

# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

## **INQUIRY INTO PASTORAL LEASES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PORT HEDLAND  
WEDNESDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2013**

### **SESSION THREE**

#### **Members**

**Hon Liz Behjat (Chairman)  
Hon Darren West (Deputy Chairman)  
Hon Nigel Hallett  
Hon Jacqui Boydell  
Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson**

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**Hearing commenced at 9.31 am**

**Mrs ROBYN RICHARDSON,**  
**Mount Florance Station, sworn and examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** On behalf of the committee, we welcome you. If you would like to take the oath or the affirmation.

[Witness took the affirmation.]

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you. If we could now have your full name, your contact address and the capacity in which you are appearing today.

**Mrs Richardson:** It is Lynette Robyn Richardson, Mount Florance Station, Tom Price. I am chief cook and bottle washer, finance manager, cook, yard manager, general assistant. My husband is a lessee.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Terrific. You would have signed a document entitled, “Information for witnesses”, have you read and understood that document?

**Mrs Richardson:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard; a transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, please quote the full title of any document you refer to during the course of this hearing for the record. Please be aware of the microphone and try to speak into it. Ensure that you do not cover it with papers or make a noise near it. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. 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. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise you that publication or disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute contempt of Parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege.

Is there an opening statement that you would like to make to the committee?

**Mrs Richardson:** I would just like to explain—I would like to put a human face on the pastoral industry, because you are getting submissions. My husband and I have been at Mount Florance for 40 years. It has been in his family—his family has been associated since 1910. We came to it in 1974—January, 1974. It was a sheep station primarily, with old infrastructure and not really suitable for cattle. Pilbara is cattle country. Mount Florance is very good cattle country. We have, over the years, particularly in the last 25 years, converted it to a cattle property. We have no sheep any more. We sold our last sheep in 1998. We have invested considerable money into Mount Florance in improving infrastructure, improving cattle, getting to a point where we run Charolais Rumen cross cattle. So we have developed a name in the south west; people like our cattle. So we do not have a problem getting rid of them generally, and we love our cattle. We have worked hard. It is not just an economic thing. Mount Florance is who we are. I come from a farming background, although my father was never on the farm but it is in my blood, and to me, a lot of people think you are stupid but it is a soul thing. It defines who we are; it is what we do. But at the end of the day, we are running business and it should never be forgotten that we are running businesses.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** How many cattle do you run?

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**Mrs Richardson:** We run around 1 500 breeders. We are not a big producer. Our area is only a bit over 100 000 hectares.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Who is the main market for your cattle?

**Mrs Richardson:** Feedlotters, graziers and we do send some out in live export because they are Charolais–Brahman cross. Our aim was to meet as many markets as we could.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The monitoring of environmental conditions on pastoral lands seems to be a big issue. What are your thoughts about the current systems that are in place with regards to monitoring the pastoral lands?

**Mrs Richardson:** I think interpretation is probably the biggest question. When they did the rangelands survey on Mt Florance in the mid-90s—1996 or 1997—we had significant issues with the interpretations they made. They did not read the buffel grass component of our lease. In fact, the comment was made to my husband that we were the worst lease in the country, which is totally wrong! Because we had not had a good season that year they did it, the buffel grass was eaten down, they did not read it at all. So when they came back, they saw how much was there. The Fortescue River runs through the length of Mt Florance, so it is river floodplain country. It has a lot of native grasses—soft spinifex, buffel grass. It is a really good property. So if you do not read the buffel grass, you are missing a big component of it. I think that the monitoring system that they are going to come—lease inspections have their problems and it depends on the type of country you have. If you have just got spinifex country, it is not really hard to interpret whether it is good or not. But if you have got grass country, like we have on the river—and that needs management. We have put in a lot of fencing to control stock because they will target palatable species and flog them out. We have had damage done in our time to Mitchell grass; we acknowledge that and we have taken means to redress that issue. It is a matter of being aware. The lease inspections are subjective, so if you get someone who comes in who does not know the country, albeit that they have the qualifications, they do not always understand your country.

We had a particularly bad lease inspection in 2004, where the inspector settled on a piece of SDE, which is severely degraded and eroded, country that has been there for a long time. Some of it probably started back before white settlement even; we do not know. But there is another part of it from the 1930s and 40s where they cut the mulga to feed the sheep; they just cut them straight across, consequently, they all died and it looked like a bomb had hit. But it is coming back. It takes time. That water was not used in that area for 30 years, but cattle break the surface of the soil. It is coming back. It is slow and when it is as bad as it is, it takes a long time to recover. A map in the 50s showed that as being a fairly significant large area. In comparison, the area now is sort of here. So it has been improving for a long time. That last little bit is—some of that may never change, but it is improving. But he got hung up on that spot; he went round and round; he just would not leave it alone. But apart from that, the original survey did not cover the spinifex country; it only covered the river country, so some of their comments about plants that were perceived to have been there before and now were gone, they sort of marked down a bit. But he went out into the spinifex country as well and he balanced it, so he gave the property a balance of readings.

I am a supporter of the new rangeland condition monitoring sites, probably because they will be objective, providing people think to put in events that happen between readings. They are read every three years, which is exactly the same with the WARMS sites. You need to document things of a very significance nature that might impact on that site in that gap, which we did. When they were put in in 1999, we had a very wet summer the following season—40 inches over five months—which, for Mt Florance, is unheard of since records have existed. That particular site was inundated and we were concerned that the grass, obviously, would all die and that we and the stock would be blamed. We got someone from the ag department to come out and do another reading on it, documenting the fact that we had had this inundation. The site is fine. But you have to be aware

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that you need to record because so much of the supposed damage done is always put down to grazing. It is not always grazing; it might be a factor, but it is not always the cause.

[9.40 am]

**The CHAIRMAN:** Your thoughts with regard to the lease renewal process that is currently underway: how do you think that is being managed?

**Mrs Richardson:** I thought it was going along great until we got the lease document! It was a legislated process. We were going through the process and then we got the draft lease agreement. No, I am not happy with that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are your concerns any different to others that you have heard?

**Mrs Richardson:** I do not think so. We are all just a bit concerned that there are elements of that lease agreement that are not in the land act. It just seems to me they are attempting at this point to slip it into the lease agreement because it is not in the land act. Obviously, ultimately, they will put it in the land act. It is very hard. My husband is refusing to sign it because he feels that we were offered a new lease back through the process; we have been offered a lease, we have been told what the conditions are and we have agreed to everything. We are not in default of anything, so, as far as he is concerned, we have a new lease. To give him that document which has so many different things in it, new things in it, is not right.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** Robyn, I note in your submission you say that better tenure is not a requirement for favourable bank loans. Can you expand on your view of that a little?

**Mrs Richardson:** We have never had a problem getting money. We have never sought money of a size to purchase property but, certainly with finance, term loans and that sort of thing, we have never had a problem. Always the issue, I have always been told, is that your ability to service the debt is the important thing, not the tenure. When the previous Labor government offered us tenure, which we definitely did not agree with, I put it to the man we were dealing with—our financial backers—who asked me, “Was it still going to be a lease?” I said yes. He said, “Will it still be subject to conditions?” I said yes. Then he said nothing has changed, because unless you have got freehold, it is not going to change for a bank. We are never going to get freehold. As I say, I am not experienced in borrowing large amounts for purchasing properties but, certainly, in the context of what we have, we have never had a problem.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Have you had thoughts of diversification?

**Mrs Richardson:** We already have a diversification permit for horticulture for growing non-Indigenous plants and for tourism.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you talk us through the process of how you applied for that, what the experience was and how it is all working for you?

**Mrs Richardson:** We have had both of them since they basically formalised it in the land act in 1997. At that point, we just had to write to the pastoral board and they gave us permission. Since then, we have had to go through the proper process. You basically just apply saying what you want. The biggest problem with it is the process where it has to go out to other departments—the Department of Indigenous Affairs, environment, water et cetera; there is quite a long list of them—and they all have to look at it and decide whether they have any objections to it. The first time we did the proper process, it took forever—it was a good six months—but I think there were problems within the pastoral land unit. People left and our application got stuck on the bottom of a pile or something; that is what we were told. The process definitely could be streamlined.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think it would be more helpful if there was a one-stop diversification shop that you could go to?

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**Mrs Richardson:** Absolutely. If the departments could talk to each other, it would be a huge help. If you go for a horticultural permit, you need a water licence. If they talked to each other, it would save you having to go here and go there and this one said this and that one said that. You have to go between the two all the time. If there was a process where they could liaise, it would make that one a lot easier.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you doing a horticultural —

**Mrs Richardson:** In the sense that we are growing at the moment elephant grass, but we are going to grow sorghum. We have only six hectares and it is not for commercial purposes, it is only for our own use for drought management.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is your tourism project?

**Mrs Richardson:** It is a very low-level campground; just a pastoral-based campground.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And that operates currently?

**Mrs Richardson:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Generally how many people come up?

**Mrs Richardson:** About 300; it is not a big thing and we do not make a lot of money out of it, but it is a good way to interact with the public to show them that we are just ordinary people. You talk to them about what you do.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have any management issues when strangers do come onto pastoral land?

**Mrs Richardson:** Some people are idiots. Most of them are good, but some people are idiots. You just would not believe some of the things they do. We can see the campground from the house. It is on the other side of the creek. I was sitting there one night and I thought: they have got a fire going on my lawn. I could not work it out, and there is a campfire space for people to have a campfire. I went over and he had my wheelbarrow with a fire in it. It is not a big thing, but why would you do that? Then they drive off around and when you ask them what they are doing, they say, “Oh, I am just having a look around.” Well, they are not actually allowed to have a look around; it is not what you do. I am used to the broader issues of going around your run, which we do not basically let people do. Gates left open is a big one, the rubbish, fire and those sorts of issues.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have issues with feral animals on your property?

**Mrs Richardson:** Wild dogs; we have the odd donkey and camel, but nothing much else.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you actively engaged in a dog eradication program?

**Mrs Richardson:** Absolutely—trapping, baiting, aerial baiting, shooting. Whichever way we can kill them, we do.

**The CHAIRMAN:** There has been some talk with regard to dog fencing. What are your thoughts on that?

**Mrs Richardson:** No; not suitable at all.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I am sorry?

**Mrs Richardson:** It is not suitable at all; not for us, no.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Why would that not work?

**Mrs Richardson:** There are just so many dogs around, so the cost of trying to maintain fencing. We have the Fortescue River run through us and the Hamersley Range runs outside, so to fence off—no. We would probably have 100 dogs on our lease for a start, straight up. It is quite thick country in places and with the river systems it is not easy to get them all.

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**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Robyn, are you keeping up with the fight on dogs or are you losing it somewhat?

**Mrs Richardson:** We are trying, trying, but we factor in about a 10 per cent loss on calves. I absolutely hate it, but there is not a lot you can do about it. In dry times they really hammer them. They hammer the cows when they get down. You know, they come in, they are a bit poor, they drink the water, then lay down and cannot get up, so they come and eat the backsides out of the mothers on the ground. They are cruel; they are horrible and I hate them. They just tear calves apart.

**Hon DARREN WEST:** Are you getting any joy from DAFWA or any organisations that give you a hand with this or are you just on your own?

**Mrs Richardson:** We pay the rates and get aerial baiting. We would love to have a dogger again because one of the biggest issues is that nobody gets pups anymore. We try, but time is a factor. We do have people that like to go shooting; we just trained one of them in how to find pups and he found a lot this year. It is hard. Since the days of the doggers being gone, they have really become a problem. The big problem is that when everyone went to cattle, they did not worry about dogs anymore because they thought that dogs did not matter, but they do matter. In the early days with sheep, my husband would have a run of 40 traps. We do not have that anymore, but my son has taken over that role and he sets traps. Back in 2005, it was a dry summer and we took off a lot of fed calves and put 150 or 180 out in a paddock that was not far from the house. Dogs killed about one-third of them. Jamie trapped 25 dogs in a month or two within a five-kilometre radius. They had pups over here and they had pups over there. It was just dynamite. Those little calves had been hand reared, so they do not know anything. There was no mum to protect them or anything like that.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** Robyn, I have another question. In your submission, you make reference to the fact that in the new draft lease the role of the Pastoral Lands Board seems to be quite diminished. You are opposed to that, so can you expand on your concerns? Do you think the role of the Pastoral Lands Board is important to industry and relating to the minister?

[9.50 am]

**Mrs Richardson:** It is a perception. If you read the pastoral section of the land act, there is a sense that the pastoral board is the go-to point. The board oversees the management of the pastoral leases. They are our go-to people; they understand the pastoral industry. In the lease, I very much got a perception that it is all about the minister and about government control. In fact, at one point it says that we have to take direction from any officer of any department, which to me is not right. I got a sense that the pastoral board were being pushed to the side and that it was going to be more of a ministerial or government decision; maybe DEC or other government departments would be looking to have a say on how pastoral land was run. Our focus is that the pastoral board has the job of administering pastoral leases, regardless of how people interpret it. That is how it is. We have quite clearly defined responsibilities and they have responsibilities. To remove that, or to in any way lessen that, I think, is a bad thing.

**Hon DARREN WEST:** You said that your husband is not going to sign the lease. What are some of the main grounds? Is it the termination clauses?

**Mrs Richardson:** The termination clauses. There is probably a number in there. The fact of the matter is that we have been offered the new lease based on five conditions we were told we had to be compliant with. We have had no excisions and we were offered the new lease. We were not told at any point in the last 10 years that when the new lease agreement came up there would be a whole set of new factors or points in there that we would have to agree to which are not currently in the land act.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** Robyn, what steps are you taking to try and address your concerns, either through the lands board or the Department of Lands?

**Mrs Richardson:** I put in a submission; I responded to the draft lease.

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**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** Excellent.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Robyn, I detect frustration in your voice.

**Mrs Richardson:** I am forever getting stabbed in the back; it drives you insane!

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Is it government departments that are hampering your business?

**Mrs Richardson:** No, I do not think it is just government departments. I agreed with the tenure that was offered to us in the previous term of the Barnett government. I thought that was a good way to go forward. People have concerns with the rangeland lease. I understand them, but once you have got a lease, it is up to you what you do with it. To me, that gave a full range of options to people who wanted to go in that direction and wanted a rangeland lease, which implied you could do a much broader application on your lease, or you could stay in a traditional pastoral lessee role and continue to run stock and low-level horticulture or whatever. That way you had to deal with an ILUA and this way you did not have to, because you were continuing in the process of what you had been doing. That suited us just fine. I do not have a problem with other people doing what they want to do. I guess if there is frustration, it is that that has not proceeded. The other factor that we need is a right to renew our lease at the end of the next term. To me, that then does away with any concern about the term of a lease because if there is an automatic right to renew, if you are compliant in everything you have done, you should be able to continue in what you are doing.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you so much for coming today, Robyn.

**Mrs Richardson:** No worries.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It is a really interesting story that you have got to tell. You are quite right; it is really good for us to have a human face put onto all these submissions that come to us. When you actually speak to someone, your passion for what you do certainly shines through. The best of luck to you.

**Mrs Richardson:** Thank you.

**Hearing concluded at 9.54 am**

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