

**SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

2012–13 AGENCY ANNUAL REPORT HEARINGS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
FRIDAY, 22 NOVEMBER 2013**

**SESSION ONE
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND WILDLIFE**

Members

**Hon Ken Travers (Chair)
Hon Alanna Clohesy
Hon Rick Mazza**

Hearing commenced at 1.08 pm**Mr JIM SHARP****Acting Director General, examined:****Dr JOHN BYRNE****Director, Corporate Services, examined:****Mr PETER DANS****Director, Regional and Fire Management Services, examined:**

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Witnesses need to be aware of severe penalties that apply to persons providing false or misleading testimony to a parliamentary committee. 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. The hearing is being held in public, although there is discretion available to the committee to hear your evidence in private either of its own motion or at the witnesses' request. 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 a question. Government agencies and departments have an important role and duty in assisting Parliament to review agencies' outcomes on behalf of the people of Western Australia. The committee values your assistance with this.

For the benefit of the members and Hansard, could each witness state their full name and the capacity in which they appear before the committee?

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: Do any of the witnesses wish to make an opening statement?

Mr Sharp: No.

The CHAIR: Before we start, the committee wanted to acknowledge the passing of your director general since we last met, and to pass on its sincere condolences to all of the staff and let it be known that we will miss his contribution. I know that he is missed by all of the staff.

We will open with questions.

Hon RICK MAZZA: My question is in relation to page 797 of the budget papers. I see that in the 2012–13 budget there is income from park visits of \$29 635, and the actual is \$29 635. I wondered why there was no discrepancy between the two figures. It seems like particularly accurate accounting or budgeting.

Mr Sharp: Can I ask Dr Byrne to answer?

The CHAIR: For the benefit of members, I should have mentioned that Dr Byrne uses a Hansard reporter because of a hearing disability, so the question is transcribed for him and he will answer.

Dr Byrne: I cannot find those two figures.

Mr Dans: I clarify that the member is referring to the \$29 635 in the budget and the estimated actual being the identical amount.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Yes.

Dr Byrne: Budgets are an estimate, and indicate that the estimated actual is expected to be very close to the budget. Of course, the end result is not exactly the same; it ends up quite close. It is standard practice if it is fairly close to the budget estimate to simply use the budget figure as your estimated actual.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Also on pages 796 and 797, a total reduction of 20 FTEs has been estimated. What are those positions that have been abolished and how will services be impacted?

Mr Sharp: Again, sorry, can you indicate—page 796?

Hon RICK MAZZA: On pages 796 and 797 there is a reduction of 20 FTEs.

Mr Sharp: I am trying to find where that would be. On page 796 there are two services. The estimated actual number of full-time equivalents for Nature Conservation services was 822 and the actual was 875. Under Sustainable Forest Management, which is a different service, the number of FTEs are the same. I am trying to locate it.

Hon RICK MAZZA: So am I; it is in my notes.

Mr Sharp: Parks and Visitor Services had 515 FTEs budgeted for, and the number was the same as the estimated actual for that year.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Was it budget paper No 2?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Nature conservation was reduced from 822 to 811; sustainable forest management from 273 to 270—there was three lost there—and parks and visitor services has been reduced from 515 to 509.

Mr Sharp: My response to that would be that there is no specific program; that is just a reduction across those services.

Dr Byrne: The numbers do tend to fluctuate from year to year. If you look at the previous year, 2011–12, actual is 818, we initially budgeted for 875. The end of the year 2012–13 was 822. It varies with the way with the way that the budget is phrased. There is not really any substantial or significant change.

Hon RICK MAZZA: This is not actually in the budget papers and it might have to be taken on notice; what is the total cost of pest animal control for the department in employing external contractors?

Mr Sharp: I will have to take that on notice; I do not have that information available but it can be obtained; it can be extracted from the budget.

[Supplementary Information No A1.]

Hon RICK MAZZA: There is, obviously, quite a wild dog problem in our pastoral lands that a lot of our pastoralists have been struggling with for some time. I know that a number of stations have been acquired by the department to manage around the Murchison area. It has been anecdotally suggested to me that there are many feral animals building up in those particular stations that the department has acquired, which is affecting neighbouring pastoralists. I just wonder what programs you have in place to keep your wild dog numbers and other pests under control.

Mr Sharp: We do have a broad brush feral animal control program. Dogs are specific to certain regions. We actually interact with local dog control committees, local groups, and we employ doggers in some situations—the goldfields region has staff allocated by way of contract. I do not have the exact numbers. Director of regional services, do you have any details?

Mr Dans: I cannot provide anything further, anything specific. There are programs; regional biosecurity groups are set up through the wheatbelt, eastern wheatbelt, Murchison and Gascoyne.

We are an active participant in that with pastoralists and the Department of Agriculture and Food. Most of the pest animal control programs—or many of them—are done collaboratively and coordinated through those regional biosecurity groups.

The CHAIR: Have they got the funding that they need yet? My understanding is that they are still trying to get them set up in terms of having the funding necessary for the work that is actually required in those areas.

Mr Dans: I am not aware of their financial capacity.

The CHAIR: To your knowledge, is there a problem in them actually being able to achieve the outcomes that you would hope for and are the target of the biosecurity groups? You might not know the specifics about the funding, but my understanding is that under those biosecurity groups there will be funding by effectively rating the affected land and that side of things has not been set up yet. Another thing that I am interested in, is when that does occur, do you expect that the department will be contributing an equivalent rate for the land that it holds or will it just be the private landowners?

Mr Dans: I am sorry, honourable chairman, I do not have, I am not across that level of detail for those groups. I know that we are a participant in them, but, as I understand it, they are convened through the Department of Agriculture and Food.

The CHAIR: Is that something you could possibly take on notice?

Mr Dans: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No A2.]

Hon RICK MAZZA: That is fine. I have one or two more questions. I will keep it fairly brief because there are other members here who want to ask questions in the limited time. I wonder how many enquiries you might get from neighbouring properties about the issue of feral animals like wild dogs coming out of lands that are managed by the department.

[1.20 pm]

Mr Sharp: Again, I could not give a number because it is widespread in terms of our regions in our regional staff. There is interaction with neighbours. The department has a good neighbour policy that is about interacting with neighbours of pastoralists, farmers and others and we try to interact with them in terms of finding outcomes to issues or problems. I would not have any idea of numbers. They would occur on a daily basis.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Has the department done any research on what impact the wild dogs are having in those areas on native wildlife?

Mr Sharp: To my knowledge not specifically on wild dogs in relation to wildlife, no.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Is the department going to possibly look at doing some research on that area?

Mr Sharp: I cannot answer about what is on the exact research program at that level, but it is something I could look in to.

[Supplementary Information No A3.]

Hon RICK MAZZA: Have you done any modelling at all on the cost of the installation of a dog-proof fence?

Mr Sharp: No.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: What are the main control methods for feral animals?

Mr Sharp: It depends on what feral animal it is and there is a whole suite of feral animals. We have a major program of baiting for foxes and cats called the Western Shield program, which is an extensive poison baiting program across the state. As I said, that is feral cats and foxes, which are

the main predator of small mammals. Other programs are specific to other animals. Control of pigs in forests is done by a trapping and eradication program. Goats in more arid areas are controlled by a shooting program. Programs range according to the type of animal and the setting in which they are found.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Is it possible to get information by program, by type and by cost of feral control methods?

Mr Sharp: It is possible to arrive at an estimate of what it costs to pursue a certain type of program, yes.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: It would be very useful if we could get that.

[*Supplementary Information No A4.*]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Do those programs include professional shooters?

Mr Sharp: Yes, they do. Contract professional shooters staff are engaged in some instances voluntary groups are involved as well.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: It would be very helpful to have the program by type, by what the goal is of that program and the cost of each.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: If I could take you to page 56 of the annual report under “Significant Issues and Trends”, the second dot point states —

DPaW will continue to implement the government’s expanded *Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy* ... to provide the largest ever targeted investment in conservation of the Kimberley’s natural assets, the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage and rock art, and the development of sustainable nature-based tourism.

Could you talk to me about exactly where that program is at the moment and whether you have rangers employed under that scheme; if so, how many; and all those things in relation to that?

Mr Sharp: In relation to that program, which is now expanded with the commitment in this budget of, I could stand corrected, an additional \$15 million, there are several elements to it. In terms of managing across that landscape, if we are dealing with, if you like, the land conservation initiative, which is dealing with impacts across that landscape, the major issues relate to fire, ferals and weeds. The most significant investment has been around fire and changing the fire regime so we get early rather than late-season burning, which means you get much less intense burning of that landscape and so you get less impact upon habitat and vegetation and its values. That has been extensive input. That is done by the agency, but it is done in partnership with other groups; for instance, Australia Wildlife Conservancy is a partner in that program, as are pastoralists in that early season of burning program.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Is that the mosaic burning program?

Mr Sharp: Yes, it is mosaic, but it is very much focused on burning early so you do not get the intensity of fire and the changing of the structure of the vegetation. That is part of it. The engagement of Aboriginal groups is a very important part of this program as well. In that case there are additional reserves being created in terms of several marine parks and there are commitments to land-based management as well across that landscape. Those outcomes require negotiations with the traditional owners under the Native Title Act, because any reserve creation would be a future act. We have had engagement with Aboriginal groups and in particular there are some groups that have been established as a ranger group under the Indigenous protected area program, which is a commonwealth-funded program, so there are some of those groups. We are also engaging them in some of the work related to fire control and into management of the lands. We pursued the minister two weeks ago and reached agreement with Dambimangari corporation in relation to the Camden

Sound Marine Park, which is a joint management group agreement required under the act for management. That will now move into ongoing, on-ground, on-water management involving the traditional owners.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: The program is funded by the commonwealth so equipment, uniforms and all those sorts of things that the Aboriginal rangers would be using come from the commonwealth, but the work is supervised by the state, is that correct?

Mr Sharp: It varies. There are instances where there are groups established that we would directly interact with that may not be commonwealth funded, but primarily, if they are in Indigenous protected areas, and a ranger group is established under that, they are funded through a commonwealth program. They would then be contracted to work for us in some instances. There are some instances where we employ ranger groups or rangers directly.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: So who monitors the work that they are doing—the number of rangers who are turning up to a project or the consistency of them turning up to a project?

Mr Sharp: It would depend. If we enter into a contract arrangement, we would have a relationship with the group that would monitor that in terms of the outcomes we want. In terms of an Indigenous protected area where Aboriginal groups are managing what is essentially their own land, that would be monitored through their own arrangements with the commonwealth.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Are you able to provide notice of this of those projects that the state is directly involved with, the numbers of people employed in that project and who has the oversight of those people? If you could provide that information, it would be terrific.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No A5.]

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: I have one other question that is not related to that, but it is to the Kimberley strategy. Under “Grants and subsidies” on page 87, line item 10, I note that the Kimberley Toad Busters in 2012 had \$162 000 by way of grants and now \$300 000 in 2013. Could you just update me on that program and the success or otherwise that we are now seeing in relation to toad busting in the Kimberley?

Mr Sharp: With the Kimberley Toad Busters that is the last year of funding under that program.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: So we have got rid of the toads, is that what you are saying?

Mr Sharp: No, but I think there is an acceptance that the toad has moved beyond that phase of being constrained. There is a state cane toad strategy that looks at their spread, but also at ways they are transported—how you can prevent transportation of the toads—and there is early identification of them moving to new areas. There is a whole range of approaches in that strategy.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: And they are?

Mr Sharp: They are continuing to advance, yes.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So the strategy is not working?

Mr Sharp: The strategy was quite clearly, and has been quite a number of years, about containing the spread with the acceptance, and hoping to constrain the spread. There is ongoing investment in research to find a solution. That potentially was going to be a biological control solution. So the attempt has always been about buying time to find that solution.

[1.30 pm]

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: If it is not going to be funded by your department past 2013, where is the funding for the ongoing strategy going to come from?

Mr Sharp: That is not for the ongoing strategy; that was direct funding into the Kimberley Toad Busters.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Okay; who then funds the overall strategy?

Mr Sharp: It is funded out of our department.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Where do I find that?

Mr Sharp: In terms of this year's budget, it is not broken down at that level. It would be part of the Kimberley region budget.

Mr Dans: It is part of that ongoing nature conservation service program in the Kimberley region.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It is hard to know where to start, but I might start there. Was funding removed from the nature conservation branch of the department this year?

Mr Sharp: No, funding has not been removed.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: You have not lost any funding to nature conservation?

Mr Sharp: No.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What about the science division?

Mr Sharp: What has happened is that there is a general reduction in budget relating to a salaries level to which we are funded; this is a slightly lower level than was previously the case, if you allow for increase. That is being dealt with across the agency by the use of voluntary severances. That is being apportioned to people who are accepted for a severance.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What impact did the reduction in the budget have on the nature conservation branch?

Mr Sharp: In terms of the nature conservation budget, the indicators here are that there is a target budget that has been set for the year and there has been no discernible impact.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Have there been redundancies as yet?

Mr Sharp: No.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What about the science division?

Mr Sharp: It will be impacted depending on the numbers that are available for take up and finalised voluntary severances.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Will those two divisions be merged?

Mr Sharp: At the moment they are not merged; they remain as two divisions as indicated here. They are being directed by the one director—the director of science—while the director for nature conservation is on extended long service leave.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: So they are going to remain as unique units.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: In relation to threatened species, I came across a report published by the CSIRO that DPaW contributed to on the woylie. I was surprised to see that the agency report does not indicate the increased threatened conservation status of the woylie. Can you speak to that?

Mr Sharp: I would have difficulty as I do not know which reports they are.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It is a 2013 CSIRO report titled "Importance of getting the numbers right: quantifying the rapid and substantial decline of an abundant marsupial, *Bettongia penicillata*". It is pretty recent and does quote research from DPaW. In the agency report that you have just done, I was interested to find that there was no indication of the critically endangered status of the woylie. The woylie appears to have increased in its threatened status, but there is no indication of that in this agency report. I want to ask you about that.

Mr Sharp: I cannot recall having seen either report. Although, the issue of how we go about determining the status of species is that there is a threatened species committee which sits as an independent committee and looks at what is happening to given species and reports on the status and any change in status.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: How does the threatened species scientific committee—TSSC—report? Is that recorded in your agency report?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: So the committee's work should be in the agency report.

Mr Sharp: If it comes before that committee, it is considered in that context and reported to the minister.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I am concerned that the fact that there is a 95 per cent decline in woylie populations and other similar marsupial species has, thus far, not been indicated in the report.

Mr Sharp: I cannot comment without having seen the report; I am finding it difficult to make comment. But, I will look at the report and provide you with the information.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: When will we get an update on the endangered nature of the woylie and other marsupial species? The reason why this is important, Mr Sharp, as I am sure you will be aware, is because we have a forest management plan before us that is dealing with the management in areas where those critically endangered species are, and if we lag behind in increasing the status of their endangerment, then we could pass a forest management plan that, perhaps, should not be passed. That is my concern. How does it normally happen? Do you issue a statement that a species has met the criteria, in this case the IUCN criteria?

Mr Sharp: That is part of the consideration of its listing and how it is listed under state legislation. Yes, its status is declared under that process.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: And you make a recommendation to the national body that its status needs to be upgraded.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: In this case the national body is the head of WA—is that right?

The CHAIR: I am not sure whether we are getting some information on notice and I do not want to miss it. Member, was there information that you were hoping to have taken on notice?

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Yes.

The CHAIR: If you can clarify what it is, I will assign a number. As we go through the hearing, if officers indicate that they can take information, can we stop and give it a clear number at that point? If you can indicate what you would like as supplementary information, I will assign a number.

[Supplementary Information No A6.]

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: A6 should be the status of the woylie.

Mr Sharp: The status of the woylie.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I would also like to know when this information will be in the system and how I can track the endangered status of threatened species. If we cannot look at the agency report and see that the status of the species has increased, where can I find that information? That is what I want to know.

Mr Sharp: The status of threatened species is listed and made publicly available. I think the question that you are asking is, if there is someone reporting that they think there is a change in that status, where is that.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: When is that?

Mr Sharp: That would be when it comes out of a consideration of the threatened species.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I expected that to be in the agency report and I must admit some of my constituents did as well. That is why I am asking in this forum.

The CHAIR: I am still not sure; are we clear about what we are actually getting? Or have we just answered the question?

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: No; we are getting something on the status of the woylie.

Mr Dans: Member, periodically, after the committee makes a recommendation to the minister, a notice will be gazetted in the *Government Gazette* pursuant to the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950. Basically, it is gazetting a revised list of threatened and endangered flora and fauna in Western Australia, as the case may be.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: That is just a periodic gazettal.

Mr Dans: It is a periodic gazettal when the committee recommends changes to the minister. That is my understanding and I am sure that the State Law Publisher website could verify that by a search through the government gazettes. It is under the Wildlife Conservation Act.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Maybe there is a time lag here. I can chase that up in other forums.

The CHAIR: You are going to provide information on the current status of the woylie.

Mr Sharp: That is the question as I understand it, Mr Chair. We are going to provide information on the current status of the woylie.

The CHAIR: That is fine.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: The other question is kind of related; it is about the updating of the Wildlife Conservation Act. I know you mentioned it in the annual report and I was wondering if you could give us a time line of the new biodiversity conservation act.

[1.40 pm]

Mr Sharp: The government made an election commitment that there would be a new biodiversity conservation act. We have been working vigorously on preparation for that act.

The CHAIR: How many years is that now?

Mr Sharp: It has been proposed in a draft form, I think, since about 2007; I could be corrected on that. This, however, is a specific commitment that was made before the election. That is being progressed as rapidly as we can for consideration by government and introduction to the Parliament. I understand there is an intention to bring it before Parliament next year.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Next year, okay. Does that include a green bill for consultation or is that just the bill?

Mr Sharp: My understanding is there is not a proposal for a green bill at the moment.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Are there any approved recovery plans that are concluding in this year?

Mr Sharp: I cannot answer that. I think we completed, as in the annual report, six or seven last year. There are always recovery plans underway, but I will take that on notice for those which I expect to be concluded in what remains of this financial year.

[*Supplementary Information No A7.*]

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I have got some questions in relation to the Department of Parks and Wildlife firefighting operations. What number of firefighters does the department employ and what is the status of their employment?

Mr Sharp: Could I ask Mr Dans, who is the director responsible for fire services, to answer.

Mr Dans: Member, we have approximately 100 dedicated fire management officers around the state. In addition to that, we have something in the order of 210 permanent front-line firefighters. The majority of those, about 185, are based in the south west of the state. On top of that figure, we would have some seasonal front-line firefighters. We would have about 100 of those seasonal firefighters in the south west of the state. That takes our total target employment numbers in the south west to 286 to be precise. There are 100 dedicated fire management officers, statewide about 300 front-line firefighters, there is probably another in the order of 400 parks and wildlife staff who also undertake fire management roles in one capacity or another. They might just help out on incident management teams or the like. They might be a mapping specialist or a fire spread specialist. It is not their core role, it is not in their job description as such, but they step into an incident management role when a fire situation requires it.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: This might be a difficult question for you to answer, but in relation specifically to your firefighting staff, both casual and permanent, does the department keep any records or information in relation to potential firefighting illnesses that those firefighters suffer? I am not talking about injuries that would ordinarily be a workers' compensation injury that they would receive the appropriate care and treatment for, but I am talking more about, I guess, the types of illnesses, such as cancer, that we are now seeing firefighters develop in other types of firefighting operations.

Mr Dans: We would not have a specific register for occupational safety and health purposes that recorded the attendance of an individual at a prescribed burn where there is significant smoke exposure or a bushfire, again, with significant smoke exposure. But we could extract that information from other human resources records, particularly their timesheets, which will indicate when they are attending prescribed burnings or bushfire suppression operations. We could develop pretty sound records of an individual's exposure to smoke, be it in prescribed burning or bushfire situations, over the period of their employment. Now I would say that it is quite likely that prescribed burning operations would contribute a significant amount to smoke exposure of individuals. Having said that, most individuals will be wearing some sort of smoke protection mask when they are in the thick of it on the fire line, be it a burn or a fire.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I guess the reason why I am asking these questions is because the Parliament recently legislated to protect firefighters employed by the fire and rescue service who would have more specialised personal protective equipment than Department of Parks and Wildlife firefighters in terms of breathing apparatus and the like. Is there a concern in the department in relation to whether or not similar protections should be afforded to Department of Parks and Wildlife firefighters? Is there any evidence, is there a concern, is there any anecdotal evidence about firefighters that have been with the department for a long time contracting cancer? If there is, what work is the department doing to perhaps substantiate some of those risks?

Mr Dans: We are not doing any work ourselves in house but we are a very active member of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council, which is a peak agency—a council, if you like—of Australian agencies from all of the jurisdictions and New Zealand. AFAC and the Bushfire CRC are undertaking some research currently on the compounds, carcinogenic or otherwise, in bushfire smoke. We are keeping abreast of that. Rather than running our own research, that collaborative effort is ultimately substantially more powerful. AFAC and the Bushfire CRC also have a number of national forums looking into things such as personal protective equipment for bush fire fighters and we are a very active participant on those things as well. So, we are not pursuing individually down those avenues; we are part of a whole—all jurisdictions—Australian approach to looking at research into the health effects of bushfire smoke and the personal protective equipment that might be required as a result of that. I am aware that some scientific research is ongoing at present.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: So is that the Monash study that you are referring to?

Mr Dans: I could not refer. I know there are a number of programs happening under the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre that are looking at the effects of bushfire smoke on firefighters.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Just continuing on the matter of firefighter injury and illness, I looked at the evidence that was given to another committee in relation to your preparedness for the fire season, particularly in relation to the preparedness of your firefighting vehicles. I noticed in that evidence that there was a response by the department that your fleet of south west-based appliances would have heat shields and water spray systems installed by the end of November. Could you perhaps update us on your progress towards meeting that target?

Mr Dans: I spoke to our fleet manager this morning, member, and confirmed all of our firefighting trucks from Wanneroo south, and that is about 98, have roll-down radiant heat-shield curtains fitted. They have heat-proofing and underbody lagging of air lines, hydraulic lines and critical componentry. They have had replacement of plastic parts. We have not progressed to install the water or gel deluge systems. We received an extension to that particular improvement notice from the WorkSafe commissioner and our deadline for that is now 30 September 2014. There is significant prototyping and engineering required before we do that. We do not have a single model of truck across our fleet of about 110 trucks; we have a number of model variants. But the majority, as I said, I think it is 98 trucks, everything from Wanneroo south right down to Esperance, is done. We still have a couple of trucks at Karijini and Millstream national park, a couple in the midwest and a couple in the Kimberley to do, which will be done over the subsequent months. But for the southern bushfire season, our heavy firefighting fleet is well prepared.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Is that going to include in-cab breathing systems?

Mr Dans: At this point in time, we are not sort of actively—we have not committed to in-cab breathing. We are working very closely with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services on what a system like that might look like. At present, as I understand it, only one jurisdiction—that is, the country fire authority in South Australia—actually utilises in-cab breathing apparatus. There are some almost off-the-shelf solutions available, but, again, we have not charged headlong into that one at present. We are dealing with the WorkSafe improvement notice requirements first and foremost, and then we will look at other enhancements we might pursue in due course.

[1.50 pm]

Hon RICK MAZZA: I want to ask about your prescribed burning program. I wonder whether you are up to date with your prescribed burning program for this year.

Mr Sharp: I will ask Mr Dans. We are moving as rapidly as we can on a program of controlled burning. Mr Dans will let you know where we are at.

Mr Dans: Up till last Friday, the fifteenth, we had achieved 43 350 hectares across the three south west forest regions. That is the area where we have that notional 200 000-hectare target. We have achieved about another 2 000 this week, largely in the Warren region around Manjimup and Pemberton, and around Walpole as well. The opportunity to do any more burning probably north of Collie has gone with the fairly rapid warming trend we have experienced over the past couple of weeks. We had a lot of rain through September and then we had a reasonable window of opportunity through October. If we had had a nice gentle warming trend, it would have been a lot better than flipping into 35, 36 and the like that we did last week and last weekend. So it is pretty much finished up north of Collie, and maybe north of Harvey, but there is still opportunity to conduct prescribed burning in the lower south west, in what we call the Warren region, in and around Pemberton, Manjimup, Walpole and across the south coast.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Did I hear right that your target is about 200 000 hectares a year?

Mr Dans: For a financial year, yes.

Hon RICK MAZZA: And you have done 43 000 or 45 000.

Mr Dans: About 45 000 to date, yes.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: It is double last year's.

Mr Dans: That is correct.

Hon RICK MAZZA: It is only about 20 per cent of the program.

Mr Dans: That is not substantially below par. If we have continued good windows of opportunity in that Warren region and we finish what we call the spring program up to around 100 000, there is every opportunity we can continue to push towards that notional target once we commence again around autumn. It all depends on when we get rain. If we get some early winter rains or early rains in April or May, we might have a good opportunity there. More so than ever, the achievement of the prescribed burning program is dependent on the weather and the rainfall events. The winters of 2010 and 2012 were the driest winters on record. There is still a significant moisture deficit in the soil, and to undertake burns in some of those conditions is incredibly risky, because the likelihood or the potential for rapid fire escalation and escape is very real.

Hon RICK MAZZA: When you do your prescribed burns, how do you determine which areas should be burnt? Is it based on the time since it was last burnt or do you look at fuel loads in that particular area? How do you actually determine which areas should be in the prescribed burning program?

Mr Dans: Member, for the different vegetation types, we use years since the last burn as a surrogate for the fuel loading. Over many decades, we are very accurate predictors for the various vegetation types. That is one factor that comes into it—year since last burn. It is probably the main factor. Other factors are then taken into account—proximity of some Parks and Wildlife-managed lands to rural subdivisions or town sites or critical infrastructure, be they roads, powerlines or the like. There are a number of factors and almost a risk assessment matrix that are used in determining which burns are actually placed on the program and given priority.

Hon RICK MAZZA: On average, how many years is the rotation for, say, a forest block? Are you finding it is a 20-year cycle or a 30-year cycle?

Mr Dans: Ideally, we aim to burn something in the order of eight per cent of our managed lands in a year; that is what the 200 000 roughly equates to, which puts it at somewhere around 12 years.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Hon Rick Mazza has asked some of the questions that I was going to ask. I notice that it was only just over 10 per cent in 2012–13 from your indicative burn target, but you have now almost reached 25 per cent. Is there a better way to be carrying out prescribed burns, on the basis that it seems over the last few years, with climatic changes, perhaps we are not burning at the right time? It is probably hard to be opportunistic in these things, but how much planning does there need to be for prescribed burning to take place? Could you not look at the weather a month ahead and say, "There is not a prescribed burn due, but we could probably manage a couple of thousand hectares if we do it then"? Have you got that flexibility available to you?

Mr Dans: There is a definite window of opportunity, member, when you can successfully and safely undertake a burn. The fuel has to be not too moist and not too dry and the wind has generally got to be in the right direction. There are a number of variables that you have to take into account. As I said, our big challenge is what appears to be a shrinking window of opportunity, or there certainly has been over the past few years a narrower window of opportunity, to undertake burns. Going forward, we are actively now pursuing other opportunities to broaden that window of opportunity. That might mean igniting a burn a lot later in the day rather than igniting a burn at maybe one or two in the afternoon, so, as the temperature falls and the relative humidity rises, the fire intensity dies down. That is the general principle under which you undertake a burn. If the fuel is a little bit drier and the fire behaviour is perhaps a little more intense, we might light at three or four in the afternoon and burn and keep the crews out there through the evening and patrolling up until midnight or something. We have got to be a little bit more innovative in how we go about it to

maximise our opportunities to achieve what we would like to achieve. That is one thing. We have spoken about and we have considered and are continuing to consider outsourcing various aspects of the prescribed burning process. There are some ancillary things we have to do now, such as traffic management, putting in signs to slow the traffic down to 80 then to 60 and signs about smoke on the road. It is particularly onerous now, and it diverts a lot of the human resources off the actual fire line doing the burn to doing some of those ancillary things.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Who would you outsource it to?

Mr Dans: There are many, many companies to do traffic management contracting.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: So you would outsource just the traffic management, not the actual burn.

Mr Dans: Not the actual burn, but some of those aspects of the prescribed burning activity that are a lot more onerous than they were a decade ago.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Also in the third paragraph in the prescribed burning section of the annual report at page 41, which is where we get those figures of the indicative burn target in the south west of 200 000 hectares, you say that there was a further 6 023 884 hectares burnt in the Kimberley, Pilbara, goldfields, midwest, wheatbelt and south coast region. Do you have an indicative burn target for those areas? Were they controlled burns or were they fires that just happened by lightning strike and you just add them into those figures?

Mr Dans: No. Those figures there are burns that were planned and implemented by the department, but many of them, particularly those in the goldfields and the Kimberley, were in conjunction with native title representative bodies and traditional owner communities. They are proactively planned and implemented prescribed burns, not bushfires or wildfires from lightning strikes or the like.

[2.00 pm]

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: So those six million hectares that were burnt, that is in addition to the 5 477 395 hectares where DEC staff attended and monitored 676 bushfires?

Mr Dans: That is correct.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: The other thing that I would like to know is the causes of the fires, and you have got some categories there. You have “deliberately lit or arson-caused fires”, which we would all understand, and “lightning”, “escapes from private burns”, “escapes from DEC burns” and “unknown”. What is an accidental fire?

Mr Dans: It might be something from a —

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Grinder.

Mr Dans: I was going to say machinery use—tools or machinery use. It might be a vehicle driving over grass and exhaust—those types of things.

The CHAIR: That is why they have paddock burns in the wheatbelt.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Yes. I understand that. Okay. That is terrific. Thanks.

[Interruption.]

Dr Byrne: I would like to thank the committee for accommodating my disability. That is appreciated.

The CHAIR: We always appreciate your attendance, Dr Byrne. It is a number of years now—for me, anyway. I will go back to Hon Rick Mazza to continue the fire questions.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Just on the fire, you spoke earlier about the onerous requirements on you now to burn a forest area, with traffic management and other things you need to do. When you identify an area that is scheduled for burning, how long before you burn it do you need to have it scheduled and what preliminary research do you have to do in that forest block as far as working

out what reptiles or animals might be affected by the burn—counts and all that sort of stuff? Is there a fair bit of preliminary work done before burning an area?

Mr Dans: Absolutely. We have two processes that run. One is a six-season, three-year—so, spring and autumn. So it is a six-season rolling master burn plan, which basically highlights areas a few years out so that staff can start doing more detailed prescribed fire planning. So for each and every burn, there is a requirement to prepare a prescribed fire plan, which takes into account the vegetation types, whether there are threatened species or threatened ecological communities or what other assets of value might be within the burn area. It takes into account the required liaison with neighbours or utilities companies. There is quite a detailed process that we have to go through before we even introduce fire into it—a very detailed process.

Hon RICK MAZZA: So, usually about three years prior.

Mr Dans: It will be foreshadowed generally three years out, and any of our six districts in the south west would have perhaps anything between 30 to 50 burns on that planning horizon, and bringing them on, as priorities dictate, to the annual program.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Okay. Thank you for that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I would like to go to the Ord River irrigation stage 2 project. Obviously, with the split of the department into the various new departments—I have asked this question of previous departments, who suggested that this question is best placed with you —

The CHAIR: They doxed you in, in other words!

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Why did the Department of State Development request changes to the implementation conditions and the proponent commitments for the Ord project?

Mr Sharp: I am afraid I am not able to answer that question; I am sorry, I cannot answer that. I have no understanding around that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: At all?

Mr Sharp: No.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So your department has nothing to do with conditions and commitments in relation to the implementation of Ord stage 2.

Mr Sharp: No. Our commitment relates to the native title agreement with the Miriuwung–Gajerrong and the creation of reserves, so our responsibility relates to working with the Miriuwung–Gajerrong and the reserve creation and management that come out of that decision.

The CHAIR: Have there been any changes to that as the result of requests from other agencies like the Department of State Development—to what is occurring in respect to the commitments you have for —

Mr Sharp: No, not at all; not that I am aware of, no.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I thought that was going to take me a really long time, but it is not.

Mr Sharp: Sorry!

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I wanted to go to reefs off Onslow and the management of those reefs.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Even offshore now.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Offshore, yes, that is right.

The CHAIR: We are travelling across the state in this area.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Are you aware of the level to which the coral cover on some reefs off Onslow has declined over the years?

Mr Sharp: We have a marine research program and that provides a broad brush of marine science input. Primarily our responsibility is for managing marine reserves—that is, parks, nature reserves and marine management areas. I do not have specific knowledge around that. There is a lot of collaborative work that is undertaken in the marine science area, particularly in the Kimberley around the Western Australian Marine Science Institution, which is a collaboration of our agency, Fisheries and a wide range of other agencies—CSIRO, AIMS and others—and some of the work that has been undertaken under the previous WAMSI program dealt with coral reefs, particularly around Ningaloo. I am not specifically aware of a declining status of coral in those reefs.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: What role does your department play in the management of the conservation of those reefs and protection of those reefs?

Mr Sharp: Specifically, we have a role in relation to the areas that we manage and a direct management responsibility. More broadly, we have a responsibility for wildlife generally under the Wildlife Conservation Act. How that interacts with coral reefs outside the marine reserves is somewhat limited, but perhaps I could look at what our role might be in terms of what research we have undertaken.

[2.10 pm]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I would not mind some more information about that, because it seems to me with the split up of the agencies that there might be more than one or two fairly major issues that seem to have fallen in between the responsibilities of the agencies. In particular what I am concerned about is who is identifying the level of the decline of coral cover and to what extent, and who is responsible for addressing that, particularly the activities that are associated with the declining coral cover.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So, to get some information back on that, particularly around or outside Onslow as well I am interested in.

Mr Sharp: Okay.

[*Supplementary Information No A8.*]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I thought that was going to on for a while too. Can I have another go?

The CHAIR: I will give you a few more questions. I am going to try to manage the time to give everyone a reasonable chance before three o'clock.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Are you still on water?

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: On seas?

Hon RICK MAZZA: Are you still offshore?

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I am onshore now, but have you got something?

Hon RICK MAZZA: I have a couple of questions on marine parks. Is that within keeping?

The CHAIR: All right. We will let the fishing side of your party come out now!

Hon RICK MAZZA: No; no fishing at this stage.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It is about time we heard from the fishers.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Yes, you are better off when we are shooting. Fishing is coming, don't you worry about that! There is plenty of fishing coming!

Just for my own information, what is a class A marine park? I see that you have a class A marine park ordered for 80 Mile Beach and I just wondered what specifies a class A marine park.

Mr Sharp: Under the CALM act it is the way in which it is classified at its level of protection in terms of changes that can be made to that reserve. A class A requires the consent of Parliament in terms of the changes to that reserve.

Hon RICK MAZZA: To make a change to the reserve you need an act of Parliament?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon RICK MAZZA: In a class A marine park what restrictions are there as far as the use of the marine park?

Mr Sharp: The restrictions in any marine park are determined by way of the zoning scheme for the park, which is developed at the same time as the park. It is a prerequisite for the park to be gazetted that you have a management plan for the park which dictates how the park is going to be managed in terms of its zoning; in other words, the uses that occur within a given zone. That sounds an obtuse answer, but it depends. If it is a general purpose area, a general use zone as defined under the act, there is a whole wide range of uses that take place and the majority of parks are zoned according to that zoning. So that allows recreation fishing, commercial fishing, oil exploration, whatever.

Hon RICK MAZZA: So the marine park itself would have multiple areas of different uses?

Mr Sharp: It has multiple different uses and purposes and therefore activities that are allowed depending upon the way in which they are zoned.

Hon RICK MAZZA: This is a fairly broad question, I suppose, but with all the state marine parks that we have in Western Australia, what is the cost of managing those?

Mr Sharp: I do not have a direct cost.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I could put a question on notice for that.

Mr Sharp: Yes, that can be arranged in terms of the cost of managing marine parks. Marine parks are managed through our regional services division and are regionalised. Some of the costs associated with that are associated with the costs which are not specific to the marine park; in other words they are managed by the district, but we can arrive at an indication.

Hon RICK MAZZA: If I could have that as a question on notice: things like vessels that are used, vehicles, personnel, all those sorts of things.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No A9.]

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I have some question in relation to the Swan River Trust and its merger with the Department of Parks and Wildlife.

The CHAIR: Why do you always ask the questions that are on my list!

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Because you normally ask mine before I get to ask them!

I am particularly concerned in relation to the Swan River Trust, which currently administers a lot of federal funding from the federal Department of Environment and supports a lot of land care and NRM groups within my electorate. I am just wondering whether you could make some comment on how you perceive the funding arrangements from the federal government working within the new merged entity, and whether or not those NRM groups and land care groups can continue to expect to receive similar levels of funding under the new arrangement.

Mr Sharp: Yes. The new arrangement the government committed to still has to be proceeded through legislation to put those arrangements in place. In terms of working with community groups and accessing commonwealth funding, I do not contemplate that there would be a difference in relation to accessing funds for purposes related to management. We have relationships with the

commonwealth in terms of funding and programs that involve community groups extensively. I would not anticipate that there would be a change in that arrangement.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I think their concern is that they have a very good working relationship with the Swan River Trust and probably part of that reason is because of the size of the agency being quite small.

Mr Sharp: Right.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I think some of their concern is that once the Swan River Trust becomes part of the Department of Parks and Wildlife, which is a much bigger agency, that the department might like to internalise perhaps some of the functions that some of these land care and NRM groups are currently being supported to do through those funding arrangements.

Mr Sharp: My comment would be, without dealing with specifics, that I would see it the other way around. Very much our agency, Parks and Wildlife, is dependent upon a broad range of community interactions and engagements to achieve outcomes. I think you will see in the annual report that there is something like 4 700 volunteers and other groups that we are reliant upon to deliver the outcomes that are expected in terms of what we have to manage. We have one-third of the country in terms of areas managed and in terms of a wide range of values and a tenth of the population and I think the funding is about that proportion; therefore community engagement and involvement is absolutely essential to those outcomes.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: When does the merger expect to commence?

Mr Sharp: It is dependent upon when the legislation is passed.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: But I assume we are working towards next financial year because I am not seeing anything obviously in the spending changes for this financial year.

Mr Sharp: No. The government's announcement was post the budget, at the start of this year's budget, so it would not be reflected in there. But I would anticipate that the ideal time would be at the start of a financial year.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Often when we see agencies merged into other agencies there are usually agreements to protect for at least a period of time a number of staff in that transitional period. Given the Swan River Trust has quite a high number of contractual staff, so not permanent staff, what is likely to happen to the workforce at the Swan River Trust?

Mr Sharp: It is difficult for me to speculate beyond that it would be expected that those staff who we currently have responsibility for as the employing agency anyway would be retained as part of the agency to perform the functions they are performing. In terms of contracts, I think contracts would depend on what is the contractual arrangement. If the funding is there, there is obviously funding for that position, so that would continue. It depends on where the contract is at and where the funds are continuing.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Obviously at the moment the Swan River Trust has some statutory responsibilities under its act.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: How is that going to function within the Department of Parks and Wildlife?

Mr Sharp: I think that would need to be worked through in terms of the legislation. My understanding of the primary change would be that the responsibilities of what is the trust in terms of statutory decision making would be that of the CEO through to the minister.

The CHAIR: On that point, prior to the decision being made what work had your agency done on the benefits that would be achieved by having a merger with the Swan River Trust?

Mr Sharp: This was a decision of government and the government made the decision about the merger, not the agency, and the agency is not engaged in that.

The CHAIR: So you did not provide any advice to government before that decision about what could be benefits —

Mr Sharp: That was not our role.

The CHAIR: Have you since the decision been able to identify any benefits that will arise out of the merger of the two organisations?

Mr Sharp: Not specifically looking at benefits or dis-benefits but we have met and looked at how those functions would continue and what benefits, if you like, could arise in terms of synergies of staff working in similar areas, say, for instance, in communications. There was one in relation to, say, landscape design and those capacities that we have a greater capacity than the Swan River Trust, and there is the economies of scale that would apply in a number of areas.

[2.20 pm]

The CHAIR: Right. So, have you been able to quantify in terms of staff or dollar terms what that will achieve?

Mr Sharp: No. There has been no attempt at quantifying.

The CHAIR: So at this stage there is none. Some of those benefits—I would have thought as an agency you would have worked quite closely with the Swan River Trust and you would have shared expertise. I assume there are probably areas where they have expertise that you do not and you would have always had a fairly good working relationship and shared that information?

Mr Sharp: Yes, we have a good positive working relationship over a number of areas, but it does make it more accessible directly to those services and benefits if they are in the agency in relation to, say, science, where we have a considerable science capacity, or, as I said, in the landscape design capacity we have far greater capacity.

The CHAIR: Have you identified any costs that will be involved in the merger yet?

Mr Sharp: No.

The CHAIR: When will that be done?

Mr Sharp: I think that will be done as the legislation is passed. There is need for legislative change to give it effect.

The CHAIR: Would you not make those decisions before the legislation goes through? I do know that has occurred in the past, but it strikes me that before you made a legislative change you would want to know the cost of that legislative change, if any. I am not suggesting there is any; I am just asking.

Mr Sharp: I am not assuming there will be any increase in cost.

The CHAIR: But no-one has done the work to see whether there will be or not.

Mr Sharp: From my perspective, I would not anticipate there would be any.

The CHAIR: Often signage alone and those things can add up, but if you have not done it, that is fine. The only other issue about the Swan River Trust then is: has the drafting of the merger legislation commenced or is that still to be commenced?

Mr Sharp: There are drafting instructions underway being prepared, yes.

The CHAIR: Right. So, do we know what the current timetable is for that to be introduced to the Parliament?

Mr Sharp: I cannot give a timetable, no.

The CHAIR: Is it a cabinet decision to release that or that has not been determined yet?

Mr Sharp: The drafting is underway. The Swan River Trust staff are providing drafting instructions. The timetable, I am not aware of.

The CHAIR: Okay. So, that is getting done by the Swan River Trust. Gnangara regional park, which I think was a concept. I do not know whether it has been now formalised into a regional park, but the old pine plantation, basically, the old Gnangara pine plantation and all its extensive areas, what work are you doing on that at the moment?

Mr Sharp: There is not a Gnangara regional park as such; there are the Gnangara plantations. There is a budget allocation I think in terms of maintaining protecting its values. That is allocated to the Wanneroo district at this time to manage that area. The director of regional services may indicate —

Mr Dans: There is an annual program in those pine areas. It focuses on, unfortunately, rubbish removal, which is a major issue up there in those pine areas and there is some revegetation of areas that have been clear felled of pine and, which are not going to be replanted. They are being revegetated progressively with native species.

The CHAIR: Can you take on notice the budget for that work?

Mr Dans: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No A10.]

The CHAIR: You mentioned there in terms of rubbish removal. The changes in terms of the increased penalties that went through the Parliament a little while ago, not that long ago now, have they had any marked impact in terms of reducing the amount of rubbish that is being left in the park?

Mr Sharp: It is difficult. We do not have that information available. That is administered through the Department of Environment Regulation.

The CHAIR: I am asking the impacts on you; have you noticed in the past couple of years there has been any change in the amount of rubbish or is the amount of rubbish you are having to clear continuing to grow?

Mr Sharp: Out of Gnangara specifically? I cannot answer that.

Mr Dans: I will not have a guess.

The CHAIR: We will make that part of A10. If you can give us the historical data going back two or three years of the amount of rubbish that you have to remove and the cost of doing that, if you are able to and if you can break that information up into both rubbish removal and the revegetation. The reason I am interested about the revegetation is you say you are not doing any, but can you give me also some areas where that revegetation is occurring and whether or not the budget is sufficient for you to revegetate the areas as fast as they are being felled? The reason I ask is if one drives along Pinjar Road, I am not sure you would call it revegetation; I think you would call it invasion of primary species, better known as weeds, along that area. I watch it fairly closely and you see plants growing where it has been felled, but what I am seeing are just weeds growing back there. It is not a proper revegetation program. If you could provide us with some more details about whether you are able to keep up with the felling; where you actually have done some revegetation; and what that revegetation has entailed; and are there now areas where because you are leaving them and you do not have the budget, that they are getting weeds invading them and then that is making the revegetation process more complex and/or costly? Are you happy to make that all A10?

Mr Dans: Yes.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Do you deal with the Port Kennedy Scientific Park? Is that under your control?

Mr Sharp: Yes, it is.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Can you give us an update on that because did we not have a fox-proof fence, a predator-proof fence, there?

Mr Sharp: No, my understanding is there was not a predator-proof fence. There was a management fence to prevent egress by off-road vehicles and other vehicles.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It was not to try to keep the predators out?

Mr Sharp: No, that is my understanding.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I thought it was a predator fence.

Mr Dans: Member, it did have a skirt on the bottom and a right angle at the top.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: There was a species we were trying to protect in there. I cannot remember what it was.

Mr Dans: There were some principles of that sort of design in it.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What is the status of it now, because I recently visited and it has got a lot of holes in it.

The CHAIR: It did not keep Green members of Parliament out, that is for sure!

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Do you have a fund or a management program for that fence?

Mr Sharp: Yes, we do. We have an ongoing responsibility for managing that area.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Can I alert you to its demise?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

The CHAIR: Just out of interest, how effective are those fences?

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: This one is not very.

The CHAIR: In terms of when you fence off those areas, because it then prevents movement between that and other areas, in terms of maintaining rare and endangered fauna, I assume is what they are mainly about, are they effective or by restricting movement does that restrict ability to —

Mr Sharp: There has been some outstanding success in terms of fences. We remove the predators from an area—that is the first thing that needs to be done—then fencing is put in place. We have had considerable success at Lorna Glen, which is a pastoral lease where there has been a removal of foxes and cats and then there has been a reconstruction of the fauna there from other parts of the state, which has seen quite a significant boost in terms of the number of animals that have been conserved. So, they are very —

[2.30 pm]

The CHAIR: What sort of area is that over, though?

Mr Sharp: It is over a very large area; I do not have it here, but it is in the hundreds of hectares. That program has been seen to be very successful in terms of exclusion of predators. We have also done one of those same fences at Perup near Manjimup as well, where there has been exclusion, and they do work. They are expensive and they need to be managed and monitored, but they can achieve the outcome of excluding predators.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Did we get a number for that?

[*Supplementary Information No A11.*]

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: A11 is the update on the status of the Port Kennedy Scientific Park fence, and whether any predators have come in and eaten everything. Does your department look at the management of the squatters on Wedge and Grey Islands?

Mr Sharp: Yes, that is correct.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What is the status of Wedge and Grey Islands? Because since the road went through, I understand there has been quite a lot more visitation, so I wondered how is that being managed?

Mr Sharp: The department manages it. There is a commitment to looking at the future of Wedge and Grey Islands. The government made a commitment to review how that would be managed into the future, and there is a planning process underway with the department and the two associations. At the moment, we are undertaking significant work looking at the hydrology of the area, waste issues and some native title issues that need to be looked at. The department is working with a working group and primarily pulling together the information to look at the future use of the area.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Have there been any concerns by the health department at Wedge and Grey recently?

Mr Sharp: No, not that I am aware of.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Not within the last 12 months?

Mr Sharp: Not that I am aware of, no.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: There were some concerns about sanitation.

Mr Sharp: There was the issue of waste removal but that has been resolved. There is a system by which the department is removing waste, and the cost is met by the lease fees from the shack owners.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Is your department in control of the management or protection of the Aboriginal sites, or is that another department?

Mr Sharp: No, there are a couple of issues in relation to this as part of the overall program. The issue of native title is the broader issue of future land use. There are some specific Aboriginal sites, and work is being undertaken in consultation with the traditional owners about the management and protection of those sites.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I understood there were some middens there that were recently vandalised.

Mr Sharp: Concerns have been raised and we are working to ensure that we do the best we can to protect those sites.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: What is the time line and the budget for Wedge and Grey Islands coming up to —

Mr Sharp: I cannot give you a definitive answer. There is a time line to come up with a report early next year, but I am relying on memory. I will need to find out.

[Supplementary Information No A12.]

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Did you make a submission to the Forest Management Plan? How does the Department of Parks and Wildlife engage with the Forest Management Plan?

Mr Sharp: The department does make a submission on the Forest Management Plan. The Conservation and Land Management Act provides that the Conservation Commission is responsible for the plan. The Conservation Commission uses the agency of the department to do the drafting for it, so that is the role of the department.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: If there were concerns about threatened species being impacted by the proposed logging, who would raise those issues, and at what point?

Mr Sharp: They would be raised at several points. They would be raised in the preparation of the plan itself, because there is extensive consultation with existing information—what knowledge

there is—when preparing a draft. All scientific information and understanding would be fed into the preparation of a draft plan for the commission. Then, of course, the plan would go out for public consultation for an extensive period. Any group could raise interests and concerns about the plan so that could get fed in to the drafting of the final plan. In this case, also, the other plans prepared by the department would get considered by the Environmental Protection Authority.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Before the plan is released for public comment, would the experts within the Conservation Commission and the Department of Parks and Wildlife ensure that it meets your criteria for the conservation of threatened species?

Mr Sharp: Yes, that is right.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I will ask a question in relation to Wedge and Grey Islands. Do you know how many permanent residents are actually on those islands?

Mr Sharp: There are very few, if any, permanent residents.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: There are crayfishermen.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Do you have any idea of the number of visitors using temporary accommodation?

Mr Sharp: It varies. I would need to check how many actual shacks there are at Wedge and Grey combined. I do know that—I would stand corrected—that it may be in the vicinity of 700 shacks, but I will need to check that. Obviously at peak holiday times more people attend the shacks than at other times, so it would not talk about residents or the number of residents. The management is more about what number of people there are at any one particular point in time.

The CHAIR: Did you want that as supplementary information?

Hon RICK MAZZA: No. That was just for my general information. I am happy with that answer.

The CHAIR: In fact, in about three hours, the population will start to climb substantially, I would expect—until about six o'clock on Sunday night.

You just said earlier that you are now picking up the cost of the rubbish removal on Wedge and Grey Islands and that it is coming out of the lease payments. Were the lease payments increased to cover that cost, or is it just out —

Mr Sharp: Yes, there was some increase in the cost to meet the cost of rubbish removal.

The CHAIR: Going back to Gngangara, has the proposal for a Gngangara regional park now been dropped? What is the long-term intention for the management of those former areas covered by pines, once the pines are removed? What is the plan in that area now, given that it is not a regional park?

Mr Sharp: There is no specific proposal for a regional park.

The CHAIR: But there was, was there not, going back to 1996?

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: It is in the budget and listed as “Gngangara Park”.

Mr Sharp: There is no specific timing or proposal. The mix of those lands is called “Gngangara Park”. Obviously, there are pine plantations with pines, but there are some areas which have had pines planted amongst it that still have some natural values. There are some wetland areas in there. It is called the management of the “Gngangara Park”, as such.

The CHAIR: What is the long-term plan? Is it to turn it into a regional park? What sort of structure will it be under? Obviously, if it becomes a regional park or a national park, it would have a management plan associated with it. Does it have a management plan associated with it?

Mr Sharp: No, it does not have a management plan. It is a forest that is under plantation at this time.

The CHAIR: But, obviously, once you remove the pines, it will not be a forest. One would hope, depending on the answers we get to the revegetation questions —

Mr Sharp: That is right.

The CHAIR: — one would hope that it would be revegetated into an area covered by native vegetation. I would have thought that at that point, it would need some sort of management that is separate from the way you would management a forest. Going back as far as 1996—I still remember the wraparound in the *Wanneroo Times* just before the 1996 state election—there was talk about it being the Kings Park of the north and becoming a regional park and all the rest of it. Immediately following the 1996 election, a lot of work was done on developing a management plan for a future regional park. I am just trying to work out where all that is at now. What is the long-term planning for that area?

[2.40 pm]

Mr Dans: The government undertook what was known as the Gngangara sustainability strategy—I think the Department of Water was the lead agency in that—to look at the future of Gngangara mound and appropriate land uses, and an appropriate schedule for the removal of the pines, which were impacting the water production capacity of the mound. However, the process that was being facilitated by the Department of Water came to an end, and I am not aware of the final outcome.

The CHAIR: The Gngangara sustainability strategy seems to have evaporated. A final version of the GSS has never been released. I do not know what the land area is, but I would imagine it is pretty significant. Ultimately, the cost of managing that area, once it is revegetated, will become quite significant. I would have thought that while it is forest, it does not require too many interpretive or other facilities. But once it is revegetated, you would want to use it in some way. I would have thought that some sort of planning would be done for that. You are absolutely right. The Gngangara sustainability strategy was part of where that was going to go. But, as I say, that seems to have just evaporated. We never hear of it anymore, and we never saw any final outcomes. Is it not an issue of concern for you as an agency as to what will happen in the long term?

Mr Sharp: It is not an issue at the moment. As Peter indicated, there is the sustainability strategy. There is also the issue of water abstraction and the impacts of water use. There is the issue, as you have indicated, of how successfully you can revegetate to native vegetation, particularly with a drying climate. We have done over a number of years various pieces of work in terms of the cost of revegetation. There is no master plan at the moment, to my knowledge, about the future of that specific land in terms of its conversion into park, because there are many unknowns in that space.

The CHAIR: Do you know what area of land is being cleared each year in terms of the pines?

Mr Sharp: No, I do not.

The CHAIR: Can we get as supplementary information the number of hectares of pines that is cleared each year? Can you also give me the average cost per hectare of the rehabilitation of that area? I imagine that the cost would probably be at the higher end, because of the acidity of the pine trees and all the rest of it. The cost would obviously be higher than the cost of revegetating a bit of bushland that is degraded. Do you remove the stumps of the pine trees as part of that revegetation?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

[*Supplementary Information No A13.*]

The CHAIR: There is a whole lot of land on Lake Pinjar that was resumed for water protection purposes. Is that now under your management? Who looks after that land? Do you look after just the pine plantations, or do you also look after the land that was resumed and brought under state control over what was the old Lake Pinjar, so basically from Pinjar road heading east, until you hit the pine plantation? Is that also under your management?

Mr Sharp: I could not say definitively that it is not, but I can take it on notice.

The CHAIR: We will make that part of A13. You are clearly a neighbour, so if you are able to give us any advice on who is the management agency for that land, that would be good.

Mr Sharp: Yes, we will provide that. We will provide you with information on the issue of revegetation. It depends on what standard you revegetate it to, so there are some variations in costs around that.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: What is the \$400 000 each year, for this financial year and into the forward estimates, for the Gngara park development used for? Is that for the clearing?

Mr Sharp: As Mr Dans indicated, that is to deal with the rubbish removal, the vandalism, the fencing and the management of the activities that occur there. There is an off-road vehicle area there, and management costs are associated with that.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: So it is for the management of the area; it is not for the development of the park?

Mr Sharp: It is for the management of that area. We try to maintain its values as best we can,

The CHAIR: The \$400 000 is the capital works. What is that used for?

Mr Sharp: That deals with all of those activities, such as fencing.

The CHAIR: Could you give us a breakdown for this year and last year of what that \$400 000 was spent on? That would probably be useful as well. I suspect that for future years you probably do not know what that money will be spent on, but if you could give us what it is intended to be spent on in 2013–14, and what it was spent on in 2012–13, that would be good.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

[Supplementary Information No A14.]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Do you have an idea of the total amount of hectares that the department manages in terms of conservation estates?

Mr Sharp: Yes. It is something like 28 million hectares, and it is broken down into different categories of land. That varies according to national park, state forest, conservation park and nature reserves, and there are some miscellaneous reserves as well. They are outlined at pages 48 and 49 of the annual report, and they are broken down by type and area, and then by name.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: There is a beautiful map as well. I love maps.

Mr Sharp: That is broken down by region, and those are our regions.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: What plans do you have in place to increase the total area of land under conservation?

Mr Sharp: We will be implementing the government's election commitments. Primarily, in relation to land, it is the creation of the Horizontal Falls national park. There is also the greater Kimberley national park. That is a mix of land tenures and will be done in consultation with traditional owners.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So there is Horizontal Falls, and the Kimberley national park?

Mr Sharp: It is the greater Kimberley park. It is not a specific area. There is a mix of tenures there. That will be done under a joint management arrangement.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So they are the only plans that you have?

Mr Sharp: That is right.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Are there any plans to transfer government-owned land into conservation, or is that the total conservation plan?

Mr Sharp: In terms of government-owned land—unvested crown land, which is a large proportion of the state—there is some 80 to 90 million hectares of that. This department has responsibility for the management of fire, ferals and weeds across that land. But it is not intended that it be transferred directly in terms of vesting into the conservation commission, which is the mechanism by which conservation land is vested; or, if it is a marine area, it is done by the Marine Parks and Reserves Authority. There is no intention to move those into vesting. That is where we have a responsibility in managing those impacts across that land area. There is no other specific crown land that I am aware of.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: So you manage those crown land in relation to pests and fire?

Mr Sharp: Yes—fire, ferals and weeds. There is an issue of fire around town sites and those areas, and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services takes responsibility for that.

Mr Dans: We do not have a fire suppression responsibility on those lands. It is 89 million hectares. But we do have a fire prevention responsibility, so prescribed burning and that type of thing. Local government still retains the responsibility for fire suppression.

[2.50 pm]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Has there been any work done on relative cost effectiveness of managed crown land as distinct from land vested in conservation estates and the cost of the management of that?

Mr Sharp: Not that I am aware of.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Using recognised vegetation mapping such as J.S. Beard's vegetation mapping, how many vegetation types are under-represented across the conservation districts?

Mr Sharp: I would have to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Not off the top your head?

Mr Sharp: No, I am sorry!

[*Supplementary Information No A15.*]

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: This might be an extension of that. For each vegetation type that is under-represented in the conservation estate, how many hectares would have to be acquired to ensure the representation is consistent with a minimum of 15 per cent of the original extent requirement?

Mr Sharp: I understand the question, but I cannot answer that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Is that able to be taken on notice?

Mr Sharp: We could do, yes. You are talking about a representative reserve system representing values of what areas are under-represented, and I think I could get some indication of that.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: The next part to that is: in relation to 28 million hectares, what percentage is recognised IUCN categories I to IV protection standards?

Mr Sharp: It is possible to do an analysis of that. We would put that information in relation to categorisation into a national database, the CAPAD database. If we could take that on notice through you, Chair, that is okay.

[*Supplementary Information No A16.*]

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Just a question on the Anstey-Kean damplands; are you aware of these?

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I understand we are looking at acquiring lots 67 and 69. Can you tell the progress of that? It is to be put into Bush Forever, I think.

Mr Sharp: I understand. There is some of that area that is already managed by the department. I cannot answer off the cuff in terms of the progress of any acquisition program. Acquisition is normally undertaken through the Department of Planning and that is where the funding would come from in terms of any acquisition that we might end up managing.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: I understand the issue has become urgent because there is some four-wheel-drive incursion into that area.

Mr Sharp: I understand that our staff are working with the local authority and others to deal with that issue. I think we have instituted regular patrols and other activities to deal with the concerns that have been raised by the community.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Could we get supplementary information about the time line to acquire lots 67 and 69 Skeet Road for Bush Forever?

[Supplementary Information No A17.]

Mr Sharp: My only comment in relation to that is that we would not be the acquiring authority as such.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: Right, so you just manage it once it is acquired.

Mr Sharp: Right.

Hon LYNN MacLAREN: But you could ask —

Mr Sharp: We will inquire and do our best to answer.

The CHAIR: On when you should expect to be looking after that land and when you should be preparing your officers to manage it.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: On page 52 of the annual report under “Conservation land acquisitions”, the purchases finalised during the year was 41 623 hectare pastoral lease north of Bullfinch in the Shire of Yilgarn. You may not have this information right at your fingertips, but how much did you pay for the pastoral lease; how do you go about destocking that lease; and what is the ongoing management plan for that particular pastoral lease?

Mr Sharp: I cannot provide that specifically right now, but the principle would be that, having acquired a pastoral lease, it is often a condition of purchase that stock is obviously removed. That would be the normal arrangement that is put in place. However, I can seek that other additional information about purchase price.

[Supplementary Information No A18.]

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: The final question I have takes us back to page 87 on recurrent grants and subsidies. I noticed there are a number of grants and subsidies to various local governments themselves and regional councils. Some of them have not previously had funding, in particular, I would like to know about the City of Stirling, \$54 000, and Mindarie Regional Council, \$51 000; what is that going to be used for?

Mr Sharp: In relation to this annual report, it was prepared for the combined agency of the Department of Environment and Conservation. My understanding, but I would need to seek some detail that, is that it would be related to the Department of Environment Regulation responsibilities, and think it may have had something to do in relation to waste, but again, that is something I would have to do seek further information on. There is a combined list here of what were the functions of the Department of Environment Regulation and Department of Parks and Wildlife in that listing because it was the last financial year.

The CHAIR: These accounts are the consolidated ones of the former agency?

Mr Sharp: In the annual report, yes, but not in terms of the budget; the budget was framed as Department of Parks and Wildlife only budget.

The CHAIR: How do we get a reconciliation between the two?

Mr Sharp: All I could suggest is that the functions that are described in the annual report are quite clearly the functions of sustainable forest management, parks and wildlife, and nature conservation. Parks businesses include those that become the functions of the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the others are the functions of the Department of Environment Regulation.

The CHAIR: In terms of, for instance, when you were the consolidated agency, part of your revenue came from the landfill levy, in terms of the waste management levy?

Mr Sharp: In terms of the former Department of Environment and Conservation?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Dr Byrne: Yes, the agency—the Department of Environment and Conservation—received the landfill levy. The legislation says it must be paid into the agency managing the legislation, which was the Department of Environment and Conservation. That money came in and was used then across the agency. Now the Department of Environment Regulation has been created and the landfill levy goes to that agency.

The CHAIR: Has your appropriation been therefore increased to cover that 75 per cent?

Dr Byrne: Yes, our appropriation has been increased to cover the amount that we were getting for the landfill levy into the nature conservation service—the appropriation has increased by that amount, yes.

The CHAIR: So for the 2013–14 financial year, what was the component of your budget, in terms of the appropriation, that was increased to replace the landfill levy? How much was it in dollar terms?

Dr Byrne: The precise figure is apparent from the Department of Environment Regulation figure in the budget statements, because they pay that money from the Department of Environment Regulation to Treasury, then Treasury appropriates it back to us. It is about \$5 million, but if you give me a minute I can also provide the precise figure for you.

[3.00 pm]

The CHAIR: All right, thank you.

I note that you have significant reserves in terms of your equity. What is that actually made up of? It is \$1.4 billion. Under equity in your statement of financial position, it states that you have contributed equity, accumulated surplus, and then reserves of \$1.45 billion. It is page 800.

Dr Byrne: When you revalue your land, it is accounted for as a reserve. Almost all of the assets are really the value of the land—a few billion or so. That is about \$1.4 billion and that relates to how the land has been revalued at various times. It is really an accounting artifice rather than something of great meaning—sorry.

The CHAIR: I would have thought that your contributed equity was your land. What then is your contributed equity?

Dr Byrne: Contributed equity would be land when the agency was formed. For example, the Department of Parks and Wildlife is the renamed Department of Environment and Conservation, with the Department of Environment Regulation being a new agency. CALM actually ceased to exist on 1 July 2006 and the Department of Environment and Conservation is a merger of two agencies. At that time, CALM's land values would have been contributed equity; anything since then is basically a revaluation and counts as reserves.

The CHAIR: I am getting a little bit confused. For the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the contributed equity would be the value of the land when the department was created and anything since then is reserves.

Dr Byrne: It was when the Department of Environment and Conservation was created in July 2006, because the Department of Parks and Wildlife is just the renamed Department of Environment and Conservation.

The CHAIR: If that is the case, why would we then not see your contributed equity in 2014–15 jumping significantly and your reserves dropping to a significantly smaller figure?

Dr Byrne: The contributed equity is not going to change very much because it is the original value of the land. It was valued just before the Department of Environment and Conservation was formed. It is the reserves that would jump up and down if the valuation changes.

The CHAIR: Are you saying that as of 1 July, whatever the value of your land was on that date when you were created as a new agency, that would become the contributed equity to the agency?

Dr Byrne: The date of creation of the Department of Parks and Wildlife was 1 July 2006. And then we created the Department of Environment and Conservation, then it was renamed on 1 July this year.

The CHAIR: So you are still the same agency that you were, but with a new name?

Dr Byrne: Yes, plus another agency was part of us. But it is just the artifice of the way these things are done. In 10 years another is created.

The CHAIR: Am I right that you obviously had a land valuation late last year that caused a significant devaluation of about half a billion dollars in the value of your land holdings?

Dr Byrne: Yes, that is correct. That is a matter for the Valuer-General who independently values the land to be included in the report. He changed the valuation for two reasons—one is a general decline in rural land values, and two is that he started to realise that there are a lot more constraints on the use of the land for any other purpose than he had previously recognised. You cannot just suddenly sell it for farms or whatever, of course. He really had to take into account what the constraints are and he reduced the value of the land for that reason—quite appropriately, of course.

The CHAIR: For me, that is one of the interesting issues. Under the current zoning, I would have thought that the land estate that you own would not be worth much at all. My interest is not so much the impact that it has on your agency, but what that then feeds into the government's consolidated accounts. Although it strikes me that you would have a net cash negative position because your current liabilities certainly outweigh your current cash assets. Am I right that you have a cash deficit each year?

Dr Byrne: Firstly, the total estate assets, which may be tens of billions of dollars, fluctuate slightly due to the Valuer-General's valuations. That is quite true. In terms of cash and cash liabilities, let me have a quick look at the current assets and the current liabilities. We basically have plenty of cash available.

The CHAIR: I am sorry; I should make myself clearer.

Dr Byrne: Current assets are \$142 million and current liabilities are \$53 million. This is on page 63. Our current assets are \$100 million more than the liabilities.

The CHAIR: But most of those cash assets are in restricted cash. What is your restricted cash?

Dr Byrne: That is quite true. But you have cash assets that are roughly similar to those liabilities. Discounting the restricted cash, the current assets are rather similar to the current liabilities.

The CHAIR: What makes up the majority of your restricted cash? Is it holding money from commonwealth grants?

Dr Byrne: It is grants and money from the Gorgon project. We have good detail of that and we can provide you with that information—for example, the top 10 biggest ones at the end of the last financial year.

The CHAIR: If you could do that, it would be great. When I look at this, most of your cash is in restricted cash, so when you look at a number of your current liabilities, they would be above what you have in terms of non-restricted cash—or getting very close to it.

[Supplementary Information No A19.]

Dr Byrne: Yes, that is quite true. The non-restricted cash is supplemented during the year by the appropriation, and that helps to remove the current liability.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. It certainly seems like Treasury keeps a close rein on you. Most agencies have a little bit more cash than you do at the end of the year to meet ongoing bills. I will now conclude.

The committee will forward any additional questions it has to you via the minister in writing in the next couple of days, together with the transcript of evidence which includes the questions that you have taken on notice. 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. Again, on behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today.

Hearing concluded at 3.09 pm