

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES AND
FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

2016–17 BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARINGS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
THURSDAY, 16 JUNE 2016**

**SESSION FOUR
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND WILDLIFE**

Members

**Hon Ken Travers (Chair)
Hon Peter Katsambanis (Deputy Chair)
Hon Alanna Clohesy
Hon Rick Mazza
Hon Helen Morton**

Hearing commenced at 3.58 pm

Hon DONNA FARAGHER

Minister representing the Minister for Environment, examined:

Mr JIM SHARP

Director General, examined:

Dr JOHN BYRNE

Director, Corporate Services, examined:

Dr MARGARET BYRNE

Director, Science and Conservation, examined:

Mr PETER DANS

Director, Regional and Fire Management Services, examined:

Mr RODNEY HUGHES

Director, Rivers and Estuaries Division, examined:

Dr MARTIN RAYNER

Acting Director, Forest and Ecosystem Management, examined:

Ms JACINTA OVERMAN

Acting Director, Parks and Visitor Services, examined:

The ACTING CHAIR: On behalf of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, I would like to welcome you to today's hearing. Can the witnesses confirm that they have read, understood and signed a document headed "Information for Witnesses"?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: It is essential that all your testimony before the committee is complete and truthful to the best of your knowledge. This hearing is being recorded by Hansard and a transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. It is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The hearing is being held in public, although there is discretion available to the committee to hear evidence in private. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today's proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session before answering the question. Agencies and departments have an important role and duty in assisting the committee to scrutinise the budget papers and the committee values your assistance with this.

I will start with Hon Rick Mazza.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I refer to page 540 and the new headquarters in Bunbury. I just wondered how many people is that building going to be designed to house.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will defer to the director general.

Mr J. Sharp: The building that is proposed as the first phase is being designed to house 100 staff.

Hon RICK MAZZA: How many staff will actually be in there when it is fully operational?

Mr J. Sharp: The commitment the government has made is that the first phase will house 100 staff and then within 10 years—that is from when the announcement was made several years ago—there will be 300 staff after a second phase is developed.

Hon RICK MAZZA: So it is on a progressive basis. Was there any contamination on that site that had to be dealt with prior to it being constructed or will there be?

Mr J. Sharp: The issues of previous mining tailings have been dealt with by an extensive investigation conducted by consultants, and that has been dealt with with the Department of Environment Regulation. That is the process. That has now been, we think, dealt with and will be part of the business case that will be considered by government.

Hon RICK MAZZA: What is the estimated cost of actually doing the remedial work on that site to deal with the contamination?

Mr J. Sharp: The cost will be met within the \$18 million which is allocated to the project. I do not have a costing on that component because there is a whole range of strategies that will be used, including avoidance.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Is that something that we could get on notice that you could provide to us at some later stage?

Mr J. Sharp: When the business case is released, yes.

Hon RICK MAZZA: That is all I have got on the headquarters. Just on the new works on that same page, the third heading down is “Firefighting Fleet Replacement” and there is some \$2.2 million being spent in the forward years every year. What items are being replaced within that fleet?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will refer to the director general.

Mr J. Sharp: This is an ongoing program. I will ask Mr Dans to give you the specific details.

Mr P. Dans: Notionally, the allocation of \$2.2 million is for 10 heavy-duty fire trucks or gang trucks. We have a fleet of approximately 110 operating throughout the state and about 100 in the south west corner, and we run them for 10 to 12 years depending on their usage and roll over and replace about 10 annually.

Hon RICK MAZZA: So these are replacements, not additional units.

Mr P. Dans: No; they are the replacement of existing trucks on a wear-and-tear basis.

Hon RICK MAZZA: With the Yarloop–Waroona fires, has there been any analysis done of what the cost was to the department to fight those fires?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: The director general.

Mr J. Sharp: There is a program by which we assess costs. I will ask Mr Dans to answer whether that has been completed yet.

Mr P. Dans: For the financial year to date, our costs are in the vicinity of \$9.5 million to \$10 million.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Good afternoon. I have a few questions but I will just ask a few. On page 534 of the budget papers, there is a comment that priority will be given to assisting the parliamentary and public consideration of the Biodiversity Conservation Bill 2015, which is intended to replace the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950 and the Sandalwood Act 1929. I have four questions. I might give them to you in a bundle because I think you will be able to answer them in a bundle. The first question is: what will it cost to implement all the measures that are proposed in the bill that is before us? How will implementation of the bill be funded from this budget; in other words, where in this budget has an allocation been made, if anywhere? Thirdly, how will

public consideration of this bill be assisted, given that the bill in its current form has not been put out for public consultation? What are the main costs of implementing the bill's clauses?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will refer that bundle of questions to the director general.

Mr J. Sharp: The cost of implementation has not been fully costed, but there has been consideration to what the costs might be. When the bill is promulgated, there will need to be a considerable period of time—we estimate, say, 12 to 18 months—to put regulations in place which would reflect the intent of the bill. Again, we will wait to see the bill and what it looks like in its final form, but we have given some consideration to the regulations which give effect to it. On the public considerations, there have been discussions and we have made ourselves available; in fact, I think there is a consultation in the south west this week with groups in terms of their interest. That will be obviously fed back into the parliamentary considerations. The minister made the commitment that it would be debated in Parliament—that would be the primary vehicle by which the elements are discussed. The major costs relate to the shift in identification of areas needing protection and the production of recovery plans and habitat plans, which places an onus on the state to prepare and identify where the values are in this legislation, and that will be, we consider, the primary cost that will arise out of the implementation of the bill.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: You said there is a rough estimate. What is the rough estimate?

Mr J. Sharp: I do not have that in front of me at the moment. It depends on a range of scenarios in terms of the way in which it is implemented, but I would think it would be in the order of \$1 million or \$2 million.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Thank you; that is a good answer. Turning to page 536, regarding the cut in funding for conserving habitats, species and ecological communities from the actual funding of just over \$80 million in 2014–15 to just under \$73 million in the 2016–17 budget, could you give me full details about which specific activities located in which regions of WA will be cut back?

Mr J. Sharp: The 2015–16 figure is the budget and we estimated an actual of \$82.3 million, and you are asking for an explanation of the difference between the —

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: You are talking about number 2, yes?

Mr J. Sharp: It is number 2, conserving habitats?

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Yes, number 2; that is correct.

Mr J. Sharp: From this current financial year, which is 2015–16, we are estimating it will be about a \$72.9 million spend, and next year in the estimates there will only be about a \$210 000 differential.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Yes, but I was referring to the 2014–15 actual, which was \$80 million, and then it has gone down to \$72 million, I guess, if you are looking at the estimated actual for this year.

[4.10 pm]

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: You are referring somewhat back in terms of previous budget years. I am happy for the director general to respond but I think he is obviously referring to the most recent budget. I thought questions would have been asked last year but I am happy to refer it to the director general.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It shows a trend, does it not, so I am wondering what we are not doing.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: To be fair, if you look at 2015–16 and 2016–17, the trend is pretty much on a par.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What did we not do in 2015–16 that we did in 2014–15? How is that? Is that a better question?

Mr J. Sharp: It is lots of things, I would imagine that we did not do with the same level of intensity or in the same way. I will ask Dr Margaret Byrne, director of science and conservation, if we have some explanation of that.

Dr M. Byrne: When we reviewed our core business and the major areas that we were to invest our activities in, the areas that had some reduction in level of intensity of management were in the areas of the biodiversity audit, hydrological monitoring and off-reserve conservation.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Were there losses of positions or was it just the work carried out in those areas?

Mr J. Sharp: In relation to reductions that are across all activities within the agency in that previous year, two redundancy programs were undertaken and Dr John Byrne can outline what the numbers were, but it was across the whole agency and across all levels of activity.

Dr J. Byrne: As the previous speaker said, that was a reduction in two previous years. We had regular expenditure reviews at that time. Details of the agency's expenditure review were included in the budget statements of 2015–16 the previous year. There are some details there where the reductions occurred.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I understand that that occurred for the 2015–16 year and we are still in that year. Will that continue for next year? Are you looking at any further losses of jobs or are you retaining the same level?

Dr J. Byrne: The budget is basically the same next year as it is this year. The number of jobs is basically the same.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: When you say “basically the same”, there were those three areas that we lost funding in the previous year. Are they continuing to be services that you are not providing?

Mr J. Sharp: There were the reductions—we can make that available from the previous budget papers—across a range of areas and programs. We have worked vigorously in entering into partnerships with others to continue to deliver. Some of them were large in terms of financial quantum. Some were smaller. A number of the activities over that time, such as the operation of the Perth Observatory have now been taken on by volunteer groups. There were four or five staff in there who took redundancies. But there has been negotiation with community groups who have now taken that on as a business. We still support the maintenance of the buildings but they run the activity. Land for Wildlife—a number of staff were operating on the ground and the state NRM bodies have taken a responsibility for doing that in partnership with us. We will maintain the records; they will conduct some of that activity. It varies, but we have used a whole range of strategies. The intention is, as best we see, the out years indicate there will be a continuation of the commitment reflected into this year's budget into the four out years.

Hon ADELE FARINA: The Wheeler airfield has been used by fixed-wing fire bombers to collect the water and take off from there during the course of a fire. In the Waroona fire it did 440 lifts, which helped control that fire to a massive extent. The airfield is on private land. It has three interconnected runways and they are constructed of compacted dirt and mowed grass. Obviously, when you are doing that many lifts and it is under that sort of constant, sustained operation, the runways do not last very long. They soon start breaking down and it creates a problem so they have to start reducing the use on the runways. That means there is less water being airlifted and less water getting to where we need it to fight the fire. I understand that a submission has been made to upgrade the facilities at the Wheeler airfield and the proposal consists of four stages and a total cost of \$515 000. I want to know whether DPaW will have considered that submission and whether it will be funding that proposal. Obviously, it is really critical for fire prevention in the south west.

Mr J. Sharp: Thanks for the question. It is understood that the Wheeler airfield played a critical role in the suppression of the fire and suppression efforts, and it was heavily impacted. I understand

we have been in discussions with the owner. I will ask Peter Dans to answer that question more specifically.

Mr P. Dans: It is a two-part response, honourable member. There was significant wear and tear on the airstrip during the Waroona fire and it was subsequently remediated to the tune, I think, of \$150 000 just basically bringing it up to tip-top operating condition, as it was before the fire. There has subsequently been a proposal put together by the Shires of Waroona and Harvey and I think there are some others. We have not seen the detail yet. We have received correspondence from one of the shire CEOs and we have indicated our willingness to meet and discuss what they have in mind. We have been given a broad outline but no detail at this stage.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I will make sure that message gets back to them. My next question is in relation to the green growth plan. How many staff at the department have been working on the green growth plan over the past five years?

Mr J. Sharp: Thank you. I cannot give a direct answer; it would be an indicative figure. A large number of staff have been playing specific roles at different points in time, whether it be in terms of mapping, fielded identification of values, producing reports or evaluating the reports. I have a small team of about four or five working on it virtually full time and a large number of other people working on it sporadically, depending upon what issues emerge.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Has the department sought additional budget to cover the additional cost of the staff who are now devoted to this plan?

Mr J. Sharp: We did seek additional funding. I think there was some funding a year or so ago but we have absorbed those costs and given it priority within the agency over the last couple of years.

Hon ADELE FARINA: You indicated that you did get some additional funding. Can you tell me how much that was? You can take it on notice.

Mr J. Sharp: I can take it on notice and see what that additional funding was, yes.

[Supplementary Information No D1.]

Hon ADELE FARINA: I understand the plan indicates that 170 000 hectares will be transferred into the conservation reserve system. I want to know whether the area in phase 1 contains land that has been purchased from previous environmental offsets.

Mr J. Sharp: The plan proposes 170 000 additions to the conservation reserve system. The first tranche is of 80 000 hectares. I cannot indicate, but I will take on notice, whether any of those proposed in the first 80 000 have been purchased by way of offsets.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Can you do that and indicate how much? That would be great.

Mr J. Sharp: For clarification, it is the areas and the value?

Hon ADELE FARINA: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No D2.]

Hon ADELE FARINA: My next question is in relation to the Pilbara biological survey. An article was published on the department's website on 3 June 2016 titled "Biodiversity survey to inform Pilbara's future". I understand a total cost of just over \$14 million was allocated for the town to undertake the survey and it was published in two volumes. The first volume was published in 2011 and the second was not published until 2015. Why has it taken nine years since the completion of the field sampling and 13 years since the survey began to publish the final results of the survey and the findings? It seems like a very long period of time.

[4.20 pm]

Mr J. Sharp: Thank you for the question. Yes, that was released a week ago. It has been a very long and extensive collaboration by the department with a range of other agencies, both universities

and other institutions, plus industry groups, who were part of funding it as well. It was designed to be completed in two stages. I will ask Dr Margaret Byrne, who has been integrally involved in that program, to answer more completely.

Dr M. Byrne: Thank you. The Pilbara survey came on just after the field survey for the agricultural zone salinity survey, so it was then undertaken at the same time as finishing the salinity survey. Then towards the end of the field season for the Pilbara survey, the Kimberley islands survey was requested. So we were at times having at least two major regional surveys operating at the same time. So there were delays and there were various priorities set at different times as to the field season and the analysis so that all of those three major surveys could be delivered as required according to the priorities at the time.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Is the information in that survey still current, given that it has taken 13 years to collect?

Dr M. Byrne: Yes, absolutely. All the specimens are held and lodged at the Museum and in the herbarium, so they are completely accessible for ongoing work, and the information that is captured through that survey and those specimens is being used in further work that is ongoing at the moment.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I understand that the department's website states that the survey had six major components, including terrestrial flora. However, neither of the volumes that have been published contains data and results on native terrestrial flora. Is there some reason for that?

Dr M. Byrne: The flora component was quite complex. It had a much broader array and a much larger number of sites than the fauna components. It is quite a diverse flora up in the Pilbara and it has taken quite a long time to identify all of those plants. The identification of the specimens is now complete and we are working through the actual database, and we will then be able to start analysis of those records.

Hon ADELE FARINA: So there will be a volume 3 with that information?

Dr M. Byrne: I am not sure it will be a complete volume. Some of that information is available. People have accessed that information already. It is just not collated effectively to make it fully available. Once we have done that, it will be released as a database and as a publication—not necessarily a volume of publication, but a single publication.

The ACTING CHAIR: I will move on to Hon Ken Travers.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: No; I am happy for Hon Adele Farina to continue. If there is time at the end, I will ask some questions. I defer to Hon Alanna Clohesy.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I would like to go to service 8, protection of the Swan and Canning River systems, and specifically to talk about the recent dolphin deaths at Elizabeth Quay. Two dolphins were found dead at Elizabeth Quay. Is that correct?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Near to.

Mr J. Sharp: Outside.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Near to. Sorry. I meant “near to”. Has the autopsy report that was commissioned from experts at Murdoch University been completed?

Mr J. Sharp: There were two components. There was an analysis of tissue, and there was an autopsy. The autopsy, which is the very first part of the analysis, has been done, but the second part has not. I ask Mr Hughes whether he is able to provide detailed information on where that is at.

Mr R. Hughes: When the dolphins—an adult female, and a male calf—were delivered, the gross anatomy examination was carried out. The adult had been dead probably for a couple of days and so post-mortem changes to the tissues meant that no cause of death could be determined. In relation to the calf, it had been dead an estimated 12 hours. In both cases, the animals were seen to be in fairly

good body condition with no visible trauma on the outside of their bodies. With the calf, they were able to determine a cause of death of possibly pneumonia, with an underlying infection. That report is being written up as we speak from that part of the analysis and we will get that in some weeks. The more complex part of the examination—the viral tests and histopathology and the like—will take several months before we will hear back from Murdoch on that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Do we have an expectation of the date when the autopsy report that is due in a couple of weeks will be given to the department and the minister?

Mr R. Hughes: We do not have a set date, no, but certainly by the end of the month we expect it will be analysed by Murdoch and our own experts. That will be a matter of weeks. As I say, the second part of that will be possibly some months away.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Back in May, the minister said that the autopsy report was expected in a week or so. What has been the delay in the autopsy report?

Mr R. Hughes: I am sorry; I cannot give a precise answer to that. I imagine it is still with Murdoch University and they will provide it to us as soon as they can.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Can I just indicate, and the director general or Mr Hughes might further indicate, I am not aware of the particular words that were used by the minister, but perhaps the initial advice that Mr Hughes has provided with respect to perhaps pneumonia as a cause was provided fairly quickly, and there is obviously further work that is currently being done with Murdoch and the department. So it may well be that what the minister was referring to was those early results. That is just by way of clarification.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: The minister said, “The time line I have been given from recovery, which was Friday, just under a week ago, was under two weeks, so I expect results on that in the next week or so.” He called them the post-mortem results, which I assume are the autopsy results.

Mr J. Sharp: We can only seek information from Murdoch University about that timing. We can seek that information. As was indicated by the minister, they are the first indications, and a detailed autopsy report will be given to us, but then, of course, the testing of tissues and tissue cultures is a very long and complicated process and we will have to wait for the results of that.

The ACTING CHAIR: Can I just clarify. Are you looking for additional information, or is that satisfactory?

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: An expected time frame for both sets of reports.

[Supplementary Information No D3.]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: How does a dolphin acquire pneumonia?

Mr R. Hughes: I cannot answer that question. It is something that has happened previously. This was the cause, if you recall, of the dolphin deaths in 2009. A similar finding was made in at least a couple of cases of the deaths there. They are mammals, with lungs, and pneumonia is a lung infection.

Mr J. Sharp: By way of explanation, there was a virus that was deemed to be responsible for that, as I understand it.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: For the deaths in 2009?

Mr J. Sharp: Yes, and it was a worldwide virus. I am not making a suggestion that that is the case on this occasion, because we have no evidence either way. That is why we need to wait on tissue culture results.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Will the post-mortem or the autopsy and tissue culture reports be made publicly available?

Mr J. Sharp: If I can check with Mr Hughes, in the past I think they have been made available, and I do not see any reason why not.

Mr R. Hughes: There is no reason why that cannot be done.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Thank you. What is the population size of female dolphins in the Swan–Canning River system at the moment?

Mr J. Sharp: As I understand it, there are 29 fully resident. But I will ask again Mr Hughes to give a more specific response to that.

Mr R. Hughes: There are up to 52 dolphins, including 13 calves, that we know to be using the river at any given time, and, within that, between 20 and 30 are known to be resident. The details of the sexes we have for the resident dolphins, and they are reported through our Dolphin Watch program. I do not have that information on me today but we can certainly provide that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I am happy to take that on notice. Thank you.

[Supplementary Information No D4.]

[4.30 pm]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: What is the trend in dolphin deaths over, say, the last 10 years in the Swan–Canning system?

Mr J. Sharp: I will ask Mr Hughes to answer that, but preface it by saying that it is very difficult to determine the life cycle and the specific age of dolphins and what is old age, but I will ask Mr Hughes to do his best.

Mr R. Hughes: Yes, I do not have the data on the trend of dolphin deaths over 10 years; we would need to provide that as supplementary information. I know that after 2009, when we had the six deaths, within a couple of years, the identified population of river residents had returned to about that 20 to 25 mark that seems to be the number that it settles at at any given time.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: That is interesting, is it not?

[Supplementary Information No D5.]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: If that could be dolphin death by sex, by cause of death and by year. Thank you.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: For what time was it again, sorry, just so that we are clear?

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: It is 10 years. That would be significant enough to identify a trend, surely.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Yes, taking into account, though, as has been discussed already, there was obviously a spike in 2009.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: That is why I have said cause of death as well.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: It is a statistical correlation to what we are looking for. It is the causal link, minister.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I would just like to ask a question about the biodiversity audit II, and follow up from some questions asked in the Legislative Assembly estimates hearings. I understand that that is not currently available to the public. When will the department make that available to the public?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will defer to the director general.

Mr J. Sharp: I will ask Dr Byrne to give more specific detail in a moment. In terms of biodiversity audit II, and it really relates to the early comments about reducing it into hard documented volumes, that information is available; it is just a format that it is made available. My understanding is that

we have set it up as part of the library and it is accessible, but it is accessible in terms of going into the database that composed the information. I will ask Dr Byrne.

Dr M. Byrne: Yes, the information collected through the biodiversity audit II is available in a database. That database is on a computer and accessible to the public in the conservation library on our Kensington site. It can also be accessed through our regional centres if you make contact with an appropriate conservation officer. As the director general said, we decided not to produce a hard copy volume as was produced for the first audit because it takes a long time to produce a version like that; it is a very large and very thick volume, and it contains a lot of information but it is in a very static format, so it is not searchable. You cannot reorganise the information according to what your particular objective is. So, it is not as readily useable than if you can put the information into a database. We decided to make a database so that the information is there, it is searchable and it can be retrieved; it is just not able to be put onto a website or things because you have to have the software that goes with it. So it has to be on our departmental systems. But it is perfectly accessible by coming into the library and using it in that format.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I understand the department has a NatureMap application that provides public access to 136 databases. Can that NatureMap not provide access to the audit II database?

Dr M. Byrne: The NatureMap draws on a lot of the similar information that the biodiversity audit has captured, so a lot of that information is available through our NatureMap portal, and they are drawing on underlying databases that contain very similar information.

Hon ADELE FARINA: What does that mean when you say “very similar information”? There is stuff that has been captured in the biodiversity audit II that will not be available through NatureMap?

Dr M. Byrne: To a large extent, it is the same information. There is also some expert opinion views and analysis of the information, and that is captured in a way that is slightly different from the underlying databases, but the primary information is the same.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Okay. I do not have great knowledge of computers or technology, but I do not quite understand it. If the government has a policy to make data publicly available, why was this data not collected in a way that could then be accessed through the department’s website, as is the case with other data that the department collects and provides?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will ask the director general to say a few words in that regard.

Mr J. Sharp: The process for the collection of this information started quite a few years ago, so it has been an ongoing collection of information. You are asking the question: how can it be integrated in with the NatureMap? We could take that on notice. Again, we would need to seek some information understanding from those who are more technically competent than I—perhaps less than Margaret but more than I—to look at how that could be done.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Okay. I am happy for that to be taken on notice.

[Supplementary Information No D6.]

Hon ADELE FARINA: Just one further component to this line of questioning. I have been told that there were 110 experts and staff involved in the production of the biodiversity audit II. Is it possible to get a list of their names and titles?

Mr J. Sharp: I will defer that to Dr Byrne.

Dr M. Byrne: It may be possible. It drew on a lot of experts across the department. I presume there may be records of the people who attended those workshops and were involved in providing that information, but I certainly do not have that available at the moment.

Hon ADELE FARINA: That is fine; you can take it on notice.

Mr J. Sharp: Yes.

[*Supplementary Information No D7.*]

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Looking again at page 537, under “Conserving Habitats, Species and Ecological Communities”, the number of full-time equivalent employees is going to drop by two, according to the budget target. Which two positions are we losing?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will defer to the director general.

Mr J. Sharp: It is not as simple as answering that. To some degree, it may not be known. We are talking about full-time equivalents, member. That may be composed of several people, and when we answered this similar question in the other place, we had to indicate that part of my time contributes towards that activity. So it would not necessarily be two specific people. But it would be taken perhaps over a number of people and components of their jobs. I will ask Dr Byrne if that is —

Dr M. Byrne: My understanding is that at the highest level in the department, the dollar value of the investment and the FTEs are comparable, but when we break that down, it is across a large number of people. So, the FTE count is derived from the dollar investment that is there, and so it may vary slightly from year to year.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: So this 428 looks like employees rather than amount of money spent on salaries.

Mr J. Sharp: That is the complexity of how it is presented. Dr John Byrne will run us through this. It actually is not persons; it is full-time equivalents. It could easily be, for instance, 800 people working half-time to get to the 400. But the dollar figure is not an equivalent, and it does not specifically relate to specific people in that case.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: No, but this is not a dollar figure.

Mr J. Sharp: No, it is FTE. In another words, it is a measure of effort that is going to be undertaken, so it could be part of 100 people. We need to manage our budget across the spread of all staff.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I guess the question specifically would be: if you can identify comparison with going back to 2014–15, which is the beginning of this budget paper, when we had 476 full-time equivalents, now that we are estimating a budget target of 428 full-time equivalents, can you identify which offices have lost that staffing component, and what positions, if you can identify that staffing component, has been reduced?

[4.40 pm]

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will defer to Dr Byrne.

Dr J. Byrne: First, I confirm the point that most of our employees—1 450 full-time equivalents, about 1 600 headcount—work on more than one service during the year and they allocate their time against the services. Their time is used to calculate the salary allocation. To do it, I would say how much salary is spent on that. Then we divide that by the total number of FTEs to get an FTE for each service, but it is not specific people. It is not 428 specific people. It could be something like 900 or 1 000 people for part of the time against that. In terms of the reduction from 2014–15—as you say, the reduction from 476—a very similar question was asked in the other house and we did respond to that. We cannot identify specific people at the service level. We can identify specific people at the department level and provide a list of these positions previously abolished due to the redundancy scheme. That came to about 50 people.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: That accounts for most of that. When you look at full-time equivalents in your budget, which salary point are you looking at? Is it an average? I think you were trying to address that before, whether it is a high-level job or a low-level job—because you are obviously not talking about bodies.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will defer to the director general first.

Mr J. Sharp: We do talk about bodies in some instances where they are fully allocated within that activity and there are some people who are fully active; in other words, 100 per cent of their time is spent within conserving habitat species and ecological communities. There is a variable around a large number of other people, which compose a component of it. We could give the direct number of people—no, I do not know whether we can do that. I will ask Dr Byrne. I do not know whether we can identify even those working full-time in that activity.

Dr J. Byrne: To answer your specific question, it is an average. You do all the services at the same average cost, the same average salary per person. We have to make simplifications like that to create meaningful data.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: In trying to assess the service of Parks and Wildlife, it would be good to find out whether there are particular offices that are under-resourced. What I am asking for is, across the spread of offices for DPAW, what the staffing component is. Can you give me a staffing component per office, knowing that some of them are going to be experts that go between offices? Can you do that, even if it is a partial —

Mr J. Sharp: I do not fully understand the question because, as Dr John Byrne indicated, staff allocate their activities, the time that they spend across the eight program areas, and that can be variable on a daily or a weekly basis. The earlier question about our effort in relation to the strategic assessment of Perth and Peel is an example of that, where people would be taken offline for two weeks to undertake some activity that contributes towards that outcome. I think we would call that a conserving habitats effort, because that is the best way of describing it in terms of our program activities. That could include clerks. It would include mapping, GIS people and others. A portion of their time is taken and allocated to that activity and, as Dr John Byrne has indicated, then we average the spend across those areas to get the number of full-time equivalents. It is actually a measure of people effort towards an activity.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I see.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: On page 533 there is an allocation for “Public Recreation and Joint Management Arrangements for the Ningaloo Coast”. Are the joint management arrangements going to be joint management with traditional owners?

Mr J. Sharp: Yes, that is correct. Negotiations are currently underway for the future management of that coast. The finalisation of the management agreement will be subject to reaching Indigenous land use agreement with the traditional owners for that area.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: How are we progressing with reaching that arrangement with the traditional owners?

Mr J. Sharp: I will ask Ms Jacinta Overman to answer that. She might be more up to date than me.

Ms J. Overman: To ensure the creation of the reserve meets the requirements of the Native Title Act, we have commenced the negotiation of an Indigenous land use agreement and we have agreement with the Gnulli native title party to enter into negotiations. That was achieved recently. We will be hoping to progress that quickly over the next six months and hope to see an outcome in the 2016–17 financial year.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: Is there any indication at this stage—I know it is early, but the plans for that arrangement on the Ningaloo Coast are pretty well advanced—of what sort of economic benefits the finalisation of the agreement is going to create for Indigenous people in the area?

Mr J. Sharp: I will ask Ms Overman.

Ms J. Overman: As an outcome of the ILUA, we would like to see joint management of the proposed conservation and recreation reserve along the 180-kilometre stretch of Ningaloo coast and also Cape Range National Park and Ningaloo Marine Park; training and employment for Gnulli rangers; the establishment of a joint management body for the reserves to oversee management. Also, this project provides for the enhancement of tourism facilities along the coast in terms of caravanning and camping and allowing that popular activity to continue. Essentially, the creation of the reserves will allow us to manage the values of that stretch of coastline, to set up the joint management agreement and the arrangements, and to enable public access in perpetuity so that people can continue to enjoy the coast.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: We will wait for the negotiations but, hopefully, there can be some really positive outcomes both from a conservation perspective and a tourism perspective, but also from an Indigenous employment and Indigenous business perspective too. I am sure your department will be as keen as anybody else to achieve those.

The next area I want to address is on page 538, item 6, “Prescribed Burning and Fire Management”. The only efficiency indicator is the average cost per hectare burnt, and the budgeted cost for this current financial year that we are still in was \$10.86 per hectare and the actual is \$63.10. There is an explanation suggesting that prescribed burning was lower due to lower rainfalls, but is that code for the fact that there are a whole heap of people being paid to sit around instead of doing prescribed burning?

Mr J. Sharp: The first answer is no, but I will ask Mr Peter Dans to give an explanation of the figures.

Mr P. Dans: Yes. As the footnote explains, it is the average cost across the whole of the state. As you know, in the south west of the state we have a notional target of approximately 200 000 hectares. However, when we go to the north of the state, particularly in the Kimberley region where we undertake early dry season burning, we have had a traditional target of something in the order of 500 000 to perhaps a million hectares. An underachievement in the Kimberley boosts the unit cost on a statewide basis very, very substantially, and that is exactly what happened. We have tried to explain there in the footnote what has actually happened this year. There has been a bit of a shift in the basis of burning of unallocated crown land in the Kimberley; whereas parks and wildlife has historically been leading the charge in that regard, now a lot of Aboriginal ranger groups and native title claimant bodies are undertaking the work themselves now, so, obviously, we do not count that as our prescribed burning achievement anymore. There has been a bit of a downturn in the Kimberley, particularly over the last financial year, the 2015–16 financial year.

[4.50 pm]

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: Has that resulted in a reduction in the staff levels of people employed to do that work?

Mr P. Dans: Not so much, no. You will see the 240 dropping down to 200. It would be fair to say that the figure of 240 for 2015–16 was very much an estimate and 2015–16 was the first financial year in which we have actually had prescribed burning, fire management and bushfire suppression as a separate service; and of course the 2014–15 year is purely hindcasting. It has just taken a while to settle out once we get a grip of a new, discrete service for bushfire suppression and prescribed burning and fire management.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: Could we take the estimated actuals for 2015–16 as a bit of a baseline?

Mr P. Dans: I think that would be a good way of putting it, member.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: In which case, if this shift in how burning takes place in the Kimberley has happened and will be permanent, or at least over the medium term will be the shift

that you have just described, how are we then going to achieve the targeted \$15.69 per hectare in 2016–17?

Mr P. Dans: We will have to see how things pan out there. As I said, there has been some movement into that area from Aboriginal traditional owner groups and ranger groups and the like. Again, we will have to see how it pans out. We have undertaken significantly more unallocated crown land burning in other regions around the state in the current financial year, and planning into the 2016–17 financial year as well.

The ACTING CHAIR: I think Hon Rick Mazza has a supplementary question.

Hon RICK MAZZA: You mention prescribed burning, fire management and then bushfire suppression. What is the difference between the two?

Mr P. Dans: The bushfire suppression budget is purely that. It is reacting to a fire that has commenced by whatever means and the costs that are incurred in suppressing that fire. Prescribed burning and fire management involves pretty much everything else we do in that broad activity of fire management. It includes community consultation, planning of a burn program, training of staff and the like.

Hon RICK MAZZA: That answers that, thank you. Just with the suppression, I see the actual there for 2014–15 in total, the net cost of services, is \$44.5 million and is dropping away quite sharply to \$28.5 million in the forward years. Is that in anticipation that the prescribed burning and fire management will maybe reduce the number of fires?

Mr P. Dans: That figure for 2014–15, you are referring to, the \$44 million, reflects the substantial costs that were incurred in the last financial year for the Northcliffe bushfire and the Boddington or Lower Hotham bushfire. They reflect some additional funding that this state received from other sources as a result of the magnitude of that suppression effort—some Western Australian natural disaster response and recovery arrangements funding, some additional funding from the National Aerial Firefighting Centre. It may be that by the time we have wrapped up this financial year and when 2015–16 appears in next year's budget statement that it looks quite a bit more than the \$28 million that is showing as the estimated actual for 2015–16.

Hon RICK MAZZA: You did say earlier that it could be \$10 million for the Yarloop–Waroon fire.

Mr P. Dans: That is right, yes.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: Also just on prescribed burning, page 134, “Significant Issues”, indicates that there will be an increase in funding of \$1.4 million in the forthcoming year for prescribed burning. Will that lead to an increased target for prescribed burning, or will it be used to achieve the existing target?

Mr J. Sharp: I will preface some comments and then pass to Mr Dans. There was additional funding of \$20 million allocated in addition to our base level funding for prescribed burning, but it will enable us to get closer to that target. That is the intention.

Mr P. Dans: We received new funding in the 2015–16 budget process through the royalties for regions program for prescribed burning of \$20 million over four financial years. It was \$3.8 million in the current financial year rising to \$5.2 million in 2016–17, which is the \$1.4 million referred to in the paper there. The objective is to consistently achieve the target of 200 000 hectares in the south west of the state—I omitted to say that that additional funding is just for the south west corner of the state—such that we get to a stage where approximately 45 per cent of Parks and Wildlife-managed land in the south west has a fuel age of less than six years.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: What will this funding, the \$20 million over four years, allow you to do that you have not been able to do because of a lack of funding in the past?

Mr P. Dans: There are a few themes of activity that the new funding is going to apply to, including extension of our seasonal firefighters, so we start them earlier and finish them later to maximise the number of staff or crews we have available to undertake burns when suitable conditions arise.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: How big is that extension at either end?

Mr P. Dans: It is about 12 weeks—six at the start of the season and six at the back end of the season; about a quarter of an FTE, a little under a quarter of an FTE. It has allowed us to more readily mobilise crews around the south west. What I mean there is that we rarely have suitable burning conditions in all regions around the south west. There are generally suitable burning conditions either up around the Swan region or down south or whatever, so we are moving staff and trucks. We might send 10 trucks from Wanneroo down to Pemberton for a week to boost their workforce there. We put them up in a hotel, feed them et cetera and bring them back for the weekend or whatever when the window of opportunity closes due to weather conditions. We are also using contractors a lot more for a similar reason—to maximise the number of available staff to apply to burning when the right conditions apply. The trick to meeting the target is going to be capitalising on every single opportunity that arises. So we will not use our own staff to do traffic management or something like that; we will get a local contractor in to do that and get some money back into the local economy and the like. I suppose one of the final things is, as I said, taking every single opportunity. There may have been some reluctance in the past to commence a burn on a Friday afternoon knowing well that you might need to have people out patrolling that burn on a Saturday and Sunday because penalty rates costs are substantial; the unit cost for that burn would go up substantially. But if you chose not to do it, you would miss that window of opportunity. A burn is not done in a day; a burn will take two, three or four days to complete and be safe. It has given us a lot more flexibility in applying our resources to absolutely maximise the use of every single opportunity.

Hon ADELE FARINA: The updated wetlands conservation policy which was approved by the wetlands coordinating committee in 2006, why has it not been released for public comment yet?

Mr J. Sharp: You are referring, I think, to a review of the buffer guidelines.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I am told it is called the wetlands conservation policy; it was an update of that. It may well be the guidelines.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: We might take that on notice, and perhaps you could provide us with the exact details of what you are asking.

Hon ADELE FARINA: Apparently it was endorsed by the wetlands coordinating committee in 2006 and no-one has seen it since. That was the first question. The second question is: why does the wetlands coordinating committee still not meet? It was established to provide advice to the minister and clearly it has done part of its work, but it has not been publicly released. It is very concerned about a range of issues and it has made a number of requests for meetings, but it is just hitting a brick wall.

[5.00 pm]

Mr J. Sharp: The Wetlands Coordinating Committee has a role of coordinating or advising in relation to coordinating the activities of government agencies. Considerable work has been undertaken on the strategic assessment and other things in that space. The need for the committee to meet, I do not think has been as great, but I will ask Dr Margaret Byrne to answer that specifically.

Dr M. Byrne: The role of the committee as set up under the state wetlands policy in 1997 was to coordinate the implementation of the policy by a range of government agencies. That is why it is called the Wetlands Coordinating Committee. It is not actually an advisory committee; it is a coordinating committee. It has a range of members from government agencies including Parks and Wildlife, Planning, Environment Regulation, Water, and Agriculture and Food, plus two independent members and an independent scientist. In the early years there was a lot of work to

do around implementing that policy and so the committee met regularly. The meetings have been less regular over the years. That policy has been in place for nearly 20 years, so a large amount of it is actions are either completed or are ongoing business. There is a lot less need for that role of the committee in coordinating those actions.

Hon ADELE FARINA: But they have actually produced an update that needs to go out for public comment and it has been sitting on a shelf since 2006. Perhaps if the committee had met more regularly, we might have got it out for public comment and endorsed by now. There seems to be a problem here. Members of that committee have asked for that committee to meet, obviously concerned that the work they completed back in 2006 has been sitting on a shelf somewhere and has not seen the light of day. I think it is reasonable to provide some feedback to this group, who are obviously very concerned about the fact the committee is not meeting, as to why the update of those guidelines has not progressed anywhere. I, for one, would like to know what that means.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: As I have indicated, we will take that on notice.

[Supplementary Information No D8.]

Hon RICK MAZZA: On page 534 you talk about invasive pests and management programs like Western Shield. How successful has the Eradicat baiting system been? Has any research been done on that?

Mr J. Sharp: The research has been done to establish the use of Eradicat. It has been through a scientific process and the broad application is about to start. I will get Dr Margaret Byrne to respond to that.

Dr M. Byrne: There has been a lot of research into the effectiveness of Eradicat. Before you can get a baiting like that approved through the APVMA, you have to be able to absolutely provide evidence that the toxins in the baits are effective on the target organism and that they do not have non-target effects. We undertook probably about 10 years of research around Eradicat prior to it being registered in December 2014. We are now at the point of rolling out that implementation phase.

Hon RICK MAZZA: The baits have not been used yet, is that what you are saying?

Dr M. Byrne: No. We had approval to undertake research trials with Eradicat. Once it was formally registered for operational use in December 2014 we have been able to implement operational use of Eradicat. We are now integrating our Eradicat baiting with our fox-baiting program through Western Shield.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Has there been any measurement of the success of Eradicat; how it has been reducing the number of cats in a particular area?

Mr J. Sharp: Its effectiveness was part of the research program. I do not think we have completed the evaluation of its application yet. I think it is a bit soon for that.

Dr M. Byrne: We know that it is very effective in rangelands areas. You can get 70 to 80 per cent knockdown of cats use in rangelands area. We need a little bit more work on how to effectively implement it in the south west where you have got very different climatic regimes and very different prey–predator relationships. We have got some funding now from the commonwealth to undertake those trials to implement the cat baiting in the south west areas.

Hon RICK MAZZA: How is that —

The ACTING CHAIR: I am sorry, Hon Rick Mazza, unless this is likely —

Hon RICK MAZZA: It is all right.

The ACTING CHAIR: I really do have to draw this to a close. We are over time as it is.

On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. The committee will forward any additional questions it has to you in writing after Monday, 20 June 2016, together with the transcript of evidence, which includes the questions you have taken on notice, highlighted in the transcript. Responses to these questions will be requested within 10 working days of receipt of the questions. Should you be unable to meet this due date, please advise the committee in writing as soon as possible before the due date. The advice is to include specific reasons as to why the due date cannot be met. If members have any unasked questions, I ask them to submit these to the committee clerk at the close of the hearing. Once again, I thank you for your attendance today.

Hearing concluded at 5.05 pm
