I have heard that. That is what I said to you early on about whether there is a plan.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: We went out to a station called Lorna Glen, out past Wiluna, and they have had that a decade or so now. There was no question that when we went there, the country was very much better than the country in the neighbouring properties that were still under grazing.

Mr Fearn: Yes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Also, they say that the animals that preceded pastoralism are starting to recover, and they also say that that means that, for example, there are more burrowing animals, which means the water is retained, and that when there is a rain, the water is more likely to be contained on the property rather than going into the river system. All those things we saw indicated a good outcome for that property. DEC says that the key to that strategy is turning off the artificial water. Do you have any response to that?

Mr Fearn: Deadset there are some areas up there that have been devastated. In the old days, when sheep prices started to go down, the only way you could make a few quid was to put more on, and they did. Some of those areas were terribly degraded. But I look at it a bit differently; most of those people up there have got the land at heart, but I think that the ones that were the cowboys were the ones who probably finished up making a real quid out of selling their property. The guy who was looking after his, he gets nothing. The guy is actually rewarded for degrading the land, whereas I think it is a pastoral lease and I think we need to look at whether they are looking after it. I think it is a privilege, not a right. They should go there and have a look around, and if you are overstocking it—that may happen with cattle yet—and all of a sudden the land is going downwards, they should be told, "Hang on a minute, pack your bags and pack your cattle and get off here." I do not think we need to reward them with a purchase of their station; I think we need to say, "You've had a fair go; have a look at this—get off." If you finish up giving them a bag full of money for the degradation he has done, it sets an example for all the other stations owners around who will think, "Jeez, this is the way to go; if I want to tell sell mine to DEC, I'll overstock it and get it looking bad, and then they'll come along and go, 'You've got to go so here's your bag of money'." Maybe I am looking at it from —

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: A taxpayer's point of view.

The CHAIRMAN: Just to answer your question: we have received a submission and verbal evidence from DEC, and I think the report will state what their objectives are—that is, 15 per cent, as Mr Johnston said. The submission and evidence indicated how far they have gotten to now; they are short of 15 per cent. They also have a plan to turn these, some time, around to conservation—to change their title from unallocated crown land to conservation status.

Mr Fearn: On that point, I rang DEC in Geraldton and spoke to an officer Roe—I cannot think of his first name—and it was in relation to Dalgara; I have a mate who is staying there. He is pretty much a bushy character; I do not think he would come —

Mr M.P. MURRAY: We have met him.

Mr Fearn: You have, have you?

The CHAIRMAN: Would his first name be Phil?

Mr Fearn: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes; he is a character. He has called me three or four times.

Mr Fearn: All right. The thing about it is that—I have lost it.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: His tenure is one of the things that he asked about, and keeping up the standard.

Mr Fearn: I still think that we need to be looking at some of the stations in relation to the long term and to a heritage-valued station trail. The question I was going to ask when I spoke to him was—he told me that that station would be returned to allocated crown land virtually that week that I spoke to him. As I understand it then—I might be wrong—does it immediately come under a native title claim then?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Hang on: it is under a native title claim. Most all the stations are under native title claim.

The CHAIRMAN: When the lease arrangement changes from pastoral lease to unallocated, it hits. The change leads to native title claim.

[11.00 am]

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: That is not correct.

Mr Fearn: That is what I am hearing.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Wherever there is native title and a claim, even if it is pastoral, it is still under native title claim. It is just that the lease will be maintained. If it goes from one title to another, we are talking about the future act and all that stuff. It does not change the fact that the claim is already there.

The CHAIRMAN: It precipitates negotiation in arrangement.

Mr Fearn: The example I got was Boolardy and, the Square Kilometre Array. While that station was there, the pastoralist had the right to do what he liked pastorally.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Subject to the lease.

Mr Fearn: Immediately they wanted that land there, that land was no longer gazetted as pastoral. It became native title and they negotiated on that square kilometre array. Is that correct?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes. I think they are in the process of finalising it.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: If you want to use the land of a pastoralist for a purpose other than the pastoral lease, you need to have agreement with the Indigenous landowner?

Mr Fearn: Maybe that throws out the window anything I indicated to you in relation to trying to maintain those homesteads because if they are no longer pastoral —

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: You are suggesting it might be something the committee looks at. It just means that if we recommend that, the question of what happens with the land use agreement is an issue for government and the committee.

The CHAIRMAN: Is your friend Phil still scheduled to leave at the end of the year?

Mr Fearn: As far as I understand, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: What does he do there; what are his tasks?

Mr Fearn: He lives on the homestead.

The CHAIRMAN: He gets coupons for petrol and other things from DEC?

Mr Fearn: Yes; he does.

The CHAIRMAN: Does he help out; does he look after the homestead?

Mr Fearn: He does most of the maintenance.

The CHAIRMAN: He does a bit of shooting, does he not?

Mr Fearn: He does a bit shooting. He has been doing quite a bit of dogging for the local station owners. He is also a labourer. If you are at Jingemarra and you want to try to get a labourer to help with some sheep; he does a bit of crutching and a bit of shearing. Keeping labour there is important. I might need a hand for a couple of days. I need another pair of hands. If he is not there, where do I get someone—from Geraldton?

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Is it your view that on every pastoral lease that is taken over by DEC, should have someone staying on it; the homestead should not just be knocked down and the property left; some presence should be on the property?

Mr Fearn: I believe that we need to look at them and see which ones. I do not think all of them are worth saving. I think some of them have been degraded too far. Have any of you been to Boolardy? In its day it had swimming pools and palms. That joint has been absolutely magnificent in its day. I will not use the words I would normally use to describe it today. But it has been magnificent. I think there is so much heritage in there, but it will take dollars and cents to bring it back up and people with interest in it, and then it will take dollars and cents long term to maintain it with some sort of integrity.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Is that a DEC-controlled station?

Mr Fearn: Boolardy is not, not but Wariredar is.

The CHAIRMAN: It is obvious when you go through there that there are very few people on the land there any more—often a couple. There is not a quid to pay for any more. What would happen if you had an emergency like fire or an infestation of pests; where would you get the labour to deal with it?

Mr Fearn: I might be putting my foot in it here. I come from a town. My brother-in-law works for DEC. They needed a crew to go up to Murgu, I think it was, last year to trap reptiles. They had swags and a couple of vehicles. That is where they got them. You have to understand that during winter, DEC in the south does not have a huge workload other than to do marsupial trapping. During summer, of course, it has fires and most of them go, “Yes; I’ll go away for a while.” He has been up to the Kimberley. He is classified for working the bomber on fires. There is a labour pool within DEC that, in my opinion, would be pretty interested. As part of maintaining your employment, you do not want to get to May and DEC say, “There are no fires any more so we will lay you three off but we will see in October–November.” Whereas, if they could say, “All right, we’ve got some money to do these stations, are you interested in going up for a couple of weeks?” It would be no different from with a we do. They could spend a couple of weeks in there and change over the crews, and do a bit of work and get fed. Does that answer that?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Fearn: There is no other labour up there, in all fairness. You go to Pia, alongside Boolardy, where there is quite a large Indigenous population. As a trainer we do not seem to ever get asked to teach those boys to put windmills together or do some timber work or some painting to assist on the

station or assist in its clean-up. I think we pay DEC, but we do not seem to go out there and actually address two problems. I work for a company that has the contract for dirt at Yarri. I have to go up in two weeks. They have mainly an Indigenous workforce, and we are training them. They are no different from anyone else. Some are good and some are bad. Some of them are keen and some are not. But with regard to Indigenous people in those communities, I have never been asked to go other than once to Warburton where it did not come off. I have never been asked to go to them to run some small vehicle courses or a chainsaw course. We seem to push money out there and not ask a lot for it in return. Maybe that is not what the committee is about; I understand that. A lot of them are very good.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: You mentioned Indigenous people. Do they still have links to the stations? We know that, historically, they used to work on the stations, but they do not seem to any more. Do they still have links through their heritage to some of these stations? Do you think they would be bothered if the homesteads were all knocked down?

Mr Fearn: I will answer that in the best way I can from my view. The older generation, I think, still have some ties to a lot of that station country. Some of it they were kept off for a long time. But in all fairness that does not seem to have been handed down. I am not picking up among the younger generation that they want to maintain that heritage link. Maybe I am wrong. I am sure there are pockets where that is the case, but I think the general view is that cars, smokes—they are no different from whites; I am not being racist here—bright lights and Kentucky Fried, which we do not have at Yalgoo.

The CHAIRMAN: So the solution is to put a Kentucky Fried Chicken place at Yalgoo!

Mr Fearn: And a training room alongside, one leads to the other. Come through one door to get to the next one.

The CHAIRMAN: Any other issues before I go to a closing statement?

Mr Fearn: The only one is, if you have them in front of you and they are not in colour, could that dam section at Yalgoo—if any of you go through that area, please. There are no signs up; there is nothing. Other than the people who have been involved no-one knows it is there.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: That is the one that held 10 million gallons.

Mr Fearn: Yes. Along the wall that is left you could not draw a line that straight. That shows the skills of those guys in 1917. It blew out in 1964 I think. From 1917 to 1919 it took to build. There are railway lines in it. I can imagine trying to put them on a rock face. I believe that is worth holding on to. I think in the original submission I put in before—it is not included in here—I see Dalgaranga, east towards the rock, as providing an area where people can pull in with their caravan at night and stay a couple of nights. Maybe there should be an environmental toilet there. They could come up that road from Gabyon, and come out at Cue, because Walga rock is on that road. Maintaining Dalgaranga as the phone there and funding it may come from those people paying \$10 a night, I do not know. If you put that photo in the paper, I reckon a lot of people would say, “I’d like to have a look at that.” Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your evidence today before the committee. A transcript of this committee will be forwarded to you for corrections and minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days of the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added by these corrections. 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 for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript.

Mr Fearn: The only thing I can say is that I have done it to the best of my ability; if it is a bit rough I am sorry.

Hearing concluded at 11.10 am