

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Tuesday, 20 April 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Dr Gillian Sparkes, Commissioner,

Mr Scott Rawlings, Director, Science and Reporting, and

Ms Fiona McKenzie, Principal Science Writer, Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website and rebroadcast of a hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234. Thank you for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

On behalf of the committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of this land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be joining us here today. I also extend a very warm welcome to any members of the public and the media who may be watching us here today. This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about the issues relevant to the inquiry.

Before we begin I need to point out a couple of things to you all. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is very important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside this hearing, even if you are just restating what you said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with the committee today. I just want to remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking because I think we all know this will help minimise interference. Fiona, Gillian and Scott, the best way for these to kick off, because they are via Zoom, is for the committee to introduce themselves first and then each of you could introduce yourself and who you are speaking on behalf of today. Then it would be fantastic to hear a 5- or no more than 10-minute presentation from you, and committee members will just jump right in with questions and we can have a bit of a discussion.

My name is Sarah Connolly. I am the Chair of this committee, and I am the very lucky Member for Tarneit. Tarneit is sitting in one of our largest growth corridors both here in Victoria and in this country.

Mr MORRIS: I am David Morris, the Deputy Chair of the committee and the Member for Mornington.

Mr FOWLES: I am Will Fowles, the Member for Burwood in the lower house.

Ms GREEN: I am Danielle Green, Member for Yan Yean, Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Victoria and for sport, and, like Sarah, I represent a very rapidly growing area.

Mr HAMER: And I am Paul Hamer. I am the Member for Box Hill.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you. We will jump over to Gillian.

Dr SPARKES: Hi, I am Gillian Sparkes. I am Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, and I am supported by two of my team today. I will hand over to Scott and Fiona to introduce themselves.

Mr RAWLINGS: Thanks, Commissioner. Scott Rawlings—I am Director of Science and Reporting for the office of the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

Ms MCKENZIE: My name is Fiona McKenzie. I am a Principal Science Writer with expertise in social science, and I obviously work for the Commissioner.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Gillian, did you have a 5- or 10-minute presentation? It does not matter if you do not have slides, if you just want to talk to your submission.

Dr SPARKES: I did have slides because I thought it might be the easiest way to frame our submission, so the slide pack that I have prepared is really just a sort of framing summary of the submission which I prepared in October. You should have an 11-page submission with a covering letter. We also sent recently an overview of our approach to reporting for this next cycle. So I might, with your permission, Chair, move straight into the presentation and then take questions.

The CHAIR: Great.

Visual presentation.

Dr SPARKES: Can I start by acknowledging the traditional owners on the lands on which we meet and particularly the Boon Wurrung people on the lands which I come to you from, on beautiful Western Port, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and any others that will be joining us today via the live stream.

The submission for the inquiry was a short submission—as I said, about 11 pages—and gave the inquiry panel members an overview of our work, largely centred on insights and recommendations from the *Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report* and other ‘state of’ reports produced by my team and me. Those reports were either tabled or released in March 2019, so they are current, and we are now on the next round of reporting. The inquiry response that I prepared responded particularly to four key terms of reference, as you can see listed there. I will not go into them—you know your terms of reference—but we focused on four, and I will talk to you about those. But before I do, I just wanted to give the panel a reminder: the Commissioner is an independent statutory role in Victoria. An objective of the Commissioner’s work is to encourage decision-making that facilitates ecologically sustainable development, and as Commissioner I operate under the *Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003*, and that is available online. It is an independent statutory role overseeing a lot of the work of the environment portfolio of government.

A lot of our work—all of our work in fact—in the program is very science based, but it is very much about engagement and collaboration and co-design on what are the important indicators that we should report on, what really matters on the ground. So I suppose the point for the inquiry is that we both use the best sources of science to do our work but also collaborate and engage heavily with practitioners on the ground to make sure that our work is very relevant and in particular that our recommendations are highly relevant to the things that matter at the moment and in the medium to long term.

For the *Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report* we prepared 20 recommendations, 19 of which were accepted in full, in part or in principle by the Victorian government. The government response was released in December 2020, so it is very contemporary, and I recommend the response to the recommendations to the committee—they are available on the DELWP website. For example, the sorts of issues that we were talking about, some of the really big issues, include biodiversity decline—the status of 75 per cent of 35 indicators assessed were in decline or unknown. We talked about climate change impacts; the important need to obviously have the link to energy policy, which we do in Victoria, but also to continue to improve localised climate projections, and I am sure that is very much a focus of the panel’s work; waste and resource recovery—again, transitioning to a circular economy model; the use of technology and data sources, earth observation and how we continue to invest as a state; and applying international frameworks, such as the United Nations sustainable development goals. You will see in the approach document that was circulated to you yesterday or Friday that we are very much applying the SDGs in our work going forward for this reporting cycle.

In response to recommendation 1 there are various aspects to our submission, but one of the key ones is that the state of the environment report included 170 baseline indicators, and you can see there the indicator status, trend and data quality. I suppose the most important message for the committee is that our reports look at the various natural ecosystems, but we are also looking at relevance to environmental infrastructure, so the work of that state of the environment report is really pertinent for your work today. We also did the *State of the Yarra and its Parklands* report, getting to a local ecosystem. Again, that is looking at that local ecosystem. We assessed the health of that river through 36 indicators. The results are there, with about half of them, or just under half, deteriorating and only a few improving. And again, all of the recommendations in the *State of the Yarra and its Parklands* report were accepted in full, part or principle by the Victorian government.

We also talked about the impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure. The key point for the committee today is that the capabilities that

we have and how we can respond—so knowing what we need to know when we need to know it—are really important for this aspect of preservation and provision of environmental infrastructure. Our recommendations looked at developing strategies and capabilities that had, you know, science impact. We focused on governance and coordination, delivery of policy—a very big one; there is a lot of great policy work making sure we deliver that—data monitoring, spatial information analytics and these sorts of innovations that we are seeing now. We are very supportive of digital twinning, for example, and the importance of citizen science and education. The involvement of citizens in the science endeavour is really critical, and our work focused on that too.

In the submission there are examples of best practice infrastructure and innovative approaches that we talked about, and we listed some examples for the inquiry's consideration, including examples around urban forestry strategy, creating nature corridors, citizen science and the rise of volunteering, and of course the very important and in many ways groundbreaking *Biodiversity 2037* plan for Victoria.

The impact of COVID-19 on the importance, use and design of environmental infrastructure: anecdotally we know that this infrastructure has been particularly important and utilised during the COVID pandemic. Fiona may be able to give us some more information there that we will be bringing into our work coming forward, starting with the state of the marine and coastal environment report this year.

All of our work that we are now working on, and the reports, the first of which will come out in December this year, are being developed under the science for sustainable development framework. The important matter about that framework for the committee is that it incorporates social science perspectives and utilises the SDGs as an operating framework while continuing to emphasise the role of science, data and community in decision-making. We are using that broader framework to make sure that our science is taking into account not just the natural science but the social science perspectives and framing recommendations using the SDGs as our framing document.

We will be preparing reports in this cycle as listed, so the state of the marine and coastal environment report, the inaugural report coming out this year, is the first one that will be delivered, and we are looking forward to releasing that report and showing the opportunity that the new frameworks and the use of the SDGs present for interpretation and understanding of environmental and social and economic systems.

Just to finalise, on page 11 of the submission you would note that we had a little anecdote about some of the work that we are doing now. One of the areas that we are working on is the state of the marine and coastal environment report, which was mandated through the *Marine and Coastal Act 2018*. We are working with coastal stakeholders now—literally, local management authorities—to identify local priorities for reporting. In the 2021 report it is going to have 87 indicators. It will be structured around five regions as the inaugural report, with the full report being produced in 2024. The headline themes are as listed there: cultural landscape health and management; environmental health; coastal hazard risks and climate change impacts; communities; governance, collaborative management and capacity. They form just a sort of high-level summary, and we are working literally now with the local management authorities on saying, 'In addition to the 87 that we report on, what would be the subset that really matter and are going to inform the state, that could be uniform across the state and that matter to you as local management authorities and your communities? And how do we bring them into our reporting so they're not just in reports, they're in your management plans, they're what you are going to report against in your businesses to your communities doing the work so we get the outcomes and improvements that we're looking for?'. So we are really excited about that work.

My closing comment is just to note the obvious. This inquiry provides a point-in-time review. However, your recommendations regarding future provision can be supported through the monitoring reporting frameworks that we develop. Our work is around periodic reporting and, I suppose for the inquiry's comfort, you have a mechanism in place to see how things are moving along and how the work is going against the recommendations that you make—how we are performing.

With that, Chair, I might stop sharing and go to the Chair—Sarah—for questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Commissioner. It is a really interesting submission that you put forward. I think just being able to limit it to those pages must have been very difficult because there is a lot of work that is involved in your space. So thank you for trying to condense it all for us.

I have a question: your submission notes that the 2018 state of environment report included a set of 170 baseline indicators and that was for monitoring environmental conditions across Victoria and that many of these have relevance to environmental infrastructure, so things like parks and open space, forests, bushland, wildlife et cetera. Can you provide the committee with a little bit of an overview of the trends in recent years for some of these indicators, particularly parks and open space? I am really interested to know: in your opinion, are things improving in terms of securing environmental infrastructure or do you think they are getting worse?

Dr SPARKES: Okay. Yes. First of all, the concept of baseline reporting, which we introduced in the 2018 cycle, was very much about being able to monitor trends—though if you are not picking a set of indicators that you continue to trend monitor over a decade or more and every commissioner changes the indicators they report against, it is much more difficult to monitor trends. So in the state of the environment report, for every one of those 170 indicators, and I refer you to the report at your leisure, we report against the status of the indicator, the trend—so is it going up or down and/or staying stable—and what the data quality is. So that tells us about the confidence that we had in the data that we were getting for that particular indicator.

I am just looking for the summary document. I might throw to Scott. We have actually got a summary of the trends performance. There are 170 indicators. Scott, have you got the trend summary in front of you please?

Mr RAWLINGS: Yes. That is a really interesting question. It would be across several indicators that we would consider green space, if you like. I can give you the overarching analysis. Of the 170 indicators, about 50 of the 170, so around a third, were considered to be deteriorating. About a third were considered to be stable, and then the other third was a mixture of improving, which was around about 18 of the 170, and the rest were unknown. We could not make a trend assessment. That is one of the difficulties we have in reporting—that there are quite a few barriers to being able to give continuity in our reporting. Sometimes it is because the monitoring and reporting regimes change; sometimes it is simply because the data is just not there and unavailable, and that is particularly of concern in the biodiversity space. One of the most difficult areas that we have had to report on is biodiversity, and clearly, as the Commissioner said in her presentation, biodiversity loss is one of the critical issues that emerged from the 2018 reports, and a lot of that is due to the fact that the data is difficult to get, particularly in terms of trend analysis.

Dr SPARKES: Yes. Can I just add to that, Chair? So over this next decade, because we picked the 170 indicators that we reported in 2018 and we worked with science and community across the state and across the country to determine what would be the baseline indicators for Victoria, we will pick up those 170 indicators and they will be reported against in the 2023 report, and we will have a much stronger view about trends against those 170 indicators that the community and scientists and all those various stakeholders that I listed work with us on.

Mr FOWLES: Gillian, sorry, can I just interject quickly there? We are spending a lot of time talking about the indicators, which I think is a good thing. I just want to understand, though, when we use rough metrics like, ‘Oh, we’ve fallen short on a third of indicators’, what that ultimately means. To what extent are the indicators themselves correlated—for example, health of the water and health of the fish within the water; you would say that they are correlated indicators—and to what extent are these indicators macro and micro? I guess I am trying to get a sense. Hearing a third of 170 sounds bad, but actually is it?

Dr SPARKES: You are talking about the interlinkages work. I will throw to Scott, but one of the Holy Grails of science reporting is to look at the interlinkages, exactly what you just talked about. How do you correlate things? So I will hand to Scott for this.

Mr FOWLES: Perhaps if you could just give us a couple of examples of those indicators as well so we know what it is that we are talking about.

Mr RAWLINGS: Sure. That is a really good question, Will—absolutely. For those who have looked at the report, they will see a great continuum in the types of indicators that we have. Some of them are quite specific about particular species and some of them are more ecosystem-based—and again I focus on biodiversity because I think it is probably the most relevant to this forum. That is something that we recognised in the reporting in 2018—the fact that a lot of our indicators were basically based on the data and information that we had, so you see a lot of indicators in there about frogs or about bats, but you do not see a lot of what we would consider really critical indicators around understanding the interlinkages between ecosystems and species, and that is something that we are working with the department on now with the new *Biodiversity 2037* framework.

That framework comes with a completely new monitoring regime and the development of a new set of indicators, and we are working with the government to create more of those types of indicators, which actually will give us a much better understanding of how we are progressing in terms of ecosystem health, in terms of systems and in terms of a systems approach to environmental management.

So I will give you an example of a specific indicator there, and then I will go back to Sarah's original question. For instance, in the state of the Yarra report we actually did have an indicator on parklands and open space, which we had good data quality for and which we assessed as fair. Importantly, though, the trend of that we assessed as improving. One of the reasons that we assessed that as improving was because of the work that is being done, particularly in the Yarra system, around biolinks and connecting environmental corridors, which of course is particularly important to this forum on environmental infrastructure. The reason that we, for instance, gave that an improving rating was because of the work that was done around Sugarloaf Link and the Yellingbo projects as well. So that is an example, I suppose, of how we assess an indicator, but each indicator has its own thresholds, it has its own metrics, and there is quite a broad spectrum of how we would assess a particular indicator.

Mr FOWLES: You speak about the indicators, about a new set of indicators coming. Does that not risk amplifying the concern that Gillian raised earlier that every time there is a new commissioner the whole thing is reworked and you sort of go back to square one?

Dr SPARKES: We will take the indicators forward. We will not create a new set, but we may add more. It is about taking those 170 forward and then adding more—or in the *State of the Yarra and its Parklands* it is 35 or 36 indicators, from memory, and adding more. So we will not lose the continuity and the baseline, and the baseline is fundamental to the work of the inquiry going forward. Available on our website is a summary, Will, of the indicator report card that talks about the sorts of indicators. Under biodiversity we have everything from private land conservation, which is fair and the data quality is good, so we are doing pretty well there, to riparian vegetation and habitat, where the data quality is poor and it is assessed as poor. This is one of those things where you actually have to get into the detail to see it. If you would like, we can send it to the secretariat for the inquiry. We could send you a copy of the report card. It is a traffic light report.

Mr FOWLES: Yes, please.

Dr SPARKES: And it makes it really easy to read, hopefully, so we will send that to you after our session.

Mr FOWLES: No worries. Thanks, Chair.

Mr RAWLINGS: If I may just add to that, Commissioner, in response to Will's question—also we will see it folding up as well. I mentioned that we had specific indicators around, say, bats and frogs; well, they will be folded up into an overarching indicator, which we worked with the department on, about ecosystem health. So those indicators will not be lost; they will just be better contextualised into a broader system.

Dr SPARKES: Can I just say for the inquiry that Victoria is the only state besides Canberra—the ACT does have a commissioner for sustainability and environment, but other than that Victoria is the only state—that has an independent commissioner doing state-of-the-environment reporting. In the other states state-of-the-environment reporting is done through the EPA or the equivalent of the department of environment or different things. One of the things that our stakeholders tell us in the community at large is that the independence is what is valued, so making sure that we have this very thorough look at the system, we have an independent view of that, we make recommendations that are then submitted—tabled, in the case of the state of the environment report. So the baseline science work that we have got working with the stakeholders to continue to advance it is really important, but the independence is good. So I would suggest to you that we are very well positioned to understand what we know, what we do not know and what we need to know.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Commissioner. I am going to go to David.

Mr MORRIS: Thank you, Chair. Commissioner, thank you for your time this morning, and Scott and Fiona as well. You talked about this in your letter, but I think we are all very aware of the rate of population growth that we have had in recent years and we are likely to continue to have. One and a half per cent does not sound like a big increase, but we know how that works out and we know that it is 8 million in 2031 and 10 million in 2051. You also talked about the UN sustainable development goals, and I am just wondering if you can talk to

us a little bit about how you see those sustainable development goals working to secure environmental infrastructure in the context of the significant population growth we are having.

Dr SPARKES: Okay. Thank you, David. I will just unpick a couple of aspects to that question. It is quite complex. I would say first of all to see the SDGs, or sustainable development goals, helping, you have to have developed a method to apply them so they can help. If you are just using them to look in the rear-vision mirror and report against them but you are not proactively managing against them, it is less helpful. It is interesting and you can put some context, but we are interested in our work—which is what I was talking to you about, that we are trialling now with the marine and coastal environment, and which the overview document that you would have received Friday or Monday suggests—looking now at: how do you use the SDGs not only for reporting but so that you get adaptive management on the ground? The first bit about that is: how do you develop uniform indicators? This is the work we are doing now with marine and coastal communities, particularly the coastal management authorities, to say that of the 87 indicators that we have agreed we will report against, if we want to pick a dozen that are uniform across the state, we can then apply them according to an SDGs framework.

We are developing the method to do that, that both looks at localised indicators but, picking up Will's earlier point, will start to develop a method around interlinkages—you know, 'How does the system work as a system? If I do that, what happens there? If I build that infrastructure, what happens with jobs? If I do that, what happens with the environment?' et cetera. That is the whole point of that framework that we are working on now—to both apply the SDGs and work with communities to make sure that we are applying them in a way that is relevant to coastal management, and that includes coastal infrastructure. So we are doing that work now, and the first one of our reports that will come out that will bring together how we have gone with this method development will be out in December this year. It is complex and it is difficult, but it is definitely about rolling up your sleeves and working with the local management authorities to work out: what are they managing against, so then what are we reporting against? That is how the SDGs will help you achieve the 2030 agenda, because if you are not managing against them, it is very hard to achieve.

Mr MORRIS: Anything is [Zoom dropout].

Dr SPARKES: Yes. And on population growth—and I am glad you brought that in—with our 2018 series of reports we were particularly looking at getting good, solid baseline science and scientific reporting methods in place so we had robust science work going forward, in perpetuity really, through the commission's work— independent science. The next wave, which is now, under this new framework is to develop the SDGs as a systems framework so that we can look broader than the science—we get into the socio-economic. Hence, Fiona joined us. Fiona is a social scientist. So we are skilling for that too. This is about getting the right skills, the right frameworks, bringing the system together. It is a slow burn, but we are certainly well ahead of the curve, we like to think, with the tabling of the science for sustainable development framework, and also the minister for environment including in the statement of expectations for the commission and myself that we implement the SDGs as our framework so that we are getting to adaptive management, not just in-the-rear-vision-mirror reporting sort of thing. I might just throw to Fiona just to make a brief comment, with the discussion around population trends, on how we are monitoring past and future population trends and then how we will bring that into our work. Fiona.

Ms McKENZIE: Yes. Thank you very much, Commissioner. Yes, we have a good relationship with the demographic experts in DELWP. They have a demographic group which, apart from analysing a lot of ABS data and population trends over a long period, also prepare the population projections for the state government. They have been monitoring even more closely over the last year of course the sorts of changes that are occurring and are likely to occur into the future. So that is work that we have access to, and we can bring that into our report in terms of our analysis. Thank you.

Mr MORRIS: Can I just ask: Commissioner, you were talking about working with the local coastal management bodies around the state. There is a range of bodies with vastly differing expertise, but I am just interested, and obviously organisations like Parks would have resident expertise there, but with particularly the smaller councils that have coastal management responsibilities, what is the level of recognition of the SDGs and how is that work playing out on a practical level—obviously you have got a long way to go—at this point in the development cycle?

Dr SPARKES: Yes. Thanks again, David. You would have noticed on an earlier slide that I put up for you we collaborate heavily with our science. Our science program is done in a collaborative way with stakeholders, both because our stakeholders want input into our work but they are also managers on the ground, so we need to make sure our work is relevant for them. With that in mind, we work with peak bodies to make sure we are working with all of the relevant stakeholders—for example, local government. So as Commissioner I have a reference group that meets at least quarterly to give feedback on our work, and it includes the CEOs of various bodies, including the Victorian Local Governance Association, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the VNPA, Environment Victoria and the VFF. I just cannot think of all of the people on my reference group at the moment—Local Jobs First commissioner, the health department. So we have huge capacity to work with peak associations and bodies, both government, local government and non-government, to make sure we are talking to people who are working then with us and helping us codesign on the ground. So our workshops with local government will start by engaging with the CEO of the VLGA and with our MAV representative. We will then say to them, ‘Okay. Well, we want to do a workshop. Who should we invite?’. They will work with their local governments.

What we find with local governments is that they are really interested in their role to play in SDGs and the 2030 agenda—a lot of commitment. In fact I do not think I have met any stakeholders across all of our work that are not very committed to the 2030 agenda and implementing the SDGs in principle, but what we can help them with, what we are trying to do together with them, is to implement them in a way that is meaningful at their level for the management of their area. Our work will go right through from catchment management authorities and local governments to involvement, where those stakeholders think is appropriate, of committees of management—the whole gamut. So we try to bring all those views into our work. Of course it is quite tricky, but we are certainly focused on localisation and local input.

Mr MORRIS: Terrific. Thank you for that. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, David. I am going to throw to Danielle. I am just conscious of time. We have got to wrap up in the next 3 minutes for this group. Danielle, did you have a quick question that you wanted to ask?

Ms GREEN: Yes, I do. If you can come back at the end, did I just catch—just a follow-up on David’s. Is the insurance council on that body that you talked about? Because, just quickly, before I go to my substantive question, one of the things we found with our inquiry last year was that local government were very frustrated with the insurance council. So, for example, if a drain or a coastal wall or something is destroyed and then they make a claim, their insurance is saying, ‘You have to build it back exactly the same’. So, just quickly, are the insurance council involved? And how can we assist you with that?

Dr SPARKES: Okay. So the insurance council are not on our reference group and they are not involved directly with our work. The avenue that would be is VMIA, so the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority, who are the government’s insurance agency. But insurers are one of the most critical sources of data for the SDGs—we know that. They are collecting data and they are way ahead on climate change impacts et cetera, so we have heavily identified that the insurance industry at large is where we need to look for the right information for our data and advice.

On issues of management, Danielle, that you have just talked about, the department would look after that, because we are not in an operational mode. We are a small office. We are less than a dozen people, and we are on the balcony looking at the system and how are the policies and the frameworks working. What is the science telling us, and how does the next wave of policies—what are the interventions that need to happen? That is what our recommendations are focusing on.

On operational matters, they would be dealt with through the DELWP regions and those sorts of bodies and, I would suggest, would be one of the areas that they would need to look at in terms of how you have to rebuild. In fact I must say, having dealt with this when I was a deputy secretary in government, working with the insurers I agree is really important, because DELWP in their own right have a huge insurance program and after any emergency have a lot of rebuild et cetera, so there is a lot of capacity and capability in that department to understand how to deal with those issues.

Ms GREEN: Yes. My substantive question was trying to pull together a few things in a short time. You mentioned with COVID—and we have all seen many more people out there walking in the environment—the importance of volunteering and citizen science. I live in Diamond Creek. Just overnight some people in

Hurstbridge posted that they found a phascogale and just how fascinated they all were with it. Unfortunately the poor fellow was dead, but it was just the conversation and all about that. If we were going to have one recommendation from our report that meant we could get a better structure for citizen science and volunteering and reporting to assist in ameliorating the impacts of climate change and loss of species, what would you want us to say? What do you think would be really good that would help your work?

Dr SPARKES: I think it would be a great opportunity if we could frame up a question. Can I take that as a question on notice? As scientists, we are heavily evidence based, so we would like to take the opportunity, if that is an invitation, Chair, to contribute to that recommendation, but I would like to do it in consultation and thoroughly so that we hit the high notes. I am really big on, 'Let's make recommendations around the critical [Zoom dropout] many things', and I think you are asking for that one recommendation. So we could get that in to you in the next little while, Chair. Would that be possible?

The CHAIR: Perfect.

Ms GREEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I love evidence based; it suits me fine. I am going to have to call time because we have the next witness waiting for us to join him, but I just want to say, Commissioner, Scott and Fiona, thank you for taking the time to talk to us. It is really interesting. You are doing some incredible work—a lot of work—and—

Mr HAMER: Sorry, Sarah, am I able to ask a question that they might be able to get back to us on?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr HAMER: My question was just about the benefits. You may not have done any work specifically about the benefits of environmental infrastructure to the community, but a lot of the discussion in your submission and in other submissions is about the qualitative benefits. I would be interested to know the research that is out there on the quantitative benefits, because I think that is one of the challenges that has come out of a lot of the submissions—the cost challenge, particularly in urban areas. So if you have come across quantitative research on the benefits that environmental infrastructure is delivering, I would be very interested in seeing that.

Mr FOWLES: I was just going to add another quick question on notice—that is, if you could get back to us. I am interested to know why it is that there is always this gap between what VicForests says is happening and what almost everyone else—academics, you guys, other people—says is happening. I do not know if you have done any work in that space, but I am concerned that there always appears to be this substantial gap between the public positions of things like academia and VicForests.

Dr SPARKES: Can I just refer you, Will, to the *State of the Forests: 2018 Report* that we did produce. It was released—it is on our website—in March 2019. It assesses—how many indicators, Scott?

Mr RAWLINGS: Fifty-two.

Dr SPARKES: Fifty-two indicators. It is, from our perspective, an independent science report—

Mr FOWLES: I appreciate that, but most of the disputation I am referring to is in more recent times, particularly around the old-growth logging ban, bushfire-affected timber sources and the like, so I just wonder—and I appreciate you are two years away from the next report—if there is a little slice of data you could share with us. That would be helpful.

Dr SPARKES: I should declare, Chair, that I am Victoria's representative on the major event review for the review of the regional forestry agreements triggered through the 2019–20 bushfires. The Commissioner is written into the modernised RFAs as the nominated panel member for that process, so in that capacity I am working on that now.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, Commissioner. We might discuss that as a committee, Will, if you want to go forward with that question, and if that is the case, Commissioner, an email will come through from the committee.

Dr SPARKES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Again, thank you very much. I am going to have to stop us there. That is fantastic.

Witnesses withdrew.