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Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Reference: Impact on agriculture of pest animals

WEDNESDAY, 16 MARCH 2005

CANBERRA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Wednesday, 16 March 2005

Members: Mr Schultz *(Chair)*, Mr Adams *(Deputy Chair)*, Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

Members in attendance:

Mr Adams, Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr Schultz, Mr Secker and Mr Windsor

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on the impact on agriculture of pest animals particularly:

1. To identify nationally significant pest animal issues and consider how existing Australian and State government processes can be better linked for more coordinated management of these issues across State boundaries.

2. To consider the approaches to pest animal issues across all relevant jurisdictions, including:

- prevention of new pest animals becoming established;
- detection and reporting systems for new and established pest animals;
- eradication of infestations (particularly newly established species or 'sleeper' populations of species which are considered to be high risk) where feasible and appropriate; and
- reduction of the impact of established pest animal populations.

3. Consider the adequacy of State Government expenditure on pest animal control in the context of other conservation and natural resource management priorities, with particular reference to National Parks.

4. Consider the scope for industry groups and R&D Corporations to improve their response to landholder concerns about pest animals.

5. Consider ways to promote community understanding of and involvement in pest animals and their management.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 5.36 p.m.

BRYDON, Ms Kristi-Anna, Executive, Animals Australia

PEARSON, Mr Mark, Vice-President, and Representative, Farm Animals Division, Animals Australia

JONES, Dr Bidda, Scientific Officer, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Australia

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into the impact on agriculture of pest animals. Today's hearing is the second since the inquiry was re-referred to the committee after it lapsed when the federal election was called. Today we are hearing from two of the animal welfare groups that made submissions. In the next few weeks we will be visiting Tasmania and Western Australia for more hearings and inspections. We will be conducting further hearings in Canberra during the sittings following the budget.

I welcome representatives from Animals Australia and the RSPCA. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Do any of you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submissions, make some introductory remarks or perhaps add anything to your submissions, which were prepared some time ago?

Dr Jones—Yes, I would like to make some introductory remarks. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. RSPCA Australia's submission to the committee described the organisation's recent involvement with pest animal management and particularly the issue of the humaneness of pest control techniques. One of the things we described in our submission is how in February 2003 we held a national seminar on the issue of humane vertebrate pest control. The aim of that seminar was to establish common ground between different stakeholder groups and to stimulate thought and discussion on practical strategies for improving the humaneness of pest control techniques.

That seminar was followed by a joint workshop that was organised by RSPCA Australia, the Vertebrate Pest Committee and the Victorian Animal Welfare Centre. The workshop sought to develop a national strategy on the issue of humane vertebrate pest control. At the time of making our initial submission to the committee the outcomes of that workshop had not been published. However, in December 2004 a discussion paper setting out a national approach to humane pest control was produced and circulated to all relevant stakeholders. We have recently submitted that discussion paper to this committee. The discussion paper provides a synthesis of the views of the diverse range of stakeholders who attended the workshop. I cannot represent the group as a whole to the committee, but I can give you a brief background on the RSPCA's position on the issue of pest animal control.

RSPCA Australia is a welfare organisation that works to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection in all areas. We believe that, in terms of the numbers of animals killed and the potential cruelty of many of the methods used, vertebrate pest control is one of the biggest animal welfare issues in Australia. Consequently, we and other groups have a key role in working to overcome this.

I should make it clear, though, that RSPCA Australia is not opposed to the control of pest animals. We recognise that wild populations of introduced animals and misplaced populations of native animals can adversely affect ecosystems, endanger native plant and animal species and jeopardise agricultural production as well as harbour pests or diseases. We also acknowledge that in certain circumstances it is necessary to control these populations. But what we believe is important is that that control is both justified and humane.

We also recognise that animal welfare issues must be integrated into a wider framework of environmental management. Equally, it is important that land managers and other stakeholders recognise that animal welfare is a key issue. We believe strongly that any measure taken to reduce or eradicate populations of pest animals must recognise that these animals require the same level of consideration for their welfare as that given to domestic and native animals. In short, it is not their fault that they are in Australia but ours, and we have a responsibility to treat them humanely, as we do with animals in any other context.

We have particular concerns over the humaneness of a range of methods used for the control of pest animal species. In particular, the use of steel-jawed leg-hold traps, inhumane poisons and baiting strategies and inhumane burrow clearing and fumigation techniques have all been highlighted as issues that require urgent attention. These are all discussed in detail in the discussion paper.

We see the discussion paper as providing a sound basis for tackling the existing problems in this area. It was clear at the workshop that there was overwhelming support from all stakeholders for the consideration of welfare issues to be integrated into pest management practices. There was also full support for a national approach to this issue. I know other submissions to this committee have supported the development of a national pest animal strategy. It is our belief that a national approach would improve both the effectiveness and the humaneness of pest animal management. That is all I want to say. I am happy to answer questions on both the RSPCA's position and on the discussion paper.

CHAIR—We will hear statements first and then go to questions.

Ms Brydon—Good evening, everyone, and thank you for having me here this evening to talk about the impact of pest animals on agriculture. I am going to talk mainly about 1080, chloropicrin and other poisons and fumigation methods. The reason we have so many foxes, wild dogs and introduced species in Australia is that we have created an environment which is perfect for their survival and disastrous for natives. European settlement has deliberately altered the Australian environment to make it unsuitable for native species and highly suitable for introduced species.

The current methods of killing foxes and other introduced animals by poisoning are not only inhumane and cruel; they are also a waste of time as they will not work. Most introduced wild

animals are rapid and prolific breeders, which means that killing these animals as a way of controlling them is essentially futile. Unless you are able to kill every single one on the mainland, which most scientists agree is impossible, the species will quickly breed to fill up the areas that have been emptied. As Professor Tony English of the University of Sydney's Faculty of Veterinary Science said in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002:

> Shooting and poisoning of feral animals is failing to reduce their thriving populations throughout NSW … instead, farmers and other landholders must be persuaded to repair the environment to make conditions less hospitable for introduced species. Despite 200 years of shooting, poisoning and trapping, feral numbers continue to rise.

Sodium monofluroacetate, or 1080, is a poison which affects both native and non-native animals. Because of the presence of small quantities of that poison found in some Western Australian vegetation, many herbivorous marsupials native to WA have a slightly higher tolerance for the poison than other natives and introduced species. However, 1080 will kill any animal if delivered in the right dose. As stated in the RSPCA report on the humaneness of 1080 prepared by Dr Miranda Sherley in January 2002:

> … because canids too are relatively large animals, enough poisoned meat to kill one fox would be sufficient to kill 22 fat-tailed dunnarts or 8 brown antechinus[20].

It is claimed that 1080 will not build up in the food chain because several studies have shown it to be rapidly broken down in the tissues of animals that have received a non-fatal dose. However, 1080 stably persists in the corpses of dead animals, resulting in a significant risk to poisoning from secondary predation, so it remains a threat to any animals that scavenge, including native birds, quolls and companion animals, such as dogs and cats.

Animals that are poisoned with 1080 suffer a horrible death. As discussed in the RSPCA report I mentioned, the symptoms of 1080 poisoning vary substantially between animal species. There is also considerable variation in the time from ingestion of the poison to death, ranging from less than an hour in some species to several days in others. In general, Australian native carnivores die the most quickly, followed by herbivores and introduced carnivores, then reptiles and amphibians. Animals poisoned by 1080 scream, vomit, defecate and suffer violent seizures. They remain conscious even after the toxin, which disrupts their energy metabolism, denies them the ability to move or escape from predators. The poison has been tested thoroughly, but not for humaneness. Apart from the obvious severe physical pain, the animal experiences stress, fear and mental suffering up until it loses consciousness. So it is impossible to claim that 1080 is a humane poison.

If 1080 is so humane, I wonder why it is not used on dogs and cats to euthanase them when they are sick or unwanted in a pound or shelter. It is definitely cheaper than what is currently used to kill these companions. And why is the community so concerned about companion animals entering the nominated baiting areas? Is someone's dog more worthy of living than a dog that no-one wants, which is considered a wild dog? The reason is that there is a double standard ruling here that says that it is okay because these animals are pests. As they are out of sight and out of mind, their interests—primarily their right to freedom from pain, suffering and fear—are ignored.

Chloropicrin and another gas, phosphine, are used to kill rabbits and foxes in their warrens by fumigation. Tear gas, which is chloropicrin, was widely used during the First World War as a chemical warfare agent. Both gases are known in the scientific community as being inhumane for fox and rabbit control. The symptoms seen in live animals and the pathological changes seen in autopsied animals suggest that suffering occurs over a period of several hours or, in the case of animals escaping from dens, possibly days. These methods, as well as warren and den ripping, are anything but humane. Fertility control of wild animals is certainly possible and has been undertaken successfully in the US for wild horses and deer and in Australia for kangaroos and koalas. All forms of painful and lethal control, including 1080, are useless and unacceptable.

Mr Pearson—Thank you very much for listening to me. One of the things I want to reiterate from our written submission is that the government has been spending enormous amounts of resources for the last 150 years or more on trying to control introduced wildlife or so-called pest or noxious animals by poisoning, trapping, shooting and various other methods. But the reality, as Kristi-Anna said, has been pointed out by Professor Tony English, from the University of Sydney, who said in a press statement in October 2003 that we have more pest or noxious animals in Australia than we have had since they actually arrived here. So there is a question about all of the methods and methodology which the government is paying for and putting large economic resources into, including the buying of poisons, the placing and delivery of poisons, the trapping and also the helicopter shooting of animals. Helicopter shooting is an extremely expensive way of killing animals. In 1999-2000 Agriculture Western Australia did an aerial shoot of 10,500 donkeys and several hundred horses. Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory aerially shot 3,724 animals.

Our submission is that maybe it is time to just review this whole approach to maiming and killing these animals as a way of controlling them. Even putting the welfare aspect of it aside, it is not scientific. We are not reducing the numbers of these animals by the methods being used—not in the long-term. We may reduce the numbers for a short period of time and there may be some sort of remedy or relief, but it is not very long before the same species of animal or another pest animal moves into the area and creates the same problems.

I would also like to make the point in relation to legislation which prevents cruelty to animals—animal protection legislation right across Australia—that if we were to do these things to other species we would actually be prosecuted and some people may even end up in jail. The issue with this is that, in every piece of legislation, there has to be a very specific exemption for us to be able to treat animals in this way, otherwise it would be a serious offence under the act.

Another point I want to put forward is that, in three issues in the last, say, four years—that is, the release of the calicivirus, the shooting of the goats on Lord Howe Island and investigations as a consequence of that and the shooting of the horses in Guy Fawkes River National Park—there has been an indication that the community is beginning to question and be rather alarmed at the methods we are using to try and control, if that is exactly what we are doing, all of these animals. I think it was interesting in the case of Lord Howe Island that, even though the National Parks and Wildlife Service sent in the helicopters and shot the goats, the community on Lord Howe Island considered the goats to be actually part of their heritage because they had been on the island for such a long time. There was this view that one part of the community or the government is seeing them as feral or noxious or introduced and unwanted, but the community which actually looks after the island saw these animals in a different way. I suppose what I am

saying is that there could well be a shift in attitude in the community now about how these animals are to be seen and whether they should always be maligned and demonised.

The other thing to consider, when we think of the government resources going into all these methods year after year with very little long-term gain or long-term considered effect, is that there are farmers and people in agriculture who use other methods to deal with wild dogs, foxes et cetera—for example, through putting other species of animal such as certain sort of species of dogs, like maremma dogs, and even alpacas with their sheep or cattle. They have found that, if they actually have these animals living with the stock animals, the stock animals can be protected from the attack of foxes and wild dogs. Yet, even though the farmers have stated this and they are using them, the government does not seem to be putting in the research and development to see how these approaches, which are quite simple in a way, could actually be of far more economic benefit to the way we approach this problem.

The last point is in relation to 1080 and other poisons. Because of the concern in the community about the clearly scientifically documented harm, pain and distress caused by many poisons, as Kristi-Anna described—particularly 1080 on animals—there has been research into whether, if these poisons are going to be used in the meantime, there should be an analgesic aspect to the poison. There has been some relatively successful research into the area. I suppose Animals Australia are saying that if 1080 is going to be used in the immediate future then we ask that a great deal of resources be put into the development and application of analgesia in these poisons so that the animals are rendered insensible to the acute action of the poisons, which is described in all the literature as very aggressive and extremely painful for the animal before they actually die.

CHAIR—I thank each of you for your contribution. The issue now is what you feel about some of the evidence that we are getting at the moment. I suggest that the best way for us to gauge that is for the committee to ask you questions about the information that we have received—and are likely to receive in the future—about the concerns of various groups of people out there about the feral animal problem and what it is doing more specifically to the economy of this country and, more importantly, to the ability of people in some instances to survive commercially in a commercial operation.

Mr ADAMS—I have only just come in and I apologise for that; I had another commitment.

Mr LINDSAY—Dr Jones, in relation to the workshop that you held, I read the list of participants. Am I right or wrong that there did not seem to be significant representation of the producers at the workshop?

Dr Jones—We invited representatives from both the sheep and cattle industries. They decided to send one representative who would report back to both groups. That representative was from the Cattle Council. We also had some landholder representatives as well.

Mr LINDSAY—There is now a division in the House of Representatives. Can we continue this afterwards?

Mr ADAMS—I will just ask a question too, and you can think about it. There was a paper on the impact of pest animals at the back of your submission. It did not have an author. It said:

There is no current research which suggests that the presence of European animals in pristine native Australian mainland ecosystems ...

and it went on about that. Where the Aborigines fired under the forests, there was a woodlands effect. It is a disputed point, I know, but I would dispute that what was said there was actually scientific. We can deal with that when we come back.

Proceedings suspended from 5.59 p.m. to 6.18 p.m.

Mr LINDSAY—Dr Jones, before the break I was asking you about the producers. Your evidence was that they were not widely represented. I was leading to the communique that you produced with little producer representation. Does that mean that the communique is suspect? Do you understand what I am asking you? Does it truly reflect what the workshop was about?

Dr Jones—Yes, it certainly reflects what the workshop was about. The discussion paper itself was developed by a small working group. One of the representatives on that working group was Michael Hartmann from the Cattle Council. So if you look at the representation on the working group itself you would probably see that it was fairly balanced in terms of the major stakeholder groups.

Mr LINDSAY—The workshop suggests a number of things in relation to implementation principles. These include: control should only be undertaken if the benefits outweigh the harms; if the proposed benefits are not achievable the control program cannot be justified; and, once the desired aims or benefits have been achieved, steps must be taken to maintain the beneficial state. How would you propose to put some sort of control on all of that? Do you think that some independent body should supervise that, should assess if the benefits outweigh the harms before anything happens, and should look after the control program after it has been implemented to make sure that the beneficial state is maintained? What would be your view in relation to all of that?

Dr Jones—All of those points are aspects of a coordinated, strategic approach to pest animal management. The basis of what that is saying is that, if you are going to go to the length of carrying out control, you want to make sure that is going to work and you want to make sure that it is going to work long term.

Mr LINDSAY—I understand all of that, but if we agree with that philosophy, what sort of an independent body or dependent body should supervise all of that? If we are going to make a recommendation, what do we recommend?

Dr Jones—I do not think one body would be able to do it.

Mr LINDSAY—It would not be the RSPCA?

Dr Jones—No, because it is part of management itself. Humaneness is one aspect of that; it is not the only one. If you are applying those principles, you are basically making sure that your control is effective as well as humane.

Mr LINDSAY—Should it be a self-managed process?

Dr Jones—My feeling would be that if those principles are incorporated into management and management is controlled on a regional basis, which seems to be the way that it is going, then you would need to have a national body to set priorities and to basically provide information about what techniques are the most humane and what are the most effective. But they would not necessarily be controlling what was happening down on the ground.

Mr LINDSAY—What does the RSPCA think of the evidence that Animals Australia gave where they said that there should be an analgesia incorporated into poisons?

Dr Jones—We are very supportive of the research that has been done to incorporate analgesics into 1080. It is our understanding that that research is being further investigated.

Mr LINDSAY—But why limit it to 1080? As a matter of principle, would you be pleased to see some law that actually says that all poisons, if they are going to be used for a 1080 type of control, should be sold with an analgesia in them?

Dr Jones—I would like to see the research that shows it was effective before you went down that path. The research has been done with 1080 and they have found particular combinations of analgesics and anxiolytics—anxiolytics being anxiety-reducing drugs like Valium. We know that that has potential. I would not recommend anything without knowing what its effect was, but if it was effective, yes, that would be a very good way of improving humaneness.

Mr LINDSAY—Do Animals Australia agree with that?

Mr Pearson—Yes.

Mr LINDSAY—Who gave evidence about fertility control?

Mr Pearson—Both Kristi-Anna and I did.

Mr LINDSAY—How practical is that? What is happening around the world in fertility control?

Ms Brydon—As far as I know it has been used successfully in the US for wild horses and deer, and it has been used for kangaroos and koalas. More research needs to be done on it—that is the thing. We are spending so much money on other methods that obviously are not effective. We should be putting more money into research into that.

Mr LINDSAY—Are you supportive of fertility control as a method of controlling pest animals?

Ms Brydon—If it is humane. It also is a matter of seeing whether it is going to be a humane method. I would say that it would be more humane than what is happening now.

Mr LINDSAY—Dr Jones, is the RSPCA in favour?

Dr Jones—Yes. We basically support any methods of control that are humane. Fertility control is an area that has obvious potential for being a humane alternative.

Mr LINDSAY—Finally, if fertility control works for a particular pest animal, does experience show that another pest animal comes along and fills the space vacated by the one that you have controlled?

Dr Jones—In the case of areas where you have predator-prey relationships between introduced animals, such as with foxes and rabbits, any kind of control that affects foxes will affect rabbits, in that, if fox numbers go down, rabbit numbers go up. That is a fairly well-established fact. So in that situation, yes, fertility control of foxes would affect rabbit numbers. Therefore you have to manage those pests in an integrated way, so that you are not just going out and dealing with the one animal; you are dealing with all of the different species that are in that system.

Mr ADAMS—There was some problem in the answer in that paper. That is not a scientific paper, is it? Someone put it as an argument, didn't they?

Ms Brydon—Can I see the point that you are referring to?

Mr ADAMS—It is headed 'The impact of pest animals: our history'. It says:

There is no current research which suggests that the presence of European animals in pristine native Australian mainland ecosystems has any significant impact. Even when (occasionally) a native species is affected ...

I just found it a bit difficult to understand.

Mr Pearson—Can we take that on notice and research it? I am aware of the research; we looked into that. We would have to find out the details of that.

Mr ADAMS—Have there been any studies done of the costs of adding the analgesics to 1080? Do you know whether that has been done at all?

Dr Jones—It is my understanding that, in the project at the moment, that information would probably be commercial-in-confidence because it is still under development. But the fact that it is under development for a commercial product suggests that it is going to be workable.

Mr ADAMS—Do you know where the work is being done?

Dr Jones—The original work was carried out in Victoria with the Department of Primary Industries, or whatever it was called at that time.

Mr ADAMS—How do you think the public should be told about introduced animals and their relationship with the environment and with farming animals? There is an economic need for how we operate at the present moment. To me, it seems that you come from a bit of a fairyland world where nothing kills anything else and everything is pristine and wonderful, and I do not think that world exists, personally. That is what I thought when I read what you presented. I can understand about being humane, and all those things are really good, but how do you think we should take out to the public of Australia what you are saying in your submission to us?

Ms Brydon—I think the problem is that if the public really knew about the amount of cruelty involved in a lot of these methods their opinions would be very different. In the case of 1080, if they actually saw a fox or other animal dying in the way they do, their opinions might be different anyway. So I think, in general, the public would definitely be okay with any method that is more humane, because most people do not agree with any form of animal cruelty. If you could make it less cruel then I think the public would definitely support it.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Nor do they agree with a wild pack of dogs tearing a kangaroo apart or killing 20 or 30 lambs in an evening, and they expect the government to do something. Wouldn't you agree with that?

Ms Brydon—Yes, but if you could protect those lambs from the wild dogs in another manner which does not kill the wild dogs either then surely that would be a better option.

CHAIR—What is another manner that you could use to protect those animals from wild dogs, as an example?

Ms Brydon—With the lambs, from what I have been told, there are dogs that have been specifically bred for that which live with the sheep and protect the sheep. Also, alpacas apparently trample and ward off foxes. I know of farms that apparently do use them very successfully, as well as fencing and—

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—You say that is what you have been told. What is the scientific source of what you have been told? You keep saying 'what I have been told'.

Ms Brydon—I can get back to you with the exact information on that.

CHAIR—We would appreciate that. Could you comment on the reality, which is that those sorts of protective measures do not work when wild dogs form packs and come out of crown land and into domestic animal areas. The dogs are becoming so aggressive that those sorts of short-term answers to protecting flocks are not working in many instances. In fact, wild dogs are so bad today that they are attacking people on horseback. What do you have to say about that?

Mr Pearson—The argument might be to go in and keep poisoning them, but the research on where these dogs come from is clear. There is clearly support for hunting to occur. The wild dogs are often dogs that have escaped from hunting groups. Even in the New South Wales parliament the hunting lobby admitted that they release animals into native areas so that they can hunt them. We have to look at the source of the wild dogs and what is contributing to the problem. If we continue to shoot them, poison them et cetera, a lot of research has pointed out that in time others will come in and take their place. We are saying the really inhumane approaches to the problem are short-sighted and do not look at the problem.

Mr ADAMS—But isn't your main political argument to stop hunting? You do not support any sort of hunting.

Mr Pearson—Certainly not.

Mr ADAMS—Your political position would be to stop hunting.

Mr Pearson—That is right. But we also say it contributes to the problems that agriculture has. Pigs are being released into the wild so that they can be hunted later. Hunters have admitted that.

Ms Brydon—Foxes, of course, were originally introduced for hunting.

CHAIR—What you have just said is the reality. Pig hunters lose dogs for whatever reason. Hunters lose dogs for whatever reason. The point I want to emphasise is that some of the dogs we are talking about have been in, for example, national parks for decades, they are hybrids and they are highly intelligent. As an example of how bad it is, following on from the 2003 fires in Kosciuszko National Park and in the high country over 3,000 dogs have been destroyed or captured coming out of those areas. That gives an indication of the magnitude of the problem. What weight do you believe should be given to the concerns of farmers and graziers about the destruction of crops and stock by animals such as wild dogs and foxes? What weight do you give to the enormous impact that these feral animals are having on our native fauna?

Mr Pearson—We certainly acknowledge that wild dogs are harming and causing problems to stock animals et cetera. But we argue that there are other ways of dealing with the problem that need to be researched and looked into. Maybe there are other ways to oversee and protect our stock animals. Maybe we need to review the situations of vulnerability into which we put our stock and review how we protect them from wild or predatory animals. I keep going back to the point that we have been shooting, trapping, killing and poisoning introduced wild animals, whether they be foxes or wild dogs, and, as it said in the report that you mentioned, here we are 150 years later and we still have so many of them. We have to rethink our approach.

CHAIR—That is why I mentioned the native animals being under threat. My question is basically: how do we overcome the problem that these introduced species produce—not only with regard to domestic animals and the horrific way in which they leave them to die but, more importantly, with feral animals and the impact that they are having on our native fauna? My understanding is that, in the submission you sent in, you are basically saying that we should return our areas back to pristine bush, as it was 200 years ago, and the animals will work out the pecking order in terms of survival themselves. I find that difficult to understand in an environment where, if threatened species such as the parma wallaby were bred up and put into the Blue Mountains, within a fortnight of those animals being released the foxes would have killed every one of them. Where do you stand in terms of our native fauna and the impact that these feral animals have on our native fauna, if we can put away the domestic animals for the time being? What is your solution to the problem?

Mr Pearson—Our view is that, whenever there has been an impact of introduced wild animals and research has been undertaken, it has never been acknowledged that it has been the removal of the natural habitat of native animals which has had the major impact on the numbers of native animals and their opportunity to survive. The amount of impact has not been acknowledged.

CHAIR—That is not absolutely correct, because clearing of land has increased the numbers of native animals, to the point where some of them have become pests themselves.

Mr Pearson—That is correct.

Ms Brydon—I do not think it is—

Mr ADAMS—Can I just deal with that—and I want to ask another question about standard operating procedures and so on, which I think are interesting stuff, and ways in which we should probably be moving. But is your submission really, as the chairman said, about going back to some pristine environment? When I read it, it sounded like you were saying, 'Just let farmland go back to the bush and everything will be okay.' That is not the philosophical base you come from, is it?

Ms Brydon—I just think that introduced species tend to survive better in what we have created—farming type land. They survive in that sort of area much better than they do in forests and natural sorts of environments. I think that is the main point.

Mr ADAMS—I think that is a contentious point. I do not know if that is entirely right scientifically.

Ms Brydon—I was going to give a statistic about what Mark was saying. Statistics provided by WIRES with regard to native animals state that habitat loss accounts for around 50 per cent of native animal loss; vehicles, around 15 per cent; and dogs, cats, foxes and other animals, only around 10 per cent. So habitat loss is definitely the biggest threat to native species.

Mr ADAMS—Sure. But, when I clean up my backyard, I change the habitat and we lose species. When a farmer cuts down a crop of wheat we are going to lose some habitat because there has been something living in there. It is simplistic to say that. Is that a scientific paper you are quoting from?

Ms Brydon—Those were statistics from WIRES.

Mr ADAMS—Sorry, I do not know what WIRES is.

Ms Brydon—They are a wildlife group that rescue and look after native animals. Those are their statistics. We have to acknowledge that clearing of land, as a key threatening process, is an issue. If we are concerned about native animals, that is an issue, so we cannot go and blame all the introduced species and not do anything about the other problem. It is hypocritical.

Mr ADAMS—Sure. That is true. But it is a part of the argument, not the whole of it. I will come back to my other question. I refer to the conference you had, the national seminar in 2003, and the development of a national code of practice and standard operating procedures for animal control. Where have you got to with that? Has that been discussed further? Has that moved on at all?

Dr Jones—Before I answer that, can I just clarify something. I have been slightly confused during this discussion at times about whether you are referring to RSPCA Australia's submission or Animals Australia's submission.

Mr ADAMS—I was referring to Animals Australia's submission.

Dr Jones—We are two totally separate organisations.

Mr ADAMS—Sorry about that.

CHAIR—That is a fair point.

Dr Jones—The codes of practice and standing operating procedures were a project funded by the Department of the Environment and Heritage and developed by New South Wales Agriculture. Codes of practice for each species and standard operating procedures for each commonly used control method have now been developed. The codes of practice include tables which give guidance on the most humane method to use in a given situation. The standard operating procedures include details of the humaneness of each of those techniques. These have been adopted by the New South Wales state government. It is my understanding—but you would probably need to check this—that the Department of the Environment and Heritage are going to require compliance with those codes under funding arrangements for control programs. They have gone to the Vertebrate Pest Committee but, as is discussed at the end of the discussion paper, at the present time they have not received support from all jurisdictions. That is something RSPCA Australia is concerned about. We see them as being the most immediate method of lifting the game on humaneness of practice.

Mr ADAMS—Have you had discussions with the New South Wales Farmers Federation?

Dr Jones—We have not had those discussions directly. We have written to both the Vertebrate Pest Committee and the Department of the Environment and Heritage supporting those codes of practice and standing operating procedures, and we will continue to support them whenever we can.

Mr ADAMS—Can we get a copy of those?

Dr Jones—The Department of the Environment and Heritage would be the place to get them. They are a pile of papers a metre high!

Mr ADAMS—Maybe we could get a summary.

CHAIR—That is nothing unusual for us to wade through!

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—At attachment 2 of your communique of 8 August you are arguing for further research and development—and no-one can argue against that. It seems that you accept that there is a case, on a cost-benefit analysis, for pest control, provided it is done humanely and that, at the end of each pest control activity, there is an analysis of whether it has been successful. That is, in essence, the outcome of your conference and your recommendation. You accept that something has to be done, but it is a question of how it is done.

Dr Jones—Yes. As I said in my opening statement, we do not oppose the control of pest animals, but you need to look at it on a case-by-case basis.

Mr ADAMS—And there are a lot of bad practices.

Dr Jones—Yes. An example is the aerial baiting of feral cats in Western Australia. There is no evidence that it is an effective means of control, yet it is carried out on a regular basis and it is

inhumane. I know that the Western Australian government are involved in research to develop a cat-specific toxin which would provide a more humane alternative, but in the meantime they continue to carry out baiting as a reactive process without having any evidence that it is doing any good.

Mr ADAMS—They come from what the cause is at the moment—what they see feral cats doing.

CHAIR—I am going back to the submission put in by Animals Australia, the Voice for Animals, and refer to pages 120 and 121 under the section 'Impact of pest animals'. I will read you the section I have concerns about and would like you to elaborate on:

Privately and publicly owned land which is not being kept as a museum of native flora and fauna should be permitted to continue its evolution towards a natural balance incorporating both native and non-native plants and animals. In the absence of any will to restore these areas to their original condition, natural selection should be allowed to take its course. Attempting to hold back the tide of evolutionary process can only ensure that far more native and non-native animals suffer than would suffer if nature was permitted to do what nature does best. Species which cannot survive in the altered environment should be permitted to achieve the peace of extinction. Species which are here to stay because we have made this place such an ideal habitat for them must be permitted to settle into their new niches and stabilise their populations with a minimum of human interference.

I can only conclude from that paragraph that you are saying as an organisation that you are quite happy for native fauna to go into extinction simply to accommodate introduced feral animals. You are basically saying that is okay.

Mr Pearson—This is looking at privately and publicly owned land. It is putting forward the suggestion that every time we intervene and try to increase numbers of a certain species or reduce numbers of another species we do not get it right.

CHAIR—It is not saying that; it is quite specific. I will repeat what it says:

Species which cannot survive in the altered environment should be permitted to achieve the peace of extinction. Species which are here to stay because we have made this place such an ideal habitat for them must be permitted to settle into their new niches and stabilise their populations with a minimum of human interference.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—I read that as saying, 'Mongrel dogs rule the roost,' in some areas.

Mr ADAMS—It is an incredible statement.

CHAIR—It is incredible. We as a race have been pulled into the public arena for decades and decades about the contribution we have made to destroying native animals and vegetation species. We in this country today—not just the people here but also the people out there in the general community—are genuinely concerned about maintaining the existence of the current species of native flora and fauna. Here we are being told by your group that it is okay for some of those species to disappear and go into extinction just to accommodate the feral animals that are creating the extinction process. I find that reprehensible.

Mr ADAMS—But we will accept that as evidence from you.

Mr Pearson—Here is a good example. We try desperately to maintain protected or endangered species to the extent that we keep them in captivity. They suffer immensely—look at some zoos or protection areas. If we consider one particular species to be of value we will go to great lengths to keep that species alive, at the serious expense of its welfare. Our argument here is that in trying to protect specific species we actually cause harm to those species. It is a dream to think we can go back to the native Australian flora and fauna—to go back to only it. We have introduced numerous species, including agricultural animals. At the moment we see them as animals that are of value because they are part of the economy and part of an industry, but they are an introduced species as well. We have serious problems even with feral cattle. The view that Animals Australia is putting is that it is time to review how we interrelate with our environment and maybe it is time to allow the environment in certain areas to sort it out. Most times when we intervene to try to assist we actually do not achieve the impact we want.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Can you nominate some areas where you think it should be done?

Mr ADAMS—Anywhere in the world.

Ms Brydon—Look at what we are currently doing with kangaroos, for example. Shooters go in and kill the biggest kangaroos. The biggest kangaroos are the oldest ones, the ones that have survived droughts and everything else. That makes the species weak. There are groups that believe that eventually we will kill out the kangaroos. That is a native species.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—I'll take you for a drive around Canberra!

Mr ADAMS—I do not think that is scientifically based.

Ms Brydon—There are groups looking into that.

CHAIR—But it is not based on science. It is based on the motivating ideology of certain individuals and groups.

Ms Brydon—If you kill the biggest and strongest ones of any species, the species becomes weak. By what we are doing now we are going to create extinctions anyway. We have already in our history created so many extinctions.

Mr ADAMS—Of course.

Ms Brydon—If there are better and more humane methods we should use them, but unfortunately this looks like the way we are going. We are creating so much suffering by what we have done so far.

Mr ADAMS—It is like this: we love dolphins and whales but we do not like sharks much.

CHAIR—I wish to go back to the submissions of both organisations, which indicate that the killing of animals should be a last resort. Both submissions, as I understand it from reading

them, also emphasise that where killing is necessary it must be humane. As collective groups, which methods do you consider should not be used because they are inhumane and what do you think are the practical solutions to the issues that agriculturalists face in respect of the introduced animal problem?

Ms Brydon—You say 'collectively', but our views are different—

CHAIR—Anybody can answer them. I am just asking the questions.

Mr Pearson—We would see 1080 poisoning as it is at the moment as the most inhumane. Then come phosphorous poisoning as it is at the moment, strychnine and all of the poisons that are delivered without any compound in them which brings about a state of analgesia or protection from the worst aspects of the pain that the chemicals inflict. We believe the next worst inhumane method of killing animals is aerial shooting from the moving platform of a helicopter. There is an enormous amount of evidence that goes to that, particularly the evidence that was gathered on Lord Howe Island and in Guy Fawkes River National Park as to the aerial culling of animals. If at any time it is found to be absolutely necessary from the science and proper analysis of the area—unlike what is happening in Western Australia with the aerial baiting of cats with 1080—and if the science holds up and the community view says, 'Okay, the number of these animals really needs to be reduced for welfare and environmental reasons,' we see the only humane way, currently, as being the clean shot from a trained marksman where the bullet instantly kills the animal.

Dr Jones—Chair, can I answer the question from RSPCA Australia's point of view—I ask that as I do not think we can give a collective response, because our views are different.

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Brydon—May I interrupt with one very last little thing?

CHAIR—Collectively or individually?

Ms Brydon—Just on what Mark said, ideally non-lethal methods would be the ultimate. Ideally there should be non-lethal methods of controlling them, such as by fertility control types of things. They would be ideal. But if the animals are suffering from starvation or whatever else, there should be a clean shot to the head.

Dr Jones—It is a huge area and there is not a simple answer, because there are a lot of different methods that have relative levels of humaneness. I think one of the issues is that a method in itself can be more or less humane depending on how it is applied. An example of that is the use of leg-hold traps. Putting aside steel-jawed traps, if you are using a padded leg-hold trap to catch a wild dog and you are checking the trap on a regular basis—say, at least every 24 hours—then that is a relatively humane method. If you are not checking that trap for a week, it is an extremely inhumane method because the animal is going to die a very painful death before you have got to it. So how the method is applied is very important. The other issue is how specific it is, because we are not talking just about the target animals; we are talking about other animals that are caught or poisoned because you have set out to target a particular species and unfortunately that poison has also been taken up by other animals. There are a range of different

ways that you can look at humaneness. When we held our seminar in 2003, I did a quick survey of RSPCA people around the country and we came up with a list of techniques that we were particularly concerned about. Rather than go through them, I can provide those in writing if that would be helpful.

CHAIR—That would be very much appreciated. Do you think that there are significant resources or enough resources coming from government at all levels to address the issue and to feed the scientific work that needs to be undertaken, for example, to come up with a better solution? Do you think that there is scope for the three levels of government—federal, state and local—to work cooperatively to ensure that the pest problem is addressed in a more organised way?

Dr Jones—There is certainly scope for the three levels of government to work together better to coordinate their activities. In terms of resourcing, clearly there are areas that could be better resourced. One of the difficulties from a national level has been that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of the Environment and Heritage have had separate funding arrangements. I believe that they are now coordinating those to some extent or at least communicating about the different projects they are funding, but it is one of those areas that goes across departments. There needs to be real coordination and communication in setting priorities for funding and research.

CHAIR—And perhaps better interaction between the different departments.

Dr Jones—Yes. One of the big points that we identified at the workshop was that, while more humane techniques may be developed, actually getting them into the marketplace in terms of registration through the APVMA and getting commercial uptake of those new products is the difficulty. More government support would help that process.

Mr ADAMS—Animals Australia, do you support or do you have a view on animals as food, philosophically?

Mr Pearson—Philosophically, obviously we support vegetarianism and veganism.

Mr ADAMS—So you oppose animals being raised for food.

Mr Pearson—Philosophically we do, but we certainly acknowledge that the community chooses to have animals as food and, in the meantime, the most humane approaches to farming and agriculture must be put in place.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Is work on analgesics being driven basically by the private sector?

Dr Jones—It is now.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Can we have the names of the companies?

Dr Jones—Yes.

CHAIR—That would be very helpful for the committee.

Mr ADAMS—There is work being done at the University of Tasmania on 1080 poisoning.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the time that you have given to bring evidence before the committee and for the frank and open way you have responded to some reasonably tight questions. We appreciate getting your views, because the committee is about getting across the views of the community to ensure we have a balanced result in the report that we will finally put out.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Martin Ferguson**):

That this committee authorises the publication of evidence given before it at the public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 6.59 p.m.