

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

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

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH  
MONDAY, 19 APRILS 2010**

**Members**

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

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**Hearing commenced at 1.05 pm****CORKER, MR JOHN DIGBY****Pastoral Lessee,  
examined:**

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Thanks for joining us. My name is Bill Johnston. I am the Deputy Chair. Mike is approaching, so I will just start us off. I need to read out some remarks. On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the Department of Environment and Conservation's management of former pastoral leases. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference

At this stage I would like to introduce myself and the other members of the committee present today. My name is Bill Johnston, member for Cannington and Deputy Chair. Mike Nahan, the member for Riverton is the Chair. My fellow members are Liza Harvey, member for Scarborough; John McGrath, member for South Perth; and Mick Murray, member for Collie–Preston. The Economics and Industry Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal procedure of Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament.

This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you would provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, I need to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Do you understand the notes at the bottom of that form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Do you have any questions about being a witness at today's hearing?

**Mr Corker:** No, none.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Would you like to make any sort of opening remarks in regard to the terms of reference?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Is there anything that you think we need to know before we start asking questions?

**Mr Corker:** It would probably be easier if I did it afterwards.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Fair enough. Could you just let us know how long you have been at Red Hill station?

**Mr Corker:** Twenty-four years.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** How big is the place and what do you run on it?

**Mr Corker:** It is 188 000 hectares.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** What sorts of animals do you run on it?

**Mr Corker:** Beef cattle.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** How many?

**Mr Corker:** About 5 000.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Do you think you have a pest—animal or pest—weed problem on the station?

**Mr Corker:** We are pretty lucky as far as weeds go, but we do have dogs, yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** You have a major pest problem with dogs. Do you have problems with camels and those other sorts of things?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you have any DEC-controlled properties around you?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, to our west is the Cane River conservation area, which DEC purchased perhaps 10 or 15 years ago.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Are you aware of the concerns of a number of pastoralists about DEC's handling or control of these stations that it has taken over?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** What do you think are the main issues?

**Mr Corker:** I guess the main issues are boundary fencing and pest control.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Can you elaborate on the boundary fencing?

**Mr Corker:** I must say that as far as we are concerned we do not have a problem ourselves, because DEC paid for a portion of the fence and all of the rest of it, but other people have not been so lucky. DEC has not been willing to contribute to fencing and maintenance of fences. They are unrealistic in that they think that a fence will keep all animals, when in actual fact it does not and it only keeps most of the animals out most of the time.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Can you give examples of the places that you are referring to?

**Mr Corker:** Properties?

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Yes, you said that you do not have this problem but that other people do.

**Mr Corker:** I guess most people apart from us, actually. I do not know why we were singled out for preferential treatment with a free fence, but most other people have not received that.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Is the DEC land adjoining yours former pastoral leases or are they national park?

**Mr Corker:** They are both actually—sorry, not national park. We have unallocated crown land on our east side, which is DEC managed too.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** DEC has told us that there has been a general problem with sustainability of a lot of other stations out there, and they are no longer running the numbers of cattle or sheep that they used to run. Can you just give us an idea of what the situation is like at the moment and how it has changed over the years, especially in your situation?

**Mr Corker:** Certainly in the Kimberley, the Pilbara and the northern and north western Gascoyne that is not the case. If you convert it back to sheep numbers, there are probably more equivalent sheep numbers in the Pilbara now than there ever has been in the past. It is all cattle now, but if you converted it to sheep numbers, it would probably be higher than the sheep peak back in the 1930s and 1940s. There is not a problem with financial viability in the Pilbara or in the Kimberley or, to a lesser extent, in the northern Gascoyne. When you get south of the Gascoyne River that changes fairly dramatically, and there are issues there with viability.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** What about the other point that has been raised by DEC about the damage to the land and, I guess, to the flora and fauna by overstocking? Do you think that has been exaggerated?

**Mr Corker:** Once again, it varies from area to area. There is no doubt that grazing has altered the landscape. There is no doubt that substantial areas have been degraded, but, generally, once again, the further north you get, the lesser the problem. Most of the problems from overgrazing are in the southern rangelands, and the Murchison particularly.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Why do you think that is the case? Why is it going okay in the north and not in the south?

**Mr Corker:** I guess it is reliable rainfall.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** There is nothing about management practices, you do not think?

**Mr Corker:** Probably more rainfall, I think.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you across the purchase decisions that CALM has made over the past decade or so?

**Mr Corker:** Reasonably.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How do they go about, in your view, if you have one, buying in? Do they buy the right properties? Why do people sell to them?

**Mr Corker:** I think DEC's primary driver of purchasing a particular property has been price. They have been buying at the bottom end of the scale. They cannot afford to pay commercial value for the better properties.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In your view, they bought the properties they have at the least economic value as a pastoral operation?

**Mr Corker:** Generally, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They were mainly in the southern area?

**Mr Corker:** There are some in the Pilbara.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They have quite a few in the southern area.

**Mr Corker:** Yes, more in the southern area. There are two or three in the Pilbara.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you very experienced with how DEC manages the properties they have purchased?

**Mr Corker:** Generally, they are not really managed at all.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Their view is, I believe, that if you buy the properties, even if they are significantly degraded, which many are, just walk away and they will go back to nature.

**Mr Corker:** Pretty well that is the attitude, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does it?

**Mr Corker:** It is never going to revert back to what it was before livestock were grazed there. It has changed irrevocably. None of us knows what it was like even before stock were there. There is very

little photographic record of what it looked like in the late 1800s and virtually no written records either. I do not really know what CALM was hoping to do even by purchasing those properties.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They basically wanted to have a certain percentage of representative natural land, as I understand it. Their view was that if they acquired these lands—it would take some time—and they stopped man's influence largely over water, which is the largest influence, yes, there would be some turmoil initially as exotics and others die of thirst, but it would go back to nature. I think their view is that it is quite ecologically robust. That is the major thesis of their purchase. Your view is—I do not want to put words into your mouth—that you do not know what natural is and, therefore, you do not know whether or not it will go back there.

**Mr Corker:** Pretty well, yes. Nobody really knows what it looked like any more.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you think there is an issue in the fact that these leases that have been taken up by DEC are basically managed from a desk somewhere in a department in the city and there is no-one on the properties, or not enough people on the properties, to make sure that things are working as they should?

**Mr Corker:** Speaking from the point of view of our local area, there is somebody living on the DEC property next to us, and he does contract work for DEC—firebreaks, some fence maintenance and that sort of stuff. But to my knowledge most of the properties they have bought have nobody living there, and they are not managed much at all.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you think they should have someone there?

**Mr Corker:** Not necessarily, no. I think it is probably impractical to put people on all of them. If they just want them to revert to nature, unless they are in an area where fires are a problem, you do not need firebreaks. Pest control is sort of a part-time thing.

[1.15 pm]

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have problems with these DEC purchases of properties; and, if so, what are they?

**Mr Corker:** I am philosophically opposed to it, I suppose. I do not particularly like the idea.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Why?

**Mr Corker:** So far DEC have not bought any sorts of what you would call good pastoral properties, most of them have been fairly marginal, but I just do not like the idea of seeing productive agricultural land going back into parks or whatever.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** So you do not think the degradation that we are told about has been caused by overstocking over many, many years; you have a personal view that it is not the great issue that is being painted by some people?

**Mr Corker:** Certainly not in the northern half. The land is more resilient to grazing; it recovers quickly with rainfall. But in the southern half, in the Murchison particularly, it has been degraded and it does not recover very well because there is low rainfall and long periods without sufficient rain too.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How long has your property been grazed?

**Mr Corker:** It was taken up in the 1870s.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you actually live on the property?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Have you ever thought about trying to purchase the property?

**Mr Corker:** We tried quite hard for several years, after DEC bought the place next to us, to buy a portion of it but they would not consider —

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** No, I mean the property that you lease. Have you ever thought about purchasing freehold on that land?

**Mr Corker:** In order to convert a pastoral lease to freehold, it has to be converted to another lease first—like a special lease—and then you have got native title, of course, and it becomes a pretty hard thing to do.

**The CHAIRMAN:** If you did change from a pastoral lease to freehold, would you have to go through the native title claims?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Are there native title claims on the lease that you have?

**Mr Corker:** Yes. There are two different claims—one for the northern half and one for the southern.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** And how do you get along with the claimants?

**Mr Corker:** We are pretty good in our relationship with the local Aboriginal people.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Are there the same claims or different claims on the DEC-managed land?

**Mr Corker:** The DEC one has a couple of different claims, one of which is the same as ours and a different one.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Do you have any knowledge of the relationship between the claimants and DEC?

**Mr Corker:** Generally, my view on that is that DEC and most of the environmental movement try to exploit Aboriginal people to further their own aims.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Sure, but do you have any knowledge about their relationship?

**Mr Corker:** Probably all right, I would say, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is your station very profitable?

**Mr Corker:** We earn a reasonable income, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What about the station adjacent to yours—the DEC one? Was that a profitable station?

**Mr Corker:** It was still running sheep when it was sold to DEC and probably was not very profitable. It may have been running at a small profit, but barely wages.

**The CHAIRMAN:** People went out of sheep mainly because of wool prices, right, and they went in to cattle?

**Mr Corker:** Pretty well, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that because of the price issue and stock and workload?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, the costs of production and all that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So the other one just did not make the changes that other ones have made? What percentage of your income do you get from goats or other ferals?

**Mr Corker:** We do not have any goats at all.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are there any other pests that you try to make money out of?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How about tourism?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, we classify those as pests too!

**The CHAIRMAN:** But you do not shoot them!

**Mr Corker:** No.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** Going back to DEC, we actually spoke to them and there was some indication from them that they have not had many, if any, complaints from their neighbours. Have you actually put in writing or rung them, saying, "Our problems are coming from your property because it is not being managed"?

**Mr Corker:** We actually get on pretty well with the local people in DEC in Karratha. They are a pretty good crew and, generally, if there is any issue, we can work it through. The biggest problem we have with the DEC property next door is that we have a fairly large river crossing running from our place into theirs, which can flow six or eight times a year and always washes the fence out every time, so our cattle go through and we have to muster our cattle back off every year. DEC do not particularly like our cattle being on there, but obviously we cannot rush out there and muster them off every time they go in there; we do it only once a year.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is your stock of cattle?

**Mr Corker:** We run about 5 000.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** I am not sure of your association with the PGA, but some concerns have been raised from the PGA about this inquiry. Do you have any concerns about us having this inquiry?

**Mr Corker:** Not at all, no. I am a member of the PGA and on the PGA pastoral committee, but I have actually been away for a couple of weeks and I have not spoken to them about it at all.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** There has been a fair bit in the media about issues with pest animals, wild dogs in particular, and also kangaroos and Australian native animals getting into plague proportions. Do you have any issues with the kangaroos or do you have any wild dog encroachment onto your properties?

**Mr Corker:** We do have wild dogs all the time. It is a constant management thing; it is just one of those things you have got to manage. They are not causing us an economic problem because we have a continual dog-control program. As far as kangaroos go, they are not a problem around our way. There were a lot of kangaroos 10 or so years back, but some virus entered the kangaroo population and actually there are not many left.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** Do the wild dogs target or go after the cattle?

**Mr Corker:** Calves, yes.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you get any funding assistance from DEC to help control the wild dogs?

**Mr Corker:** Yes; they pay for aerial baiting on adjoining DEC-controlled land, which is limited to a set amount of dollars, of course.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** It has been raised with us that there have been shortfalls in that funding from time to time and when someone has asked for assistance or they need a program to be implemented, DEC has just said, "Well, we don't have the funding to do it."

**Mr Corker:** They do have a set budget for aerial baiting each year, which, off the top of my head, is around \$10 000 a year, but —

**The CHAIRMAN:** For that station?

**Mr Corker:** No, for the whole of the Pilbara.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Ten thousand dollars?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That is aerial?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** That does not seem like a lot of money.

**Mr Corker:** No. Do not hold me to that \$10 000; I think it is that amount or thereabouts. I think the total budget for aerial baiting in the Pilbara is around only \$100 000 or \$120 000 anyway, so maybe 10 per cent of that —

**The CHAIRMAN:** What kind of bait do they use—arsenic?

**Mr Corker:** They use 1080.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do some people use arsenic?

**Mr Corker:** No, arsenic is not allowed at all.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** I will ask a more general question. You have obviously been in the pastoral industry for a while. We have been told by DEC—I know you have disputed that—that a lot of these places are no longer as sustainable as they used to be and they cannot run the heads of sheep or cattle that they used to run. We are also told that there is a shortage of food in the world and we have to feed a growing population. Do you have any view as to the future of the pastoral industry in Western Australia and the possibilities for that industry going forward in terms of providing food and exports?

**Mr Corker:** Yes. We are held back or limited to a degree by our tenure. It is difficult to undertake any agricultural supporting industry. For example, if you want to grow irrigated agriculture, it is quite difficult to get permits from DEC to clear land. It is difficult to get permits from DEC to grow all but a few species of grass, even under irrigation. It is my view that we need a better tenure and as part of that tenure we should have a right to clear a certain amount of land for agriculture on each pastoral lease. DEC and the agriculture department have just provided a list of species that can be grown on pastoral leases that we can choose from, but there are only 10 species on the list that you can use and you still have to have a permit from DEC to do it. Originally, it was planned to be a list that we could just pick from, “Okay; I want to grow this one”, and you can go ahead but —

**The CHAIRMAN:** What would be on this list? Would it be grasses or commercial —

**Mr Corker:** All grasses, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So the aim is to retain this pasture, not agriculture.

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I raise with you the question of trying to convert from a lease, which is in fact only the right to graze your animals, to a higher form of landholding, such as freehold. You said that one of the issues would be the native title question. Are there any other issues that might arise? Is the cost an issue for you?

**Mr Corker:** Certainly, with freehold, I think the mining lobby would be fairly strongly against that, probably even more than the Aboriginal lobby, because of the different rules for compensation. That would be a big hurdle.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I will put it another way: what would you be prepared to pay to get a higher value for your land, given that you have only a limited value on it now?

**Mr Corker:** I guess it would depend on what you got for that and what it entailed. If it was freehold, the same as the rest of the freehold in this state, it would probably be a fair bit, particularly for those of us in the iron ore country, like we are.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** How long is your lease?

**Mr Corker:** They all expire in 2015 and all are being renewed for the same term that we have now.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Which is?

**Mr Corker:** Ours runs out, I think, in 2038.



**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you think it should be longer? Are you happy with the period but just feel that you should be given a bit more freedom in the lease?

[1.30 pm]

**Mr Corker:** The big problem with the fixed-term leases we have now is that the right to renew those leases exists with the minister. There is no right for me to renew my lease. If it were my right to renew the lease and the minister had to renew it if I asked, we would be secure. But at the moment nothing compels the minister to renew a lease. Once the lease expires, he does not have to renew it.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** How much is your rent?

**Mr Corker:** The new rent is just over \$7 000 a year.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Is that for 188 000 hectares?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** It is a very, very small amount of money is it not?

**Mr Corker:** It is, yes. I disagree with the PGA on that point. We have had some fairly robust discussions at meetings. I do not believe the rent is overly high. It is probably set about where it should be, but I have a problem with the methodology of the lease. If property A, which can run 5 000 cattle, pays X, and property B next door can run 5 000 cattle, it should pay the same amount, but that is not the case and for no apparent reason.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Who sets the fee?

**Mr Corker:** Basically, the Valuer General.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** Is it possible, do you think, to isolate where the packs of wild dogs originate? Can you determine whether they originate from particular properties or do they generally roam all over the place?

**Mr Corker:** They do travel, but they sort of push each other out. If there are not big numbers, they tend to live in an area. As the families have litters and need new territory they go out further. I do not believe they travel large distances as adults. Even as young dogs they may shift only 50 to 100 kilometres from where they are born. But it takes a few years for them to spread. Once they start to spread they can separate quite quickly. For example, for the first 15 years I was at Red Hill, I would have shot two dogs. Within the next five years we were shooting 100 a year. That is how quickly they can breed. That was the five years when the doggers were done away with.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** The difficulty that I see is in determining where these packs are coming from. DEC says it is not its problem; they are not coming from DEC properties. And other property owners are saying that they do come from DEC properties. It sounds as though you could probably pinpoint, going back in time, from sightings perhaps to where they may have originated?

**Mr Corker:** Obviously they need water. They will not breed where there is no water. If there is no water at all on the DEC property, they are not coming from there.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you agree with the program that DEC has put in place of cutting off the water the way it has?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Why do you say that?

**Mr Corker:** It is animal cruelty, basically. It is not just the remnant livestock that die; it is also all the native animals. That is another reason I do not think DEC should be buying pastoral leases. There is less biodiversity on DEC's property next door to me than there is on my place because there is no water there now. There are no finches, for example, because they all died. Finches have to have water every day.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** You would obviously recommend that if DEC takes over these properties and it does not cut off the water, it will need someone to keep an eye on the water—or maybe not buy the properties.

**Mr Corker:** Yes. DEC says that they are man-made waters so it is not natural. But those waters have been there for more than a century now. It is a bit hard to tell a finch, “Sorry mate, no more water for you,” just for a philosophical argument.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you dispute the actual aims DEC says it is trying to achieve by taking over these pastoral easements?

**Mr Corker:** I can see DEC’s point, but I do not think it is necessary. I do not think grazing has enough impact on the land to alter where the land is now. All the alteration was done probably 80 years ago. It has now stabilised and it will not change any more in the future. I do not see any point in buying leases any more.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I understand DEC has a policy to purchase properties until it gets 10 per cent of a certain type of land. I have not looked at how it defines that. That means it will substantially increase the total stock of land, particularly in the Pilbara and maybe the Kimberley. In fact if I remember correctly, DEC owns very few properties in the Kimberley, so it envisages a substantial increase in the purchase of properties up there. Your view is that it should not buy any more, is that it?

**Mr Corker:** That is my view, yes. DEC rather conveniently does not add unallocated crown land into any of those calculations. Even though it is now managed by DEC and basically belongs to DEC, for all intents and purposes, it does not count it in its area of representative land system. When you look at a map of the Pilbara there is a lot of unallocated crown land there. Admittedly it is mostly hilly or mountainous country.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Another issue is that you have your lease and DEC has input over what you can do with that lease and adjudicate it, probably to ensure that you provide ecological benefits. It stops you from introducing exotic grasses, for instance. Do you think you provide environmental services by your management? You are raising cattle, but you are also sustaining flora and fauna up there. Maybe the best way to do that is through pastoralists who could make a bit of money off the property and manage it at the same time rather than DEC owning land and basically just walking away from it.

**Mr Corker:** I agree with that. As I say, we have more biodiversity on our place than there is on the place next door simply because of the water.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is it because the biodiversity has fled DEC onto your property?

**Mr Corker:** I guess some may have. I would say most of the smaller birds and some of the small mammals, such as quolls and what have you, would have died.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Have there been changes to migratory animals?

**Mr Corker:** Not that I know of. You do get migratory birds, but I do not think it would affect them.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They are basically desert birds that fly around.

**Mr Corker:** Some are coastal birds.

**The CHAIRMAN:** If there is water.

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** You referred to the fact that you believe pastoral leaseholders such as you could maintain good biodiversity because of the way you operate your stations. Do you think most pastoralists are good, responsible citizens in that regard? Do you think most are fairly well run and

managed and that people running the stations understand the need to not just eat out the vegetation and run the ground down, sort of thing?

**Mr Corker:** I think people have come a long way in the past couple of decades on that. The attitude is a lot different from what it used to be. Generally, people are very aware of the environmental side of the picture.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** You have two major issues with DEC. How do you believe they should be fixed?

**Mr Corker:** Boundary fences and pests, yes. I guess it boils down to money. DEC never has any money to do any on-ground work.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** It could be about its priority within its own budget.

**Mr Corker:** It could be that too. The reason always given is that it does not have any money.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do any penalties apply if your stock get through a fence when a flood comes or does DEC get unhappy and say, "We'd like them off as soon as you can"?

**Mr Corker:** It is a bit of a grey area because it is covered by, I think, three different acts. The rules are slightly different for cattle straying onto DEC land than to other land. I do not think anyone has ever really tested what the three acts actually say. I know DEC does not like it. It threatened to shoot our cattle several years ago and we contacted the stock squad who contacted DEC. That was the end of that idea.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Did the stock squad refuse to do it?

**Mr Corker:** No; the stock squad informed DEC that if it did that, its people would be arrested for cattle stealing. That was the end of that idea. DEC is coming around to the idea that our cattle and cattle from the neighbouring properties straying onto its property will be a yearly thing. It took a while to convince DEC.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is the Pilbara Zone Control Authority?

**Mr Corker:** It is a body that sets the Agriculture Protection Board rates for pastoral leases in the Pilbara. I think five of them cover all the pastoral areas in the state.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is DEC's involvement in that?

**Mr Corker:** It attends the meetings and has input there.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** There is some talk that DEC may close some roads in its areas. Do you think it will divert more problems from your "terrorists" if DEC blocks off whichever is the track and it comes back through your open land?

**Mr Corker:** I have not heard DEC doing that in our area. It may be a problem in other areas. Most of the roads on the DEC place next to us are reasonably well maintained because they are graded for fire breaks. They can fairly easily fax us them.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Is Karratha the closest town to your station?

**Mr Corker:** It is our regional centre. Pannawonica is our closest town.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have children?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, three.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do they study on the property?

**Mr Corker:** They are all in Perth now.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that a difficulty?

**Mr Corker:** Not for them! No, not really.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You are quite isolated if your closest urban centre is Pannawonica.

**Mr Corker:** We call it insulated!

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do any other countries in the world have a similar situation such as ours, whereby a department such as DEC is buying up pastoral leases or properties for conservation? Are you aware of it happening in other countries?

**Mr Corker:** Not really, no. In England, for example, a lot of national parks and whatever are utilised substantially for all sorts of things.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Including walking. They have certain walking rights across private and public land.

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Are you saying they serve a dual purpose?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** They do not have “international best practice”.

**Mr Corker:** Maybe you are right.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are any private people buying pastoral leases and turning them into nature reserves?

**Mr Corker:** There are a few, yes. But they are all illegal. They do not comply with the act.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Who are they?

**Mr Corker:** I think it is the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It has been buying properties in Victoria too.

**Mr Corker:** Yes, all over Australia.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** In what regard are they illegal? Is it because there are obligations as pastoralists too?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** You indicated that you do not think DEC is providing enough resources for the management of these. I am not trying to put words in your mouth, but do you think there is any scope for royalties for regions to support expanding the amount of resources?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Why is that?

**Mr Corker:** I do not think DEC deserves it. I do not think royalties for regions should go to government departments, full stop—not just DEC.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** What about Karratha Hospital getting money from royalties for regions?

**Mr Corker:** Maybe health should.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** That is a service to the community.

**Mr Corker:** Health and education should, but not for administrative-type stuff.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** We heard some talk about some of the pastoralists having alterations to the leases so they can grow, say, 1 000 tonne of watermelons, with government assistance. Is that something you would encourage?

**Mr Corker:** I do not think they should get assistance with the actual growing of watermelons, no. Maybe they could have assistance with fighting their way through the red tape type of thing to convert their titles, but not necessarily monetary assistance.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does the property adjacent to you have any heritage issues around old buildings?

**Mr Corker:** Not really; the homestead was burnt down in a fire, but it was not much of a building.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Where do you take your cattle? Where do you ship them from?

**Mr Corker:** Port Hedland, Broome or Fremantle.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you take them as far as Broome?

**Mr Corker:** Broome is closer than Fremantle!

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Where do they go?

**Mr Corker:** Mostly to Indonesia.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do they feedstock them over there?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Where in Indonesia?

**Mr Corker:** Mostly to Java.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you think we could see resurgence in the industry, given proper opportunities?

**Mr Corker:** Absolutely, yes.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** What do you mean by “resurgence”?

**Mr Corker:** There has been a big resurgence in the Pilbara and Kimberley—particularly in the Kimberley—over the past 15 years, basically driven by live exports. It has cut the freight bill out of the Kimberley. Most Kimberley and Pilbara properties are doing all right, but we could do a lot more if we could grow cattle feed, for example, and irrigate more easily.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would you have the water?

**Mr Corker:** We have plenty of water, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Aquifer or surface?

**Mr Corker:** Underground.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does it come up hot?

**Mr Corker:** No, it is sub-artesian.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Okay.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Can you not do irrigation unless you get a special permit?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, we have to have a clearing permit initially, water permits, and permits to plant non-native species.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So you would have an irrigated thing for fodder for cattle, for intensive feeding prior to shipment?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, basically.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** That sounds like an interesting prospect. You would not need more people to do that, would you, to try to increase your productivity with the people you already engage?

**Mr Corker:** We would need more staff to do that sort of thing.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** How many people do you have?

**Mr Corker:** We do not employ any full-timers—only casuals for half the year.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Some contractors as well, I imagine?

**Mr Corker:** Occasionally, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you run the property yourself?

**Mr Corker:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How many people?

**Mr Corker:** Just Leanne and I.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What happens if you have a flood and it wipes out all your fences?

**Mr Corker:** We put them up again, I suppose!

**The CHAIRMAN:** That is a lot of hard work.

**Mr Corker:** They wash out only in short sections.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Is your station one of the bigger stations? Can you give us some idea of the size of some of the stations?

**Mr Corker:** I think there are 63 or 64 leases in the Pilbara, and we come in at about number 50.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are there doggers in the area?

**Mr Corker:** There is one that we have employed just recently for a short time.

**The CHAIRMAN:** There used to be quite a few more.

**Mr Corker:** Yes, there used to be about six.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What happened to them? Why have they gone?

**Mr Corker:** There is not enough money.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Who paid them—CALM?

**Mr Corker:** No; it was the APB rates, which were paid through pastoral leases, and the government matched them dollar for dollar.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Could both sides not agree on maintaining funding for the doggers?

**Mr Corker:** It was our side, really; we set the rates.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So the pastoralists basically decided to do it themselves?

**Mr Corker:** Yes. Basically, the rates have not kept up with inflation for 20-odd years.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Buying up the leases, because DEC does not pay rates, has meant that there is a reduction in the amount of funds.

**Mr Corker:** There is a reduction in the actual rates, but, as I say, DEC contributes a small amount towards dogs. Dogs are actually now less of an issue in the Pilbara than weeds. That is the big problem for us, really, and it is getting bigger all the time.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** What sorts of weeds?

**Mr Corker:** Parkinsonia, mesquite and caltrop are basically the three. Caltrop has been in the Pilbara for only about 15 years and would be controllable, but we cannot get any funding to do it, because it is not a weed of national significance, and it will not be until it becomes uncontrollable.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I would just like to go back to alternative uses of your property. You are restricted to pastoralism. What other things would you be interested in doing, if you were allowed?

**Mr Corker:** As I said earlier, I am not really interested in tourism, but a lot of people are. My view is that small-scale farm stay type tourism on a pastoral lease should be included as a pastoral activity and allowed without a permit. It is different for operations such as El Questro, but small-scale stuff should be allowed without a permit. As I say, I think it would be a good idea to have the right to clear a certain amount of land on a pastoral lease for agriculture or horticulture.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think very many stations would be interested or have the capacity to do that in your area?

**Mr Corker:** I think a lot of places would be interested, I guess.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That would be quite easy to do, actually, with the irrigation equipment they have nowadays.

**Mr Corker:** Yes, and there is more and more mine dewatering, too, which makes water available.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In the Pilbara, there is actually no shortage of water.

**Mr Corker:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The mining sector uses huge volumes of water.

**Mr Corker:** For every three tonnes of iron ore exported, a tonne of water is used.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes. In fact, Western Australia is one of the few places where agriculture is not the dominant user of water; it is just not completely measured. So it would go into fodder and feed; is there anything else?

**Mr Corker:** A lot of people are interested in horticulture. There is already some horticulture on some pastoral leases.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Like what? Melons?

**Mr Corker:** Melons, sweet corn and, in the past, even potatoes have been grown.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** What do you think would be fair value for the land if you could have agriculture instead of pastoralism? I worked out that it is 3.7c a hectare at the moment.

**Mr Corker:** Yes, which does not sound very much.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** It is not very much.

**Mr Corker:** No, it is still cheap land, but as far as horticulture goes, how would you compare it with buying a place in Carnarvon? Carnarvon has a lot of facilities, such as packing plants and all that sort of stuff, whereas on a pastoral lease you would do all your own and start from scratch with the water supply and everything.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Do you have any idea what a fair value would be?

**Mr Corker:** Certainly not for horticulture. For agriculture, I guess, hopefully not as much as what we will be charged for the new land at Kununurra, if the government hopes to recoup its costs there. I really would not know.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** Going back to the 188 000 hectares that you have, is all of that land potentially viable for pastoralism, or are there sections that you could not graze cattle on or use for agriculture, for instance?

**Mr Corker:** The average Pilbara place—ours, for example—would have about a quarter of which is very low carrying capacity, which is mainly hills. There is some grazing in amongst that, but it is pretty well impossible to excise it out, because it is scattered everywhere. That is our place. There are other places where chunks could be cut off where it is all just hills, but, generally, it would be pretty hard and impractical to excise the bad bits.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** I was just going back to your 3.7c per hectare calculation. My experience of those areas is that not every square metre of land is viable or even usable.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** In some areas DEC has passed on the lease where the leaseholders kept the part that they could run stock on and sold off the part that was too hilly to work. Do you have a reaction to that?

**Mr Corker:** That sort of thing probably works pretty well, I would say. But we are sort of the other way; we would like to buy a piece off DEC.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I was not here, sorry. I was delayed. You said that you might have a statement to make towards the end.

**Mr Corker:** I think we have pretty well covered everything I wanted to say.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** I will just go back again to the issue of weeds. There is no program as such for either the control or eradication of weeds; it is just bits here and bits there. To me that is one of the major problems and something that has to be dealt with quite early. It is really part of our process here, because it is not just wild animals; it is pests, weeds and that sort of thing. What is actually being done on the ground? I am not talking about bulldust castle; I am talking about out on the ground.

**Mr Corker:** A reasonable amount has been spent on mesquite—several hundred thousand dollars over the past few years. Parkinsonia is pretty ad hoc; there is not a lot of money available there. We would like it if, the next time Citic Pacific, Rio Tinto or BHP come to the state government looking for changes to their state agreement acts, they were told that they have to put money into mesquite, because we have a fairly unique opportunity now in that nearly all the mesquite in the Pilbara is owned by mining companies, and they could afford to pay a hell of a lot more than they do to do something about it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Why do they own it?

**Mr Corker:** They own the leases where most of the mesquite is.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is it because they do not deal with it and other people do?

**Mr Corker:** Basically, they pay only what a normal pastoral lessee would pay. My view is that a mum and dad show can afford to pay only a certain amount, whereas the mining company can afford to pay a hell of a lot more, and probably would not mind doing so, if the right people were asked.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** This needs to be prioritised as a problem.

**Mr Corker:** Yes. The people we talk to are fairly well down the pecking order, but the government tends to talk to people a bit further up.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** You talk about the problem of not getting funding unless it is proved to be at a certain level. Is that a commonwealth decision?

**Mr Corker:** Yes, it is the commonwealth.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Have you made any approaches to federal members of Parliament or to the commonwealth government?

**Mr Corker:** No, not on that. We have been looking elsewhere for non-commonwealth funding.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do you think it is a serious enough issue to pastoralists for the commonwealth to have a good look at it?

**Mr Corker:** I think it is, yes. Calotrope is still controllable in the Pilbara; it is covering a reasonable area, but it is still very thin. It could be eradicated if we had enough money to do it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that spreading to the DEC property?

**Mr Corker:** No, it is all on private properties or Aboriginal-owned properties at the moment.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In summary, one of the problems with having DEC-owned land that is going back to nature is that it acts as a refuge for pests and other animals to infiltrate. This is a common problem for national parks, too. Your view is that it is not a large problem for fauna, because they are shutting off the waterholes and therefore they are dying. What about flora?



**Mr Corker:** I guess there would be some advantages there. Any vegetation that has maybe disappeared—nobody knows whether any has disappeared out of the Pilbara—is already gone, and the ones that are there are obviously resilient enough to survive grazing. I do not see that as a problem at all.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** You mentioned the Aboriginal-owned properties. Do any of those properties border your property? Do you have any problems with pest and weed invasion from the Aboriginal-owned properties?

**Mr Corker:** There is an Aboriginal-owned property, but it is actually privately Aboriginal-owned; I think it is the only one in the Pilbara. They do the same as everybody else.

**Mrs L.M. HARVEY:** So there is no identifiable problem with pest incursion onto your property from there?

**Mr Corker:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days.

**Mr Corker:** Can that be emailed?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes. We will adjust the time. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please provide a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you very much for coming.

**Hearing concluded at 2.00 pm**