

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 14 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell



**WITNESSES**

Ms Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Environment,

Mr John Bradley, Secretary,

Ms Christine Ferguson, Deputy Secretary, Forest, Fire and Regions,

Ms Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples,

Mr Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer,

Ms Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator,

Mr Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria,

Mr Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria,

Mr Tony Circelli, Head, Recycling Victoria,

Ms Bronwyn Di Carlo, Executive Director, Finance, and

Dr Graeme Emonson, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments made outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing this afternoon via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Environment the Honourable Ingrid Stitt and officers from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee today about how our government is investing in a strong natural environment. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge the deep and continuing connection First Peoples have to land and water across our state. I also want to state my commitment to maintaining and growing our partnership with traditional owners in caring for country through the environment portfolio.

Our government is committed to protecting and enhancing our natural environment, and since coming to government we have invested more than \$4.2 billion in initiatives across the environment portfolio. This budget is delivering on our election commitments. Those initiatives are targeted and deliver programs that protect our environment and support the Victorian community, including \$36.5 million to transition 50 short-term contract firefighters into full-time roles, \$10.9 million to upgrade visitor facilities and infrastructure at Serendip

Sanctuary and the You Yangs, \$13.4 million to build six new dog parks and upgrade up to 22 existing dog parks and \$7.2 million for a package of wildlife welfare and conservation programs. Collectively these commitments are supporting Victorians across the state to connect with nature and ensure that our precious natural environment is well cared for.

Since coming to government we have also invested over \$515 million to undertake a once-in-a-generation reform of our waste and recycling sector. That includes our circular economy policy *Recycling Victoria: A New Economy* and a landmark set of forms that are continuing to be rolled out: our statewide four-bin waste and recycling system, including the new glass bin and organics bin for all Victorians; the most accessible container deposit scheme in the country to begin from 1 November; and our ban on problematic single-use plastic.

The budget delivers funding to support a number of programs that help children and families connect with our natural environment. This includes the half-price camping fees and kids go free to the zoo initiative, which support families to experience the great outdoors while assisting with the cost of living. The budget also provides \$1 million to deliver the next stage of the CERES environment park master plan in Brunswick East.

The budget also invests in protecting our natural environment, including the continuation of our faunal emblems program and maintaining our strategic fuel breaks, which provide a crucial barrier for communities and reduce the impact of catastrophic fires on our biodiversity. This commitment will enable the maintenance of over 900 kilometres of existing strategic fuel breaks per year.

This budget delivers an additional \$46.9 million to strengthen the activities of the EPA, in addition to providing \$20 million to complete the EPA's remediation of the Lemon Springs toxic site in north-west Victoria. We have delivered a record \$339.2 million in funding to the EPA since 2017–18 to strengthen the EPA's regulatory functions, including responding to community reports and ensuring that they have the resources to crack down on polluters.

We have committed \$13.7 million in this budget to continue our successful VicCoasts initiative, which addresses critical erosion risks, protects marine and coastal assets and supports local communities. The budget also provides almost \$4 million for the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority to continue their important work at this iconic world-class destination. And finally, as the committee would be aware, the budget includes \$200 million to support the transition out of native timber harvesting by 1 January 2024. We acknowledge the difficulty of this situation for workers, their families and communities, and this package includes funding to secure forest contractors for the immediate 2023–24 fire season while work gets underway to secure longer term arrangements to support land and fire management activities led by DEECA. The government will also establish an advisory panel to consider and make recommendations to government on the areas of our forests that qualify for further protections and areas suitable for recreational opportunities and opportunities for the management of public land by traditional owners.

In summary, this is a budget that delivers on our election commitments and funds crucial initiatives that build on our government's strong investment in our natural environment, fire prevention and biodiversity conservation. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. The first set of questions are going to go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. But I am actually going to go to the Secretary Mr Bradley. In May 2023 it was revealed in the *Herald Sun* that one of the Andrews government's signature climate action schemes gave away millions of dollars in carbon credits to companies that installed water heaters that failed to deliver the energy efficiency they promised. What oversight mechanisms did the government have in place for this program, Secretary, and how did they fail so catastrophically?

**John BRADLEY:** Thank you for the question, but I am afraid that is within the climate action portfolio.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you have no interest in it?

**John BRADLEY:** Sorry, Member, I do, but it just falls within the estimates hearings of the climate action portfolio that has previously been considered.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Well, then, I will go to Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer of Parks Victoria, if he could perhaps come up to the table. This is budget paper 3, page 29, and the questionnaire from the department about performance measures. Mr Jackson, thank you. It notes the performance measure:

Area treated to minimise the impact of pest plants, pest animals and over abundant native animals in parks managed by Parks Victoria

So noting this performance measure, how much was spent on controlling noxious weeds in Victoria's national parks or is budgeted to be spent this year and the next financial year?

**Matthew JACKSON:** Thank you for the question. The question relates to one on the pest animals and plants, so we work in very close consideration and partnership with the department to fund all of our pest animal and plant programs, including feral horses – right through that – through to the biodiversity division of the department. The successful programs we have run over the last 12 months have been funded specifically out of the bushfire 2019–20 programs, which are coming to fruition at the end of this year. I do not have the breakdown between the amount of budget for pest animals and plants right through to budget for weeds, but note that we do have agreements in place and our whole program is around \$22 million for conservation programs per year for Parks Victoria. That does include pest animals and plants, urban weed programs and all of our conservation programs.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So can you get that detail for me, Mr Jackson?

**Ingrid STITT:** Can I give that detail to you now, Mrs McArthur?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Oh, lovely, Minister.

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you. Obviously there is important work that Parks Victoria undertake in this area. We know that we need to continue to take strong action when it comes to invasive species management in Victoria, and I think that –

**Bev McARTHUR:** So the amount, Minister?

**Ingrid STITT:** something that we can probably all agree is that this is the biggest threat to biodiversity that we face as a state. So the department as well as Parks Victoria, in partnership with a number of other agencies, including our catchment management authorities and local government and land managers –

**Bev McARTHUR:** How much has your department spent, Minister?

**Ingrid STITT:** We have demonstrated our commitment to protecting our biodiversity by investing over \$30 million this current financial year into activities that impact and reduce the impacts of pests and weeds. There are a number of different programs, Ms McArthur, including the weeds and pests on public land program; the Good Neighbour program, which is about where landowners are making their best efforts but have a neighbour that is not –

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Ingrid STITT:** so the seed is all blowing over their boundary; the roadside weeds and pests program, which I am sure you are a passionate supporter of, Mrs McArthur; the peri-urban weed –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Can we have the details, Minister?

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, let me be clear when I say this: the minister is comprehensively answering your question. If you would like to hear the answer to your question, please give the minister the courtesy of allowing a response.

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you, Chair. As I was saying, Mrs McArthur, we have got a range of different programs that are really targeted in relation to invasive species management and weeds across the state. It includes the peri-urban weed management partnership, which is important that we work with our local government and land management partners on; the pest and weed projects within the protecting biodiversity program; the deer control program, which I am sure you would agree is an absolute priority given that there are,

we estimate, around one million wild deer in Victoria who are having a fairly devastating impact on our public land estate –

**Bev McARTHUR:** How much was spent on that, Minister?

**Ingrid STITT:** As I was saying, we have invested over \$30 million this financial year. With respect to the deer control strategy, we have invested over \$18 million over four years. This is all part of our deer strategy, which has a number of different strands to it, depending on the particular area that we are focusing control measures on. There are the east and west deer control plans, which we have just recently released. That is in respect to those unique areas of the east and west that have had significant damage from feral species of deer. There is also the *Peri-urban Deer Control Plan 2021*, which was released in March of 2022. So we have got a comprehensive plan in place and significant investment across all of those different programs that I have just described to you that are all about trying to mitigate the risks posed by invasive species and weeds. Of course we know that we have also got issues that we are dealing with in respect to wild pigs, feral horses – the list goes on. This is something that I am absolutely committed, as the environment minister, to continuing to have a strong focus on in terms of our protection of biodiversity. I also know that my colleague the Minister for Agriculture is very much focused on the programs within the agriculture portfolio that work alongside the programs that I have just described in my portfolio to really make sure that there is a whole-of-government approach on our land.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Jackson.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mrs McArthur. The time is up. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister; good afternoon, officials. Thank you for joining us. Minister, I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, table 1.9 on page 28, which refers to half-price camping fees. Could you please describe for the committee a little bit more about this initiative and how this will benefit Victorians.

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you, Mr Galea, and thank you for that question. It is a really fantastic government initiative. We know that in Victoria we just have so many incredible places in our state that we want to make sure people have every opportunity to visit and appreciate. I think we can all agree that access to open space is incredibly important for people's wellbeing and their health, both physical and mental. It gives an opportunity for individuals and families to really get some outdoor experiences that they will cherish. I think it is also about making sure that people who might be doing it fairly tough at the moment because of cost-of-living pressures have still got the opportunity to get out there and enjoy the great outdoors.

I think there are also some significant economic and social benefits to this policy. We know that during COVID-19 we saw a real surge in community demand for additional open spaces and access to time in nature, so we are really committed to making sure that we have got affordable recreational activities available to support that desire for people to get out and about in the great outdoors. I am really proud that we have invested, in this year's budget, \$3.9 million to continue our government's half-price camping fees initiative. This means that Victorians will have access to half-price camping for a further 12 months, making camping more affordable and getting more Victorians out into nature, which is the best kind of investment that we can make in this area.

It is not just important for families. We know that camping and recreation in Victoria's national parks and state forests is worth about \$2.1 billion per year to our economy, so it is incredibly important in terms of the economic activity that it generates. It supports over 20,400 jobs around the state as well, so this is one of those policies where for a reasonably modest outlay we are seeing really significant benefits. We expect that the increase in visitation will generate approximately \$13.2 million in economic output for the Victorian economy plus an additional \$9.5 million in value-added expenditure, with visitors spending approximately \$176 per night. That is a significant boost for our regions that rely on tourism and ecotourism. As you can see, we have taken some time to actually work out the benefits of this policy over and above the obvious benefits of people being able to enjoy our fantastic natural assets.

That builds on the budget allocation that we made in 2018, where we invested \$12 million over four years for a half-price camping fee initiative as part of the Victoria's Great Outdoors commitment to make Victorian national and state parks accessible and affordable for the whole community. As part of this, it is not just half-

price camping that is improving how people are accessing our national parks. Over the last four years the Victorian government has invested over \$106 million towards Victoria's Great Outdoors program, so that is a terrific added benefit. We have our \$16 million to cut camp site fees in national parks by up to half, all year round. We have built 30 new campgrounds and upgraded more than 30 others to provide much greater opportunity for people to visit the great outdoors, and that was an investment of \$44.6 million, and \$10.5 million to upgrade seven iconic four-wheel drive tracks across the state, including the Wonnangatta Drive in the Alpine National Park and Grampians Drive in the Grampians National Park. I know that people are very passionate in the four-wheel drive community about getting out into nature, and I have spoken with a number of four-wheel drive representatives who talk very passionately about caring for the environment as well as exercising their great passion for driving four-wheel drives on our park infrastructure.

We have also invested \$4.3 million to build and upgrade hiking tracks across the state for those that might prefer on-foot activities. That is including in the Otways at Stevensons Falls and the Keppel Lookout Trail at Marysville. These are all beautiful parts of our state, and no matter where you live, you are going to be able to access these areas at a discounted rate. We have of course also awarded \$6.6 million in caravan and camping grants across three grant rounds, with 45 projects already completed and acquitted out of 63 that were funded. I just think that overall this is a wonderful initiative. It is something that I know will be taken up with gusto by communities right across the state. Whether you live in the city or whether you live in regional Victoria, I know there are going to be many, many more opportunities for camping and getting out into the great outdoors and, most importantly, doing that in a way that supports people with the cost of living at a time when really we need to think of all the sorts of different ways in which we can do that.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The next 7 minutes are going to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Mr Jackson, the Barmah Strategic Action Plan, released in February 2020, says:

The feral horse population will be surveyed annually ... to track population numbers.

Have these surveys been completed? When will they be publicly released? How many animals have you removed to be rehomed, and how many have you culled?

**Matthew JACKSON:** Thank you for the question, Mrs McArthur. I can answer your first question about the surveys. If you refer to our website, we do have the surveys up from 2018 through to 2021 for the Barmah and Alpine national parks. Unfortunately, during COVID in 2020 we could not do any surveys, as you would expect, due to protocols and processes. They are on our website. Barmah is a current report coming too. We have finished that, and it will be coming out shortly. But as for 2018, 2019 and 2021, they are on our website.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many horses have been removed for rehoming, and how many have been culled?

**Matthew JACKSON:** I will not go into details of the full program, for the health and safety of our staff, Mrs McArthur, but I will state that in the recent storms 120 horses were euthanised for cultural heritage protection and/or removal from the park under equine vets' analysis. Thirty-three horses were rehomed – and successfully rehomed – to programs in Barmah and the local community. Unfortunately, a further 21 were trapped and declined by the community due to the sex or age of the horse, which means they had to be released back into the park.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Thank you, Mr Jackson. Starving horses trapped on high land during the flooding in the Barmah were fed by helicopter hay drops on the grounds of animal welfare. Well done. Can you inform us whether these actions are or have been the subject of any complaint or investigation by groups which claim the actions contravened Aboriginal heritage or conservation laws?

**Ingrid STITT:** Perhaps, Mrs McArthur, it might be more appropriate for me to answer that question for you. I am aware that there have been some concerns expressed, in respect to some of the emergency measures that were put in place, by Yorta Yorta nations. They were very concerned about some of the cultural sites in the Barmah National Park. Since resuming management of the area in the aftermath of those floods, Parks Victoria have been continuing to work closely with Yorta Yorta on the joint management plan for the Barmah National Park. We have got a strong commitment, our government, to self-determination by traditional owners. By way of context and background, the decision to feed these feral horses was made by the multi-agency incident

control centre, which was managing the response to the flood emergency, and they took that action following veterinary advice. That was in accordance with the incident control centre's plan that was being executed during those floods. There was a –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Is this subject to any legal action, Minister, at the moment – that action?

**Ingrid STITT:** Well, not that I am aware of, Mrs McArthur. But what I can tell you is that I have had direct discussions with Yorta Yorta, who have raised this issue with me, and since hearing about their concerns I have tasked my department with working with Emergency Management Victoria to make sure that we have got supports in place for incident control centres so that we can embed that designated Aboriginal perspective to advise on matters related to cultural values when we are dealing with a very live emergency situation. I am sure you would appreciate that these decisions are made in the height of an emergency and all care is always taken to try to get the emergency response that is appropriate. But I have taken on board the concerns that Yorta Yorta have given me, and I think that what we will see going forward is a much more robust system within our emergency incident centres. I think it is really important right across the portfolio to make sure that we are taking into account the views of traditional owners.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Good. Can I now go to Mr Miezis, the Chief Executive Officer of Environment Protection Authority, DEECA. I am sorry to drag you back again, sir. The Minister for Commonwealth Games Delivery told us yesterday that she had been working with the EPA on the contaminated soil at the old saleyards site in Ballarat and that you would have all the information, so can you tell us when you started looking at that site in Ballarat and what remediation is underway? How long will it take? Where will the contaminated product go? What will it cost, and are you responsible for the cost? Is the EPA responsible?

**Lee MIEZIS:** I will start at the last question there. No, EPA is not responsible. Our role is to make sure that the standards are met by those that are responsible. We have had long-term involvement in that site. It has been under long-term management by the City of Ballarat. Since it has been proposed as a Commonwealth Games site, we are currently assessing documentation that has been provided to us by Development Victoria, but we have not completed that assessment as yet.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So do you think the site will be suitable for the construction of houses?

**Lee MIEZIS:** We are still working through that assessment.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How long will it take, do you think?

**Lee MIEZIS:** We are expecting to have that assessment completed by the end of this month.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How long do you think it would take to remediate the soil, in your experience?

**Lee MIEZIS:** I think we would be speculating as to the exact issues, and there are different ways that you can do it. Our real interest is making sure that risks are controlled, and there are different ways that you can control those risks, which do not necessarily always mean remediation of the site.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So would some of those remediation issues require less invasive groundwork, for instance?

**Lee MIEZIS:** It could. Again, we are still working through the details of what is being proposed in terms of the assessments that have been undertaken but equally the mitigations that are being looked at.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Where would you take the contaminated soil in these instances?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. The time is up. We will go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. Budget paper 3, page 145, sets out some departmental objectives, and underneath the 'Healthy, resilient and biodiverse environment' objective is the output for 'Waste and recycling'. How do you see the government's investment in waste and recycling as contributing to protecting the environment?



**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you for that question, Ms Kathage – it is an important one – and thank you for your strong interest in this area of the government’s work. We know that Victorians are incredibly passionate about reducing waste and recycling whenever they can, and that is one of the reasons why our government has made a landmark investment of \$515 million to absolutely transform the way that we manage waste and recycling in our state. It is the most significant investment by any government in Victoria’s history, but it is necessary investment so that we can ensure that we can reduce by 80 per cent waste diverted to landfill by 2030. I think that one of the things that is really important in this policy area is to have very clear and strong commitments and goals around changing the way that we manage waste, always thinking about how we can reduce, re-use and recycle in whatever sort of stream we are talking about.

One of the key ways that we are overhauling our waste and recycling is by rolling out our standardised four-bin system to all Victorian households, and in the 2020–21 budget we made a significant investment of more than \$300 million to deliver *Recycling Victoria: A New Economy*, which is our 10-year policy for a circular economy transition in our state. One of the key commitments of the policy is to change the way that Victorians recycle, starting in the home. This is the first standardised four-bin system of any jurisdiction in Australia, and it is incredibly important because we know through very close consultation with operators in this sector that separating glass from mixed recycling protects those valuable materials from contaminating one another and ensures that they can be used again to make new products and, equally as important, are kept out of landfill to protect our precious environment. But saving the materials from landfill can really only make a difference if we actually have the capacity here in Victoria to sort and recycle and process those materials. That is why we have also awarded more than \$127 million in grants to Victorian waste and recycling infrastructure projects, which has resulted in almost 1.5 million tonnes of new resource recovery infrastructure. These are incredibly important investments to make sure that as we do overhaul the whole waste and recycling system, including the four-bin system, that our facilities that receive this material have got the capacity to sort it properly and recover the value of those recycled products.

The investment includes \$54.4 million for the Circular Economy Infrastructure Fund, which is supporting businesses to invest in infrastructure to sort and reprocess recyclables for re-use in manufacturing, something I know that a number of my cabinet colleagues are very passionate about in terms of our state’s manufacturing capacity and looking at new markets; and \$30.5 million for the recycling markets acceleration package, which provides grants to enable research, investment and innovation targeting infrastructure, packaging and recycling streams. I was at an environment ministers meeting just last week where we made some important announcements around really pushing the next phase of innovation around packaging to reduce the amount of plastics and contamination that is in our packaging systems in Australia at the moment. It is really, I think, an exciting time in terms of the commitment by both the Commonwealth and all the other states and territories to all work together to push in that direction. We have also invested \$11.5 million for infrastructure to manage hazardous waste, protecting the community from illegal chemical stockpiles; \$10 million for the Circular Economy Business Support Fund and a further \$3 million for the Circular Economy Innovation Fund.

The projects that we funded through these grants include new and upgraded infrastructure, as I have said. They improve the recovery of a number of different products, including glass; tyres, which is another problematic product that we need to find more solutions for how we re-use those products at scale; organics – of course we have got our FOGO collection system that will come online, and many, many councils are already collecting food and organic waste and will continue to roll out that additional bin; and textiles, which is another area that I know the federal minister is very passionate about tackling. I think one of the by-products of having kind of a fast fashion supply chain around the world is the outrageous amount of textile waste that we are producing across the world. There is a real commitment to tackle that as well. Paper and cardboard and plastics is another area of particular focus for our waste and recycling reforms and investments, because we know that these are pretty harmful and do not break down easily.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will go to the Deputy Chair.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you. My question is for the Chief Executive for the EPA. I have asked the question about this previously, so I am sure you are aware of it. The Heatherdale Road waste transfer facility, operated by a company called Recycal – I have asked previously about what has been stored there. It was subject to an incident back in April 2021, from memory. I am just wondering whether you can provide an update in terms of any measures or any involvement by EPA at that site. I know, in particular, locals in my area

have had a long-held concern for the area and for that particular site, and I am including of course the Heatherdale Community Action Group in that as well.

**Lee MIEZIS:** The site is well known to EPA. We have been, obviously, actively regulating to make sure of compliance with our environmental protection laws over time, and we have also been engaging fairly closely with that local community.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Is it presently compliant? I suppose that is my concern, because the last response I had indicated to me that perhaps they were not compliant – that the EPA were working with them. Would that be a fair summary?

**Lee MIEZIS:** I would have to confirm. I will have to take on notice whether or not all of the active notices have been complied with or the due date is still at a point in the future.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I would be most appreciative if you could do that – provide both the notices but also the dates they are required to comply. That would at least give my community some sense of certainty going forward.

Minister, just very briefly – and then I wish to hand over to Danny O’Brien – something that struck me when I was speaking to fire officers across the state, but locally in Box Hill and Eltham recently, is the concern about the built environment, which goes to your portfolio eventually, because at some point if a place is destroyed by fire or it is just destroyed naturally and it goes into landfill, the materials we are using increasingly have so many toxins in them, like the modern-day benchtops, for example. Has your portfolio started to look at work in terms of what we are using in our construction of modern-day houses, or industrial sites or commercial sites, and whether we should actually be turning our mind to whether we should be allowing some of these materials for the benefit of fire safety for the fire officers involved but also for the community, obviously?

**Ingrid STITT:** There is a bit in that, but I do not think it all falls within my portfolio responsibilities other than to say that obviously the EPA have a strong role in making sure that the general duties under the environment protection legislative framework are being complied with by all businesses and organisations across the state. Sometimes the EPA will get involved in issues around building and construction and products and safety, but I think that is something that is more about the standards of materials that are used in construction.

In respect of the part of your question about our forest firefighters, I know that the health and safety of our FFMVic personnel is absolutely paramount. I mean, these are incredible people who put themselves in harm’s way to protect the community right across our public land estate, and we will continue to do whatever we need to do to make sure that their health and safety are absolutely paramount, not only in the equipment that we provide for them but in terms of the situations that they are placed in. I know that there are very strong protocols in place for how we manage forest fires, but I think some of the parts of your question might be better directed to some of the ministers that have got responsibility for, you know, products and safety and construction.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Thanks, Minister. Can I ask a question to Mr Jackson, please, if he could come back? Perhaps to Mr Miezis while he is coming, rather than you disappearing, a quick question on Lemon Springs: has the EPA identified any contamination of the underlying groundwater at Lemon Springs? But perhaps get Mr Jackson in with someone else while you answer that question. I am running out of time.

**Lee MIEZIS:** Sorry, what was the –

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Have you identified any contamination of groundwater?

**Lee MIEZIS:** Have we found any?

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Yes.

**Lee MIEZIS:** We have had continuous monitoring and have not determined any groundwater contamination, but that monitoring will need to continue beyond the clean-up, so we will continue to do that. I think we have got about 50 monitoring sites across the property.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Great. Thank you. Mr Jackson, you will recall at the previous outcomes hearings 18 months ago I asked you about the Thurra River bridge replacement. Has that gone out to tender yet?

**Matthew JACKSON:** Can I just refer that to the Deputy Secretary?

**Ingrid STITT:** I am happy to have a go at that if you like.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I do not want to have a go at it, I just want to know: has it gone out to tender yet?

**Ingrid STITT:** I know this is a project that you are very familiar with, Mr O'Brien. You have asked –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, I have got very limited time, and this is a really important issue that I am pretty cranky about. I just want to know: has it gone out to tender?

**Ingrid STITT:** The information that I have is that I believe it has gone out for tender.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Mr Jackson, can you confirm? I got told 18 months ago, Minister and Mr Jackson, that this is a priority – 'The bridge is going to tender,' 'a complex design'.

**Ingrid STITT:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** 'I can assure you that it is ready to go out,' 'working with the roading department'.

**Ingrid STITT:** One of the issues with respect to this project, Mr O'Brien, is that the complexities around the fact –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I have heard all that, Minister.

**Ingrid STITT:** The course of the river has changed.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** We are now 3½ years since the bushfires, and this little community of Thurra River and Croajingolong – so impacting Cann River and Orbost, which you are now destroying through shutting down the timber industry – is still waiting for this bridge to be fixed. Has it gone to tender, and when will it be built?

**Ingrid STITT:** Okay. I am in the process of answering your question. Recently DEECA completed the preconstruction planning phase.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I got told that was happening 18 months ago.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, you are waiting for an answer to your question. The minister is trying to answer you.

**Ingrid STITT:** That includes regulatory approvals, engineering investigations and a new cultural heritage management plan. I understand that this is incredibly complex work, and I think that you appreciate that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, I have got 30 seconds to go. When is the bridge going to be rebuilt?

**Ingrid STITT:** Construction is currently estimated to be completed by late 2025 is the advice that I have.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. The cabins at Cape Conran likewise still have not started. Can you tell me when they are going to be rebuilt?

**Ingrid STITT:** In respect to Cape Conran, I know that there have been assessments made. There are, as you appreciate –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Chair, can I take a point of order, please?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, on a point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On a point of order, I just need to get this on record, Minister, and it is a point of order because it relates to the evidence that we are being provided at these hearings. This is just disgraceful, Minister, and can I please ask you to intervene to get these jobs done. You have got bloody dog parks getting done in the city, you have got dozens of parks being done in the city, yet this little bridge and a campground in the country – five years it is going to take to rebuild it. Can I please ask you to have the respect to the committee and the people in East Gippsland and get it done.

**Ingrid STITT:** I have got an enormous amount of respect for people in your community, Mr O'Brien, and I am very mindful of the enormous amount of recovery work that is underway right across the state, including in those areas impacted by recent floods in your communities. And on top of that, they are already communities that were significantly impacted through the 2019–20 bushfire event, so I am absolutely cognisant of the need to get this work done. But I –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, with respect, Minister, there is no way the city would put up with this delay. This is just ridiculous.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, there is a point of order. We are moving on. Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this afternoon. I might move to budget paper 3, page 28, and in particular around the 'Environment and biodiversity' line items that are in the budget. I am just trying to understand how the budget will help protect the state's precious biodiversity but particularly in reference to the *Biodiversity 2037* targets.

**Ingrid STITT:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. It is a very important issue and something that I am very committed to continuing the good work of my predecessor on. You would be aware that we have our *Biodiversity 2037* policy, which sets out a really important road map for how we will protect our precious biodiversity and also recover our biodiversity across the state. We are committed to the protection and conservation right across Victoria. We have demonstrated that by both our investment and our action. I think it is important to always remember that we have invested over \$582 million in the biodiversity space since we came to government in 2014. In 2017 the previous minister for the environment the Honourable Lily D'Ambrosio released *Biodiversity 2037*. It is a 20-year plan to halt the decline of our biodiversity and improve outcomes for our precious threatened species. It is a really important long-term vision for the state, and it sets out two overarching goals, the first being that Victorians value nature and that Victoria's natural environment is healthy.

Biodiversity in all its components of the living world – the number and the variety of native plants, animals and other living things across our land, our rivers, our coastal areas and our oceans – is a top priority for our government. This budget, on top of the previous long-term investment, continues to demonstrate our commitment. We have invested over \$22 million in this year's budget to contribute to supporting our state's biodiversity and natural environment. That includes \$2.1 million to continue our protecting our faunal emblems program, which is a wonderful program. I had the very great privilege recently of joining some of our wonderful Parks Vic and Healesville Sanctuary staff out in the Yarra Ranges to release a number of threatened helmeted honeyeaters, which was a very amazing event to be part of. They are very clever people, the people at Healesville and Parks Vic. They have managed to get our population in the wild up to 200 helmeted honeyeaters just through really fabulous research and breeding within Healesville and then releasing those birds into the wild. It is amazing work and really important work.

There is over \$7.4 million to protect our parks, pets and wildlife through the animal welfare package in the budget and over \$2 million to take our coastlines and coastal ecosystems and make them more resilient for the future. And I think I mentioned in my presentation that we are investing \$11 million in Serendip Sanctuary and the You Yongs to enhance and protect this natural and cultural precinct for future generations. And there are very important partnerships with conservation organisations involved in that particular project.

The budget outcomes contributing to protecting the biodiversity, for this budget, are on top of the \$60 million in ongoing funding for the 2023–24 year flowing from previous budget allocations. So it is important to remember that we have continued to build on that funding and the programs are ongoing in 2023–24. There are a number of programs that I have already mentioned in an answer to a previous question from the committee about our

landscape-scale weed and pest projects across the state to control and limit the spread of invasive species. We know that probably the single biggest threats to biodiversity are feral animals, invasive species and weeds. The programs include a number of important deliveries of pest management programs. I have already mentioned the peri-urban weed partnership for weeds and pests on public land. The program has been running since 2005, and it operates as a collaborative partnership between more than 36 partners and stakeholders, including, importantly, traditional owners and also some of our other government agencies, including the Arthur Rylah Institute, Melbourne Water, our local government partners and catchment management authorities, universities, community organisations and of course our wonderful environmental volunteer groups, who do such incredible work for no reward financially. They do it because they are absolutely committed to making a difference to their local communities and the precious environments that they enjoy.

We know, as I was speaking to earlier, that deer are impacting our state's biodiversity in terms of water quality, public safety, agriculture and indeed Aboriginal cultural heritage. So the deer program is a very important program delivered as a way of protecting our biodiversity. We released that strategy in 2020 as a first step of a quite comprehensive plan. Within that strategy there is a control framework, which guides and coordinates and is adaptive for local conditions.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will go to Ms Sandell.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, I would also like to ask about biodiversity but this time about cuts to biodiversity programs in the budget. BP3, page 145, shows that the environment and biodiversity section has been cut by more than 22 per cent, and we are not just talking about bushfire programs that are ending, we are talking about cuts to core environmental programs, among a range of other cuts to environment programs. You would be well aware that the last state of the environment report said that our biodiversity is poor and declining across all our indicators in Victoria. Given these cuts, I want to ask: are we still on track to meet the targets in *Biodiversity 2037*?

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you for your question, Ms Sandell. It is obviously a very important area of the work that I as minister but also so many different organisations across the state are contributing to. The *Biodiversity 2037* plan is tracking as we would expect, but I think that we can never rest on our laurels, and we need to make sure that the programs that we are delivering are targeted in the right areas. We obviously have a focus on taking a risk-based assessment, targeting our programs where there are the highest levels of biodiversity value and making sure that we are protecting those particularly critical high-conservation areas, which I think –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Have any of the targets been cut?

**Ingrid STITT:** I was just about to get to that part of your question. I do not accept your characterisation about the way in which the budget is framed. I think I have in a couple of answers already today reflected on the fact that the \$22 million allocated in the budget around support to biodiversity and our native wildlife is only part of the picture. There is an additional \$60 million in ongoing funding that flows from the previous budget in ongoing funding for at least 17 individual biodiversity-focused projects –

**Ellen SANDELL:** I appreciate that.

**Ingrid STITT:** including many that I have already gone through about tackling introduced species and weeds –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you. You have mentioned that. I have got very limited time –

**Ingrid STITT:** I know that, but I want to give justice to –

**Ellen SANDELL:** and I do want to ask some specific questions, Minister, such as: why hasn't there been a progress report on *Biodiversity 2037*? There has not been a progress report since 2020. Why is that?

**Ingrid STITT:** We will continue to report against *Biodiversity 2037*.

**Ellen SANDELL:** But there has not been one.

**Ingrid STITT:** There is no issue with doing that. I think it is important that we are tracking how we are going.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Will there be a report this year?

**Ingrid STITT:** We will be reporting against *Biodiversity 2037*.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Have any of the targets in the strategy been cut? We have heard rumours that the department does not feel they can meet the targets, there is not enough funding and therefore the targets will be removed. Is that true?

**Ingrid STITT:** Well, we want to make sure that we are taking the time to ensure the accuracy of the report. I am not in the business of ticking the box; I am in the business of making sure that, because of the myriad of different partners that we work with across the state to deliver on these programs, we are taking all of the information required from them to report transparently on how we are going with *Biodiversity 2037*.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Core environmental programs have been cut, so what are those environmental programs that have been cut?

**Ingrid STITT:** I do not accept that.

**Ellen SANDELL:** It says in the budget that there –

**Ingrid STITT:** There have been some lapsing programs, which we have actually fully implemented. They were always going to be a time-based set of programs. There were 17 bushfire recovery projects –

**Ellen SANDELL:** They are core environmental programs.

**Ingrid STITT:** previously funded through the program that are now completed because they were –

**Ellen SANDELL:** I appreciate that, but I am not talking about them. I am talking about that it specifically it says the reduction in funding is due to cuts in core environmental programs, so what are those core environmental programs that no longer exist?

**Ingrid STITT:** There is a reduction of \$7.2 million relating to the distribution of corporate-related activities, which is spread across all of the outputs. I am not sure that I accept the way in which you are framing your question. There is also \$8 million of reduction based on successful completion of recovery works, which I was just about to get into –

**Ellen SANDELL:** I am not asking about that. I appreciate that.

**Ingrid STITT:** where immediate recovery requirements have already been completed. So I do not think we should be criticised for getting work done –

**Ellen SANDELL:** That is a separate thing, though.

**Ingrid STITT:** that we said was going to be done within a certain period of time. That is not as you describe it. That is a program that has been fully delivered.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Okay. That is not what I was referring to, but I will refer to another specific matter that has been cut, as I understand it. So we had a Nature Fund, which was given \$10 million last year. It is a fund to do conservation work on private land. New South Wales and Queensland have similar funds that are in the order of \$60 million–\$70 million a year. We had a one-off fund for \$10 million but now there is no further funding. So is that program being wound up – it will not be funded into the future?

**Ingrid STITT:** Not at all, and I do not accept the way that you are just cherrypicking one particular biodiversity program.

**Ellen SANDELL:** But it is one. I understand there are other programs. I am just specifically asking about this program, though.

**Ingrid STITT:** Well, if you can let me answer, you have asked me the question. You have asked me the question, and I am –

**The CHAIR:** Ms Sandell, the minister is keen to answer your question. Please let her proceed.

**Ellen SANDELL:** I am sure she is. If she answers it, I will be very happy. I am not interested in other programs, though, Minister. I am interested in this program.

**Ingrid STITT:** No, no, but you are cherrypicking one biodiversity program –

**Ellen SANDELL:** No, I am asking about one program, Minister.

**Ingrid STITT:** without any acknowledgement of the other significant programs that are in place. The \$10 million Nature Fund is to support those high-impact projects that I was talking about earlier that go towards the *Biodiversity 2037* goals. The fact is that this is a really innovative program and –

**Ellen SANDELL:** But it has got no funding.

**Ingrid STITT:** I have got every intention of continuing it.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Okay. So is the architecture going to stay there?

**Ingrid STITT:** For the \$10 million that the government invested in the Nature Fund initially, \$23 million of private investment has flowed through that.

**Ellen SANDELL:** I appreciate that. I like it. That is why I am asking about whether it will get funded in future or is it being wound up? Because you need the architecture there presumably to enable it to continue. So is it being wound up or is it continuing?

**Ingrid STITT:** Of course it is not being wound up.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Okay. Great.

**Ingrid STITT:** It is not being wound up at all.

**Ellen SANDELL:** That is all you needed to say.

**Ingrid STITT:** Well, all you needed to do was allow me to actually answer the question.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Point of order, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur on a point of order.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Chair, I take exception to the minister suggesting that our colleague here is cherrypicking questions. She is entitled to ask, I would have thought, whatever question she likes to ask on the portfolio at hand. It is totally disingenuous of the minister to say she has to incorporate every aspect of the area that she is talking about in her question. So Ms Sandell should have had a full range.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I understand your point of order. Mr Hilakari on the point of order.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am not sure if there was a point of order, but if there was it is that people can ask questions, the committee members can ask questions, and those witnesses can answer those questions in the manner that they choose – if there was indeed a point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On the point of order, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** What an interesting afternoon. Mr O'Brien on the point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, it is one day to go and we are all getting cranky, and the original point of order is absolutely right. What we are getting very frustrated with is ministers saying, 'Thank you for your question. I'd like to answer this question.' And if you do not like us interrupting and bringing the minister or the witness back to the question, then remove the time limit and we will let them talk all day. But when we ask a specific question and a witness says, 'Thank you. I'll answer something else,' that is when we are getting cranky about it. Chair, that is what we need to actually be – on the job. When we have got limited time, ministers and witnesses should answer the question at hand, not the question they would like to answer.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. On the point of order, members are allowed to ask the questions they wish to ask, but also the minister is responding to the question that you asked, Ms Sandell. The fact that you do not like her answer – I cannot direct the minister to provide you an answer that you like. There is no point of order. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, I would like to ask you about a topic that is very important to all Victorians but especially regional Victorians and those of us in outer suburban areas, and that is bushfire preparedness. I understand in budget paper 3, page 28, table 1.9, there is a line item 'Bolstering the forest firefighting workforce'. Minister, could you please outline how this and other initiatives will support our firefighters to keep us safe, especially with what many are expecting to be a very dry summer approaching?

**Ingrid STITT:** Yes. It is an excellent question. Thank you for that, Mr Galea. The acknowledgement that I want to make from the outset is the incredible work that our Forest Fire Management Victoria team does. I am very proud of the work that they do. FFMVic are a partnership between DEECA, Parks Victoria, VicForests and Melbourne Water. They do amazing work to keep our communities safe, and our uniquely skilled forest firefighters are an integral part of our response to bushfires and other major emergencies, including of course the significant role that they played during the devastating storms of 2021 and the flood events that we have seen over the last couple of years. FFMVic is regularly called on to assist nationally and internationally with emergency management, and that is highly relevant at the moment because we have got a contingent of our forest firefighters over in Canada supporting firefighters over there. I would think probably we have all seen the footage on the news of the devastating bushfires in Canada, and the frightening thing about it is it is the very beginning of their fire season over there. It just gives you an idea of the impact that climate change is having on the way in which our emergency services have to plan and respond, and I could not be prouder of the role that FFMVic and the team play.

During the summer FFMVic have over 3000 personnel with an emergency management role so they are ready to respond. They are based right across Victoria so that incident control centres and regional control centres can be on the ground working with communities as quickly as possible in emergency situations. They obviously work very closely with the CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria and other emergency services to prepare for and respond to bushfire on public land. We have invested in this budget \$36.5 million to bolster the forest-firefighting workforce. This will fund and allow 50 short-term contract forest firefighters to transition to ongoing full-time roles, ensuring public land is better protected from the threat of bushfire, and an additional 54 short-term roles will also continue in 2023–24.

So I think that is a demonstration of our government's commitment to continuing to make sure that communities that live in and around our bushfire-prone areas have got very significant support in place through the FFMVic team. That allows the team to expand its bushfire risk reduction program, including more mechanical fuel reduction through mowing, slashing and mulching. \$3.76 million will be invested to maintain our nation-leading 1447 kilometres of strategic fuel breaks, on top of additional funds as part of the \$200 million package to support forestry transition, including for the delivery of an additional 34 kilometres of strategic fuel breaks. This will enhance our ability to manage bushfire risk right across the landscape and keep forestry contractors employed. It builds on significant funding provided in previous budgets, and I am very confident in FFMVic's preparedness for the upcoming fire season. I think that one thing we are very mindful of is that we appear to be moving into a much drier period after a couple of years of relatively benign fire seasons. I do not think that that will be the case ongoing, so it is very important that we have the resources in place that we need.

It is probably important also to mention the Safer Together strategy, which is a whole-of-sector and whole-of-government approach to bushfire management founded on community partnerships and using the best available science and technology to target bushfire management actions to where they can do the most to reduce the risk



to our communities right across the state. Safer Together is a key component of our government's strategy to reduce bushfire risk in a rapidly changing climate, and our ongoing funding commitment to these programs helps keep communities safe. I have had the very great pleasure of –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Point of order, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Minister. There is a point of order.

**Bev McARTHUR:** The minister is clearly reading from her document. Perhaps you could save Hansard the time and just table it and we can read it tomorrow.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, I know it has been a long couple of weeks. The break is coming. The minister is not reading from her notes; she is referring to her notes. Minister, please proceed.

**Ingrid STITT:** Thank you, Chair. I was talking about some of the most selfless people in our workforce, Mrs McArthur – people who I have had the absolute privilege to go out and meet in the field, people who put themselves in harm's way time and time again to keep our communities safe. I know that you understand that. I know as a regional MP you understand the importance of making sure that our FFMVic team are properly resourced, and that is what I have been speaking about this afternoon in answer to Mr Galea's question, a very important question. We have –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies for stopping you there, Minister. Minister and department officials, the time has come for the end of questions for this session. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the early childhood and pre-prep portfolio at 2:25 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**