

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

2021–22 BUDGET ESTIMATES



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2021**

**SESSION ONE
DEPARTMENT OF BIODIVERSITY, CONSERVATION AND ATTRACTIONS**

**Members
Hon Peter Collier (Chair)
Hon Samantha Rowe (Deputy Chair)
Hon Jackie Jarvis
Hon Nick Goiran
Hon Dr Brad Pettitt**

Hearing commenced at 10.00 am

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON

Minister for Mental Health representing the Minister for Environment, examined:

Mr PETER DANS

Acting Director General, examined:

Dr FRAN STANLEY

Executive Director, Conservation and Ecosystem Management, examined:

Mr ALAN BARRETT

Executive Director, Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, examined:

Ms WENDY ATTENBOROUGH

Executive Director, Zoological Parks Authority, examined:

Mr JASON FOSTER

Executive Director, Regional and Fire Management Services Division, examined:

Mr SUNNY ASHAR

Acting Manager, Reporting and Budgeting, examined:

Dr MARGARET BYRNE

Executive Director, Biodiversity and Conservation Science, examined:

Mrs SANDRA THOMAS

Senior Policy Adviser, Minister for Environment, examined:

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming, everyone. Welcome to today's estimates hearings. The committee acknowledges and honours the traditional owners of the ancestral lands upon which we meet today, the Whadjuk Noongar people, and pays its respects to their elders, both past and present. Can the witnesses confirm whether they have read, understood and signed a document titled, "Information for Witnesses"?

The WITNESSES: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Your testimony before the committee must be complete and truthful to the best of your knowledge. This hearing is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The committee will place the uncorrected transcript of your evidence on the internet a few days after the hearing. When the transcript is finalised, the uncorrected version will be replaced by the finalised version. This is a public hearing, but the committee can elect to hear evidence in private. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session before answering the question.

For those who have not been to a session before, I have been allowing follow-on questions. If someone asks a question and you would like to follow-up, that is fine. We have limited time, of course, so I will share the love. The estimates committee will go first and then the shadow minister will get a bit longer. If time permits after that, we will go for second dubs.

Minister, do have any opening comments?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No—fire away.

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: Last night we had the Forest Products Commission in, but I believe it is this agency, DBCA, that manages the forest management plan. I am looking at page 708 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the line item “Implementation of the Forest Management Plan”. There is some further detail on page 713. Given the changing landscape in forestry and the decision to stop harvesting native timbers, I am interested in what DBCA’s role is regarding the forest management plan and how that now gets implemented or whether it will change the way the forest management plan is managed?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will say at the outset that at the moment we are in the *Forest management plan 2014–2023*, so we are implementing that at this stage and we will continue implementing that. At the same time, over the next few months, we will start to develop the next forest management plan, and that will run from 2024. Stakeholder engagement and consultation for the new plan is anticipated to start later in the year.

Just generally, the government is committed to continuing to manage the state’s forests to protect old-growth forests and indeed our water catchments to conserve our plants and our animals, and to enable recreation and tourism in our parks where appropriate. There are also opportunities for other economic activities and other public uses under the direction of the current forest management plan. We are and will remain committed to protecting at least an additional 400 000 hectares of karri, jarrah and wandoo forests by ceasing native timber harvesting from 2024, and are also immediately protecting around 9 000 hectares of two-tier mixed-age karri forest.

Obviously, climate change plays a role, and we see ever increasing impacts of climate change on our forests. We also have to make sure that we that we maintain biodiversity and forest health. We need to continue to capture and store carbon, and we are also seeing challenges with declining timber yields. That makes it essential that we take action now to protect our forests for future generations. We believe that protecting our forests is an important step in the fight against climate change. It builds on the legacy of the Gallop Labor government’s decision to end native timber harvesting in old-growth forests that was made early in the 2000s. My advice tells me that our south west native forests store about 600 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent—so roughly 116 years’ worth of annual emissions for every car in Western Australia. So they are important for us.

As I said, some announcements have been made recently, but we are still in the existing forest management plan; the work will start on the next one later this year.

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: A follow-up, if I may, chair. With the announcement of the end of native forest logging, I have had a number of constituent questions in the south west about the idea that people will just go mad and keep logging up until the end the forest management plan like it is open slather. From my understanding of the forest management plan, that is not how it works; it is already predefined how much wood can be taken out between now and the end of 2023 or the end of the forest management plan.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Dr Stanley to answer that particular element.

Dr STANLEY: Yes, you are correct: the current forest management plan sets an annual limit on the amount of timber that can be taken out of the forest. As the minister indicated, we are still implementing that plan until it ends in 2023.

[10.10 am]

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: Minister, my question is around the Swan Canning Riverpark.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Do you have a line in the budget?

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: Yes, I do; it is budget paper No 2, volume 2, page 705, and the line item is “Swan Canning Riverpark Initiatives”. Minister, I am just wanting to find out from you what measures are currently in place to protect and enhance that river park, both from an environmental perspective, but also for the community as well?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: A couple of things—I can start off and I might throw over possibly to Dr Stanley as well. Over the last 12 months, about \$1.5 million has been distributed to 12 riverfront local governments for 21 foreshore restoration projects throughout the river park. That included about \$500 000 that came out of the recovery plan. These projects included foreshore planning, erosion control, revegetation, weed control, revetment construction, enhancing foreshore and river access, and widening vegetation corridors and creating native animal habitat. Through round 4 of our Community Rivercare program, 24 community groups shared \$403 000 in funding to deliver projects that address water quality improvement and also more foreshore restoration and habitat creation. Then there is a variety of community engagement projects that continue to be delivered to support behaviour change and citizen-science initiatives; I should give a plug to the various community groups at this stage who are involved in, I guess, their own little piece of the river. Collectively, they contribute quite a lot to protecting our river generally. There are now more than 1 100 trained dolphin watch volunteers. They contribute thousands of reports annually that help researchers monitor the health of the river park’s dolphins. We also have our Reel it In fishing line bin project. That now has 67 dedicated fishing line bins at popular jetties, fishing platforms, traffic bridges and foreshores throughout the river park. In the last financial year, 2020–21, these bins collected about 28 kilometres of fishing line, which is substantial; about 4 500 hooks and sinkers; about 2 200 bait bags; and more than 11 000 pieces of general rubbish from the river park. Collectively, all of these projects, I think together, help protect and help monitor the health of the river.

Then, too, the agency DBCA has continued to support the Nature Conservancy’s Swan–Canning mussel reef restoration project. We have provided about \$250 000 in funding for that project. We are also implementing the Swan Canning Riverpark habitat creation project, which will see \$2 million invested in the program over the next four years. There has also been further funding confirmed for the Swan–Canning urban forest program. In this financial year, there is \$415 000 put towards that. Over the next four years, \$3 million will be invested in this program. Obviously, the Swan–Canning River system is the jewel in the crown for Perth’s environment and so it is important that we do protect it. There is a great deal of work happening by us as an agency, but also by the various groups that we are able to fund who do great work throughout the river. I am not sure whether Dr Stanley has anything else to add.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: Good to hear.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: I am referring to page 708 of budget paper No 2, volume 2. I refer to the line listing the “Proportion of critically endangered and endangered taxa and ecological communities that have a recovery plan”. There are no references to reviewing or reporting on the success of the recovery plans against their stated performance criteria as key performance indicators. What funding, or resource allocation for reviewing these recovery plans, is in the budget, please?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Dr Byrne and I might have some stuff I want to add at the end, but I will ask Dr Byrne to start off.

Dr BYRNE: Thank you for the question. That indicator is the number of critically endangered and endangered taxa and ecological communities that have a recovery plan. That indicator changes, of course, according to the number of species that we have on the list and how many get listed, and the number that have recovery plans. It changes according to that ratio. In relation to recovery plans, recovery plans are developed either solely within Western Australia or for species that are more relevant across the broader area, may be undertaken jointly with the commonwealth as joint plans under the Biodiversity Conservation Act and the commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. There are multiple different ways in which recovery plans can be developed.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: Where I am getting at with this one is specifically in relation to Carnaby's cockatoos. Obviously, there has been some press around that Carnaby's cockatoos' starvation could start within three years, BirdLife Australia are talking about that, which would indicate that the recovery plan is probably not being successful, given it is due to end in 2023. I am just trying to understand, I mean, how those plans in terms of funding and resource allocation flows from that, so making sure that obviously that has been a useful measure, and we are not just measuring something that is in decline. What does that do in terms of actual funding?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Dr Byrne.

Dr BYRNE: In terms of recovery plans, recovery plans themselves are not necessarily funded. They include information about the species and the threats that are impacting on the species and the decline and indicate what kind of recovery actions would be able to be implemented. For iconic species like Carnaby's and other key species, there are often multiple groups that are interested in the conservation outcomes, and recovery plans provide a mechanism by coordinating that activity so that there is a clear direction of the kinds of recovery actions different groups would be able to undertake in a coordinated way. They are not specifically funded. Explicitly, different groups who have can bring their capacity to bear on coordinating the activities to undertake recovery of the species.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: Is there any specific funding, which I could not find in here, for the recovery of Carnaby's cockatoos flowing out from those recovery plans?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: If I can answer that, while there is not a line item that you can point to in here, there is absolutely a great deal of work happening in relation to Carnaby's cockatoos. DBCA works with a recovery team to guide and coordinate conservation efforts. In partnership with the WA Museum, non-government organisations such as BirdLife Australia, the World Wildlife Fund and also research institutions and community volunteers were implementing actions from the recovery plan for this species to guide ongoing conservation efforts. Some of those efforts include the installation and the repair of artificial nest boxes to improve breeding success. We are also working on measures to reduce vehicle collisions with adult birds and there has been some focus made on rehabilitating injured cockatoos, protecting habitat and monitoring and research so that we can understand the movements and also the requirements of the species.

One action that is of relevance to the conservation of Carnaby's is the carbon for conservation initiative. That was released as part of our COVID-19 economic stimulus and recovery plan. One of the candidate sites identified for the carbon for conservation initiative is the northern Swan coastal plain area. That includes the areas of harvested pine plantation within the Gngangara state forest. DBCA has been partnering with the Water Corporation in this regard and about 15 000 seedlings have begun to be planted up there. I had the pleasure of attending previously in a previous role as Minister for Environment. I think 15 000 to 20 000 is the figure of native plant seedlings that are being planted each year over the next five years. That also complements our ongoing annual

replanting program within the former pine plantation areas to create a habitat for Carnaby's and indeed other endangered or native wildlife.

While there is not a line item in this, a great deal of work is happening across the agency. I think the EPA did a report last year as well, which is outside of this session, that suggested that the Carnaby's numbers were not as dire as we thought, but there is still a lot of work to be done in this regard. Plenty has been done by this agency to make sure that we protect these fantastic species for the future.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: I have one more really short one—I think it is a short one—which is around the little penguins. An item on page 714 of budget paper No 2 volume 2, which talks about an investment in a new Penguin Island discovery centre. The question that, of course, came to mind in relation to that is that I could not see any funding, though, allocated to actually help the little penguin population recover. There have been reports of an 80 per cent decrease in breeding pairs since 2007. Of course, having a discovery centre with no penguins would be an unfortunate outcome. So I am asking to understand what kind of funds are being put in to help those penguins recover.

[10.20 am]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I can ask Mr Foster to answer that.

Mr FOSTER: As part of the WA recovery plan around \$3.3 million is available for the construction of a new facility on Penguin Island to replace the ageing infrastructure. We are currently working through the design of that facility at the moment and we are looking to redesign that facility to maximise existing little penguin habitat and look to rehabilitate and provide some additional habitat area through restoration of parts of the old cleared site, which would be supplemented by additional nesting facilities for the little penguins. In addition to that, with the actual penguin facility, we are working on design options with the Perth Zoo in regard to the design for the enclosure of the little penguins within that facility.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: I have got a couple of questions for the minister with regard to a grant to Legal Aid WA and also some questions regarding the Friends of Brixton Street Wetlands, but I am conscious of the fact that we have got the shadow Minister for Environment today and we have very little time.

The CHAIR: You have got six minutes; the shadow minister will have 10 minutes.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: I will just yield my time to him for the time being, but if I could reserve the right to ask some questions later, that would be appreciated.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I thank my colleague, Hon Nick Goiran and you chair, and to the department for turning up today. I wish we could have you for longer, but we have you for as long as we have you.

I might have two streams of questioning. One has been asked already and I might continue on with that stream about the conservation service line, particularly the implementation and monitoring of recovery plans across the agency. The second stream of questioning that I will get to is about the plan for our parks. I might talk to the conservation of habitat species in ecological communities as it is referred to on pages 706 and 708. I want to get a better sense, please, of how recovery programs are implemented across the department. It is all very well to have these plans, but how is success against delivery measured, monitored and, where necessary, improved?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: What was that last bit of the question, please? Sorry, I was writing something.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: The essence of it is: it is all very well to have recovery plans, but how do we know that they are effective?

Dr BYRNE: Yes; we have a number of recovery plans that are in place for a range of species. As I said before, they guide the actions of a range of organisations in a coordinated way so that different organisations can coordinate their activities to deliver. The success of the plans is not reviewed explicitly. Many species have recovery teams, and those recovery teams bring together a range of organisations that have interests in the recovery of those species. The recovery teams do look at the recovery actions undertaken on a regular basis and consider where future directions need to go in recovery actions for particular species.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: The first phrase there was there is no explicit performance—I do not want to misconstrue your testimony—but there is no explicit performance metric to ascertain as to whether or not a recovery plan is effective or ineffective, presumably insofar as recovering that species is concerned; is that correct?

Dr BYRNE: Yes. There is no explicit process to undertake that. Recovery plans are not statutory instruments; they are guidance instruments to guide recovery actions for a particular species. They do have criteria in them around what constitutes successful recovery or not, but there is no formal process by which those plans are reviewed.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: As Dr Byrne has said, recovery plans tend to have recovery teams around them that work to protect and to help recover that species. Obviously, those teams include internal DBCA staff as well as external partners from NGOs and the like who work collectively to do it.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Which service line—I presume it is service line 6, but I might be wrong—and what quantum of funding is attached? You have hundreds of these plans, presumably. How much funding is attached annually to, I suppose, developing and implementing the plan? Is that a figure that is immediately accessible in terms of this budget paper; and, if not, can I take that as a supplementary?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I do not think it is teasable. These teams exist across the agency. I do not know that there is a line item we can point to, but Dr Byrne can answer.

Dr BYRNE: Recovery plans do not work in the way that there is explicit funding directed to those plans themselves. Recovery actions are undertaken for a species within our regional services area, so at an operational level. Those actions are undertaken and guided by recovery plans, so the funding for the recovery actions is delivered through the operational business of the department at the regional level on site and the locations where those species occur, as opposed to being a centralised approach to it. It is very much embedded within our operational approaches within our districts and regions.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Is it possible, therefore, to take a sample of that operational funding? It is very unclear reading this budget paper—and this is not a criticism because it is a standardised reporting framework—but it is also unclear, frankly, reading your annual report, how much funding is directed towards implementing recovery actions which are based on recovery plans. I wonder whether or not that data is in any way accessible.

The CHAIR: Minister, I think you may have answered it.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is not, honourable member. As Dr Byrne said, our regional services team are the main people who deal with the work. But from day to day or, indeed, week to week, it might be that 0.2 of a person's workload might be dealing with the recovery of a particular thing, so it is not easily untangled. I cannot give you an easy number to say this amount is spent on this area.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: That is disappointing. My final question in this stream of questioning, before I get to my next stream, if I get the chance—and I am not expecting an immediate answer but I might be able to get some guidance. There was an Auditor General’s report from September 2017, and the title was *Rich and rare: Conservation of threatened species follow-up audit*. At the back there is a series of recommendations in a table. One of these recommendations as it appears on page 22 of this document is for the department to —

Develop and implement a database to record all threatened species recovery actions and monitor progress against recovery plans.”

It made the assessment —

DBCAs does not have a central system to record recovery actions, but does have substantial information about threatened species and is reviewing its information needs.

Has any action been undertaken to establish this central system that was recommended by the Auditor General, now four years ago? I would make the assumption that if there was one, you might be able to answer questions such as that I have just asked on how much money is being spent on recovery actions, but could I get an answer, please?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Member, you are taking a liberty this morning because you have not referred to a line item in the budget papers that alludes to this issue. That issue does not appear in the budget papers before us; however, I am told Dr Byrne may well be able to provide an answer.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: That is partly my point.

The CHAIR: That is right, but if we can because, as you know, we tend to be a little broader in the Legislative Council.

Dr BYRNE: That was a recommendation out of the Auditor General’s report *Rich and rare*, and we have since then implemented a program to develop what is called the threatened species and communities database. We have made significant progress on that database and are in the final stages of finalising the database build and infrastructure. We have also taken steps to get greater digitisation of a lot of hard copy records so that once the database is finalised a lot of those records will be available and we will be able to get much more information out more readily.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: My final series of questions—minister, you will enjoy these ones.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It would just be helpful if you can point to a line item so I can use my file.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: We may all be the wiser, somewhat. I am interested in the plan for our parks initiative as it appears under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 705 and 706.

What I am struggling to do, minister, is reconcile a proposition to expand the conservation estate in Western Australia by some 20 per cent and then attempt to find where I might see a commensurate rise in service delivery in recurrent spend across the forward estimates. So my basic question is: where in the budget papers is the recurrent spending increase which matches the expansion of the state?

[10.30 am]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: If I can, as part of the process to create these new parks, the agency or the state is required to negotiate an Indigenous land use agreement with the particular native title holder for that area. Upon an ILUA being agreed, or signed, the agency then goes through the budget process to get the money. So, government has committed to the policy and the overall, kind of, five million hectares over the next few years, and government has prioritised the areas around the state that we want to add to the conservation estate. But as we negotiate each ILUA, we then go to

Treasury, because each ILUA is different and each ILUA may have different things included. So once we know what is in an ILUA, we then go to Treasury to get the money to enable us to create the park.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Of the extant estate—it is something sort of beyond 20 million hectares, I think, of land and sea country—it seems to be fragmented, potentially, across the different service lines, but can you point me in the direction where it effectively shows where DBCA is funded on a recurrent basis to actively manage that estate as it exists today? Which service line should I look at?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Mr Dans if he can answer this one.

Mr DANS: There is no single line item that refers to the total spend on the existing conservation estate on a statewide basis because it is spread, as you alluded, member, across the various services, across parks and visitor services, across conservation and ecosystem management and across fire management services. So all of those services contribute into the day-to-day management and the ongoing management of parks and reserves, both marine and terrestrial, across the state.

The CHAIR: Okay. I could ask a question, but Hon Tjorn Sibma.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Thank you for that. I expected as much, but is it possible to get, possibly as a supplementary, an approximate figure of actually how much money per annum is spent on the active management of the present conservation estate?

The CHAIR: You mean a consolidated figure?

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Consolidated—and I presume there will be some variability. But the reason I ask that question, sir, is I do not necessarily see commensurate increases in, say, service lines five, six, or seven where I might expect some of the spend to be dispersed across the forward estimates either, so I just do not know how much money the government spends per year on the conservation estate as it is and what an adequate level of funding might be for an expansion of that estate by some 20 per cent by 2024. That is what I am trying to get an answer to.

The CHAIR: So, is it possible to get that consolidated figure? And we can take it on notice if you like, Mr Dans.

Mr DANS: I would suspect that it would be in the order probably in excess of \$200 million across the conservation estate, statewide, on a per annum basis.

The CHAIR: So, minister, can we take that on notice?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Hang on for a second. Not yet. I am told that page 708 of budget paper No 2, “Service Summary” 5 has the “Visitor Services and Public Programs Provided in the National Parks and Other Lands and Waters”. That only includes visitor services. Would there be additional things to add to that? There would be fire management —

Mr DANS: And there would be conserving habitat species and ecological communities.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Okay. So you can probably actually do it, honourable member. So, service summary 5, service summary 6 and service summary 9 and a bit of service summary 8, too.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: And a bit of service summary 8? Hence my question.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Let me try to go away and see what I can find. You are not going to get —

Hon TJORN SIBMA: That would be marvellous.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It would really be an estimate, to be honest, without actually getting the department to spend weeks on this stuff, I will give you a high-level figure—kind of a ballpark figure, okay?

The CHAIR: If you could do that, minister, I think that would be good. I appreciate that we do not want to be spending an enormous amount of arduous time on this, but I think what the honourable member has asked for is quite reasonable. So if we could get that ballpark figure, that would be great.

[Supplementary Information No A1.]

Hon STEVE MARTIN: Minister, I have some questions on budget paper No 2, volume 2, page 707, paragraph 15, which refers to the forest management plan. It mentions the stakeholders and a stakeholder registry. Can I ask: how many stakeholders have been identified on that register mentioned in the paragraph?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Sure. I will ask Dr Stanley if she can provide an answer to that.

Dr STANLEY: Thank you, minister. I do not have the exact number off the top of my head. We have been collating stakeholders that we are aware of and other people that have contacted us in recent months with an interest in the forest management plan. So I would have to get an exact number.

[Supplementary Information No A2.]

Hon STEVE MARTIN: So that will be tabled. Can I ask, minister: were any of the stakeholders listed on the register consulted prior to the decision to ban hardwood harvesting on 8 September 2021?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Honourable member, you would be aware that the state did carry out some preliminary consultation through a community survey —

Hon STEVE MARTIN: I am absolutely aware, minister, yes.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: — where we had nearly 17 000 responses received, of which 95 per cent of the respondents were in favour of more areas of native forest being protected and then 73 per cent agreeing that no native forest harvesting should occur. In terms of who was spoken to before the announcement, I am not sure the department would have that information. I suspect the minister may well have that information, so I think that is probably a question to ask the minister. I am not sure that these officers here would know.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: From that response, are we conflating the survey with 17 000 respondents to industry stakeholder engagement? Are they the same thing? Effectively, what I am asking is: was that 17 000-person survey the same thing as the stakeholder engagement referred to on page 707?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am told no. I can ask Dr Stanley to add further information to that.

Dr STANLEY: Thank you. So, the survey was conducted online and individuals or people representing companies—and there were some industry representatives—answered that survey. But the stakeholder consultation that is referred to in the budget papers is more in respect to the development of the next forest management plan and we will be conducting both targeted and broader consultation and stakeholder engagement over the next few months.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: I will change tack slightly and refer to a question on sandalwood, which is referred to on page 706, paragraph 13, where it talks about —

The Department is continuing to work closely with its partners to protect the State's unique biodiversity and implement recovery programs ...

I am referring to this after asking a question of the Forest Products Commission about their wild sandalwood harvesting, given that we have a recent ABC news article from a WA-based research ecologist and Charles Sturt University PhD candidate Richard McLellan who is calling for sandalwood to be added to the state and national threatened species listing.

He is in effect claiming that it could be extinct in the wild within 50 years if something is not done. It was put to me this morning that in fact what FPC is doing is old-growth logging of sandalwood in the pastoral areas. Can I ask for this department's view: are you aware of that research and do you have a view on whether something should be done about the wild harvesting of sandalwood?

[10.40 am]

The CHAIR: That question will go to the minister. Minister, did you want to respond to that?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am not aware of that research and I am not aware of the report, and indeed I am not aware of the evidence that was given last night by the FPC. Dr Stanley may well be able to give at least some answer in relation to the issue.

Dr STANLEY: We are aware of that research and aware of Richard McLellan's PhD studies. I know that the paper you are referring to does not go into detail into the findings of his research; it is more of an overarching publication referring to previous views that sandalwood in the wild could be under threat.

In respect to the question regarding whether the FPC is harvesting old-growth sandalwood, I think that is a question that should be directed to them; they undertake the harvesting. Under the Biodiversity Conservation Act, the minister regulates that through an order that sets a quota each year. That is the key mechanism by which the amount of sandalwood that is taken from the wild is regulated.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: This is following on from the questioning of Hon Tjorn Sibma in relation to budget paper No 2, page 705. We are looking at "Spending Changes" and in particular "Election Commitments" and "New Initiatives". I note that there is no specific line item related to the establishment of the south coast marine park. I note the answers before about the need to negotiate the ILUAs before these costs can be budgeted, but surely there must be some total budget or projected budget for the establishment of the south coast marine park?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I can ask Mr Dans to comment on that. Obviously, the consultation has started with stakeholders for that marine park—both stakeholders and indeed local communities. The ministerial panel, I am told, has planned for November this year so that we can continue to engage with the community on the south coast marine park proposal and to answer any questions. I will ask Mr Dans to comment.

Mr DANS: Previous budgets provide money for the planning for the Plan for Our Parks program—so the management planning for the new reserves. They provide budgets for the negotiation of Indigenous land use agreements, which are required; they provide the consent for the state to establish the reserves over areas where native title exists; and they provide budgets for us to work with traditional owners in how they might be involved in the ongoing management of the new reserves once they are actually established. They are in previous budgets; there are some budgets showing up in the 2021–22 budget for some additional areas that we are working on as well. In the case of the south coast marine park, there is nothing in the budget papers to suggest what it will cost because we do not know what the marine park is going to look like yet. All that has been essentially released is a study area that extends eastwards from Bremer Bay to the Western Australia–South Australian border. The public consultation process, which kicked off in earnest last week with some public workshops across the south coast and the release of an expression of interest seeking community representation on the community consultative committee, that EOI is out and closes at the end of October. The minister will appoint the committee, and the formal consultation process on what the actual marine park will look like, what the outer boundary will look like and what the zoning scheme within the park will look like, will commence. Sorry, I

incorrectly referred to it; it is the community reference committee. We expect to have the first meeting of that committee in December this year.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: There are costs associated with that consultation process. There is nothing in the out years for the south coast marine park. Is that indicative that it will not be established in that period?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Again, it is the same kind of comment I made to Hon Tjorn Sibma earlier. We have got the funding to do the initial consultation to start that process. Once we have got boundaries, we can then work on getting Indigenous land use agreements or negotiations with the appropriate people. After that, when we are ready, we then go back to Treasury to get funding for the creation of the park in the future. That is the case with any of our new parks, whether they are marine or terrestrial parks. Once we have settled, we can go to Treasury to get funding to create the park.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: The minister also has confirmed, in questions asked in the Council in the past, that there is a need for additional research and obviously the consultation that we have talked about, as well as those partnering arrangements. Is that budgeted for itself? Is there a specific line item for that or is that just done as a part of the department's —

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: That is done during the course of the department's general work.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: Minister, do we have any idea what the ILUAs might look like or what the costs associated with them will be? Can we not even predict what it might cost to establish this marine park?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, we do not. All we know, as Mr Dans said, is that an indicative boundary has been released. Obviously, we will consult on that. But it really is: how long is a piece of string? What comes out the other end will dictate what we go to Treasury looking for funding for to create the park. It depends. After community consultation, it could be that size. Obviously a park that size is a lot cheaper than a park that size, for example. Once we have done the work, we can go to Treasury with some indicative costs about what it will cost to create the park.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: I take it from that, then, there really is no limit to what these parks might cost. Is there a point that the government would say, "Hang on; that's just too expensive" or "We're just going to do it"? If the ILUA comes back at a very high cost to the state, is there a point at which the government revisits the decision?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We have done ILUAs with a range of traditional owner groups around the state over the last few years in particular, particularly in the last few years with Plan for Our Parks.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: So you must have an idea what it costs.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Each one is different, bearing in mind. It is a difficult question to answer because what will happen is once DBCA has landed on boundaries, the minister will put a submission through the ERC cabinet process and then we will see what comes out the other end.

The CHAIR: We are going to have to move on.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I want to ask some questions, minister, about fire management. I refer you to budget paper No 2, pages 713 to 714, services 9 and 10. Can I start by asking you about the decline in full-time equivalent employees between the 2019–20 actual and the 2021–22 budget. There is some 28 less FTEs under the bushfire suppression service.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Mr Dans to comment on that.

Mr DANS: The FTEs indicated on page 714, I note you are suggesting it stepped down from 2019–20, where it was 153, to the estimated actual of 125 and the budget target for 2021–22 of 125. That is not an accurate number of the number of FTEs involved in fire management; it is a pro rata amount of that service—the dollar value of that service against the dollar value of the whole departmental budget. That proportion of FTEs is allocated to fire management. There are probably over 900 DBCA staff who participate in fire management. The reason it has dropped is that other services, in particular parks and visitor services, service 5, has increased significantly through Plan for Our Parks—entirely through Plan for Our Parks—such that it is drawing a greater proportion of FTE under that service. You will see a corresponding increase in FTEs against service 5. It is just a pro rata amount of the FTE allocated on a pro rata amount of the budget basis.

[10.50 am]

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: You mentioned that there are about 900 staff engaged in fire-suppression or mitigation activities. Are you able to tell me how many of those are permanent staff versus seasonal workforce?

Mr DANS: Yes, I can. Mr Foster might be able to provide a little bit more detail, but we have approximately 350 conservation employees across the state, and they are the frontline firefighters who work on the trucks, on the heavy appliances. About 250 to 260 of those are permanent full-time or permanent part-time; the remaining, something in the order of 90 to 100, are seasonal employees who are generally taken on about September or October to assist with prescribed burning. They then work on fire suppression through the southern bushfire season, and then they work on prescribed burning through the autumn. Depending on how the weather is going, they might finish up in April, May or even June if it is a late onset of winter. That is a rough proportion.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Are you anticipating any challenges in attracting and retaining that seasonal workforce this high-threat period, given the current labour market conditions?

Mr DANS: I think Mr Foster is probably closer to that issue.

Mr FOSTER: With the market at the moment it is a challenge in getting staff on board, but we are going through a recruitment process at the moment for our seasonal conservation employees who are our frontline firefighters, and we are not having any issues at this point in time with those seasonals applying and retaining those jobs over that season.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: That is good to hear. Can I ask, of your frontline firefighting workforce, how many of them are vaccinated against COVID-19?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Sorry, we do not have that information. It is not collected by the agency.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: It is not collected by the agency, okay. I am sure you are aware that DFES has implemented a policy with respect to its frontline firefighters, volunteer and career, requiring them to have received at least one dose of vaccine by 1 December. They also advised me, through parliamentary questions, that that policy is going to extend to other agencies, including yours, where your firefighters interact with DFES firefighters. Were you consulted on that policy prior to it being established?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am advised that the agency has been talking to DFES about the issue.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: What is the DBCA policy with respect to requiring COVID-19 vaccinations of its frontline firefighters?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: There is no policy at this stage.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: The date of 1 December is not that far away. When will it consider implementing a policy, or how will it respond to the DFES policy, which as I understand it, according to the questions answered in Parliament, will require DBCA compliance?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: The issue is under active consideration.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Minister, you say that the agency is not collecting information on the vaccination status of its firefighters. In light of the DFES decision, why is it not collecting data?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It has not been collecting data to this date, and a decision has not been made at this stage to collect it.

The CHAIR: Just to let you know, we will go a little over, because we still have two members for questions. As I said, I would like to give five to six minutes per person, and I have done that thus far.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Chair, I have a session after this as well, so I do need a bit of a break, too.

The CHAIR: I know; it will only be a couple of minutes.

Hon PETER FOSTER: Thank you, chair, for the opportunity to ask my first question in an estimates hearing. My question is on the Murujuga World Heritage nomination. Of course, it is a significant site in the Pilbara.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Honourable member, do you have a line item that you are referring to, please?

Hon PETER FOSTER: Yes, I am coming to that. I refer to the spending changes on page 705 of budget paper No 2, which indicates a \$4.06 million investment into Murujuga National Park joint management over the next four years. Could you please update us on the progress of the joint management with the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation and on the World Heritage nomination for Murujuga National Park?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Sure, I am happy to do that. Congratulations on asking your first question in estimates! This is a project that, I think, started under me when I was previously the Minister for Environment. As you indicated, there is just over \$4 million in the budget to progress with this work. It is fair to say that we continue to work in partnership with the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation to support the traditional owners in their aspirations at Murujuga. Obviously, we recognise their ongoing spiritual and cultural connection to the area and also their traditional obligations for both the land and the sea in that area, too. The funding in the budget will provide for the employment or contracting of Aboriginal rangers and DBCA staff to co-manage the Murujuga National Park itself and also the islands off the Dampier Archipelago. Through the joint management arrangement in 2020, the Ngajarli art viewing trail was officially opened, and that was a \$1.3 million project. It was the first recreation site to be developed in the Murujuga National Park and provides visitors with increased access to viewing some of the most easily accessed rock art in a culturally safe way. We also have committed a further \$15 million towards road improvements and additional visitor facilities at Conzinc Bay, which will complement MAC's planned living knowledge centre and tourism precinct. In following the successful addition of the Murujuga cultural landscape to Australia's World Heritage tentative list in January 2020, there has been some progress made towards the formal nomination dossier, and this was supported by a budget allocation of \$1.393 million over four years to fund the preparation of the nomination. Honourable member, the nomination process is quite laborious and cumbersome, so without taking the time of the committee today I am very happy, on behalf of the minister, to offer you a briefing, if you are interested in that process, outside of this session.

Hon PETER FOSTER: Fantastic. Thank you.

Hon DAN CADDY: Minister, I will keep you on page 705. You just mentioned as part of that answer then the Aboriginal rangers. Looking at the significant issues impacting the agency, my question is in two parts. The first is quite simple: if you could provide just a brief update on the progress and how that program is tracking, that would be great. Also, the quantum of the additional funding indicates a fairly major expansion of the program. Can you just break down for me where this additional funding would go and how that will impact the program?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Sure. Over the last four years, we had \$20 million funding for the Aboriginal ranger program, and that went to 35 projects right around the state. The latest statistics show that there were about 435 Aboriginal people who were employed as part of that process. Almost half of them were women. As part of that process, too, 57 rangers have achieved or earned a nationally recognised qualification. In terms of the future, there is \$50 million in the budget to expand the ranger program over the next few years. I think it is anticipated from something that I have seen earlier that that would create about 1 000 jobs around the state. It is important to bear in mind that many of these jobs are in regional and remote communities, in places where there are not too many other jobs. They are positive on multiple levels. Obviously, they protect the environment, but also it is people out on country, it is people looking after their own plants and animals. The \$50 million over the next four years includes component of \$5 million for the metropolitan area, because as part of the previous program, the \$20 million went to the regions. So there is \$5 million in the budget for the metropolitan area and \$45 million for the regions. In terms of where it will go and what that looks like, that work is being done at the moment. The department has been engaged with key stakeholders over the past few months to look at how the ranger program worked over the past four years, to analyse that and to work out how it should look over the next four years as we expand it around the state. I expect an announcement hopefully over the next few months from the Minister for Environment about that. As with the first round of funding, I think this process, it is fair to say, has been co-designed with the Aboriginal leadership from around the state—so, to learn how the last round worked and direct how the next round will work.

[11.00 am]

The CHAIR: Hon Nick Goiran, you have got a couple of minutes.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Minister, in response to Hon Tjorn Sibma in “Answers to questions prior to hearing”, the minister indicated that there has been a grant provided to Legal Aid Western Australia. The answer went on to indicate that there were funds provided to support the Environmental Defender’s Office of Western Australia and this was some sort of joint commitment with the Department of Justice. There was an indication that funding may be provided in the out years, yet at page 721 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, there is no mention of any funding for the out years.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Is your question that there does not appear to be money in the out years for this issue?

Hon NICK GOIRAN: That is right, despite the fact that there was some suggestion it would be provided in the out years.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: A decision is made annually, I am told, by the agency to provide funding to the Environmental Defender’s Office, and it is done out of existing revenue. So, I do not know if there ever appears a line item in the budget papers, but the decision is made annually based on the agency being able to afford to provide that funding.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: So, in 2019–20 the actual spend was \$50 000, but there was nothing anticipated or estimated for the last financial year and there is nothing in the budget for this year, so the decision has already been made not to allocate any money for the current year.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: They have received funding for the last, from my understanding, three years and there is currently a request before government at the moment to provide funding for next year.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: But that is not what the budget paper says. At page 721, it says that \$50 000 was provided for 2019–20, and then you can see, minister, each of the following columns simply have a dash indicating the nil sum.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am just told, honourable member, that no decision has been made for this current year.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: No, but you just said to the committee that funding has been provided for the last three years. That is not what the budget papers reflect. It may be that there is an error in the budget papers.

The CHAIR: We will need a response because we have to wrap up shortly.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It definitely happened in 2019–20. I think we will have to take on notice whether it was provided.

[Supplementary Information No A3.]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I think a decision was made after the budget papers were done. We will take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Before I make my closing comments, this is the first session that I have been to where we have actually run out of time. We did not have sufficient time. We have had plenty of time for others. Can I say to all members that the committee can only go by the priorities that are provided by their parties? So, for future reference, the parties might like to give us the priorities they want for their various agencies. This was evidently a good hearing, but, unfortunately, we just did not have enough time. That said, there is another opportunity for members and, as you would all be aware, you may submit your remaining questions, if you have any that did not get asked, through the electronic lodgement system. That will close at 5.00 pm on 29 October 2021. If you can put them in, please, members.

Witnesses, the committee will forward the uncorrected transcript of evidence with questions taken on notice highlighted as soon as possible after the hearing. Responses to questions on notice are due by 5.00 pm on 17 November 2021. Should you be unable to meet the due date, please advise the committee in writing as soon as possible before the due date. The advice is to include specific reasons why the due date cannot be met.

I thank you once again for taking the time to be here today. It is very much appreciated. Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 11.03 am
