



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. Gavin Pearce MP

Tuesday 2 June 2026

MEMBERS

Rob Fairs MP (Chair)

Hon Josh Willie MP

Vica Bayley MP

George Razay MP

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Mr Di Falco

Ms Finlay

Dr Woodruff

Mr George

Mr Ferguson

Ms Badger

Ms Butler

IN ATTENDANCE

HON. GAVIN PEARCE MP

Minister for Primary Industries and Water, Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

Primary Industries and Water portfolio

Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania

Jason Jacobi

Secretary

Mandy Clarke

A/Deputy Secretary, Primary Industries and Water

(in the room)

David Midson

General Manager (Marine)

Ashley Bastock

General Manager (Agriculture and Water)

Rae Burrows

General Manager (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Justin Helmich

Director (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Deborah McSweyn

Chief Veterinary Officer (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Chris Lyall

Chief Inspector of Primary Produce Safety (Biosecurity Tasmania)

Louise Wilson

Deputy Secretary, Environment, Heritage and Land

Jo Crisp

General Manager (Environment)

Anita Yan

Deputy Chief Operations Officer

Inland Fisheries Services

Ryan Wilkinson

Director (Inland Fisheries)

Veterans' Affairs portfolio

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Melissa Gray

Deputy Secretary Policy and Reform

Jodi Wilcox

Executive Director - Policy and Intergovernmental

Karelle Logan

Manager Transport and Building Services (Previously Senior Program Officer, Veterans' Affairs)

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Primary Industries and Water

The committee met at 3.08 p.m.

CHAIR - (Mr Fairs) - Before we go to questions, I want to remind members of the Order of the House, Establishing Estimates Committees, which provides:

Questions must be relevant to the portfolio and outputs of a particular session.

However, as with other sessions, I will permit broad questions about the minister's role as a member of the Cabinet in relation to the issues of public concern in relation to former minister Ogilvie, if the minister chooses to answer them.

The scrutiny of the Primary Industries and Water portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table, names and positions, please, for the benefit of Hansard.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, committee. To my right I have Jason Jacobi, secretary of Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania (NRE). To his right is Mandy Clarke, the deputy secretary for Primary Industries and Water.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. The time scheduled for the Estimates for the Minister for Primary Industries and Water is four hours. We will take a short break for afternoon tea at 4.30 p.m. Would the minister like to make an opening statement?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee. Tasmania's agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture sectors remain central to our economy, supporting regional communities, driving exports and sustaining thousands of jobs. With the farm gate value now at \$2.83 billion, government is working towards our target of increasing farm gate value to \$10 billion by 2050.

Irrigation underpins our growth and we are continuing to invest in our Tranche Three projects, including Northern Midlands, Sassafras Wesley Vale Augmentation, and the Greater South East.

Biosecurity is vital for our state as we continue to advance key work on animal welfare, traceability systems, invasive species and pests, and statewide rabbit management. This includes a \$2.3 million investment in national resource management bodies, along with targeted funding to tackle invasive weeds.

We're also strengthening Tasmania's living marine resources, including \$1 million investment into Abalone Industry Reinvestment Fund to combat the long-spined urchin. We are providing an additional \$680,000 to strengthen inland fisheries operations and to enhance recreational fishing experiences.

We're taking strong action to reduce wild fallow deer numbers and to cut red tape. Feedback from the Deer Management Policy Review was clear, and that was that more action is needed. And we're delivering it. All landowners will now only require one permit to cull male and female deer year-round. Quotas and tagging will apply to male deer in zone 1, and

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permits will be valid for five years. Restrictions on taking male deer and antlers have been removed, reducing the number of permits from eight to two. Recreational hunters will have expanded opportunities, including taking two stags during the male season in zone 1, while the eight-month antlerless season remains unchanged. In zones 2 and 3, hunters will have a year-round open season with no bag limits or tagging requirements, and we are also removing labelling requirements for deer parts in order to reduce red tape.

We're enabling expanded commercial harvesting opportunities which will create new markets, support farmers, improve environmental outcomes and ensure that carcasses are not wasted.

We're also bringing forward the Tasmanian Deer Management Plan Review. This will include consultation on the status of deer and further measures to return populations to sustainable levels. This consultation is essential in order to protect community safety, to safeguard productive farmland and to ensure that deer numbers are responsibly managed.

Thank you, committee. Thank you, Chair.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, welcome to Estimates. When did you first become aware that Madeleine Ogilvie was party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - I've got a little -

Mr GEORGE - Note, have you?

Mr PEARCE - - note on that one. Here we go. Do you want me to read the whole thing?

Ms FINLAY - Does it give me a date?

Mr PEARCE - I can read that.

Ms FINLAY - We've got a lot of things to cover today, and this is a very simple question, and the question is: when did you first become aware that she was party to a Supreme Court matter? Do your notes have a date?

Mr PEARCE - My notes don't have a date.

Ms FINLAY - Does your memory or your mind or your diary have a date? When did you first become aware?

Mr PEARCE - No. I would have to get back to you on that.

Ms FINLAY - Are you happy to take that on notice?

Mr PEARCE - No. I'm unclear at this time when or where I become available of that information.

Ms FINLAY - So you've looked and you couldn't figure it out? Or you haven't looked?

Mr PEARCE - I am unaware of the time in which I first -

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Ms FINLAY - Have you made any effort to find out, minister?

Mr PEARCE - No.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, you would be aware how important it is that people don't mislead or are not tricky with the truth.

Mr PEARCE - Absolutely.

Ms FINLAY - I appreciate that and I know that those things are important to you. This has been a matter that has been prosecuted now for days. You are before Estimates. You will be well aware that other ministers are being asked, and have answered, this question. My question is to you, minister. Why have you not chosen to confirm when you first found out when minister Ogilvie became party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - And you raise a very good point. The misleading of any parliament proceedings is a serious matter. I am unsure of that - that's why I am not answering, for fear of exactly that - and I will be making no such comment in the future.

Ms FINLAY - Do you appreciate that you're saying that you're fearful of misleading, that you understand the impacts of misleading. However, you have a diary, you have a significant team of people that could actually support you in understanding at which Cabinet meeting you first became aware. I would love you to take the time to ask any of the thousands of people that are in the room today, when did you first find out that former minister Madeleine Ogilvie was party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - I won't be commenting any further on that matter.

Ms FINLAY - Have you done the research? Have you asked? Because here's the thing, minister: it is clear that former minister misled. You know that. Everybody knows that. You know that these things are important. You are a member of Cabinet, and in Cabinet, Cabinet approve these matters, so you will have been party to a decision. Therefore that makes you a party to the misleading. I'm asking you today, when did you first find out that the former minister was party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - And I won't be commenting on that any further.

Ms FINLAY - Did you know before 17 November?

Mr PEARCE - I won't be commenting on that any further.

Ms FINLAY - Were you in the room when Cabinet made that decision?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, the minister's given his answer.

Ms FINLAY - You understand how important this is, minister? You are now becoming party to this by not answering the questions.

Mr PEARCE - I won't be commenting on that any further.

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Ms FINLAY - I expected more from you.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, do you have another question?

Ms FINLAY - I'd like an answer, Chair.

CHAIR - He's given his answer. I can't make him answer, Ms Finlay. You do have one question remaining.

Ms FINLAY - I would have thought you would have protected yourself from this, minister, because it is clear that every member of Cabinet is now tied up in this mess. Every member of Cabinet is now party to the misleading by not answering these questions. I will ask you once more: when did you first find out that former minister Ogilvie was party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - Chair, I refer to your previous ruling.

Ms FINLAY - Hiding. I would expect more from you.

CHAIR - We'll move on. Dr Woodruff.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you, Chair. Thank you for Ms Finlay for asking those questions. I'm going to ask you some questions about the total quantity of florfenicol administered to salmon that's been used in Tasmanian waterways since the emergency permit was granted late last year. What is the quantity, please? I'm also just looking for a number.

Mr PEARCE - I'm going to throw it to the secretary.

Dr WOODRUFF - Who I hope will give us a number. Thank you, minister.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister: I thank the member for the question. For the total amount, the final reports - which aren't the total amount - but the final reports outline the total amount of florfenicol administered over the period of the emergency permit was 3610.5 kilograms.

I'm advised that Huon Aquaculture administered a total of 2710.5 kilograms at the south of Zuidpool Rock leased site, while Tassal administered 233 kilograms at the Meads Creek lease, 320 kilograms at the Stringers Cove lease, and 347 kilograms at the Soldiers Point lease.

Tassal is due to provide the final therapeutants residue monitoring reports for florfenicol treatments administered at the Great Taylors Bay (1 and 2) and Roaring Beach/Redcliffs leases to the EPA by 5 June 2026, and draft reports for The Sheppards and Roberts Point leases are to be submitted by 9 June 2026.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you, minister. So, that is the complete amount of information you have to date, but it's not the total quantity of florfenicol that has been used since the emergency permits, because the Great Taylors Bay and the other lease, that information the department still doesn't have. Is that correct?

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Mr JACOBI - So, the department receives notifications of the intention of companies to administer therapeutants. The challenge for my department is that the amount of therapeutant in the feed is influenced by the fish appetite. Companies must be careful, and are mindful, of not putting medicated feed into the environment if it is not eaten by the fish. The treatments start and completion dates and sites, including maps, are published in real time. But we don't actually have the final reports. The final reports are provided to the Environment Protection Authority (EPA). The final reports contain the verified actual amounts of florfenicol administered under the 14 veterinary medication authorities that were issued between 7 November and 19 January 2026. They're the final reports that I referred to before, but there are further reports that are due to be provided to the EPA in the coming weeks.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. So, I'd like to understand why NRE isn't able to give us that information, all of that information, now. As I understand it, the Chief Veterinary Officer wrote an initial letter of support to the APVMA for the companies' and the government's support for an emergency permit for florfenicol. So, the Chief Veterinary Officer, as I would understand it, has responsibilities for overseeing the use of an antibiotic to livestock. So, can you explain why the CVO - and through the CVO, you - don't have the information today for how much florfenicol has been used?

Mr PEARCE - Secretary, can you run the member through the progressive nature of reporting back from EPA?

Mr JACOBI - I can talk to that. Through you, minister. So, it's very important to ensure that all published information regarding the amount of florfenicol administered to unwell fish is accurate and the public interest data integrity principles are maintained, meaning that the information released must be accurate, reliable, objective, and transparent. This is why the Environmental Protection Authority is the reporting authority for the verified quantity of therapeutants used in salmon aquaculture.

The EPA published reports for each antibiotic treatment, which includes the quantity of florfenicol per treatment - and this is the most important point - after completion of the required therapeutant residue monitoring program. This has been common practice for a considerable period regarding therapeutant treatment in salmon aquaculture.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. I just want to get the final clarification. I still don't understand. As I've been told, members here have been told ad infinitum, the EPA is responsible for pollutants going into the environment. They're responsible for waste and dealing with mortalities in salmon farming. NRE is responsible for livestock management, and responsible for florfenicol, which is an antibiotic going to livestock. I don't understand. What is the role of the CVO in this? Does the CVO get notified of what's going on, or are they completely kept in the dark and this all just something that happens between the salmon companies and their own monitoring and the EPA - which to me seems very inappropriate?

Mr JACOBI - I think, through you, minister, I've already answered the question as best I can. We are notified and the CVO is notified of the intention by companies to apply the treatment, but they are not exact quantities. In order to provide the public with a final exact quantity, we have to await the results of the treatment, which is provided to the EPA to publish.

Dr WOODRUFF - Do you think that's good enough? I mean, as minister, you're responsible for all the other industries.

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CHAIR - Dr Woodruff, next round.

Mr GEORGE - I, too, am puzzled about why you just don't know when a company used florfenicol. They know. The companies know exactly how much florfenicol they've used. Clearly they do because that's what they put in the water. Why they can't report that as it happens, or the day after it happens, is completely beyond me.

The other thing is completely beyond me is how do traces of florfenicol find their way into abalone flesh 14 kilometres away from treatments in diseased salmon farms? Will you also tell me where that was found and what areas are still closed to commercial fishers because of florfenicol traces?

Mr PEARCE - Did you want to go through the current detections for me, Jay?

Mr JACOBI - I think there were a number of questions in there and I'll try to do my best to answer them. When the treatment of florfenicol commenced, we immediately - or my department immediately - implemented a number of harvest area closures. And those closures were in the interests of protecting trade. This is a very important distinction between trade risk and health -

Mr GEORGE - Understood.

Mr JACOBI - Good. I'm glad you understand that. Those closures were extended over the course of the treatment period, depending on where the treatments occurred, and those closures remain in place.

One of the particular areas we are considering reopening because the period of time has passed and the detections are now so low, if not non-existent, that we feel comfortable about reopening that particular harvest area. And I might ask David Midson, the general manager of Marine Resources to come to the table in a minute to explain that.

In terms of, those closures were instituted to protect trade risk. As we gather more intelligence and more data, we will absolutely reopen those closed harvest areas. We intend to do that as soon as we can have absolute confidence there is no longer a trade risk.

I think it's important also to note that the research that has been conducted by my department in partnership with IMAS is groundbreaking research. We will know more about the impact of florfenicol use on wild fish species than I think has been known to date. But this is very much an evolving area of research. We are learning more every day about how particular species take in florfenicol. And that may be, as I understand it, largely attributed to water movement, particularly in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel.

We don't have an absolute answer at this point in time as to why abalone or rock lobster are presenting with residues of florfenicol. But I think it is really important for everybody to understand and appreciate that the levels of florfenicol that are being detected are in the hundredths of milligrams. They are very, very small percentages that are being detected. They pose absolutely no health risk and no environmental risk. But they do raise an important question. It's about how did it get there and why are these particular species taking up this particular antibiotic? The answer to your question is that we don't know exactly why. Maybe David might be able to share a little bit more information. But I can assure you, through IMAS,

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who is our lead research partner in this space, and in partnership with industry, we are working very hard to understand the nature of this particular therapeutant, how it moves and how it transfers through the marine ecosystem. And that is absolutely imperative to know ahead of the salmon industry applying for any further permits from the APVMA.

CHAIR - Just before we continue, I am being very liberal with time limits for everybody. But just for the record, can you introduce the latest person to join us at the table, please, minister?

Mr PEARCE - This is David Midson. He is the general manager, Marine Resources Tasmania (MRT).

CHAIR - Thank you very much, minister. The time has expired on that question. We'll come back.

Mr MIDSON - I'll stay put.

Mr GEORGE - Stay put.

CHAIR - Look, I'm happy to go to the member, but we are 3.31 minutes into the answer, so in lieu of time, even though it is a lengthier hearing, happy to come back. Mr Garland, you have the call.

Mr GARLAND - Thanks, Chair. I want to talk about sardines, minister. Sardines have more potential for the Tasmanian economy than fishmeal and cat food could ever provide. Can you provide the total amount of taxpayer funding spent to date on developing the proposed Tasmanian sardine fishery, including stock assessments, scientific research, consultation, legal advice, policy development and departmental staffing? And how much additional funding has been allocated in the 2026-27 Budget?

Mr PEARCE - NRE released the Tasmanian Sardine Fishery policy paper on 23 December and we closed that on 6 March. The government committed \$250,000 in the 2024-25 budget to support the initial development of the fishery. So, the initial '24-25 was \$250,000. In terms of budget from that point on, so 2026 the original budget was \$170,000. The estimated outcome was \$170,000. In 2026-27 it goes back to a nil balance. So, the rollover of the \$170,000 from the '24-25 into the '25-26 was approved by the Treasurer, and that's that \$250,000 that I talk about.

Mr GARLAND - Can I ask a follow-up from that?

CHAIR - Is it a different question or is it linked to the answers?

Mr GARLAND - It's tied in with funding and sardines. I'm sure you still have strong connections with your Commonwealth counterparts. Can you confirm that the proposed Tasmanian sardine fishery will operate under an offshore constitutional settlement arrangement between Tasmania and the Commonwealth? And if so, what expenditure has Tasmania incurred, and what has been budgeted as a consequence of accepting those management responsibilities?

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Mr PEARCE - As you'd be aware - I'm sure the member is aware that there are four stocks of Australian sardine within the south-eastern stock area, including Tasmania's jurisdiction. Under the *Offshore Constitutional Settlement Agreement Act 1996*, the OCS, rule amendment or creation needed to access the offshore waters, the OCS, as part of that fishery. Australian sardines are a small pelagic school fish found in temperate waters across south Australia. This fish species, such as sardines, support many of the world's largest fisheries by providing protein, employment and economic opportunity. And in doing so, they contribute a significant portion to the world's annual catch of seafood.

Modelling across the south-east of Australia indicates that the marine food web is not highly dependent on the Australian sardine, and this means that its higher order predators such as penguins, seals and other fish such as tuna, do not have a dietary dependency on this particular species.

If there's any further depth that you'd like to go into as to the Commonwealth's role in that delineation, I'll flick over to David. If you could clear up the Commonwealth's role in there.

Mr MIDSON - Certainly, minister. There is a fishery within three nautical miles, and I'm sure you more than most are aware that that's managed under our scalefish rules. So, we have scalefish rules that allow for the catch of some quantity of sardines at the moment. And any change to the fishery within three nautical miles would be done through the scalefish rules.

Under the Offshore Constitutional Settlement, what's required is that Tasmania set up a management plan specific to those waters outside three nautical miles that are the Tasmanian waters to manage under that settlement in Bass Strait. The very process that we're going through of setting up sardine rules for the Tasmanian sardine fishery will meet those requirements under the Offshore Constitutional Settlement and allow Tasmania to manage that fishery.

In terms of the legal advice and drafting advice and things like that, there's no additional cost to the department. We get that advice from the Solicitor-General or the Office of Parliamentary Council.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, congratulations on your work in the portfolio. Thanks for being here today with your team. As you'd be aware, veterinarians are in short supply around our state, around the country actually. It could be said there are plenty in the cities, but where our industries really need them are in the regional centres, and places like Flinders Island where Ms Finlay and I visited and saw the work the council is doing in this space with our support. Minister, I was pleased to see support in last year's budget to help attract more veterinarians and retain the ones that we already have here in Tasmania. I'd like to ask you, please, for an update on what has been achieved through this initiative to date and how do you see it rolling out in future to support our rural industries.

Mr PEARCE - I thank the member for his question. I thank you for bringing up Flinders Island. We're trying our very best to get a veterinary officer, even if it was on a shared part-time basis. Nevertheless, vets are important. In fact, on a daily basis, we have contact in a significant way with our chief government vet. She's with us today and I hope you get the opportunity of her briefing you on some of the great work that she's doing.

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Our veterinarians play a critical role, as you'd be quite aware, in animal health and welfare. As well as that, they strengthen biosecurity systems and support agricultural productivity, particularly given the stocking rates that we're seeing in mainstream agriculture these days. They protect public health, and as well as that they are more often than not, pillars of the community.

That's why we've committed \$400,000 in the 2024-25 budget to establish a Veterinary Attraction and Retention Package. Importantly, this is being led by the Veterinary Board of Tasmania with support from Biosecurity Tasmania and it recognises that these workforce challenges affect both private and government vet services across the state.

There are four basic components to that. First of all, the Family Care Subsidy which was launched in September 2025, provides support for vets. Vets are people and vets have families and we put some support around child-care for family needs for our vets so that they could have more time at their practice and less time away due to family or caring responsibilities. I'm pleased to advise the committee that since the launch of that particular subsidy, eight previously latent or near-latent veterinarians are now practicing in Tasmania or having increased their working hours by at least five hours per fortnight, so positive.

The next part is the Veterinary Student Travel Subsidy which was launched in November 2025 and helps to attract future vets to Tasmania by supporting the 5th and final year of veterinary students to undertake clinical placements here in the state. To date 19 of these grants have been issued to mainland students. It's an important initiative because exposure to regional practices and environments can strongly influence where graduates choose to establish their careers. Where I come from in the north-west, it's large animal vets that we really look for.

The workforce training program will be focused on improving psychosocial safety in the workplace with veterinary practices and is scheduled to commence in September. These measures are already delivering practical outcomes. I'm advised that other states have been looking at our initiatives with interest and it was reported in one of the rural newspapers only recently.

Finally, every additional veterinarian returning to practice and/or increasing their hours, or choosing Tasmania for clinical training helps strengthen our veterinary capacity across our communities and our agricultural industries and I can't speak highly enough for our vets in Tasmania.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you, Chair. It feels like this hearing is going to go all over the place. It's a bit messy, but that's a little bit like the department actually and the management of these really critical areas, minister.

You call yourself a champion for industry, but I don't think industry feel like they're being championed when both yourself and the department leave the public confused. And in fact, I think it would be fair to say that members of this committee of the parliament either intentionally or are actually also confused. When the florfenicol issue first came up, why didn't you more clearly, or the department more clearly, develop a communication strategy to explain florfenicol, to explain the monitoring, the regulation, the safeguards, the public health matters

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versus the trade issues? The community have been left in a void and there's a clear lack of understanding and concern created by that. You call yourself a champion for industry. Why didn't you step up more clearly to communicate?

Mr PEARCE - I refute the premise of that question 100 per cent and I will back the department on the very antithesis that you just described there. From the very get go, we've never seen florfenicol in Tasmanian waters and I can't speak highly enough for my secretary and particularly his departmental staff, and his scientific staff across the board.

We quickly and flexibly moved into what was unknown territory and I am convinced beyond reasonable doubt that we did provide that feedback. Now, whether or not you were confused or not, that's not my particular issue at this point in time.

Ms FINLAY - I never said I was confused, minister.

Mr PEARCE - What I am saying to you is I will stand in front of that department eight days a week and protect their very professionalism and approach to this because that isn't on having a go at a department when we're trying to monitor, to administer, to supervise, to roll out a therapeutant that had never been seen before.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, my question wasn't about the work, it wasn't about what was happening, it wasn't about the research or the efforts. It's the communication. There is a void of clear and strong communication to explain to the public what was happening and why? And therefore the void of communication creates concern, even just at this exchange before, in a response to the member from Franklin's question, there was a reference to hundredths in terms of the tiny size of measurements. It's actually parts per billion, not parts per million and not parts per hundred. It's not hundreds, it's billions. It is tiny. Just that simple level of miscommunication. This is not a reflection on you, but it is reflection on what is being allowed to occur here. What happens is that in the void of clear and strong communication counter positions get presented. When the community are concerned and that intentional mix of public health versus trade challenges and we're trying to understand the scale of this, references to hundreds when it's actually parts per billion is important.

My question to you was about communications plan. What is the communications plan that you have for Tasmanians to understand this? What was the work that you did on rolling out how to explain it clearly so there are not concerns in the community?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of communication, I can acknowledge the importance of maintaining health in salmon and communicating exactly what we're doing to not only the stakeholders, not only to wild fishes, dive sector, but also the general public and wreck fishers, that was done exhaustively.

David, General Manager of Marine Resources, can you just detail some of the programs that you run on the ground? Because I really refute the premise of this question.

Ms FINLAY - I'm not asking about programs, minister, before you hand that off. I'm asking about a communications plan to the public.

Mr PEARCE - That's what I'm asking Mr Midson to detail.

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Mr MIDSON - Thank you. Through you, minister, it is really clear that the public have clear and specific information and that's why for things like public health, it really is a matter for the Director of Public Health to provide that, so there is one source of information. In our communications, we always refer back to the relevant regulator. For the environment that is the EPA. You will see on our website and our social medias, we refer back to those regulators so that we do have that one source of truth on those matters.

When florfenicol was first used, I and my team, we did develop a communication plan around the areas that we regulate. That's things like trade and particularly our industry stakeholders. And we have rolled out communications relevant to those people, particularly for industry. That is included at the moment, they're fortnightly briefings because we actually -

Ms FINLAY - I'm talking about the public, though. My interest is communication to the public.

Mr MIDSON - And we have rolled out communications on our social media and website, particularly for rec fishers, and our team that are out at boat ramps are also equipped with information to provide people that are interested in florfenicol.

A lot of the time it is really difficult to proactively anticipate exactly what people will be interested in because there are a number of different perspectives from fishers and other members of the public, but the team is prepared to answer those questions and that's what they've been out there doing, particularly in the south-east.

Ms FINLAY - Can I ask, specifically, one of the things that you mentioned - through you, minister - is the regulation of trade, and that's important. Can I ask, before the moment where fishers were required to pull pots and come back to port, with the impacts on trade, what were the specific engagements that you had at a federal level around trade prior to that decision for fishers to have to come home?

Mr PEARCE - Are you happy to continue with that? Can you just take us through the DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) work?

Ms FINLAY - Prior. Not since, but prior.

Mr MIDSON - We have ongoing relationship, particularly through product integrity, with DAFF and other regulators. It's important that that relationship continues and is ongoing. It's really important the regulators don't -

Ms FINLAY - Specific to the florfenicol.

Mr MIDSON - don't operate in silos. Prior to the use of florfenicol, there was a limited period of time from the first notification of use to when it was actually used.

Ms FINLAY - What was that gap in time? We actually explored this at last Estimates. So there wasn't actually a small period of time from the first notification of their intention to use florfenicol until when - you're remembering this - until when pots were pulled and people were asked to come back to port. It was actually a significant period of time. What I'm interested in, is in that period of time prior to the decision where fishers had to come home, what was the proactive engagement with the feds about concerns of impact on trade?

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Mr MIDSON - I can't recall any specific engagement.

Ms FINLAY - That's a worry, isn't it?

Mr MIDSON - It was some time ago.

Ms FINLAY - And again, that's not fair to you, but minister -

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please.

Ms FINLAY - That's a worry, minister, that there is no recall of engagement with the feds on the impact of trade in the knowledge that there was florfenicol being used in the waters that eventually impacted on fishers, having already set pots, being required to go back and pull their pots and come back to port.

Mr PEARCE - In terms of trade, we have protected trade, and there have not - to the very best of my knowledge, correct me if I'm wrong, secretary - we have not had a breach or detection in any part of our trade in terms of seafood.

Ms FINLAY - But that wasn't the question, minister. The question was, what proactive work -

Mr PEARCE - I'm just stating what we've achieved.

Ms FINLAY - - did the government do to protect fishers in advance.

Mr PEARCE - I'm stating what the output was and what we have achieved.

Ms FINLAY - You're lucky, minister.

Dr WOODRUFF - Look, I totally concur with what Ms Finlay is saying. It might seem as though the sort of work is going ahead from the department's point of view with clarity in your area of responsibility. To people in the community, they don't understand who's got responsibility for these different areas. So I want to talk about antibiotic testing. NRE itself has undertaken antibiotic testing in parallel to the EPA's monitoring program to assess the impact on wild fish species. You published the interim results in February, and that showed that some samples tested positive for florfenicol up to 10 kilometres away from the application site in abalone, lobsters and whelk. Has that testing regime been completed, and if so, what are the final results?

Mr PEARCE - Well, you're here, David. You've done it. You're the boss. If you can give us a brief, thanks.

Mr MIDSON - Thank you, minister. It is really important that we clarify that this is a different type of testing program than the testing program for environmental impact. It's different to the testing that's being done by the EPA. We started this monitoring program for a couple of purposes. One is to inform our management of the wild-catch fisheries sector and to provide assurance to regulators that we were appropriately managing any risk that Tasmanian seafood might not meet all relevant requirements. So we've had a very extensive monitoring program with approximately 1700 samples collected, and we have been engaging regularly

with industry and regulators on what those results mean for management. We've instituted closures and very recently we reopened an urchin fishery, for example. We've had a lot of ongoing engagement from that monitoring program with industry about how we manage those fisheries so that they can meet all their requirements.

The basis of our management has always been to be highly precautionary. I'm certainly very aware of the importance of export and domestic markets to our fisheries sector. We have been very cautious about both our management measures and the information that we share. The monitoring program is not complete at the moment and this is work being done by really high-quality researchers at IMAS and I think it is really important so that when the public gets information that, like the secretary said earlier, that it is properly verified, it's in the appropriate context; that we let those scientists finish their work and publish it as they would. We're not currently ready to release that information. The monitoring program is ongoing and we're still finding out important information.

Dr WOODRUFF - Okay, thank you very much, Mr Midson. So that just opens quite a big oyster of questions. So the interim results, when they were presented to some members of parliament, the department indicated that the results were surprising, that they were seeing florfenicol persisting for such a long time in abalone. Mr Midson has just talked about taking a highly precautionary approach and that the management of the wild catch fish sector would be making sure any risk was monitored. Why hasn't this work been done before florfenicol was used in the environment, rather than afterwards? Why would the government in any world consider going ahead with supporting another application for florfenicol when we don't know the risk to these other export sectors which have been shut down because of the use of florfenicol?

Mr PEARCE - Can I firstly respond to that by saying that that data is absolute key. We had absolutely no data on how that therapeutant would react to certain species under certain conditions in certain parts of our fisheries. In northern Tasmania, it would be different to southern Tasmania. In mainland waters, it would be different again. The amount of data that we have collected since that time is incredible. David, I wouldn't you highlighting on that. What hasn't been also touched is, it's not just the detection and the distances and the hydrology behind how that got from A to B, but also once it did get from A to B, as Ms Finlay pointed out, the levels were very small, and the other issue is how that particular therapeutant is metabolised throughout different species. In oysters, it's going to be different to rock lobster, it's different to green and black lip abalone. All of this data is absolutely vital.

Dr WOODRUFF - I know. So why have you allowed the salmon industry to go ahead dumping 3.6 tonnes of florfenicol, more, and you don't know this, and you've just said it has to be highly precautionary and a tiny amount, it doesn't matter how small it is, if it's registered then we cannot export, we cannot export the crayfish, we cannot export the abalone. It's ongoing. Why have you let the salmon industry walk all over wild-catch industries, and you for that matter, as Minister?

Mr PEARCE - You can say that and point the finger at me, but I want to point out very clearly to the committee that the Australian pesticide that sorry, the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority, the APVMA, is the authority for the issue of that conditional permit.

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Dr WOODRUFF - But you supported the application, the CVO supported the application in the first place. You didn't have to do that. You could have stayed right out and let an industry body try to go to the APVMA without any Tasmanian government support and said, 'Well, you go and you go and see how that's going to go because we don't know what's going to happen to our wild catch industries. And, in fact, you've been proved right if you've taken that position because they've been damaged. They've been shut down and we don't know what the impact will be. Are you really going to go ahead and do that again? Support another application?

Mr PEARCE - Again, we would have to look at the science and the application. We have no such application in front of us at the moment.

Dr WOODRUFF - It sounds like we don't know when the science is going to be finished. It sounds like there's a lot of good work going on, and I mean that genuinely.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, last week farmers travelled from across the state to hear a matter of public importance on farmers' right to farm in parliament. They were looking for assistance to cut the red tape and costs around forestry practices. At the time, you mentioned reviewing forestry practice regulations in Tasmania and that you will consult over this. When will the consultation process begin? What are the main areas that are under consideration for an overhaul? And what are you considering to ease the financial pressure and cut the red tape for our farmers generally?

Mr PEARCE - I appreciate your question. I appreciate the topic. In terms of me determining when Mr Ellis is going to, in his portfolio, open that particular review process or any form of public consultation, I'm going to have to get you to refer that to Mr Ellis.

In terms of the general point that you raise, it is an issue. It is raised with me often about the management of forestry on agricultural land, or the management of forestry adjacent to agricultural land, so that verge if you like. It doesn't just go down into just privately owned wooded areas. When we start talking about forestry for instance, Sustainable Timbers Tasmania (STT), the management of that forest directly impacts that neighbouring farm, and vice versa, by the way, in terms of wildlife and what have you.

Often farmers are required, in order to fence out wallabies and other pests, to spend literally hundreds of thousands of dollars on wallaby-proof fence. If you've got a forest right up against that, it's very easy for, you know, during inclement weather or wind that a limb comes out of that tree straight over the fence. It's never the same again. They require constant, constant maintenance. In terms of the way that a farmer manages that and mitigates that risk, it's important.

Even though it's not my portfolio, I urge every farmer to make a submission to this because it's incredibly important. It's important that we, as an industry, highlight the very challenges that we face on a day-to-day basis because I don't think necessarily up and down the chain they understand what this is like.

I don't want to brush that off to Mr Ellis, but I'm sure you understand my position, our position, the department's position, the government's position, and I appreciate the question.

Mr Di FALCO - Your government, leading into the last election, said this:

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A re-elected majority Liberal government will continue to support recreational hunting by maintaining current hunting seasons.

I'm sure you could understand the hunting community's disappointment with your decision yesterday and the direction to eradicate deer from zone 2.

Mr PEARCE - In terms of recreational hunting we've made more land - in excess of 85,000 hectares available. That includes the Crown land, that includes STT land and other land that we've made available for recreational hunting. I've made that very clear throughout the entire process. That's 85,000 hectares. Incredible. In terms of - so, I refute the premise of your question. I want to give hunters the very best chance that they can have going about their business.

When it comes to hunters also, I've also got to balance - and I notice in the name of your party, there's fishers and there's shooters, but there's also farmers. And you will get this loud and clear. That is a balance that I live with, that you live with also. The investment, from a farmer's perspective - I mean, you look, you take the midlands for instance. The amount of money that we've poured into irrigation in the midlands is incredible. Mind-boggling.

Ms Butler - Thank you, David Llewellyn. He started it all off.

Mr PEARCE - The amount of money that we've poured into - and I recognise the interjection. But now we see green circles. They're not just green circles of anything; they're green high-value crops. You can't expect a farmer to make that sort of investment, you can't expect the state to make that sort of investment. Irrigation's absolutely changed the way we look at agriculture in this state. It is revolutionised. The landscape's changed. Along with that has come the value of those crops. You can't expect to make that sort of investment and, at the same time, have in excess of 71,000 fallow deer roaming around. And have you seen some of the damage that these deer do to crops?

So, hunters are going to have to work with our farmers, and that's what I want to see. I want to see them working hand in glove. This is going to take everybody. This is all hands on the pumps. If we're going to get those numbers where we need them to be - I'm sure you recognise that, shooters are going to be busy, busier than ever.

I'm an avid shooter myself. I get it loud and clear. But what I will say is, we've got to be practical. We can't just simply kick the can down the road.

A member - Does it go far enough?

Mr Di FALCO - Yeah, so -

Mr PEARCE - He thinks I went too far.

Mr Di FALCO - No, no, no. I'm sure that the farmers will grab as many farm shooters into -

Mr PEARCE - That's what I'm hoping for, honestly.

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Mr Di FALCO - That's what I'm hoping for, too. But we'll wait and see because access has always been the issue.

Mr FERGUSON - I was going to ask a question on deer but your announcement has negated the need for it, so thank you for your work there and your consulting with stakeholders.

My question is about our detector dogs. Our farmers and producers are relying heavily on our strong biosecurity reputation and, obviously, we need to maintain that. As you know, minister, even a single point of incursion of a pest or germ could have very significant consequences.

Can you outline the work of the detector dog program, any recent changes or any new recruits, and how those dogs and their handlers are performing as our agricultural champions in Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for raising a vitally important element when it comes to biosecurity in Tasmania. Only yesterday - yesterday, the day before, I met with our newest recruits. They're ex - so, personnel was from Biosecurity. The dogs were ex-defence, EOD dogs, explosives dogs that have been retrained. I met Gwen and Yuri and provided them their badge. I was very proud to do so. That comes at the completion of a very exhaustive period of training for not only the dog but also the handler, and also the capability. Every time, without exception, that I have anything to do with my Biosecurity staff, particularly in relation to our detector dogs, I walk away that proud with my chest sticking out because that's the capability that we've got.

I recently had a colleague from Western Australia, the shadow minister for agriculture, come over. The first thing he said to me was, 'Love the dogs at the airport. It's good to see you take that seriously'. It's the first thing visitors see and I'm glad that they see them.

In terms of keeping that capability going, since 2023 we've invested over \$1 million in the delivery of detector dogs and that program. It was designed to bolster our capabilities at our borders. Through this investment, we have retired Biosecurity Tasmania's previous fleet of dogs. We've trained and developed a new fleet of particularly purpose-bred dogs. We've provided additional improved training for our team of handlers. We've upgraded critical kennel infrastructure to ensure facilities continue to exceed all regulatory welfare standards, including upgrades and exercise yards. We've put support around enrichment and exercise requirements for those dogs, and animal husbandry around kennelling and what have you. We've also looked after our retiring dogs because old dogs need a good life in old age.

In closing, this is a vitally important role that our detector dogs do on so many levels. We have something that is absolutely precious here in Tasmania and that is we are surrounded we are girt by sea. That strengthens our biosecurity. I tell you what, this is something that that we take very seriously and the moment you look away from our mission in terms of biosecurity is the moment we have an incursion of something absolutely devastating.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, circling back to the florfenicol and the trade issue. We know that there's a suspension in place now. We've heard that before the areas were closed and fishers had to come home, there hadn't been engagement with the feds around the trade impacts. What I'm wanting to know now is since the suspension, what specifically has been the engagement

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with the federal counterparts to resolve this issue? Is closure the answer or what is the answer to this going forward for trade?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of trade, and we're already seeing it now. We're seeing the salmon industry and they're being, I can vouch for this, that they are leading collaborative talks with other fishers, wild catch fishes, lobster, abalone, oysters and alike. The reason that they're doing that is to come up with an adaptive management outcome that is advantageous for all parties. It's coming from the ground up and that's exactly where it needs to come from and they're taking the lead on this and they are well down the track. We monitored that, we assist that, we support where we can, but let me tell you, there's a lot of work being done in terms of collaborative adaptive management. Secretary, I'm sure that you can probably highlight some of the specifics around that.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, Minister. We have been briefing industry through the Seafood Industry Tasmania and all the representative key bodies on a fortnightly basis on any new information that's been coming to light through the research program conducted by IMAS. We have also been including, where appropriate, DAF in those conversations so that DAF are aware on a regular basis on what the research is telling us.

In terms of an exact solution to enable the industry to use florfenicol going forward, we are still working through that. Closures of harvest areas is a blunt instrument. I think everybody accepts that that is not ideal. A solution will be the industry demonstrating through their application for a minor use permit that they have strategies in place to mitigate trade risk.

Ms FINLAY - You talked about engagement with DAF. I am interested in any conversations that are happening at a federal level. You talked about briefing them about what industry is doing, but I'm interested in what you are doing proactively with your Commonwealth counterparts to establish certainty for trade?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, no. Briefings that we are providing to industry and DAF are the results of the research that we are conducting with IMAS. They are the briefings. They have briefings with industry fortnightly, include DAF representatives.

Ms FINLAY - What I'm hearing is that that's information about things that are happening in Tasmania and the industry are leading conversations with wild fishers outside reports about the work that you're doing here. Are you progressing anything specific? There are a lot of MRLs in other areas, other categories. Are you considering that? Are you considering anything specific that can protect outside what might be cooperative agreements between two sectors? What structurally are you changing?

Mr PEARCE - If you continue where you're going, you're on the right track.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, just to be clear, the application to the APVMA is the responsibility of the proponent, which is Abbey Labs. Abbey Labs will be making the application. The industry is doing a significant body of work, as I understand it, to inform that application. We and my department are supporting the industry with every request for information that they ask of us so that we are keeping them fully informed on any material that might be of assistance with their application.

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Ms FINLAY - I hear that. I suppose what I'm interested in is: we've been talking about - and you have clarified in your own language - that there are tiny trace elements that are being returned in assessments. I know that there's an incredible team of people doing that work. I'm keen to understand where that level of assessment or records are returned anywhere else in the world at that level. Are we clear that that testing is accredited, and what else are you doing to understand what can be done to minimise the trade impacts around the information that you're receiving? And what can be done to bring that up to uniform with everywhere else and all other jurisdictions?

Mr JACOBI - The Chief Inspector of Food Safety in my department is involved in discussions with FSANZ (Food Standards Australia New Zealand) and DAFF over the last couple of months to understand what are the pathways that might be used by the federal regulators for an MRL (maximum residue limit) to be applied to other -

Ms FINLAY - This is a different answer. Thank you. You could have gone there first. So, how's that going?

Mr JACOBI - I'm trying to answer your questions as best as I can as I understand them when they're being presented.

Ms FINLAY - How's that being progressed?

Mr JACOBI - My understanding is that we have made a number of requests for advice from DAFF and FSANZ and we have not received a clear indication on what is the preferred pathway or what are the pathway options that are available to us or to them.

Dr WOODRUFF - Minister, Jane McGann of the Tasmanian Rock Lobster Council wrote in the April/May edition of the Seafood Industry Tasmania newsletter that -

The entire wildcatch sector breathed a sigh of relief when the APVMA suspended the emergency permit allowing florfenicol treatment of salmon.

We've discussed that the industry is preparing a full registration application. So far, you've prioritised the interests of the multinational salmon industry over the needs of wild-caught fishers. Given what you know about florfenicol in the environment and persisting in abalone, is it your view that some fisheries will need to be closed indefinitely if florfenicol is going to be used by salmon companies on a permanent basis?

Mr PEARCE - The question that you raised is one that is hypothetical. You're asking something that has -

Ms FINLAY - It also mixes two different issues, environment and -

Mr PEARCE - In terms of what I said in my previous response around the collaborative adaptive management piece that industry is leading with other fishers right now; that, I think, is key to unlocking exactly how we move forward in terms of managing that, in terms of minimising the impacts to lobster, for instance, with the example that you've given, but - excuse me. At the moment you're asking me to comment on something that we haven't seen an application for. Should we see an application, I can tell you now that -

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Dr WOODRUFF - Are you going to support it?

Mr PEARCE - I'm just responding to your answer. Should we see, in the future, a permit or an application, we are armed with an incredible amount of scientific data that we weren't armed with initially. So in terms of adaptive management and minimisation to other bordering sectors, I'm sure that we could look at that a lot more efficiently than what we probably did in the past. We learnt something, we all learned something.

Dr WOODRUFF - Well, what we just heard from Mr Midson is that you don't know anything really yet about the impacts on those sectors. That's what he just said. The science is incomplete -

Mr PEARCE - Well, that was part of his evidence, but he also highlighted exactly how much data they've collected.

Dr WOODRUFF - Yes, but he said it's not finished.

Mr PEARCE - So we can't be selective about his response.

Dr WOODRUFF - And he said the monitoring's ongoing, and he couldn't give us the results of how long it persists, because that's not finished. The research is ongoing. But it is pretty clear that florfenicol persists in abalone. It can spread up to 14 kilometres in the water that we know of. So, your department is very clear that you don't have a handle on the impacts of those fisheries. How can you have a highly precautionary approach and an adaptive approach when you don't know the baseline? Will you, on that basis, not support an application for a full permit? Because you don't know the impacts on Tasmania's wild catch industries, let alone the rest of the environment.

Mr PEARCE - And again, you know, you've said the words many times throughout that question: 'You don't know, you don't know.' Well, we don't know because we haven't seen an application yet. We don't know whether one is or isn't going to be lodged.

Dr WOODRUFF - They've told us that they will. They said they're doing it. John Whittington's been very clear.

Mr PEARCE - Well, I haven't seen one, and until such time as there's -

Dr WOODRUFF - Do you need to see one to know that they want to have a permanent application? This is the issue.

CHAIR - Dr Woodruff, please let the minister finish the answer.

Mr PEARCE - I have no such permit in front of - or we have no such permit in front of us, and when, if that happens, then we will assess that on its scientific merit.

Dr WOODRUFF - To your knowledge, has the industry used florfenicol off-label since the emergency permit was cancelled?

Mr PEARCE - I'm not aware of that. No.

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Dr WOODRUFF - Could you check, or is that a no?

Mr PEARCE - No.

Dr WOODRUFF - Alright. Thanks.

Mr GEORGE - I just remind the minister that I did ask where the florfenicol trace had been found in abalone 14 kilometres away and I haven't got an answer to that, but I want to move on. I wouldn't mind if you could give it to me.

At the risk of triggering Ms Finlay, what due diligence do you do, and does your department do, and does Mr Midson do, to ensure that scientists at IMAS are never put in the very invidious position of a conflict of interest, considering that a number of them also work on projects supported by, paid for by, the salmon industry, and often in strict commercial-in-confidence? So, what due diligence do you do to make sure that they are not conflicted by that?

Mr PEARCE - There you go, secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister: we don't, that I'm aware of, question the research that is being conducted by IMAS scientists for other partners or other industry actors. The only interest I have is that I am absolutely confident that IMAS are independent. They are technical specialists in their field. We have a longstanding research and collaboration agreement with them, which has underpinned endless decisions that we have made in the marine and fisheries space. And on the evidence that I have seen on the material that has been provided to my department, I have never, ever needed to call into question the independence of any of the research that has been conducted.

Mr GEORGE - So, minister, let me tell you that I have spoken to plenty of scientists working in IMAS who do feel a lot of pressure. And they tell me - and I'm surprised they haven't told anyone in the department - they feel a lot of pressure from the salmon industry, and that's because a lot of them have a way of life and their lives are supported by the work that they do for the salmon industry, and they are uncomfortable. I'm not saying that they're dishonest. I'm not saying it even impacts the research they do. What I'm saying to you is that you'd need to do due diligence to make sure that scientists in a small institute on a small island, feel free to speak their minds and do their research freely and without influence.

CHAIR - Mr George, I just remind -

Mr GEORGE - Sorry, that was a question. There was a question mark on the end of it.

CHAIR - I didn't hear a question. I just heard a passionate statement.

Mr GEORGE - Would you agree that that's actually an important element of ensuring freedom of decision and professionalism?

Mr PEARCE - 100 per cent.

Mr GARLAND - Minister, adaptive management has been a complete and utter failure. It has failed the small mesh sector, it is now failing the ab sector, the crayfishes, our

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environment and community. The morale amongst fishers right now - cray fishermen, ab divers and others - is terrible. They feel underrepresented. And it was highlighted to me the other day, when we renew our personal fishing licence, there's a compulsory levy taken out which goes to Seafood Industry Tasmania that is supposed to represent us, but how can it adequately represent us at the same time it's managing salmon interests also? We feel like we've been left out completely and ignored.

So, if I weren't to pay that levy, would I get my personal licence renewed? Because right now, myself and others are looking for representation elsewhere because it's not forthcoming under the existing bodies that we have.

This is a big issue. The issue with the farmers the other day, we're in exactly the same boat - and we deserve better. We feed people, we engage people, we provide four times more return to the community than large entities and we use a fraction of the fuel to do so. Our communities are suffering as a result of that. We've got fish everywhere on the north-west coast and there are no fishermen there harvesting them and bringing them back to the community.

My question is exactly that: why should we pay a compulsory levy when we're not being represented?

Mr PEARCE - Yeah, the question, really - it probably centres around Seafood Industry Tasmania (SIT). I'm not passing the buck there, but they are the responsible - That is exactly where that question needs to be -

Mr GARLAND - But we pay it through -

Mr PEARCE - The levy that you talk about goes to fund that very organisation.

Mr GARLAND - That's right, and we won't get our licence renewed if we don't pay that levy, and we are not being represented right now. We never have been.

Mr PEARCE - Well, the question I have for you is, have you raised this with SIT?

Mr GARLAND - We've raised it on numerous occasions. I have personally and other fishers have personally, and we've seen nothing and there's been no action. All I get is silence on the end of the phone. There's no argument, there's no disagreeing with what I'm saying, so, you know, this is right with the government, because they control the -

Mr PEARCE - I would like to hear about it. I'd like to hear about specifics, because I will take it up on your behalf, but I'll need to know some specifics. I mean that.

Mr GARLAND - Please do. Well, the specifics are: if we don't pay that levy, which is \$300, \$400, \$500, I'm not sure what it is now, we won't get our personal licence renewed. If we don't have our personal licence, we can't go fishing. So we're in a terrible position and we have been for a very long time.

Mr PEARCE - Well, I commit to you that if you write to me, then I will take that up on your behalf with SIT.

Mr GARLAND - So, I'll put it on notice and give it to you?

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Mr PEARCE - I don't think there's any need to. I committed to you that if you write a letter to me, then I will pass that on and represent you, not as a - not necessarily as a fisher -

Ms FINLAY - You'd have to be careful there.

Mr PEARCE - or a politician. I don't think that's conflicted at all. But your points are important and I would've hoped that you do write me a letter.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, last budget Estimates, which were in November, I asked your team whether they would agree that cormorants had reached what many anglers themselves at that point were describing as plague precautions. Your team acknowledged that significant impact on the trout fishery, but advised that the increase was seen as something that happens from time to time on a cycle, part of a natural cycle, and also expressed optimism that the problem was easing.

Seven months on, my question to you and your team is: what is the current perspective on this regarding cormorant numbers? Are they declining? Are trout populations recovering? The second part of my question is the obvious one: if the recovery isn't occurring, what additional management options of the cormorant would the government, and would you, be prepared to consider?

Mr PEARCE - Yep. I want to thank the member for his question.

Dr WOODRUFF - There're lots of reasons the trout have declined.

Mr PEARCE - This is an issue that I think is raised particularly within inland trout fishermen and women on a daily basis. Cormorants are - and while I'm introducing the answer to your question, I'd like to call Ryan Wilkinson, Dr Wilkinson up. He runs our Inland Fisheries and he is the resident expert in relation to cormorants. Cormorants -

Ms FINLAY - He brought out his great tie again.

Mr FERGUSON - Yeah, that tie's come out for a second coming.

Mr PEARCE - By the end of Estimates he'll have his own YouTube channel, I'm sure.

CHAIR - Minister, just for the record, please introduce our new member.

Mr PEARCE - This is Dr Ryan Wilkinson. He is the manager of Inland Fisheries.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Mr PEARCE - And just as I finish off, the issue with cormorants, it's a cyclic thing. Depending on the season, depending on the environment, depending on the year, will depend on the populations and the locations of these cormorants. They're absolutely devastating and these guys are busting their proverbial one end trying to stock those inland lakes and at the same time are seeing cormorant damage. It's not just taking the fish. Sometimes it's scarring the fish and leaving them suffering.

Dr WOODRUFF - They are a native species, and trout, bless them, are introduced.

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CHAIR - Dr Woodruff.

Dr WOODRUFF - There's lots of reasons that trout are declining, like insects.

Mr PEARCE - You trout hater.

Dr WOODRUFF - No, not at all, but you know, insect life, quality of water.

CHAIR - Dr Woodruff.

Ms BUTLER - You're already one minute 20 into your response.

Mr PEARCE - I will hand now to Dr Wilkinson.

Mr WILKINSON - Through you, minister: yes, as has been mentioned, the cormorant issue - we are probably 12 months post, we call it 'post-cormorants'. We've seen a decline of the number of cormorants in the fishery. It's important to remember that cormorants are a natural part of the fishery. They are always here. They are a native species. They are a part of the food web, but we did see large numbers in recent seasons.

The good news is that we feel the fishery is beginning to recover. Many of our survey results would indicate an improvement in trout stocks, particularly in the rivers. The sentiment from anglers this season has been a bit more positive in terms of their catch rates, and indeed, the quality of the fish they've caught this year.

We've done some things as well to try and help the system along. So, we've managed to increase our stocking rates from 2024 to 2025. I think we stocked around 80,000 fish into the public fishery in 2024. We've increased that to around 478 in 2025, and a lot of those were specifically targeted stockings on some of our most heavily impacted rivers.

We've also worked with local volunteers to do some innovative things. We're trialling the use of floating egg boxes. Actually, the volunteers are facilitating those trials. That seems to be successful. That's actually stimulated a fair bit of excitement with the angling community as well, so we're looking to expand that program into the future.

Mr FERGUSON - Can I just clarify, please - as others have, Chair - quickly, if I may, which is to say, next time a peak population of cormorants occurs, even if it's a natural cycle, can we not be better prepared to do some population control, rather than just wait to sit it out?

Mr WILKINSON - Through you, minister: population control's I think proven to be extremely difficult overseas. And we are, again, grappling with it as a native species issue. Whether there's a return on investment in terms of those control measures, there's probably not a lot of evidence to suggest that that works overseas. So, we've worked really hard to communicate the issue to anglers. The other thing we've done, too, is the annual water bird monitoring work that NRE do, we've asked them more recently to include cormorants in those surveys so we can actually start to get some quantifiable numbers of the birds moving forward.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, I'm going to ask a really serious and important question and it in no way reflects on the people in the team of this work, but you have relied on report of florfenicol detection in abalone 14 kilometres away from salmon leases. Can you please

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confirm for me whether the lab, the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) lab, was accredited for that specific florfenicol test in abalone tissue, not just whether the lab itself was generally accredited?

Mr PEARCE - I can confirm to you and this committee that Analytical Services Tasmania (AST) has undertaken proficiency testing and the interlaboratory comparison testing with the National Measurement Institute (NMI). And AST undertakes routine QAQC processes consistent with ISO 17025 laboratory requirements, and has been progressing NATA accreditation for florfenicol, with the assessment for accreditation scheduled to occur in June.

Ms FINLAY - So, for the purposes of the testing done it wasn't accredited, but it's seeking to be accredited now?

Mr WILKINSON - That is correct.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. I'm interested, then, across all of our primary producers, whether the government is now determining that ultra-trace levels at the parts per billion has become the baseline for agriculture and seafood testing. As you would appreciate, that level that could be all sorts of things detected in all sorts of our primary products. Is that now the baseline, and if so, have you done work in terms of what that means for biosecurity, for trade, for market access and reputational risk? What sort of precedents does this set?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. That's probably a specialist -

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, I might ask Ms McSweyn, the Chief Veterinary Officer, to come to the table to ask that. I think it is important, just while Deb is coming forward, that the use of florfenicol, in terms of testing, was the first time that we'd done this sort of testing. So that is why we're still seeking accreditation. But I'm absolutely assured that the quality and the standards and the process that AST (Analytical Services Tasmania) have adopted are -

Ms FINLAY - And like I said, it definitely wasn't a reflection on the people -

Mr JACOBI - No, I understood that. I understood that.

Ms FINLAY - It was just a question. It is just a question. And similarly to this question, it's have we set a precedent here across - I'm interested in all of our primary industries, and in terms of testing to this level, at this sort of ultra-trace level, what are we setting ourselves up for here across other products and other implications? Because we could at that level detect all sorts of things.

Ms McSWEYN - Through you, minister, I think when we're talking about those ultra levels of testing, it is really important to know exactly what we need to find and what we need to do for our trade markets. That is set out to us by DAFF, so those levels of detectability are not set out by us.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, we will just pause there for a short break and then we'll come back with your next question.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. I've got two more questions to land when I come back.

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Members interjecting.

Ms FINLAY - Well, Mr Ferguson took two and there's been a couple of extras with the Independents, so I'm just seeking to correct it at this point.

CHAIR - Again, I am giving members leeway to ask relevant follow-up questions to clarify information and things like that, and I'm being fair to everybody, but if the committee wants me to rule with the roost and stick exactly to everything -

Ms FINLAY - I'm not asking you to rule with the roost, here, just confirming that I've got two questions when we return.

CHAIR - Yes you do.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

CHAIR - We'll take a break and we'll be back shortly. Please stop the clock.

The committee suspended from 4.30 p.m. to 4.43 p.m.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. I'm going to change it up a little bit. The operational efficiencies that have been outlined, we went over this yesterday. I know that there's overall departmental operational efficiencies I'm really interested in NRE and your areas as they pertain to you. There's no doubt that the saving targets are aggressive, and already in NRE, it would be appreciated by all, and I'm sure by yourself as well, that you have a lot of great people doing a lot of things on not much. There's already been a lot of reshaping and a lot of people doing important work where they're probably carrying the loads of numerous jobs. So what's your expectations of these operational efficiencies and what's already been set down in the areas that you're responsible for?

Mr PEARCE - Okay, in terms of the exact what that looks like across the department, I'm going to hand over in a minute to the department secretary, but I do want to point out for the purposes of the committee that this is a portfolio, I think, like no other in the fact that we live a very practical role each day. Every day that we come to work, there is something different, something different that we have to protect Tasmanians from, or solve an issue that is in front of our primary industries, be that whatever sphere of industry in terms of agriculture. With that in mind, with that practical, outcome-driven element in mind, we need to be outcome driven in terms of our approach and we need to monitor any changes that we make with whether that is going to affect or erode the outcome. And that's the approach -

Ms FINLAY - You know your people are already under pressure, right? In terms of keeping up with expectations and -

Mr PEARCE - We're all under pressure. I mean, I'm under pressure, you're under pressure, Mr Di Falco's under pressure, every Tasmanian is under pressure, but pressure is something that makes us stronger and with that, I'm going to hand over to you, secretary, if you just outline what we've we're looking at across the board.

Ms FINLAY - And perhaps what instructions you've given or what expectations you've -

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Mr PEARCE - Yeah, and that's why I made that opening comment, because we need to, we need to look at our outcomes, our efficiencies, our deliverables. There are certain things that we cannot compromise on. I mean we've just gone through questions on biosecurity on our dog team. We have questions on biotoxin measurements, we have questions on monitoring, we have questions on management. Everything that we do has a very real impact. This is not a nice to have, it's a very real portfolio, and that outcome-driven focus, that practical outcome-driven focus, is what I've instructed needs to be at the centre of every decision, that we're not eroding from our capability. Thanks, secretary.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you. Through you, minister, as outlined at the table to you, I can go over the budget savings targets again if that's of help. Or do you want me specifically to talk about -

Ms FINLAY - I'm only interested in those particular to this minister's portfolio areas, and as the minister's outlined, there are some really critical tasks where, and I will say great people doing really hard work, and yes, pressure might be good for people, but pressure's not great if we're not actually delivering for Tasmania and it's putting Tasmania at risk. So there are already delays, impacts, with the resources that the department has. So I'm only interested as it pertains to this minister's portfolio.

Mr JACOBI - Thank you. So through you, minister. I'm acutely aware of the importance of the services that are provided across this portfolio. You know, we have people who are delivering biosecurity outcomes at airports, at ports. We have people doing testing on a regular basis, both for animals, but for other issues like aquaculture, we have staff doing water monitoring all across the state. There are a number of programs that we are already funded through the government's allocations under previous election commitments that we continue to deliver. All of those programs have to continue. I'm very acutely aware of the very important work that is done not just across the department, particularly also in this portfolio.

As of yesterday I called an expressions of interest for TNVR, so targeted negotiated voluntary redundancies, across the department, that will provide all of the staff across NRE and this portfolio to make an application to me to be identified as a redundancy. I will be assessing each and every one of those applications on a case-by-case basis and the assessment will be conducted by a committee that I stood up in March 2025. That committee is called the Establishment Management Recruitment Executive Committee. It's a team of my senior executive who receive every single business case for recruitment, and who assess the business case on the basis of the importance and criticality of the position, the level of the position and its remuneration, the responsibilities of the role. We also look at whether there are any opportunities for the duties to be dispersed to other areas in the organisation. We look at the opportunities for redeployment of existing staff, because redeployment is a fundamentally important piece of this strategy. If a particular program were to end and there is no longer any funding for that program, then those positions who are skilled, valued, trained employees ideally should be redeployed elsewhere in the department, or across government, to deliver on other priorities. That is the role of that MREC committee and it does take a case-by-case approach.

Ms FINLAY - I'm particularly interested in the impacts on our primary producers, so our fishers and our farmers. I'm particularly interested in already the department not being able to keep up with necessary approvals in order to allow people to go to work. I know specifically of rock lobster fishers and scallop fishers who have not been able to go to work because of

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delays in approvals, so I have a specific question: How many commercial fishers or processors have lost fishing or processing time in the last 12 months due to NRE delays, late approvals or administrative failures? Hopefully, you would say 'zero', but we know that's not true. Hopefully, it's a small -

Dr WOODRUFF - Take it on notice.

Ms FINLAY - Well, hopefully, it's a small number that you should know. But the reality is -

Dr WOODRUFF - Let the minister answer the question.

CHAIR - Yeah, Ms Finlay, we may just let the minister respond.

Ms FINLAY - that there are delays and it's impacting people's livelihoods. People are not able to go to work and earn their living.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, we're well aware of the - yes.

Ms FINLAY - Well, they're not trying to answer, Chair, so I'm just giving them details.

Mr PEARCE - As a response, we take very seriously the very matters that you bring up. We take very seriously the roles in which our primary production sector require each day in order to earn a livelihood. We take very seriously the scrutiny that we need to apply and the fairness that we need to deliver also when it comes to the issue of licences and permits, and everything else for that matter. But if we were to wave them through and brush the detail away -

Ms FINLAY - Asking you to get the job done in a timely way to stop -

Mr PEARCE - you'd be griping just as loudly.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, there are fishers not being able to fish and earn a livelihood -

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please.

Ms FINLAY - Can you please answer the question? How many -

Mr PEARCE - Well, I'm trying to but you're interjecting. The Chair's already onto you. You know, you ask a question, you zip it, and you listen.

Ms FINLAY - How many fishers and processors have lost processing time and fish time?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, the minister has the call.

Mr PEARCE - As I was saying, we take very seriously the very matter that you raise. We go above and beyond in terms of delivering our requirements, in terms of expedience, in terms of your turnaround times, in terms of opening and closing times -

Ms FINLAY - This is below and behind, not above and beyond. I would like an answer to the question, minister. You're just padding it out.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, we'll move on.

Ms FINLAY - I haven't had an answer, Chair. The answer's there on the page. Can you please answer how many people have been delayed in the last 12 months?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, we're moving on.

Ms FINLAY - Do you know the answer?

Dr WOODRUFF - In relation to the Reflections and Learnings report that arose from the 2025 salmon mortality event, this outlined 10 so-called continuous improvement actions that should be taken by the salmon industry to respond to the crisis. One of those actions is to introduce 10-year licence periods for marine farming licences and to eliminate annual renewal processes. Minister, how can you seriously be considering giving a salmon farm licence holder carte blanche to pollute the marine environment for 10 years without a review? And how's it going to improve environmental outcomes?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the 10-year licences, I think that's been cleared up. The Premier made that statement only recently. We have unequivocal support of this industry, we really do and the jobs that it supports.

Dr WOODRUFF - I know that. That's the problem.

Mr PEARCE - At the same time, we recognise that strong environmental protections and community confidence are also essential. We get that. It's a balance for long-term sustainable success. These are complementary priorities; they're not competing ones, in my book. And consistent with our approach to continuous improvement, that is why we've commissioned the independent study to look at exactly these matters.

I'm advised that the licensing framework provides for the licensing of marine farming and fisheries for a period of up to 10 years. The proposal to extend that licence duration was administrative in nature. It was not designed to weaken the legislation or the regulation. It formed part of government's broader agenda to reduce the overbearing regulation. We're trying to reduce red tape. That's what we - you see that every single campaign that we go on. We're actually trying to do that. It formed part of our red tape reduction. It formed part of our efficiencies across licensing frameworks working across multiple sectors.

I get that strong regulatory powers would remain unchanged, including the power to vary, to suspend or to cancel licences. We can do that at a moment's notice. We don't need any notice, we don't -

Dr WOODRUFF - Sorry, I don't understand what your answer is. Are you still going to go ahead with that change?

Mr PEARCE - To be clear, the environmental standards monitoring and compliance and enforcement activities that apply to salmon farming operations would not have changed. Notwithstanding these gains in administrative efficiency, we have been deliberate and considered in our decision not to proceed in increasing the duration of salmon licences at this stage.

PUBLIC

Dr WOODRUFF - Okay, well, that's good news. So they're going to stay with annual renewal processes?

Mr PEARCE - And the Premier made that comment on -

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you, I'm just really clarifying that that's what's happening.

Mr PEARCE - Now, can I make one clarifying remark? That is subject to recommendations from the independent study.

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. The second part - you've referred to this, another reform from the department was to amend or remake the marine farming development plan regulations to, as you've talked about, 'reduce red tape, remove duplication, streamline planning and approvals processes, and improve compliance outcomes'.

I think I speak on behalf of every member of the community and stakeholder I've ever spoken to. How on earth would reducing red tape be a reasonable response to the salmon mortality crisis? There were 4 million farmed salmon that died. It wasn't red tape that killed them. So, how on earth is that going to improve environmental outcomes?

Mr PEARCE - In answering your question, I will say that - in fact, I brushed on it in my response. The issuer of that permit or licence, that authority can suspend, adjust, adapt, amend at any stage without notice. If we see an impropriety - and I wouldn't mind getting, if we can just get Mr Midson on his way up, in terms of QAQC (quality assurance and quality control) on licensing, we reserve the right to revoke any licence that, you know, if there are any breaches of any protocol or any regulatory errors or detections, then we reserve that right to remove, revoke, adjust at any time.

Dr WOODRUFF - All right. So, do you think less regulation would have prevented what happened with the salmon mortality? Do you think it's in any way related to regulation?

Mr PEARCE - This is already the most regulated agricultural pursuit in the state.

Dr WOODRUFF - Well, something's not working.

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the - can I just go through the - I think it's very important that we clear up the QAQC of licences, permits -

Dr WOODRUFF - Whatever that means.

Mr PEARCE - and how seriously we take that.

Dr WOODRUFF - With respect, maybe if it's something that you've got, you could just move on to someone else on the committee because I'm not sure that it's going to relate to the question I asked.

Mr PEARCE - Okay. I do apologise, David.

Dr WOODRUFF - Sorry about that, Mr Midson.

PUBLIC

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, the public's main concern is that the salmon they eat is healthy and it's free of antibiotics. It's right that if you use antibiotics, any antibiotic can lead to resistance, and that bacteria resistance to antibiotics can be transmitted through the food supply.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Prof RAZAY - I know florfenicol is used for the first time here, so we still don't know whether it can develop a resistance to bacteria. How can we ensure the salmon on sale is healthy, free of antibiotics, and do we hope in the future that any bacteria in salmon that tests for - whether they develop resistance?

Mr PEARCE - Yep. You raise a very important point. You raise a point that is on the lips of many Australians right across the country, in terms of antimicrobial resistance.

I'm going to call the chief government vet, Dr Deb McSweyn. Deb, if you wouldn't mind going through your considerations as a veterinary officer in terms of management and considerations around antimicrobial resistance, please.

Ms McSWEYN - Yeah. Certainly. Thank you for your question and through you, minister, I am quite happy to talk about antimicrobial resistance. It's something very close to my heart, and I think that people often don't understand how important it is in a veterinarian's role. And quite selfishly, I hope that my two epidemiological professors from university are watching, because they taught me very well.

I will start by saying that, as we know, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a global issue that we need to combat with public health and also with the environment. From an animal regulation point of view, the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) sets all of our global standards for dealing with antimicrobial resistance. They set those guidelines and we adopt them through national and state government, and so they underpin all of our biosecurity regulations here in Tasmania.

Australia is also a leader in minimising the use of antimicrobials in food-producing animals, and surveys done in Australia in recent years show a low risk of AMR in the food animal sector.

Antimicrobial resistance in the Australian animal sector is covered by - sorry, they're quite long - by the Australian National Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy 2020 and Beyond; the Australia's Animal Sector Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan 2023-2028; and from an aquatic-specific point of view, AQUAPLAN - Australia's National Strategic Plan for Aquatic Animal Health. This year specifically will mark the first year that Australia actually publishes their use of antimicrobials, and this will be based on registered purchase of antimicrobials. Once they've secured datasets for under permanent antimicrobials and off-label antimicrobials, those will also be publicly published.

The most important step in combating AMR for us is the collection of data. Via Australia's AMR strategy 2023-2028, a national surveillance plan will be rolled out, which we will take part in. So, that consultation has begun. Tasmania has taken part in that consultation and given our feedback. We've put our hand up for any pilot programs that come for that. We've also doxed in our friends in Public Health and Environment to join us on that one as well.

PUBLIC

Once established, this data goes back through our federal friends, and that goes back up to WOA, and WOA then communicates with a group called the Quadripartite. And the Quadripartite involves several world organisations, so they include the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, which we would all be familiar with, the United Nations Environment Programme, World Health Organisation and the World Organisation for Animal Health. They get together and collaborate on AMR and they come up with our new international standards, which we then adopt here in Tasmania.

So that is how we combat it on a global scale.

Mr Di FALCO - Minister, I'd like to read a quote from the RSPCA, even though they're not always our friends:

We consider the removal of female deer with dependent young inherently heightens risk of suffering for the fawns (e.g. orphaning, starvation, predation, and injury), even when follow-up euthanasia is attempted. Given the high probability that the dependent young may be hidden or missed, it is unlikely that 'reasonable efforts' will suffice to ensure animal welfare standards.

Ethical hunting and animal welfare should be a priority. What will your department be doing to ensure this?

Mr PEARCE - Can I make it very clear to the committee from the outset that animal husbandry, animal welfare is paramount in terms of any animal, be they introduced or native.

In terms of the considerations around the taking of deer, particularly female deer, all year round, can I remind you and the rest of the committee that that has been in place for years, in zones 2 and 3. As well as that, it's been the practice of other states and territories around the country and is the industry standard.

What I'm concerned about, what I want to make very clear, what I have, in fact, as late as this morning spoke with my department in relation to getting the message out there about exactly what to do if you do find a deer with a fawn or, as you rightly point out, they cache these young animals, these fawn. It is no different than if a shooter, hunter or farmer, or a land manager, for instance, shot a wallaby and that had an infant attached on board, then that would be humanely euthanised. I can't stress the importance of being responsible. This is not a free-for-all and we must consider the long-term suffering of, particularly, infants.

What I also would like to point out is getting that information out and communicating that. I know that the groups that you deal with - the hunters, that fraternity - I would hope that you would be instrumental in being the transmitter of that good news, and how we can clearly look after those fawning infants.

Mr Di FALCO - Caching is a bit different than hoisting a joey out of a pouch. I mean, that's something that will happen, like, 100 per cent.

Mr PEARCE - I understand.

PUBLIC

Mr Di FALCO - Looking for a cached fawn is really hard. In countries like Belgium, they even have drones going over fields with thermal gear to make sure that they pick up hog deer fawns in a paddock before they mow it. So, deer are really good at caching their fawns.

Mr PEARCE - I understand that. I hope I made it clear enough.

Mr Di FALCO - Yes, understood.

Mr PEARCE - The importance that is paramount. The legislation says that they must take 'reasonable steps'. 'Make all effort' to find the fawn.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, can you first of all confirm that the Commonwealth has declined the request, I think, a national body request to fund the *Centrostephanus* business plan aimed at controlling the spread of long-spined sea urchins? And if that's the case, and given the significant threat that those urchins pose to our ecosystem and our wild fisheries, what is your response, and what should the Tasmanian Government be doing next?

Mr PEARCE - You raise an important point around the spiny urchin - *Centrostephanus* and the fact that that is prevalent particularly up our east coast, as well as the remainder of the east coast of Australia. So, Victoria and New South Wales are particularly impeded by this particular sea urchin.

It has been mooted by not only Tasmania but also Victoria and New South Wales. They've lobbied to the federal government in order to put some funding towards R&D and research around the removal of the long-spined sea urchin.

We haven't seen any commitment from the federal government, and I would continue to advocate on behalf of Tasmania that we need to continue that pressure on our Commonwealth Government.

In terms of the industry that we have here, what I want everyone to realise is that our marine production is valued to \$1.5 billion - \$1.5 billion.

Centrostephanus removes environments, basically sterilises them. We've put funding to the tune of a further \$1 million to establish markets on spiny urchin roe to try and get and encourage our dive fishers to at least make a dent in these things. That was an extra \$1 million that we put into doing that in the 2026-27 Budget. That's going to make a small dent, but we need that federal funding. We need all hands at the pumps when it comes to the management of this invasive species.

And the other thing that we need to consider is - water's warm, they spread quicker. And, you know, they can reproduce from kilometres away when they spawn. It can be carried by the tides and, of course, you get a very quick infestation over a very short period. So, a very good question. This is particularly impacting our abalone industry. It causes havoc with many facets, and Mr Garland would be fully aware of the impacts that *Centrostephanus* placed on our fishers.

Mr FERGUSON - So, not giving up?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - No. Just to give you an idea, over 3200 tonnes of *Centrostephanus* have been commercially harvested since 2018. And 3200 tonnes takes a lot of diving. You can imagine the effort that goes behind that. But it's almost as fast as we can - it's like digging a hole in wet sand. As quick as you dig, it fills itself back in. We need that assistance from the federal government, and I think we need a combined approach, with Victoria and New South Wales, up the eastern seaboard.

Mr FERGUSON - Well, it was a national bid, I believe.

Ms FINLAY - I'm going to ask the question again, minister. In the last 12 months, how many commercial fishers or processors have lost fishing time or processing time as a result of delays out of NRE - late approvals, administrative failures? Do you have that? If not, will you take that on notice?

Mr PEARCE - The secretary may have some rudimentary data.

Ms FINLAY - Don't screw your face up. This is really important.

Mr PEARCE - If you listen, I'll pass over to the secretary.

Mr JACOBI - No, we don't have the data on the effectiveness of time or timeframes of each and every permit. That would be impossible to dictate.

I think one of the key things that I do need to clarify for the House is that often permits are received that don't actually have adequate data to make an informed decision. One of the key things that my department faces regularly is that the information that's provided is not adequate. We have to -

Ms FINLAY - I am talking about professional local regular fishers that go to work year on year that exactly know your process, which is difficult to navigate. These are fishers that would otherwise be going to work that have been prevented from going for work.

Mr JACOBI - So, there are a whole suite of permits and licences that we issue on a regular basis. If you want to be specific about the particular permit -

Ms FINLAY - You're not tracking your good time?

Mr JACOBI - We have performance measures that we track our performance against, but they are across a whole suite of different permits and licences. If you want to provide me with a specific example of a particular fisher who has encountered a challenge with a timeframe, I'm more than happy to look into that in more detail.

Ms FINLAY -- Minister, my specific question to you is: will you take on notice or will you investigate the number of commercial fishers and processors that have lost real time at work due to delays out of NRE? Would you take that on notice, please?

Mr PEARCE - I'll recognise your point. And you mentioned two courses of action there. You mentioned taking on notice and you mentioned investigating. I'm happy to look at that matter, and I'll do so through the secretary. But I will look at that matter.

PUBLIC

Ms FINLAY - Great. I'll put that question on notice. Thank you. One of the things -

CHAIR - Sorry, just to clarify. Minister, did you take the question on notice?

Mr PEARCE - I didn't take the question on notice. I said I would investigate. You mentioned two courses of action during your question. One was to take the matter -

Ms FINLAY - Well, the ones you know, do you care?

Mr PEARCE - Are you going -

Ms FINLAY - So, you'll investigate. How will I know how you'll come back to the committee or to the parliament with the outcome?

Mr PEARCE - I'll come back to the committee.

Ms FINLAY - So, therefore, to do that, does it not need to be taken on notice so that information comes back to the committee, Chair?

CHAIR - Just bear with me. Ms Finlay, the minister can come back with the information any time during this hearing.

Ms FINLAY - So, you'll come back before the end of the hearing, minister?

Mr PEARCE - I'm listening out of my good ear. We've got an answer.

Ms FINLAY - Wow.

Mr PEARCE - Are you going to be - we've got to be very quiet. In 2024-25, this is our fishing licence transaction time. It's a KPI of processing routine -

Ms FINLAY - So you do have the data?

Mr PEARCE - of processing routine applications. For 2024-25, our target was 95 and our actual was 95. In 2023-24, our actual was 95. These are percentages, so 95 per cent -

Ms FINLAY - Would you just share with the committee the raw numbers?

Mr PEARCE - Well, this is done on a percentage.

Ms FINLAY - Of a raw number. Would you be able to tell me the raw number that that data is - for instance, if it's 95 per cent of 1000, it's a big number that's missing. If it's 95 per cent of 20, it's not so much an issue. What's the raw number?

Mr PEARCE - I can tell you the quota units, if you'd like that.

Ms FINLAY - I'd like the raw number of routine -

Mr PEARCE - Would you like the quota units?

PUBLIC

Ms FINLAY - No, I would like the number relevant to the percentages that you're using there.

Mr PEARCE - All I can give you, even if we took it on notice, all we're going to be able to provide you with is the quota numbers for, say, abalone, quota numbers for rock lobster and the percentages of licensing transaction times.

Ms FINLAY - Great. Would you be happy to table that, minister?

Mr PEARCE - I'll just check. It's not mine. It's his. I'm happy to give you a synopsis of these numbers. I'm happy to provide these numbers in written form.

Ms FINLAY - Tabling it? Or I'll ask that on notice.

Dr WOODRUFF - Chair, this is a very long exchange.

Mr PEARCE - I'll take that -

Ms FINLAY - There's real financial -

CHAIR - Order. Just let me hear from the minister, please.

Mr PEARCE - I'll take that on notice. We'll provide this committee with the quota, the unit of measure, the percentages and the fisher licence transaction times, processing of routine applications.

Ms FINLAY - You could have done that right at the beginning, minister. Thank you.

Dr WOODRUFF - Chair?

Ms FINLAY - Well, that was one question.

Mr GEORGE - Can we move on?

Dr WOODRUFF - Yes, I know but it was very long.

Ms FINLAY - But it was a question that he could've taken on notice at the beginning. That's not my fault.

Dr WOODRUFF - I know, but proportionality, Chair.

CHAIR - Order.

Dr WOODRUFF - There were so many interruptions, Ms Finlay. We're patient, in reason.

Ms FINLAY - Yes, but if the minister answered the question -

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Yes - look, I realise where we're at and it's a long day. Please, let's keep it together. If we keep interjections and that to a minimum, both sides, we will get through this a lot quicker. So, yes, Ms Finlay, you have -

Dr WOODRUFF - Can I just suggest, Chair - I support interjections. I do it. But we do have a three-minute time limit for answers to questions and that should include interjections. That must've gone on, I don't know, for eight minutes. It's just a long time for one question.

CHAIR - Well, okay -

Ms FINLAY - This question is about a critical matter on biosecurity.

CHAIR - I've asked the committee several times, do you want me to rule the roost and stick heavily, like spot-on, to the deadlines? You've said twice, no.

Dr WOODRUFF - I'm suggesting things have just got a little out of balance at this point, Chair. That's all I'm saying.

CHAIR - I do realise that, Dr Woodruff. Thank you.

Ms FINLAY - I'm ready with my next question, thanks, Chair.

CHAIR - Is the committee still happy to proceed the way it's going or do you want me to introduce -

Mr GEORGE - Yes, let's get on with it. Ms Finlay's got one more question. Can we make it quick?

Dr WOODRUFF - Could you just call these things and stop interruptions so we can have -

CHAIR - It would help if both sides didn't interject with each other, as well, for time.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, biosecurity, as you acknowledge, is critical. It protects our farmers, our fishers, our exporters, the environment. But the Budget shows that funding for keeping Tasmania disease-free will end in 2028-29. The threats haven't gone away. We're not now safe from disease, but the funding's been cut.

Last night you recognised and conceded that it's not correct that it should be cut because ongoing funding will be required. How is such a critical error in the budget papers? And what are you going to do to correct this oversight in the Budget?

Mr PEARCE - Can I start by saying that no one has invested more in a biosecurity than this government, and that's a fact. Stopping pests and diseases, as you rightly point out, has been a key priority for us, for successive Liberal governments, since the beginning of time. In terms of the operational efficiency dividend, which has been applied across the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, we have done so as a response to those efficiency dividends.

Ms FINLAY - On biosecurity?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - We tried to apply these savings to outputs that NRE Tasmania will develop on a budget sustainability plan for the 2026-27 period at the end of those years. Now, I'm advised that the budget sustainability plan will focus on discretionary expenditure, on operational savings,

Ms FINLAY - Keeping Tasmania disease-free is discretionary?

Mr PEARCE - Chair, did you just speak to the committee about interjections, or -

Ms FINLAY - I asked a very simple question. The money stops in the Budget. What are you doing to correct it? You're going nowhere near the question, minister.

CHAIR - Again, I ask the minister to -

Ms FINLAY - You can't not have money in the Budget for -

CHAIR - address the question, please, and ask that interjections are kept to a minimum.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks, Chair. I'll cut to the chase. The decrease in the 2028-29 - that's the number that you're talking about - of the \$2 million, that's the 2028-29 - I would submit to you that there is ample time between this time and that to submit budget submissions in order to -

Ms FINLAY - See, this is the problem with how this government runs their budget. In the out-years, you don't put in critical funding that's required to protect Tasmania to make the budget look better. You know that you will need to fund that beyond 2028-29. We've got a real threat in Geelong with Varroa mite. How are you going to protect Tasmania without the funding in the budget going forward? You cannot cut this money.

Mr PEARCE - So, 2028-29, I would submit to you that a lot could happen between now and then in terms of our biosecurity threat. It changes on a daily basis.

Ms FINLAY - It's false presentation of real budget.

Mr PEARCE - We don't know from one day to the next what we're going to be hit with. We're talking 2028-29. There is ample time during that time, given the points that -

Ms FINLAY - So, you're saying the out-years aren't well-shaped?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, please.

Dr WOODRUFF - Can I submit that Ms Finlay has made an excellent point, very well done, and that's more than three minutes, and could we maybe move on, Chair?

CHAIR - Yes.

Dr WOODRUFF - The government aren't funding - it's a false budget. It's a pretense.

Ms FINLAY - It's a false budget.

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Dr WOODRUFF - It's a sham, and we all know that we're going to have to spend money on biosecurity.

CHAIR - Can we get back to the actual hearing, Dr Woodruff?

Dr WOODRUFF - Thank you. On animal welfare, an animal welfare investigation was commenced into Huon Aquaculture over their mistreatment of live salmon during the 2025 mortality crisis. Where is that investigation up to, and have criminal charges been brought against Huon Aquaculture?

Mr PEARCE - That matter, I'm informed, is still under investigation. I'm not able to comment.

Dr WOODRUFF - Well, we've had this response, endlessly ever since - so when is it going to be finalised?

Mr PEARCE - I understand you don't like that response, but that unfortunately is a legal binding response. I am unable to comment on that as that matter is under investigation.

Dr WOODRUFF - Do you have an idea how long it's going to take to finalise?

Mr PEARCE - I can say it again -

Dr WOODRUFF - Well, it's a different - it's a clarification of a different thing.

Mr PEARCE - I can only offer this response, and that is matters under the *Animal Welfare Act 1993* have a two-year statute of limitations for those offences.

Dr WOODRUFF - You mean the whole matter has to be tied up within two years?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. I'm unable to speak on the matter as it's under investigation.

Dr WOODRUFF - Okay. Thank you. My second question on animal welfare is that the RSPCA have inspectorate and enforcement powers under the *Animal Welfare Act*, and they've been resourced to conduct animal welfare investigations, to issue warrants and to seize animals. They are concerned, we are concerned, that the budget paper - page 171, budget paper 2 - says that the decrease in 2028-29 reflects:

the completion of key deliverables from previous budgets, including RSPCA support and strengthening biosecurity to keep Tasmania disease and test free. Can you confirm that the funding that's committed to the RSPCA is intended to be continued under a new agreement? The funding agreement runs out in 2028. Can you confirm that there will be a new contract with the RSPCA to do their regulatory work?

Mr PEARCE - I can confirm for you that they will require a new budget request. Our commitment provides a total funding of \$6 million over four years. That's \$1.5 million per annum to enable RSPCA to effectively carry out vital work in safeguarding animal welfare. I'm advised that RSPCA currently has eight inspectors across the state. The funding across 2027-28, as you rightly point out, is \$1.5 million and then reduced to core funding of an

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estimated \$550,000 in the 2028-29 forward Estimates and a new budget request will be required.

Dr WOODRUFF - My question was about the contract for funding. The funding agreement with the RSPCA, their funding agreement with your department, finishes in 2028. Can you confirm that you intend to fund a new contract with the RSPCA because they have mandated, legislated required work to do? Surely, the answer is 'yes'.

Mr PEARCE - That will have to go through the advisory committee.

Dr WOODRUFF - Well, it's just a decision to fund them to follow the law.

Mr PEARCE - Once that contract's at the submission stage, then they would need to seek a new budget request. That would, obviously, all go through our Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. That would support that.

Dr WOODRUFF - They know that. You're the minister. They would like some confidence that they will - of course, this is just a little budgetary thing.

Mr PEARCE - I need to follow the process. I'm very supportive of the RSPCA. They do a great job.

Dr WOODRUFF - Great, so you're going to be advocating for them to get the money, and continuous money.

Mr PEARCE - I'm very supportive of the RSPCA. I also have an Animal Welfare Advisory Committee that I listen to also. We need to follow the process on this.

Dr WOODRUFF - Alright.

Mr GEORGE - Thank you, I didn't know it was my turn coming up. Minister, could you outline for me how many meetings you've had with wild fishers, abalone and rock fishers in the past 12 months, specifically about the use of florfenicol, or in the last eight months really specifically about florfenicol, and how many meetings you may have had with salmon industry executives, including John Whittington, the lobbyist. Would you accept gifts or hospitality from the salmon industry, or have you? And if so, would you be disclosing them?

Mr PEARCE - I'll answer the last part of your question first and that is disclosure is something I take very seriously and there are times where we are taken out to dinner meetings, for instance, and I may pay one time, someone else may pay the next time. That's how we do it in Tasmania. But if whomever pays for me, I will declare that. That's obviously that declaration. I think there's one in my declaration that you're referring to, so well-picked up, good, Mr George.

Mr GEORGE - And you wouldn't take gifts either, I assume, from industries?

Mr PEARCE - Not me.

Mr GEORGE - Good. And the first part of the question - sorry, please. I don't mean to interject.

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Members interjecting.

Ms FINLAY - Really? Come on. Are we capturing this, everybody?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. In terms of my interaction with industry, both salmon and wild catch fisheries that is a daily occurrence. If it's not a face-to-face meeting, it's a phone call or an email we have. This is a living, breathing operational portfolio and I love it to bits and I'm very proud of the role that I play, that the leadership team plays, and you've got people up the back like the stature of the people that we've got and the capability that they've got and how seriously they take their job. I'm proud to lead that team. Our interaction with the industry is it's ever present. In terms of how many, well, I wouldn't like to hazard a guess but it's certainly more than the amount of free dinners that someone buys me, of which I would declare.

Mr GARLAND - No good greasing you up with a few mutton birds then.

Talk about beekeeping. Tasmanian's commercial beekeeping industry is now valued at approximately \$17.6 million at the farm gate. What assessment is the government undertaking into industry concerns regarding regulatory costs, fees and consultation processes affecting beekeepers?

Mr PEARCE - You raise a good point that our beekeeping industry is incredibly important. With \$17.6 million at the farm gate, as you rightly say.

We as a government have made hive licencing easier and reduced costs for beekeepers. A single beekeeper can now have multiple hive sites on parks, reserves and on Crown land covered under one licence. They weren't able to do that before; they'd have multiple licences. Reducing the number of licences required and the fee obviously is commensurate to that. The Tasmanian government continues its support to the sector through our core work with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment and through Biosecurity Tasmania.

Chair, can I make a point of clarification?

CHAIR - Yes. On this or another?

Mr PEARCE - No, it's different. It's from the previous response. In reference to my comment that there is a statute of limitations that had to be tidied up in two years. To be clear, the department must lodge a prosecution within court for those two years. I just didn't want that confused. That was all.

CHAIR - Thank you, Minister.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. In terms of Mr Garland's question. We've got some more information for you. We've invested \$780,000 in order to implement the report on the Bee Industry Futures Report. It was an extensive piece of work and through that program completed a range of actions which helped grow the sector.

From that report, I'm talking now, we've invested \$147,000 in order to develop market prestige of Tasmania's iconic leatherwood honey and to promote it to the world. We've helped beekeepers access hive sites in leatherwood-rich areas throughout the state and about \$350,000

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of maintenance work on remote vehicle tracks. As you would know, the leatherwood grows in very remote regions and it's normally in low areas that requires some track work.

We've committed \$120,000 to support beekeepers to provide alternative nutrition for bee colonies following the general failure of leatherwood blossoms in 2019. It was a bad year.

I think you can see there from that that we take our bee industry very seriously. We're very proud of them and our support is commensurate to that importance. Thank you.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, as you'd be well aware, research in any industry sector can lead to innovation, hopefully transform practice. Certainly that would then lead to investment, new markets and ultimately jobs for Tasmanians. My question's about research in your space with agricultural research. How are we leveraging outside of funding bodies to achieve better and more research with our research partners. While you're seeking that information, the second part of the question is around the partnership with TIA. I'd like a status update on how that's going, particularly from a northern perspective, please.

Mr PEARCE - Well, thanks very much for the question. In terms of research and development, in terms of TIA, you mentioned, our institute of agriculture, it's not only the R&D work that they do and the work they do on specific projects, it's the reactory work they do. I'll give you one example. That was potato mop-top virus, and also powdery scab, *Spongospora subterranea*. The work that they're doing is world-leading and it's reducing the impacts that we're having, that we're seeing on the potato industry.

In terms of leveraging external research funding, we continue to make significant investments in practical industry focused agricultural research that delivers real outcomes for Tasmanian farmers and producers and agribusiness. It's a key part of this investment for our ongoing support of the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture, which remains critical to our research and innovation for the state's agricultural sector.

We provide around \$5 million in pool funding the TIA to support agricultural research and development and extension in education activities across Tasmania. Importantly, the 2026-27 budget also includes \$750,000 for the second year of the government's \$1.5 million Agricultural Research and Development Fund.

Now, this investment is helping secure industry-led research projects that improve productivity, strengthen sustainability and create new opportunities for Tasmanian agriculture. Our government is focused on ensuring that taxpayer investments deliver strong returns for industry and a broader economy. I'm pleased to inform the committee that TIA substantially exceeded its external funding target in the 2025 calendar year. The target for the external funds leveraged throughout the government investment in primary industry search was \$8 million. It's significant. TIA also exceeded this target by attracting \$11.6 million in external funding from private businesses, national competitive grants and rural research and development corporations. I want to recognise, I want to acknowledge and I want to congratulate TIA for being proactive in that region.

In the previous calendar year, it's interesting that TIA attracted more than \$13.7 million in external funding against the same \$8 million target, so they're doing well. Industry that these investments are - you know, obviously they deliver practical benefits to producers, but it's also an industry-wide benefit that they provide in R&D and creating stimulus amongst - I've been

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to some of those discussion groups. It's not necessarily the information that they're teaching or presenting at some of these discussion groups. It's the fact that real farmers are there and that networking is done at various levels within those farmer groups and it's magic to watch. It really is. It's magic to see that -

CHAIR - Minister, time's expired.

Ms FINLAY - Chair, following up on my committee colleague's question around the bee industry, but Tasmania more broadly, given the recent detection of Varroa mite in the Geelong region and given that Geelong is a departure point for the *Spirit of Tasmania*, not just for passengers, but for vehicles and freight movements into Devonport, what's the current risk rating for Varroa mite entering Tasmania and what extra resources have been allocated? What's the change, actual change, that's happened at our ports with freight pathways and vessel entry points since Varroa has been detected?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, sincerely, for the question. It's an important question. I'd like to call the General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania, Rae Burrows. Rae, would you mind joining us? So, Rae Burrows is the General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania. Thanks, Rae.

Ms BURROWS - Thanks, minister, and through you: I may not remember the whole question, sorry, but I will start with the Varroa mite being found at Geelong, if that's okay. And you did mention about the TT-Line and so forth.

Ms FINLAY - I'm just wondering what the current rating is of the risk, and what specifically has happened since the detection?

Ms BURROWS - When the Varroa mite was found on the mainland, we developed, under the Chief Plant Protection Officer's (CPPO) Susanna, an industry government taskforce on Varroa mite, and one of the early actions that they developed was an import risk assessment process. It's not quite complete yet. They've done the first round of consultation with the industry group and the taskforce group, and it still needs another round of consultation to finalise the risk assessment.

Ms FINLAY - May I clarify, Chair, do you mean from the initial detection some time ago or the detection in Geelong?

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister. No, I'm sorry. I'm talking more generally.

Ms FINLAY - That work's not complete yet? That was some time ago that the original detection was made.

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister: the actual import risk assessment process is actually quite long. It's one of the actions out of the action plan. To deal with the actual Geelong issue, yes, we've identified it's there. As you are probably aware, we have an MOU with the TT-Line, which hasn't been updated for a while, so we're now in the process of working with TT-Line to update that.

And as you are probably well aware, we have contractors that are trained by BT staff in Geelong that actually look at both passengers and freight and vehicles coming onto the ferry in Geelong. Our proposal is that their educational messages will be extended and their inspections

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will be extended to include potential Varroa mite vectors, I suppose, honey equipment and so forth. So, they will be looking pre-border, which is where we want to keep Varroa mite, obviously, away from Tasmania. That's one of the things that we're looking at right now. More generally -

Ms FINLAY - Can I clarify before you move on with that? Thank you for that update. You said 'proposal'. Has there been any change? Is there a change to the classification, and is there a change to any of those processes now, or is that being proposed?

Ms BURROWS - I'm sorry, I'm not sure - the proposal for?

Ms FINLAY - In your language then, when you answered it, you said it's proposed that there be more education, more inspections. I'm just not sure whether those changes have happened or they're happening.

Ms BURROWS - Through you, minister, when I was saying 'proposal', I'm merely meaning that the negotiations with TT-Line are still ongoing. They're not finalised. I don't propose to actually say that's what we would like, but I don't know whether TT-Line will finalise that negotiation with us. That's what we're aiming for.

Ms FINLAY - Can I ask you, minister, there's obviously a lot of concern in industry around this, and given that it's so close and Geelong is an entry point to Tasmania, minister, would you give a clear commitment that the government will review, as a matter of urgency, this Geelong-Devonport pathway, and advise directly to industry specifically what measures have been taken, and when, around these changes?

Could I ask again, has the risk classification changed? My understanding was the latest risk was low-risk. Given that it's now detected and in Geelong, is that risk rating remaining low-risk?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the risk rating, I'm going to leave that one with Rae Burrows. In terms of the reclassification and the revising of the classification, which is the premise of your question, I will undertake to this committee that I will seek information on that, depending on what the process is for the changing of any such classification.

Ms FINLAY - So, are you happy to take that question that I specifically asked, then, on notice?

Mr PEARCE - I've got some information here to hand. I'm advised that there is no change to the risk rating at this point in time.

Ms FINLAY - Is that curious, minister?

Mr PEARCE - It is. In fact, to put your mind at rest, I'm happy to write to the Department to get some clarity about that, if you like.

Ms FINLAY - They're just sitting next to you.

Mr PEARCE - We're sort of formal. We write letters to each other and stuff.

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Ms FINLAY - This is actually a very serious issue.

Mr PEARCE - It is a very serious issue, and that's why I'm taking it seriously, and I want a formal communication done back to the department so that there's some auditable -

Ms FINLAY - Can't you express to the Department your concern that the risk rating hasn't changed since there's been a detection of Varroa mite in Geelong?

Mr PEARCE - Well, there are many variables. I don't know what the process for changing is. Neither do you, for that matter.

Ms FINLAY - I don't know -

Mr PEARCE - We have people like Rae, who runs Biosecurity -

Ms FINLAY - Minister, will you give clear commitment that there will be a review of the pathway and will you communicate directly with industry? Would you take that on notice?

Mr PEARCE - I'm happy to bring Susanna Driessen, who is Chief Plant Protection Officer. I reckon she'd be able to clear some of your points up -

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - Because I'm not sure about the reclassification. I don't get down to that sort of granularity. Susanna, would you mind? Here we have Susanna Driessen - she is the Chief Plant Protection Officer.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you for joining us, and just bringing you up to speed, I've been asking a series of questions about the detection of Varroa mite in Geelong and the concerns around the Geelong-Devonport pathway with the *Spirits* and wondering what changes have happened to the classification. My understanding is the latest classification was low risk. I'm wondering if there's been an amendment to that, and also what real changes have happened since the detection in terms of the resources applied and any processes in protecting Tasmania from Varroa mite now that it is so close.

Dr DRIESSEN - Thank you very much for the question. Through you, minister, could I just clarify the risk rating you're referring to, as there are a number of different risk ratings. I'm just seeking clarification as to whether it's a risk rating associated with the ports where we have surveillance, or is this the risk rating that we've identified in the import risk analyses, which is about movement pathways across everywhere, potentially into Tasmania.

Ms FINLAY - I would love an answer on both, thank you.

Dr DRIESSEN - Thank you. Fantastic. Bear with me for two moments.

Ms FINLAY - My pleasure.

Dr DRIESSEN - So, as part of the import risk analyses, which I would like to emphasise is about managed pathways into Tasmania, and then the outcomes of any import risk analyses

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underpins what regulatory measures we may put at the border to minimise the risk of introduction of Varroa into Tasmania.

We operate according to what is standard across Australia, Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP). Our ALOP is very low, but it's not negligible or beyond very low or nil, so when we're looking at pathways, we're looking at reducing the risk of the import of Varroa mite on carriers into Tasmania below ALOP, which is very low but not negligible. So, in the import risk assessment, the unrestricted estimate of Varroa across, perhaps most relevant to your question, if I may, are water vessels and shipping containers, which was one of the pathways, was identified as low or moderate - so above ALOP.

Ms FINLAY - Interesting. May I check, was that the assessment done in 2020 or is this assessment done since there has been a detection in Geelong?

Dr DRIESSEN - Yes. These are two different assessments for two different points. I believe that the 2020 assessment that you're referring to is around identifying ports for purposes of surveillance. So, identifying risk associated with ports where Varroa might come in, for the purposes of defining what our surveillance activity should be. This import risk analyses is - doesn't matter about ports - it's across the board. It's about the potential carriers.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. What date was that risk assessment completed?

Dr DRIESSEN - This risk assessment, as the General Manager of Biosecurity Tasmania has indicated, is ongoing at the moment. So, a substantial amount of work and one round of targeted stakeholder consultation, which was all the key members of the Varroa mite taskforce which we formed back in 2024. It is 2026 now. They've had a first round of consultation. There will be a subsequent round. So, it hasn't been finalised. It has been developed during the process of 2024-25.

Ms FINLAY - Perhaps I could ask a specific question then to you, minister, and you might hand it on. Given that there has been a detection in Geelong, how urgent is it that these - and I know that you have to go through the steps to get a quality outcome - but when would we expect an outcome to this and therefore changes in what's happening in Geelong to protect Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - Well, I'd accept advice from the people that I've got in front of me.

Ms FINLAY - Sure. I just wanted to come back through you, that's all.

Ms BURROWS - Minister, through you, is it useful, Ms Finlay, if I go through the actions that we're already doing that have mitigated the risk -

Ms FINLAY - Since the detection?

Ms BURROWS - Since the general detection.

Ms FINLAY - No, I'm specifically interested -

Ms BURROWS - So you want the additional ones?

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Ms FINLAY - So, the original detections were New South Wales and other places. At that time we had a response. I've been tracking that response since then. Now that there's a detection in Geelong, I'm interested whether that has caused there to be a change to those things because it's getting closer.

CHAIR - I believe we've covered that already. We can swing back next round, if you need more information, Ms Finlay.

Ms BADGER - Minister, as other members have touched on already in this hearing, there are significant cuts - or efficiencies as you're calling them - to biosecurity, which is a significant concern. I wish we could deal with feral deer in the current financial year. I don't believe that we can, and that will need funding going forward, as will the cat management plan. We also need to take action, I'm sure you'd agree, on the likes of rainbow lorikeets. Now, there are several changes, regulatory-wise, that could be put in place to help mitigate some of these issues, such as better regulations around the import and breeding of rainbow lorikeets. In addition, invasive deer should be declared invasive species. The science tells us that these things will help, minister. Why aren't you doing them?

Mr PEARCE - When you say - What specific measures are you talking about in relation to rainbow lorikeets, for instance? Let's use that as an example.

Ms BADGER - As you know, the volunteer group that - And as the minister's seeking clarification, this is not my second question.

CHAIR - Yes, I understand.

Ms BADGER - They're after, you know, funding. There's certain - you know, it's still a partially controlled species in terms of bringing it into the state. There are various things that you could put in place regulation-wise, without having to put in thousands, hundreds of thousands of dollars into a straight-out eradication program, for example. You could also answer the aspect around deer and why you're not declaring it an invasive species or removing the partial protection. Any of those regulatory measures I'd like to hear about.

Mr PEARCE - Okay, so let's deal with - we'll use rainbow lorikeets as an example, if you like, yeah? Now, this was established as a pest in Tasmania, and it started in the north-west coast. Obviously a pet that had been let go. Since then, rainbow lorikeets are an absolute invasive mess. They are controlled under the *Nature Conservation Act 2002* and are not permitted for import except under a specific permit, and that would be only on compassionate grounds.

We've had care groups, like Landcare Tasmania, they had a rainbow lorikeet management group and they've managed that - which is, I would imagine, where you were alluding to in terms of some of these measures. There was a lady, Lalani Hyatt, she's a former park ranger. She ran that program for a long, long time. In fact, I was the one that presented her with her award.

Ms BADGER - You were, last year.

Mr PEARCE - Trouble with people like Lalani is they don't go on forever and I'm trying to find a suitable replacement for her.

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In terms of controlling that particular species, and it is difficult at best, the other thing that we need to consider is sometimes if you go into control one particular species, then you'll end up doing more damage to other adjoining or adjacent species at the same time.

So yes, I agree with you that there are measures that we can employ. I agree with you in a perfect world, we'd find another Lalani, or maybe even three or four of them. But these people come along very rarely. But I want to make the point very clearly to the committee on *Hansard* that the rainbow lorikeet issue has come from people - I mean, they're a beautiful little bird, and they've let them go into our wildlife and they've now bred into plague proportions, and they're causing damage to other species like the swift parrot and other delicate parrots. So, I hear what you're saying, but trapping of these birds, it'd be almost impossible. The bycatch would far outweigh the benefits.

Ms BADGER - Thank you, minister. Just in the interest of time, if I could just draw you to the second part of that question which is: why are you not removing the partial protection on invasive deer?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the removal of the partial protection on deer, under the *Wildlife Conservation Act*, I'm required by two things. The first thing is legislation. Any changes to that would need to go to public consultation for a statutory period. And secondly, it's the fair thing to do.

Ms BADGER - Yes. Will you do it?

Mr PEARCE - That's what I'm doing. I've said that in my media release. I'm bringing forward the deer management plan. And as part of that, I'm going to consultation with changes to status under the *Wildlife Conservation Act*.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. And we'd love to get your media releases again so that we know when these things are happening, minister. My second question was, in a ministerial briefing note last year from department secretary Mr Jacobi, it said:

The Tasmanian government's June 2025-26 budget included funding of \$440,000 for one year towards the Rural Water Use Strategy, which is critical to maintaining project science and water policy staff capacity to be able to deliver on the rural water use underpinning irrigation and water development.

That was a change. It was a single line item of the \$440,000. Previous to that there had been more ongoing in the forward Estimates. We can't find a single line item in this year's Budget, so we're just wondering how much funding has been allocated to the Rural Water Use Strategy in this year's Budget and whether that will be for a single year, or moving forward?

Mr JACOBI - Sorry, could you just refer again to the particular minute that was issued?

Ms BADGER - It was a quote from the ministerial briefing note last year, but the specific reference is really just to an individual line item in the budget. Because I agree with your articulation that it's important.

Mr PEARCE - Just bear with me.

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Ms BADGER - That's okay. As long as you're looking it up. Or in the interest of time and the others, I'm very happy if you take it on notice.

Mr PEARCE - No, I want to get back to you. So, rural water use strategy implementation, it's called. For 2025-26, \$690,000, outcome was \$690,000. The 2026-27 budgeted \$250,000 in the outcome; forward Estimate is \$250,000. In 2028-29, there's no line item in that at this point in time. The budget is made up of \$250,000 from the 2024-25 election commitment, and that was a total of \$440,000 from the 2025-26 election commitment.

Ms BADGER - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - Are we good?

Ms BADGER - We are good.

CHAIR - Prof Razay.

Ms BADGER - I'll ask another question, if no one else does.

CHAIR - Sorry, that was your second question.

Ms BADGER - I know. But the awkward silence, I thought I'd fill it with a third.

CHAIR - Thank you, Ms Badger. Prof Razay.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, as you are aware, the Firmus AI factory is being built in St Leonards near Launceston. There is concern about the large amount of water they are using, which could place a strain on our water security and TasWater supply, especially in drier summers. We know TasWater set an ambitious goal to recycle 100 per cent of treated effluent by 2050, such as the Tamar Valley. As you are the minister of Water, how can we promote and encourage this industry to use recycled water rather than drinking water?

Mr PEARCE - I thank the member for his question. Yes, I am the Minister for Primary Industries and Water. However, not TasWater. Having said that, I spoke with TasWater only recently about that very matter on an informal basis. Not that I was interfering with their department by any means. But you raise a very valid point, particularly in that area, particularly in the Tamar.

We've also recently doubled down on our commitment to look to irrigation solutions for the Tamar Irrigation System and would love to have that developed. I've written to the federal government in terms of funding the pre-construction stage of that irrigation project, and we are in constant discussions with those irrigators.

Ms FINLAY - Are you?

Mr PEARCE - Sorry?

Ms FINLAY - Are you?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, I am -

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Ms FINLAY - With the Tamar irrigators?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay. Minister, please continue.

Mr PEARCE - with farmers in the Tamar Valley that want to irrigate. The wastewater aspect from the TasWater thing, as you rightly point out, is something that shouldn't be overlooked. Will it answer all the questions? No, it won't. It is difficult, particularly, you know, any scheme down there if we've got to get water into the Tamar, it's we're going to have to go under that river twice. You've got to look at the cost of that water per megalitre and the construction costs.

Are there other options? I'd like to think so. That's where we're at the moment, and I've instructed my department and TI (Tasmanian Irrigation) to look at blue sky options, as well as pursuing that \$19.8 million, I think it was, off the top of my head, from the federal government in terms of pre-construction.

Mr Di FALCO - There was an allocation of over \$800,000 in this year's Budget for peri-urban deer management. As you are aware, our firearms laws are very stringent in urban areas. Have you considered utilising bow hunting, that has strong evidence for ethical animal control and is safely practised all over the world? Could you change the regulations with NRE to legalise it, as is the case in the rest of the country?

Mr PEARCE - No, and it's not my responsibility. It falls under a different minister, I'm sorry.

Mr Di FALCO - Okay.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, I want to take you to our government's relationship and support for NRM (Natural Resource Management) groups. You're probably about to agree with me that they do a tremendous job and it's a partnership that's been very successful. I think there's a fair bit of Commonwealth money that comes into that as well.

But I'd like you to outline what the government is doing to support our natural resource management and our partners who work in that space. You may not have it with you, but I would seek your view on the role and the success of the Launceston City Deal, which had significant funds for NRM North around fencing off riparian and tributaries for the Tamar to help deal with silt entering into the Tamar River. So I appreciate you may not have that with you, but it is a very ambitious and exciting project and I'd seek your views on all of the above.

Mr PEARCE - I want to thank you first of all for your question. Tasmania's environment is one of our greatest competitive advantages. It really is, in so many ways. Protecting that land, our waterways and our natural assets is essential to supporting strong regional communities as well as sustainable agriculture and long-term economic growth. That's why we as a government continue to make significant investments in natural resource management across the state. We're fortunate, in this state, to have three highly effective regional natural resource management organisations working collaboratively with government, with industry, with landholders and community groups to deliver practical, on-ground environmental outcomes. They play a critical role in supporting both the Tasmanian and the Australian governments, by the way, in terms of natural resource management.

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Building on our previous investments in the 2026/27 budget, we're delivering an additional \$2.3 million of investment for Tasmania's NRM bodies. Tasmania's NRMs are delivering important regional programs and projects that progress the state priorities in these areas such as water, vegetation - you've touched on this in your question - and soil management. Threatened species is also another issue that they're dealing with. Weed and pest management; I know my NRMs constantly visiting and they've always got a program in relation to pests and weeds.

Our investment in national resource management is complemented by strong support from community-led initiatives such as LandCare, as I said. The LandCare Action grants program continues to deliver real on the ground outcomes for Tasmanians, and we've committed \$1.865 million over three years to support these grants. Recently we announced round 6 grant recipients, with \$340,000 being made available to 23 successful projects across the state. We understand as a government that strong environmental stewardship and strong agricultural productivity go hand-in-hand, and that's why we'll continue to invest in these practical, science-based and community-driven natural resource management initiatives. Well done, on the record. Well done to our NRMs throughout the state for their great work.

Ms FINLAY - I know that they appreciate the uplift. Not quite what they asked, but they are very appreciative of that increase. I just want to go back and explore the comments made around the Tamar Irrigation Scheme. For years now there was a commitment made that this would be delivered. There was a commitment that in delivering water to Bell Bay, the farmers in the Tamar Valley would benefit on the way through. I know there have been problems in terms of water sales, but each year at Estimates you commit that there will be a scheme and it will get delivered.

You just made a comment about TasWater, and I'm trusting that you're not trying to transfer this project off TI and onto TasWater. So, it's a question of clarification. Are you seeking now to resolve a solution that is a dual project, because as you would be aware, there are high-value producers in the valley that couldn't commingle their produce and recycled water. What's the current proposal for the Tamar scheme?

Mr PEARCE - Okay. So to clarify that for you, and I did clarify it when I responded to Mr Razay, I said that he raised a very good point in that we should, in his words, 'Consider the use of wastewater.' I agreed with that sentiment and there are certain applications where we could. Of course, the situation and the circumstances that you just raised would preclude that particular part of the industry from using it, but in terms of our commitment to the Tamar Irrigation Scheme, we are committed to the development of that proposed combined agricultural and industrial water supply scheme, to the Tamar Valley, to the Tamar region.

A preliminary business case provided to the Tasmanian Government in October 25 is currently under consideration. Funding options for progressing the proposed preconstruction and construction phases of the project are being investigated, and importantly we are seeking to work with the Australian Government on the next steps to progressing water supply solutions for the Tamar region.

I note and I've already mentioned that the federal government funding for the national water grid remains available, including more than \$13 million notionally allocated to the Tamar waters scheme, subject to the submission of the business case. We have committed to invest in

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the Tamar irrigation scheme to unlock federal government support for a combined irrigation and industrial scheme. So that's the one that we've already spoken about at Bell Bay.

We also want to see the most cost effective and appropriate solution for Bell Bay Green Hydrogen Hub also and their water requirements. At the same time helping to secure the prospects of the proposed Tamar Irrigation Scheme for agriculture. \$1.9 million has been provided to Tas Irrigation from the Bell Bay Green Hydrogen initiative for the work in developing the business case and I'm engaging closely on this to ensure that the best solution is found for both agriculture as well as the industrial component, which is in this case is hydrogen.

The federal Labor Government have not committed to retaining transitory projects of essential Tasmanian irrigation schemes in their latest infrastructure priority list. To that end, I've written to the federal minister for Water, Murray Watt and federal minister for Agriculture, Julie Collins, expressing our concerns that the Tamar water scheme is no longer on the Infrastructure Australia's priority list and to confirm their commitment to these remaining schemes.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. And so, I may have misunderstood your previous answer to the other member of the committee, but can you confirm for me there is no suggestion that there'd be recycled water as a solution there?

Mr PEARCE - No, that is not what I said, nor is it our intention at this time.

Ms FINLAY - So, there's no intention to use recycled water? Thank you. One of the other schemes that I regularly inquire about at Estimates because it seems to be long delays between solutions is the Winnaleah scheme. Not only under your ministerial responsibilities but successive previous ministers, there's been commitments that a resolution will be made at Winnaleah before the next irrigating season, you know, it's coming fast. My question to you is, will matters at Winnaleah be resolved in advance of the fast-approaching irrigating season?

Mr PEARCE - Yeah, and you know as well as I do, everybody understands the peculiarities that go behind Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme. Now, our government supports community - let me make this very clear - we support community managed irrigation schemes right from the get-go. In 2023 we passed amendments to our water management legislation enabling Tasmanian Irrigation to delegate certain powers and functions to irrigated groups such as -

Ms FINLAY - We don't need the history, just what's currently - well, for a matter of time, we don't need the history. This is why things take so long.

Mr PEARCE - Both parties agree. Now I want to recognise the board of the Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme, I want to recognise Tas Farmers and I want to recognise TI for their efforts today. Our trial in relation to the whistle is progressing well. There's further work that we need to do and -

Ms FINLAY - Will it be resolved before the irrigation season?

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Mr PEARCE - I'm many things, but I am not Nostradamus, but we are making best efforts to resolve a very complex issue around the Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme. There are many things involving the Australian -

Ms FINLAY - The problem is that every year there is a commitment that it will be resolved before the next irrigating season and it is never resolved, year-on-year the commitment has been made that it would be resolved before the next irrigating season. So my question is, do you imagine that this matter will be resolved before the fast-approaching irrigating season?

Mr PEARCE - I'll have another go. I am making every effort, every effort, to ensure that that is the case. However, there are many considerations outside of my control, outside of Winnaleah Irrigation Scheme committee's control, that need to be resolved before a complete resolution takes place. I am making best effort, and I mean that very genuinely, to give you a, 'Are we there yet?' I can't do that, but let me reassure you and let me reassure the committee that, you know, we are doing everything we can to get this resolution in place.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you. I'd like just to move now to our wild fishing fleet with a particular interest and focus on single-handed fishers. For some time now it's been unclear to the Tasmanian fishing community the government's policy around our fishing fleet, and whether the government would prefer to have a large number of fishers be able to go to work and earn a living and support a community with their single-handed fishing, or whether you'd like to consolidate a fleet and have a small number of vessels fish the majority of the fishing biomass. Wondering, as minister, are you committed to supporting single handed fishers who fish out of local ports, support their families, support their communities or are you seeking to consolidate the fleet?

Mr PEARCE - Yeah, now and it's only a couple of weeks ago I was up there on the east coast talking to some of those smaller guys and they raised some very valid points. It was a really worthwhile trip. I want to recommit today our original commitment of those smaller vessels, those local vessels, locals are important to every industry, especially our fishing industry. So yes, I hear them and I heard their points that day. I've heard them since as well, and I want to pledge my continued support on our previous ministers have done so. But those, those small vessels, those smaller operators are important to Tasmania. Particularly the east coast.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you, Minister.

Ms BADGER - Thank you, Minister. I want to ask about the Water Accountability Framework. In August 2023, the independent review of Tasmania's Water Accountability Framework was complete and released, and the government released a response to the report that accepted all 23 of the recommendations that were made. Minister, can you please give us a status update on those recommendations? So how many have been completed and, if there are any that remain underway or outstanding. and indeed, which ones those are?

Mr PEARCE - That's an excellent question. I don't know where you got it from, but it's an excellent question. I'd like to bring Director of Water, her name is Caroline Atkinson, and while Caroline's coming up, I would like a point of clarification, please, Chair?

CHAIR - Yes, Minister.

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Mr PEARCE - Chair, I want to correct my response in response to Mr George's question, I'm advised that although I personally have not received any gifts from any salmon companies or anyone else for that matter, I'm advised that my office has and that has been declared. I have accepted a dinner invitation, I've said that to you, Mr George, when we were speaking. I'll restate: I have not personally, however, my office has. I want to make that clear, and these will be disclosed in the usual process.

CHAIR - Thank you for the clarification.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Caroline?

Ms ATKINSON - Through you, Minister, thank you. The Water Accountability Project is one of the headline projects of the Rural Water Use Strategy, and as you know and mentioned, that there were 23 recommendations proposed by Ricardo, the independent consultant in 2024; 12 of the 23 recommendations are currently being delivered. In November 2024, NRE Tas engaged the consultant consultancy firm Ricardo to develop the first recommendation, which is a catchment prioritisation framework to look at higher risk catchments that require action. It's essentially a tool to evaluate the potential for catchments to experience water stress based on conditions where their water demand is high compared to supply or there could be an impact on drinking water.

The framework is currently being finalised, supported by survey work, field work and case study examples where improved water accountability is needed to support water management. This has been overseen by a group including most of Tasmania's water managers, Hydro Tasmania, Tasmania Irrigation and TasWater.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. Just for clarification, the last part of that question was any of the 23 recommendations that remain outstanding.

Ms ATKINSON - There are some that haven't been completed, but we support delivering recommendations in full as per the government's response to the recommendations.

Ms BADGER - I am happy for this to be taken on notice as well.

Ms ATKINSON - Through you, Minister. Twelve of the 23 are underway and I can provide detail on that if needed.

Ms BADGER - Through you, Minister. We're after the outstanding ones and the time frame of how they will be rolled out or what the intentions are to finish those.

My second question, minister, and I apologise profusely if I've upset the Liberal media unit. I understand the Greens are getting your media releases even if I wasn't.

Mr PEARCE - They cut me out.

Ms BADGER - I know, rude. Or I need to be more diligent checking my emails, minister.

I'd like to go back to the media release about deer that you put out earlier. I fully support that you are taking action and appreciate that you've brought this work forward given the impact of deer. That's quite sincerely appreciated, minister. You do say in it that it is your intention to

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consult on the status of deer and a range of other measures. That intention is fantastic. I'm hoping you can provide us with some more concrete detail around timeframes of how you're going to be doing that and what the rollout might look like.

Mr PEARCE - Yes, thank you. I've said in that release that I'll bring forward the review of the Tasmanian Deer Management Plan from 2027 and accelerate further action. As part of developing that new plan, we will need to consult, it is a statute requirement that we consult and consider further measures to retain populations at sustainable levels. Consultation on the status of deer is mandatory, but it's also the right thing to do. There are many stakeholders involved with very varied positions on this, and I need to consider that as minister, I need to be fair and balanced. I also need to consider unintended consequences and knock-on effects. We don't want to do something that's actually going to disincentivise.

I mentioned before when Mr Di Falco asked his question, we are going to need every shooter, every hunter, every landowner to pull together if we want to achieve our aim of getting those deer numbers to a sustainable level. I don't want to create an 'us and them' mentality, and I mean that. This is a war, basically, and we're going to have everybody facing the enemy and getting that target to where it needs to be - because if we don't, our environment is going to suffer.

Ms BADGER - Absolutely agree. We'll just go back to the question around specific timeframes on the status of deer, specifically, not generally, because obviously you have just put out a discussion paper that's had a lot of feedback and that was supported as a part of it. So, if you're going to have more consultation, what does that look like?

Mr PEARCE - I want to go to community consultation in 2026 this year.

Ms BADGER - In addition to what you've already done?

Mr PEARCE - Yes. I better get moving on it.

Ms BADGER - You do, I agree.

Mr GEORGE - I would love to be asking about mop-top virus, however -

Mr PEARCE - You're going to ask me about salmon, aren't you?

Mr GEORGE - Senior meteorologist at the Bureau of Meteorology says that winter waters are 2 degrees above average around the state, and a hot winter and summer is expected to follow, which doesn't bode well for the coming summer and the spread of disease among stressed salmon in pens. We know that the EPA is making a number of plans for a hot summer, including the disposal of morts. What plans is your department making for the real potential of mass disease and mass mortalities, and the impact on waterways and wild fishers for the coming summer?

Mr PEARCE - So in terms of -

Mr GEORGE - Contingency plans, I guess I'm asking for.

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Mr PEARCE - Yes, I understand. So, in terms of contingency planning around mortalities, that's probably better framed at the EPA.

Mr GEORGE - The EPA? Yep.

Mr PEARCE - In terms of what we're doing, we can step you through exactly what we're doing in terms of -

Mr GEORGE - Excellent, thank you.

Mr JACOBI - Sure, thank you, minister, and I thank the member for the question. The team at NRE Tas have done an extraordinary amount of work anticipating how best to respond to increases in climate temperatures particularly, but also the combination of issues that might arise.

We have learned an extraordinary amount from what has occurred in South Australia. There have been a lot of conversations with our South Australian colleagues about the causes of that particular harmful algal bloom event, their response and the strategies that they deployed, the communications that they put in place with the broader community - not just the fisheries sector, but the whole community because, as you know, beaches and a number of other recreational areas were impacted.

One of the key things that we have prepared in response to a potential harmful algal bloom is what's called the draft Harmful Algal Bloom Response Plan. I think that is a key important piece of work that will ensure that if we were to see a rise in temperatures, that we are able to properly anticipate those temperatures and the potential flow-on impacts, but also ensure that we have a coordinated response across government. One of the key things that we've learned through the salmon mortality event, and from our South Australian colleagues in terms of the harmful algal bloom response, is that coordination across departments is key. Communication with the community is essential in making sure that everybody is well-informed about the risks. And I suppose that's probably one of the best examples of the work that has already been done.

Mr GEORGE - I did ask specifically about preparation for salmon, rather than just algal blooms. Can you address that?

Mr JACOBI - Yes. We also have developed a response plan for a mortality event. I'm trying to remember the name of it. We might, maybe we could bring David Midson to the table to talk about the work that has been done in that space.

While David is coming to the table, as recently as in the last two weeks, we've brought together a whole suite of representatives from across government, industry and the sectors to test our response capability. And even that has been a very recent and informative piece of work that's been done to ensure that our planning is appropriate..

Mr MIDSON - While you asked about specifically salmon, it is really important to note that the marine environment is integrated and salmon farming occurs in an area where there are a range of other activities happening. So, it is really important that we look at changes in the marine environment and how that all integrates.

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As the secretary has been saying, we have, in the Marine Resources business unit, had a real focus on marine stressors. After the mortality event that occurred, the department released the Marine Stressors Response Plan. Under that we've done a range of work around harmful algal bloom response. And we have also been working to increase our capability and the capability of other sectors. We've had workshops with the wild-catch sector, we've had workshops with the shellfish aquaculture sector and the finfish aquaculture sector. And we've been working to understand how we, together, can respond to incidents that happen in environments where we have increased marine stressors, harmful algal blooms being one of those, increasing temperatures being another.

We have also increased our capacity around dealing with some of those stressors. The secretary mentioned the South Australian algal bloom. We have done some work around increasing capacity to identify *Karenia*, for example.

Mr GEORGE - Does that include additional resources like people? Are you increasing your staffing resources?

Mr JACOBI - We have interoperability arrangements in place. Interoperability is the tool that we use within the department and across government to bring together a whole suite of people with different skill sets to effectively respond to any sort of emergency. And we have people, for example, on spatial mapping, GIS, who would be absolutely critical to an event, that we would bring in and use for an event response.

And also, NRE Tas and industry are participating in an exercise being led by DAFF later this month, which is called Exercise Streamline. So, it's another example of sort of state-Commonwealth building capacity.

Mr Di FALCO - Minister, I'm very supportive your increased funding for Inland Fisheries in the Budget. I have full confidence in Ryan and his team. The next step is the hatchery at New Norfolk. Have you initiated any plans to revitalise it? And any future investment in Lake Sorell and Lake Crescent, that used to be a world-class fishery?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. You spoke about the right individual when it comes to anything Inland Fisheries.

Mr WILKINSON - I'll deal with the hatchery question first. I think the term you used there was 'revitalising' the hatchery. So, the hatchery at the back of New Norfolk was an IFS asset. I'm not sure exactly what year it was built. But it's currently leased to a commercial operator. They use it for part of their production requirements.

Currently, I don't have the operating budget to utilise that facility. It's something that I would like to work towards in the future, if we're fortunate enough to get to that space. I think it's just important to remember, too, with the hatchery, it's not a silver bullet to address some of the challenges that we face in the fishery. I do see it as a potential future tool in the toolbox that we could use to de-risk our stocking program, if we had a little bit more internal capacity for that. So, it's something we're certainly working towards hopefully in the future.

The second part of your question was around Lakes Sorell and Crescent. We're staying fairly actively - although we're not water managers in the sense of how water is managed on those lakes, but we're staying fairly actively involved in watching what the water levels are

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doing, working with the department around how those levels change between the two lakes. We're keeping an operational capacity in terms of water release from Lake Sorell to Lake Crescent when that's required, so we're playing a role there. We're also looking at doing some angler access improvements to both facilities.

One of the more recent developments there was the construction of a new landing jetty at the Lake Crescent boat ramp. That was a collaborative effort between Anglers Alliance Tasmania, MAST, Central Highlands Council and us.

And we're also currently in the process of looking at Mountain Creek as the main spawning facility on Lake Sorell, and whether there are some improvements that can be made to that facility to try and support the trout population going forward. That's just some of the things we're doing up there.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister and to your team. I'd like to just explore with you the role of salmon vaccine development here in Tasmania through the Centre for Aquatic Animal Health - no doubt, interstate, perhaps international collaboration. What is the role of this centre in supporting our vital salmonid industry?

I'd also like to know how that is delivering improvements to the health of salmon being farmed in Tasmania, particularly in addressing *P. salmonis*. And to what extent is this a collaboration with industry itself, and are they helping to pay for it?

Mr PEARCE - I thank the member for his question. It's an important one. The Centre for Aquatic Animal Health and Vaccines that you speak of, the CAAHV, plays a critical role in leading and supporting the strength, sustainability and reputation of our salmonid aquaculture industry. It is unique - it's a unique industry. There's none like it. Government partnerships bringing together the expertise of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Salmon Tasmania and the Australian Government through the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation. This model allows commercial focus to be maintained throughout that, and that's important. It's practical, it's outcome-driven and it's what expected. It's a science-driven research and development model with a clear objective of improving fish health, supporting animal welfare and underpinning sustainable production.

The centre has already delivered significant outcomes for industry, and in Tasmania here it has become a national leader in the development and use of fish vaccines. Many of these vaccines used in the salmon industry today have been developed locally, specifically tailored for Tasmanian conditions and disease challenges here in Tassie.

Mr GEORGE - They don't work very well.

Mr PEARCE - These vaccines are a vital tool in modern aquaculture. To help prevent disease before it occurs - and that's what the real aim is, we need to reduce the reliance on antibiotics. That's right, Mr George, we need to reduce the antibiotics -

Mr GEORGE - We do, and the vaccines aren't helping.

Mr PEARCE - and support strong animal welfare outcomes. Importantly, vaccination programs are integrated into production from an early stage. It's something we take very

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seriously. Ensuring that fish develop robust immunity prior to entering that marine environment is absolutely paramount.

Turning to *Piscirickettsia salmonis*, this is highly recognised as a pathogen of significant concern. The work that's being led by CAAHV is both comprehensive and it's active. Scientists are currently assessing the performance and the longevity of protection that these vaccines provide, vaccines like the Tegovac Plus-EC vaccine. That's a vaccine that has been widely deployed across the industry. I understand that every fish that's been transferred to sea has been vaccinated, and that gives them the very best chance that they can have.

Also underway are long-term trials, on-farm monitoring, and these are things to ensure the protection that's provided by the vaccine is maintained as best it can to the full production cycle, which is essential for managing risk in real-world conditions. Our centre is progressing next generation solutions that include pilot work with an oral booster which has the potential to strengthen immunity in a practical and scalable way. Parallel researchers have commenced development on the second generation of live attenuated *P. salmonis* vaccine, with the aim of delivering long-lasting and more effective protection against this disease.

CHAIR - The minister's time has expired on that one.

Ms FINLAY - Minister, the Natural Values Atlas that's used by our fishers, our farmers, our private foresters, irrigators for biosecurity approvals, your own material shows that the update that's been underway since 2022 was targeted for release early this year. Just wondering, first, if that is still on track to be released in the first half of this year?

Mr PEARCE - I might just throw that one to you, Jo Crisp?

Mr JACOBI - We'll ask Jo, if Jo would come to the table. Jo Crisp is our general manager for the Environment, Heritage and Lands Division. I will say while Jo is coming to the table that the department and her team have done an extraordinary amount of work around the Natural Values Atlas. In fact, I think it's probably certainly national-leading work, and the data that will be provided through the LIST layer will be so important to enabling everybody to find information. I'll hand over to Jo to explain the program and the timing.

Ms FINLAY - Yeah, that's why I'm keen to understand where it's at.

CHAIR - Just for the record, minister, please introduce the new member to the table.

Mr PEARCE - This is Jo Crisp. She's the general manager, Environment. Welcome, Jo.

Ms CRISP - Thank you very much, minister. Yes, the Natural Values Atlas is something that we're very proud of and very excited about because while it's been an amazing tool that is used by researchers, used by industry and consultants and used by our own department, conservation organisations, et cetera, it has been clunky and the reports take a while to generate. The update, which will improve data storage speed time, be better accessible on a mobile phone when you're out and about, et cetera, has been a really important piece of work. Initially, we started it, we only had one person who was responsible. More recently, in the last sort of 18 months or so, we've been very successful in attracting an Australian Government grant to allow us to speed up the process of undertaking the work, and so we're coming to that sort of

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pointy end where we're actually doing the bit where you test the system, this is not what the developers would say, but you know, when you test the system and try and break it.

Ms FINLAY - They would in fact say that.

Ms CRISP - Yeah, right. So, we're doing that internally and also making sure that we've got a national [inaudible] project as well. So making sure that those layers are incorporated, and so the scope has expanded a little bit, the timelines have therefore extended out until October or thereabouts. But we're very excited that we'll be able to have something in the latter part of 2026, and excited also that we'll be able to showcase it at Agfest next year and do some really good promotion around the system.

Ms FINLAY - Do you feel confident about that October date?

Ms CRISP - I do feel confident insofar as we have been testing it to break it, and as long as the scope stays within the scope that it's currently in; if suddenly there were extensions that were added to the system, obviously they would take additional time to deliver on.

Ms FINLAY - One of the reasons why I ask is that it's been presented to me that while the updates are happening, there is some known evidence of things that are quite different from what's in the Atlas, sort of the reality versus what's in the current older version, and so that can create some conflicts and some delays, perhaps people are having to do things that they wouldn't have to do if and when it was updated, how do you manage those sort of timing challenges between what we know on the ground versus what the Atlas says?

Ms CRISP - So the, the current Atlas is currently being updated, and so data is regularly being updated in the system, and so it's not the data, the data is as good as the data is, you know, it's updated in, but we're basically rebuilding the system from scratch, and so that piece, in terms of speed, products, the reporting, the look and feel - I'll be able to go in and see how we're going in terms of number of records, users, all those sorts of things, very quickly, which I can't currently do. So it'll be better tool for managers and decision-makers.

Ms FINLAY - Okay. So, October?

Ms CRISP - So, October, cross fingers.

Ms FINLAY - Great. Thank you. Appreciate that update. That was the purpose of my question for that, so thank you.

The other piece of work that I'm keen for an update on, minister, is around - and at the very beginning of this output there were some questions about - the sardine fishery. I'm just really interested in progress on that. I feel like the timelines on that have slipped and there's some missed opportunities for Tasmania, so can you please bring the committee up to date with whether you're on track for your own timelines, and when you expect there to be a fishery available to land and benefit Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - Yeah and appreciate the question on sardines. I'm going to get David Midson, our General Manager Marine Resources, he's been working on this very thing. Just before he starts, can I make a public service announcement?

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CHAIR - Please elaborate, minister.

Mr PEARCE - It's in relation to a safety issue around Mr Di Falco's question regarding bow hunting, and whilst I said that we weren't considering that, it's best that we really clear this up for safety reasons. Under the Nature Conservation (Wildlife Regulations 21), the use of a bow and arrow is listed as a prohibited method for taking wildlife such as game species, and I know this is something that you've been keen to see happen, as have many others, including some members of the Game Council, but there's no consideration - and I said 'no' - consideration at this time. The use of bows raises issues with respect to animal welfare and the humane destruction which I'm sure that you're aware of but I respect your opinion, but those are the rules and I wanted to clear that up.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. Please continue.

Mr PEARCE - David Midson, General Manager (Marine Resources).

Mr MIDSON - Thank you, Minister. The sardine fishery has been of interest to Tasmania for a long time. It was only recently that the first comprehensive survey was done, but it builds upon a lot of previous knowledge through a long-term developmental fishery that fishers up in the north contributed to over a long period of time.

Also, work builds on some partial surveys in 2019, so there has been a long period of collecting information. We've been working really hard to go through the process to turn that information into a fishery management plan.

The minister spoke before about the release of the policy paper where it outlined what the government's policy thinking at that time on the sardine fishery was. There will be, I hope in the near future, some other documents released. We have also recently had an ecosystem workshop with a range of experts and we hope to release a report on that.

We have also done some work with the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) around the economic benefits of the fishery and cost recovery. That's been also released by IMAS. It's been published on their website.

The next the next steps that we have are to release a report on the consultation, so we went out to consult. We need to release what we heard from that consultation. That's currently scheduled for approximately August, so later this year.

We also have to draft a management plan. Drafting a management plan does take some time. It relies on us working with the Office of Parliamentary Council, so I can't put a definitive timeline on that, but we have started that work. We certainly realise that it is going to be really important for scale fishers that this sardine fishery is set up, but I am also really mindful that this is a very rare opportunity. This is a very large stock of sardines in Bass Strait. It's very rare for fisheries managers to be able to set up a brand new fishery. It's a really rare opportunity for Tasmania's fishing fleet, so it's important that we get it right and we go through the appropriate process.

Ms FINLAY - You don't want to lose the opportunity though and get landed somewhere else.

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Mr MIDSON - The sardines in Bass Strait under the Offshore Constitutional Settlement can be managed by Tasmania. I don't think that's a risk but what we've seen from consultation is there are some diverse views on a sardine fishery, so it is important that we go through these steps of consultation and making sure that we have the appropriate management framework in place.

Ms FINLAY - My question was specifically, because it has been long known, there's been a lot of data, there's been a lot of work from your original timeframes. Have you slipped on that? If everything goes to plan, to your time-frames, when can you imagine that fishers can go fishing?

Mr MIDSON - There is already some fishing for sardines in Tasmania. Through a permit, we allowed a scale fisher to take a small number of sardines and we've done some great work, particularly here in the south east on human consumption, so using those sardines out in market to try and start building Tasmania's taste for sardines. There is some fishing for sardines and I think we will be able to look at that through the upcoming scalefish rules in November as well, so that's within those 3 nautical miles, and I think that will be a really important step, particularly for local human consumption. Not everyone likes the taste of sardines. I know that there are many who do.

In terms of the Tasmanian sardine fishery, we need to draft the management plan. I can't give a definitive timeline on that because it does require us working with another entity, the Office of Parliamentary Council, to go through that process of drafting -

Ms FINLAY - You would have something mapped out in your mind because you said yourself it is exciting for -

Mr GEORGE - That's a lot of questions. It's a lot of time.

CHAIR - It's still relating to a third question. You get the same courtesy.

Ms FINLAY - It is a question about the sardine fishery. It is exciting to have a new fishery land in Tasmania. The economic opportunity is massive, so there must be some sort of understanding because the small test around for human consumption is really positive but that will be a tiny portion of what is possible, even with the very conservative biomass that you've identified for the fishery.

So, do you have any expectation of when, if you follow all your processes, understanding the time it takes, which you will take into consideration, for this to progress, when a commercial-scale fishery could commence in Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - Mr Midson's just gone through it.

Ms FINLAY - I didn't get an indication of timeframe, though.

Mr PEARCE - Obviously we've got to get the report that he talked about, that data's got to - you know, we've got to consume that. That's got to be churned into this legislation. We've got to, you know, there will be a community consultative process involved as well, a mandatory one. But I don't want to kick this down any the road any longer than it already has.

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Ms FINLAY - You must, as minister, have an expectation on when you expect this work to be done. What would that date be?

Mr PEARCE - If Mr Midson was asked the question he would tell you that I've expressed -

Ms FINLAY - I'm asking you. It's a committee for answering questions. This is a serious opportunity.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, let the minister answer.

Mr GEORGE - Point of order, Chair.

Ms FINLAY - What would be your expectation?

CHAIR - Ms Finlay, point of order.

Mr GEORGE - I know Labor's questions are very important, but so are others. This is a lot of questions.

Ms FINLAY - What's your expectation, minister.

CHAIR - I'm well aware.

Mr PEARCE - I'd like to progress with this as soon as possible.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Ms BADGER - Last year in budget Estimates - this is back on river health - Mr Graham told us that the Drivers of Change river health project would be complete by June 2026. We're just wondering if that project has been completed. We haven't seen any reports or anything out. Just wondering if there will be, if they'll be public, and when.

Mr PEARCE - That's an excellent question and I appreciate it. Have you got anything up there, Mandy, on that? Or should we get Caroline Atkinson? Thank you, Caroline, you're across Drivers of Change?

Ms ATKINSON - I am, thanks. Through you, minister: so, the Drivers of Change project is another of the headline projects under the Rural Water Use Strategy. Work has been underway so far to undertake testing between 2023 and 2025 at 50 monitoring sites around Tasmania, testing water quality, waterbugs, algae, sediment. Then there's also work ongoing on four case studies of particular rivers - the Upper Ringarooma, Leven, Pipers River and Mountain River. Analysis of the statewide data and the case studies is still ongoing and we're expecting further analysis to be released later in 2026, from memory.

Ms BADGER - Just to sort of follow up and circle back to the original question, as a part of that, there'll be a report that will be public in 2026? How will that be relayed?

Ms ATKINSON - There will certainly be. I'm not sure of the exact format, but yes, there certainly will be some published information in 2026.

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Ms BADGER - Fantastic, thank you. I suspect you'll be able to help with my second question as well. This is, again, following on from questions that I asked last year about the strategic directions for healthy waterways project, which was delayed a little bit at that time, particularly when the Drivers of Change project was being prioritised. So last year Mr Graham said that the project was yet to commence, with scoping for the project to commence in the first half of 2026. Has that scoping now started? What's the current time line for completing the project?

Ms ATKINSON - Yes. So, following the Drivers of Change project, it's then proposed that we'll start the strategic directions for healthy waterways project. The first stage, to be undertaken in 2026, will outline the roles and responsibilities for river health and water quality management and monitoring in Tasmania.

It's then proposed that stage 2 could involve reviewing the main challenges and opportunities, as well as identifying actions and policies to maintain and improve water quality and river health in Tasmania.

Probably before taking this work too far, we'll be considering the review of the NRM framework, because it'll all interrelate.

Ms BADGER - Is there a timeframe, sorry, on the, the stage 2 component of that, if stage 1 is going to start in 2026?

Ms ATKINSON - Not at this stage, but obviously, yes, we'll work through that. It'll sort of come out of once that first initial work's done in 2026.

Ms BADGER - Thanks. That's how you do two questions in three minutes, guys.

Mr GEORGE - I have a question which didn't get answered earlier, which is: can you tell us which area was traces of florfenicol discovered at 14 kilometres from the nearest diseased pen? What areas remain closed to rock lobster and abalone for the time being?

Mr PEARCE - We might get the general manager in to answer your questions, Mr George.

Mr GEORGE - Sure. Thank you. At least it's a nice, simple one.

Ms FINLAY - Sounds like two questions. Don't mean to trigger you.

Mr PEARCE - Don't badger the witness.

Ms BADGER - What if I'm the witness? It's late. Sorry.

Mr PEARCE - Didn't mean it like that.

Members interjecting.

CHAIR - Order. I know it's late. Let's give Mr George and Mr Midson respect, please.

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Mr MIDSON - Thank you. So, in relation to the first question, I would go to what I said before. We've done an extensive monitoring program throughout the area. We haven't had any detections in areas outside of the currently closed blocks, but I'm not willing to go into detail about exactly where detections have been, because it's really important that IMAS and those scientists have the time to go through those reports and provide verified data. I don't want to put out inaccurate data.

We've worked very closely with industry and taken a precautionary approach to use the best available information that we have at the time to make management decisions in order to protect those industries. But the research program and the monitoring program isn't finished yet. It's still subject to ongoing QA/QC, and it's really important that we give those scientists the time to go through their work properly. Then it will get released in due course.

In terms of the blocks that are closed, I've recently reopened all relevant blocks to urchin diving, so that's for the commercial dive fishery, and that was on the basis of the risk review around the uptake of florfenicol into urchin roe. We found that there was no evidence of uptake of florfenicol into urchin roe. To be clear, there is currently no restriction on urchin fishery.

We did close a range of sub-blocks for the rest of commercial dives. That's for shellfish species - 14B and 14C. As well as that for 14B and C, there are also abalone sub-blocks that are 14B and C and they remain closed. For part of the time, they were closed for other reasons. So, we open and close fisheries blocks for a range of different reasons, biotoxins being one, but also catch caps, because we manage commercial fisheries' catches very closely.

We also closed abalone block 15. Again, that was only for part of the time that it's been closed for florfenicol. It was closed for other reasons prior to that. And we have closed abalone sub-blocks 17A and 18. Again, that's only for part of the time, because there was a range of seasonal closures in place.

In terms of rock lobster, I closed rock lobster sub-blocks 7G1L and 7G1M. Again, it's only for part of the date. There was a range of seasonal closures in effect. I also closed a partial sub-block, so part of sub-block 7G1N.

These sub-blocks represent only a very small part of the commercial fishery, under 2 per cent of these fisheries. So it's a very limited amount of impact on the overall commercial fishery.

As we get this data in, even though it is preliminary in the sense that the research report hasn't been done, we continually assess the risk in conjunction with the wild catch sector, where I take a very precautionary approach, but I do expect to be consulting on reopening parts of these blocks soon. This is an operational process. I do it in conjunction with the relevant wild catch sector industry. I look at the data, and with them, we look at the risks of making a determination about what's appropriate for that industry.

I remain really committed to making sure that Tasmanian seafood meets all relevant standards, and it does. And I continue to make sure that our monitoring program, and my actions, and the actions of our fisheries management team, provide assurance of that to other regulators, such as DAFF, so they can make sure that our international markets are aware of that as well.

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Mr GEORGE - Well, obviously from the nods of Ms Finlay, pleases both her and me, which is something new. But minister, I don't understand the secrecy around why you can't tell us which area abalone with traces of florfenicol was found at 14 kilometres away from the nearest pen. What pen or which area? You can't tell us that? It's a secret?

Mr MIDSON - The abalone we're talking about is wild catch abalone, so it's not in pens. It's in -

Mr GEORGE - No, I'm saying it's 14 kilometres from the nearest diseased pen.

Mr MIDSON - I'm very mindful that Tasmania's seafood sector is very reliant on export markets, and trade is a really sensitive matter, so it is really important that we handle this data appropriately. And as the Secretary said earlier, we do have obligations around making sure that the data that we put out in the public is appropriately verified and checked before it's published. In this case, we're working with scientists at IMAS. I will take my lead from them about when the monitoring program is concluded to an appropriate level, where we can put out data that is appropriately checked with the appropriate context. So it is really important that we take the time that's necessary to do that. In the meantime, we do utilise the best available information that we have to make management decisions to protect our wild catch sector.

Mr GEORGE - None of this would come out. I mean this comes out from abalone divers themselves. I mean, I can probably ring someone and say, 'Where was this found?' I mean, I don't understand the secrecy. What's the secrecy about it? We're all well aware. I mean, the international markets are well aware of the issues that we've got.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks, David. It was a comprehensive answer, appreciate it.

Mr GEORGE - It was a good answer, other than where it is.

CHAIR - Thank you, Mr George. It has been answered.

Mr Di FALCO - Minister, when is the booking system going live, and can I stress the importance of including Sustainable Timber Tasmania (STT) properties?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the STT land, for shooters?

Mr Di FALCO - Yes.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister: I thank the member for the question. We are trying to push through the booking system as quickly as possible. There's just, as I might have mentioned to you in another briefing, there's just getting the Parks Reserved Land and Future Potential Production Forest Land (FPPFL) onto the booking system. As soon as we've done that, as soon as we've done some notifications to landholders that this is all going to kick off, the booking system will go live, I think in the next couple of months would be fair to say. So we're not talking a long time. Short. And your second question was in?

Mr Di FALCO - Can I stress the importance of including STT.

Mr JACOBI - Yes, STT. Since you mentioned it at the table a couple of sessions ago, I've already spoken to STT. They're open to the idea of STT parcels being added to the booking

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system. That is something we'd have to work through over time. My first priority is making sure that the booking system is up and running, that it works, it doesn't have any glitches. That's the most important thing, and then I'm happy to talk with STT over time about when they can start to transition land across.

Mr PEARCE - And safety, safety, safety.

Mr Di FALCO - Oh, absolutely, for sure.

CHAIR - Ms Finlay.

Mr FERGUSON - I have a question.

CHAIR - Oh, you do now. Sorry. Okay. Mr Ferguson. Apologies, Ms Finlay.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you. Minister, I want to just take you to red tape, and ask you if you've got some red tape-reduction achievements or ambitions. I know that there has been one in particular that you may care to share with the committee around canola, for GM canola. While we maintain the GMO moratorium, I understand that through the portal, one opportunity raised was in helping farmers manage former GM canola sites, however with a lower compliance burden. I'd like to know how that's going.

Mr PEARCE - Yep, and a good question. Not one that's raised very often. But Tasmania's genetically modified organism-free status is important to Tasmania. For those that aren't aware, in our feedlot the northern part of, you know, just at Powranna there, they're directly back into the Japanese market, and they rely heavily on that GMO-free status. As a government, we remain absolutely committed to maintaining that GMO moratorium while ensuring our regulatory system is practical, it's science-based and it's proportionate. Members would be aware of the GM canola trials that occurred between - I think it was 1998 to 2000, before the state introduced that GMO moratorium in 2001. In 2004, there was also limited contamination of non-GM canola crops through imported seed containing low levels of GM material.

Since that time, affected landholders have operated permits or exemptions, and it's been clunky; it's been laborious. Importantly, these sites have been monitored for more than 20 years now. NRE has undertaken regular inspections, often up to three times a year, to identify and destroy any volunteer plants that we might have. We don't want this getting away. We are now implementing a new framework that recognises the scientific reality that canola seeds do not remain viable in the soil indefinitely. Over time, natural breakdown processes combined with normal farming practices such as cultivation significantly reduce the remaining seed bank and its viability. This framework, developed with the support of the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture, establishes clear evidence-based criteria to determine the former GM canola site can be considered low-risk and cleared from ongoing regulatory requirements.

Importantly, this does not change Tasmania's GMO moratorium. What it does do is reduce any unnecessary regulatory burden on farmers who have to go through this process, and I want to acknowledge the work that NRE has done on this. I mentioned to Mr Di Falco there before, to a different matter, in red tape that you mentioned - reducing those permits from eight to two. Everywhere we look, if we try and apply that red tape reduction, that's what we need to be aiming for, I think, so thank you for the question.

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Ms FINLAY - Two questions in this last round. In terms of budget impacts on our fishers, recreational fishers, I'm just wondering whether you can rule out any increase in fees to recreational fishers in terms of some of the licencing they need, and rule out any fee that might be applied to rod and line licencing and whether you're expecting to gain any increased revenues out of our rec fishers?

Mr PEARCE - I'm not aware of any - I can have a look for you, but I'm not aware of any increases at this stage.

Ms FINLAY - If there are any, I would love to be notified. That would be great. Thank you. My second question is also around resourcing in the aquaculture cost recovery programs. Can you outline for me how many roles there are funded by the cost recovery program, and detail what their titles and functions are?

Mr JACOBI - Yeah, we can provide that information.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - So they're comprised of Marine Resources: Biosecurity/Environment; Strategic Business Services Research: Environment Protection Authority/Inland Fisheries, so 2024-25, 54.75; 2025-26, 54.7.

Ms FINLAY - And proposed in 2026-27?

Mr PEARCE - No increases.

Ms FINLAY - No increases?

Mr PEARCE - No.

Ms FINLAY - And can you tell me what the overall budget is in 2026/27 to bring in through full cost recovery.

Ms CLARKE - Through you, minister. So, salmon cost recovery occurs in arrears.

Ms FINLAY - Could you tell me the final position for 2025/26?

Ms CLARKE - Yes, I can.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Ms CLARKE - It is \$10 million, just over \$10 million.

Ms FINLAY - Ten million, thank you very much. Final question then for the night, I'm interested in the challenges being faced in the north east as a result of a potential sale of Brushy Lagoon. Just wondering what advocacy you're doing on behalf of that in response to those concerns?

Mr PEARCE - To any of those who don't know, I'm not explaining it to you but I'm explaining it to other members of the committee, it's a 22,000-and-something hectare property

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at Brushy that the proposed sale of which would put that in the hands of a foreign investor, in the form of Gresham House, from the United Kingdom. They've already public stated that they intend to put at least 8500 hectares of that property down to *Pinus radiata*. I have written to the federal Treasurer because, you know, the sentiment from our farmer industry and you would have heard it has, has been pretty strong against that.

I've written and outlined that to Jim Chalmers, the federal Treasurer, in his capacity as the caretaker minister of the Foreign Investment Review Board, of which that process will need to go through. I've also spoken to several colleagues that are in a similar position. You know, one of the big concerns that they have - I'm trying to get to the bottom of whether the federal government with the Clean Energy Future Fund, whether that has been accessed or not and it's very difficult for me to find that information out.

But I will state for the record that, personally, I am against any distortion of the purchaser's ability at the market stage. So, if I'm a farmer, you're a farmer, and all of a sudden, you want to plant trees, you get some sort of incentive from a future energy carbon type funding stream. Then that advantages you compared to us as normal farmers, and I've articulated that to not only Mr Chalmers, but also the minister.

Ms FINLAY - Could I ask at a state level whether you've done any creative thinking about how the state might be able to intervene and secure for Tasmania's emerging farmers, young farmers who are being accessed out of land?

Mr PEARCE - Yep, and to that end I looked at the whole property because you know the number that was floated around initially, anecdotally, was somewhere between 8000-8500 hectares that they're going to put in with pine. I got a meeting happening with the mayor.

Ms FINLAY - Simplot?

Mr PEARCE - Simplot, yep, and a number of local people with Gresham House. Whether they could lease or buy or you know certain blocks, may not be the whole lot. I don't think anything come of that but at least it was something I need to try out. In terms of intervening in that process, it's difficult for me or anyone from the state to - we can't stop that, this is not North Korea, and we've got a number of processes that need to go through in terms of checks and balances for foreign investment review boards in terms of - you know, there'll be requirements under the Clean Energy Future Fund that they'll need to go through as well. But I have articulated very clearly to Jim Chalmers exactly what the farming community of Tasmania feels about this.

Ms FINLAY - Thank you.

Ms BADGER - Minister, on the statewide water quality monitoring program, it was some time ago that the government committed to reestablishing that monitoring program and the groundwork for that started in 2022 with the creation of the water managers and data custodians working group. I believe there was then work undertaken to review existing monitoring to identify gaps and overlaps and then in October last year, network design was presented to the Rural Water Roundtable Group. Could you outline what gaps you found when reviewing existing monitoring and explain some of the key elements of the network design for

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the program? In the process of reviewing existed data collection, what sort of analysis of that data was undertaken?

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for the question. Data is important and there's no better person to answer that than Caroline.

Ms ATKINSON - Thank you. To provide a better understanding of diffuse pollutants or non-point-source pollution, NRE is developing this new collaborative statewide water quality monitoring program in partnership with TasWater, Tas Irrigation, Hydro Tas and the EPA. What they identified was that there were gaps in monitoring sites. So, there'll be an additional 33 monitoring sites proposed, on top of 51 existing sites that are already monitored. At the sites, they'll measure a range of parameters, including water temperature, dissolved oxygen and nutrients.

Now, in terms of progress of the project, a memorandum of understanding has been signed by all parties outlining their in-principle commitment to the monitoring program. The next stage is a formal partnership agreement which will sort of determine the details of the program, so to speak. That'll be overseen by an interim partnership committee with representation from all of the parties.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. Just back to the original question and outlining in terms of some of the gaps that were in the data. Thank you very much for that high-level explanation. Is there anything of that that's going to be made public in a report of some form as well to reflect upon in the future?

Ms ATKINSON - Yes, I think that - yes, there will. And the details will be worked out through the interim partnership committee. And that will include publication of information. There are obviously various options for that, whether it's through our portal or through a different instrument. But that will be worked out as the partnership program is developed.

Ms BADGER - Thank you. Before you run away, Caroline, I'd like to just go back to the part of the Rural Water Use Strategy and the 2025-2027 implementation plan. Specifically, on recommendation 23 from the Water Accountability Review, which was:

NRE Tasmania should review its approach to publishing water use accountability information with a focus to providing fit-for-purpose publicly available water use metering and compliance information. Information should meet the usability and accessibility requirements recommendation in recommendation 19. That should include progress on implementing water accountability reforms, annual aggregated water accounts for high-risk catchments in areas of public interest, compliance and enforcement activity.

I think you touched on it a little bit in terms of some extra sites that are coming on board. But how is that recommendation 23 specifically being delivered? And what further plans are there to publish the annual aggregated water accounts, particularly for the high-risk catchments?

Ms ATKINSON - As I said earlier, that we've developed the prioritisation framework as an initial first step to identify catchments that could potentially be under stress. Further work is needed in terms of field work, survey work to confirm those results and then determine what action will be taken in regards to those sites. So, that work is still ongoing.

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Ms BADGER - No worries. That formal agreement that you mentioned in my first question, and the MOU, is that expected to be this year that that will be undertaken?

Ms ATKINSON - We're still working through the timing, but I would anticipate, like, that's what we're aiming towards. But yes, that's the intention.

Ms BADGER - Thank you.

Mr Di FALCO - Minister, you mentioned that you cut six or seven permits. What were they?

Mr PEARCE - That's an excellent question.

Ms FINLAY - What were the eight permits?

Mr PEARCE - What permits did we cut? We've gone from eight to two.

Members interjecting.

Mr PEARCE - You are fast.

Mr Di FALCO - She's just waiting to -

Ms BUTLER - And you're not.

Mr PEARCE - It's really small. Okay, so, a simpler permit system for landholders to cull deer, a greater flexibility to control deer numbers. A permit is required to take all classes of deer statewide 365 days a year with no quota, bag limits or tagging requirements. Either a property protection permit if deer are causing an economic impact or a special purpose wildlife permit if deer are impacting on natural values identified under the legislation, and/or a Voluntary Conservation Management Agreement and you have prepared a property-based wildlife management plan.

This doesn't go into the ones that we have cut. The member wanted to know which ones we've cut. I'm going to call Ashley Bastock. He's our general manager (Agriculture and Water).

Mr BASTOCK - Mr Di Falco, at the moment there are eight different property protection permit types that are in operation that a farmer can access at different times. To go through the list, in Deer Management Zone 1 there's a property protection permit, Antlers. In Zone 1 there is a property protection permit, Emergency Antlers. There's a property protection permit in Zone 1, Immature Male. There's a property protection permit, Adult Male in DMZ 1. In Zone 1, there's also a property protection permit, Male, Immature Male and Adult Male. In Zone 1 there's also a property protection permit for an Emergency Adult Male. In Zone 1, we have a property protection permit, Adult Male Recreational Hunting Seasons. And in Zones 2 and 3, there's a property protection permit, Adult Male, Immature Male Antlers.

I think that the minister has outlined how we've gone from to one form of property protection permit. And the other one, when the minister talks about there now being two permits, is if it's a special-purpose wildlife permit for where there's natural values. So, I think that self-explanatory, minister, as to how we've reduced that.

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CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired. The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

The committee suspended from 7.21 p.m. to 7.27 p.m.

Veterans' Affairs

CHAIR - Before we go to questions, I want to remind members of the order of the House establishing Estimates committee, which provides:

Questions must be relevant to the portfolio and outputs of a particular session.

However, as with other sessions, I will permit broad questions about the minister's role as a member of the Cabinet in relation to issues of public concern in relation to former minister Ogilvie if the minister chooses to answer them.

The scrutiny of the veterans affairs portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I now invite the minister to please introduce persons at the table, names and positions for the benefit of Hansard.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee. With me today I have Mellissa Gray. Mellissa is the deputy secretary, policy and reform. Thank you for today and all that you've done for us. Also Jodi Willcox, Executive Director of Policy and Intergovernmental, and likewise appreciate and thank you for the work that you have done and continue to do.

CHAIR - The time scheduled for the estimates of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs is one hour. Would the minister like to make a short opening statement?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee. I'm very pleased to be here tonight in my capacity as the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. As a veteran who shares a lived experience with more than 17,500 ex-serving men and women in Tasmania, I am passionate about leading the portfolio. I'm very pleased that the Tasmanian government's 2026-27 budget continues to deliver strong funding for Veterans Affairs. With \$983,000 in 2026-27 and \$2.4 million across the forward Estimates.

This budget will support, firstly, the continued delivery of the state's first veteran employment strategy and the Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program. It delivers the Teddy Sheean Grants Program, the Cameron Baird Scholarship and the Frank McDonald Memorial Prize and \$60,000 to be shared between the Hobart and Launceston Legacy to ensure that the dependents of our veterans are never left behind.

We're also continuing to fund RSL Tasmania as Tasmania's peak body for veterans. This budget also includes Tasmanian government's implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide Final Report, and our continued advocacy for Tasmanian veterans on the important issue.

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In addition to the measures included in the 2026-27 budget, last night I was pleased to announce that the *Anzac Day Observance Act 1929* will be reviewed. In no way will this review or any amendments to that act diminish the focus of preserving observance and commemorative activities. At the centre of the trading restrictions before 12.30 p.m. is ensuring people can attend services. Having administered this act for Anzac Day this year, it was clear to me that this is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. We need to make it easier for businesses and organisations to understand the requirements and when they need to seek approval to operate, to trade or to hold events on Anzac Day. The act also needs to reflect current business practices and a modern society. There's a lot of red tape that we can cut for businesses and there are government administrative efficiencies that we can also achieve.

There's also an opportunity to consider Victoria's model - consider it -which requires a percentage of revenue tickets from ticket sales or gate takings for major sporting events to be paid to a fund, and this fund in turn is reinvested back into the veteran community. I'm very proud of the fact that Tasmanian government continues to deliver practical, target support for veterans. At the end of the day, we owe that support to those families who carry the memory of our fallen, and we'll do everything in our power to support them.

Ms BUTLER - Thank you. As the Minister for Veterans Affairs and former veteran yourself - sorry, you're still a veteran as someone who's served previously.

Mr PEARCE - Yeah.

Ms BUTLER - I just want to - I know that from previous Estimates' hearings over the last two days you have been asked this a number of time, but I'd like to ask you, as the minister for Veterans' when it comes to the issues with the former minister, Madeleine Ogilvie, and whether you can remember when you first became aware that Madeleine Ogilvie was party to a Supreme Court matter.

Mr PEARCE - Through you, Chair. I have stated in my previous response to this question that I'm not going to answer any question in relation to that matter.

Ms BUTLER - You say that this matter is really important to you. I did hear you in a previous Estimates committee today reiterating that misleading parliament, you understand the gravity and this is a really important matter to you. Have you had anyone from your office review your diary to try to identify when you may have become aware that Madeleine Ogilvie was party to a Supreme Court matter?

Mr PEARCE - Through you, Chair. I restate my previous response and that I'm not going to respond to that question.

Ms BUTLER - Minister, Cabinet approved Madeleine Ogilvie's legal fees, which means you were aware that she was involved in a legal matter in the Supreme Court, potentially, if you were there. Can you reaffirm if you were a minister at that time, when that matter would have gone in front of Cabinet?

Mr PEARCE - Through you, Chair. I'm not going to respond to that question.

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Mr BAYLEY - Minister, thank you and to your officials, thanks for coming in. Minister, you spoke about the \$983 million being a strong contribution to Veterans' Affairs this year and that's sort of virtually replicated for the next couple of years in the forward Estimates.

I think one of the criticisms we've made and levelled at this Budget is around what I would call 'the mirage' of a surplus in a couple of years' time and the observation, whether it be peri-urban deer funding, whether it be a range of different things that there are sort of holes in the forward Estimates that don't have any budget allocations to them.

I acknowledge that in Veterans' Affairs that's not the case. But certainly the funding in the out years in 2029-2030 it drops by more than half from \$983,000 as you celebrated in your opening statement down to \$400,000. That's alarming, I would imagine, as Minister for Veterans' Affairs, because veterans are one of our most vulnerable cohorts of our community.

Can you tell me what is your expectation for 2029-2030, assuming you're still a minister? Would you think it be appropriate for that level of funding to be delivered in that year for this portfolio? How do you explain a more than halving of the budget in the year 2029-2030 of the forward Estimates?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of the forward Estimates, the decrease in the 2026-2027 and variation in the forward Estimates reflects the profile of funding allocated 2025-2026 to develop and implement the Veterans' Employment Portal. Secondly, the employment register and to establish links to the RSL veterans hubs and resource in other jurisdictions.

I can also add that funding available in the 2029-2030 declines as delivery of a number of key initiatives concludes. There are a number of those programs that come to an end.

I will be considering funding requirements for new initiatives and obviously they will come on as required, and that's reasonable. I will be considering those funding requirements for new initiatives in the context of future budget processes.

Just as the RSL was highlighted publicly last week in the *Mercury*, that smart investment they spoke of very clearly in their model on existing services that deliver real benefits for veterans and their families in Tasmania.

Mr BAYLEY - As a proactive minister in this space, you would expect that, assuming you're still in this portfolio that within two or three years when you are developing a budget for 2029-2030, there would be additional programs that you would have put on the table and you would expect to see funded.

Mr PEARCE - I would like to think so.

Mr BAYLEY - You would like to think so. So it sort of reinforces the analysis that the surplus - You know, that there is insufficient funding in the forward Estimates to deliver on a range of services that Tasmanians need, and the surplus is, you know, in jeopardy as a result.

Mr PEARCE - Can I just add to that? There's also - by that stage - we're going to see what tails and what deficits there are in the funding from - you know, I mentioned the Royal Commission into Veteran Suicide. There are certain aspects of that where that stops, and there's no service, or limited service.

PUBLIC

Mr BAYLEY - That's right, and I'll come back to a \$5000 cap on allied health service delivery -

Mr PEARCE - But that's one example. You can understand that whilst the state doesn't want to take over that responsibility, they don't want to see veterans -

Mr BAYLEY - You may need to pick up some responsibility.

Mr PEARCE - Exactly right. They don't want to see veterans suffer.

CHAIR - Honourable minister, RSL Tasmania says that employment remains one of the strongest protective factors for veteran transition from military service, providing purpose, stability and connection to community. I note the Tasmanian Veteran Employment Strategy 2023-27 was launched with an aspirational target of employing 100 additional veterans into Tasmania's State Service over four years. How many former defence personnel have found jobs under the Tasmanian Veteran Employment Strategy?

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for the question. I'm informed here that they're obviously running a baseline to try and establish those numbers exactly.

What I will reinforce, what I will reinstate, what I will bring to everyone's attention is the importance of not so much the numbers, but the strategy itself. So, in the military, in the brotherhood of arms, or the sisterhood of arms, it's like a family, and it was a family to me for more than 20 years of my life, through thick and thin. But when you exit defence, it's almost leaving that family, and that separation anxiety in itself is enough to trigger some of the impacts of, you know, particularly active service and service life.

There are a couple of things, in my opinion, that make that transition from that big military family to the civilian world easier. The first one is your family, and I think we need a family focus around support for our veterans, and indeed, care for our veterans. I'm looking at - even acute PTSD-affected veterans, that there are programs that could be made where veterans' families transition through that program, because those kids need to understand why mum or dad feels the way they do. So this is the first thing.

The second thing is creating a purpose for that veteran and maintaining a purpose. And if they have no employment, have no job, then they have very little - in their terms, often - very little self esteem. This employment strategy goes a long way into creating and maintaining that. Did you want to add anything there, Mel?

Ms GRAY - Yep. Through you, minister, the target of 100 new veterans, we asked a question in the State Service Survey, and that was the 394. Based on self-identification, though, there may be a larger number of veterans and ex-serving people in the State Service.

The focus of the strategy is to encourage employment in the State Service, but also in government business enterprises and in the private sector as well. We've got the baseline now. The survey is going to be run again this year. We will ask those questions. It will give us an indication of whether any of our actions have led to an increase. So we needed that baseline to know whether we were going to have an increase or not. The target is an aspirational target as it's outlined in the strategy, but we'll do our very best.

PUBLIC

We have a network of mentors in the State Service. We've reached out to those recently. We want their lived experience about working in the State Service, so that we can understand how we can do things better and attract and retain the very valuable skills that veterans bring, especially to frontline roles and management roles.

Mr PEARCE - And parliament.

Mr FERGUSON - Minister, thank you for your work in this portfolio. I think I've previously congratulated you on being appointed to this portfolio at last November's Estimates. You're a great person to be doing this work, and I appreciate your support for our veterans and working with the ESOs that we have here in Tasmania.

Well, two questions I was going to ask have just been asked, so I'll move to mental health and wellbeing. It's one of the more important things that a state government can be doing. Of course, the federal government should and does take the lead in these areas of support, but where the state can, we are. So I'd like to ask you for your views and current activities around supporting veterans' mental health and wellbeing. I'm thinking of the voucher program - and also wish to commend you and your predecessor for the work of supporting the Veteran Hub in Launceston, which is absolutely delivering in spades in the space of mental health and wellbeing. But I'd seek your views on current programs and your evaluation of those.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you, and I appreciate the question and the feedback. So the 2026-27 Budget includes funding to continue that Veteran Wellbeing Voucher Program and broader work within the Department of Health, ex-service organisations, and indeed, the federal government. The wellbeing voucher program supports health and wellbeing of Tasmanian veterans by trying to support them in active recreation, sport, community events, that type of thing. Eligible participants may receive two vouchers per financial year. They're valued at \$100. I mean, it's not much, but sometimes it makes all the difference. They take it up in spades, and it's often that discretionary money that they haven't got which precludes them from doing this sort of activity.

In terms of some of the other programs around, I mean, the RSL has the hub and spoke veterans wellbeing centre, there is a north-west veterans hub, veterans and families hub in Burnie, Tasmania. They've got a very family focus, and because it's close to me I see most of it. Although that's a federally funded model, there's still a lot that we do as a state in plugging in and dovetailing into that. And I get the fact that this is a federal responsibility, I really do, but there are other matters that fall out of the back of that, or gaps in service delivery, or a continuum of care, or a continuum of that process of integration between the big military family and civilian employment.

It's an incredible change in a veteran's life, so anything that supports that. I also encourage veterans to get out and meet - You know, I don't want them all hanging around in small groups talking to each other either. I like them to get out into communities and I'd encourage people to remember that in those communities, as a veteran, you're very well received, you're very well welcomed. Tasmania, of all places, is one of the most welcoming places, particularly once you get out in the bush. We see a lot of our veterans moving out into the bush for various reasons, but what I don't want to see them moving out into the bush for, and that is to be, you know, in solitary seclusion, and we've got to watch that as well. Not every veteran is affected by PTSD and mental health, and I don't want that label to be applied to every veteran.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Ms BUTLER - Last year in Estimates, I've got the transcript with me to remind you because I'm just aware that you've been through a four-hour Estimates committee before this one. I asked a question around Legacy Tasmania and their funding. Legacy Tasmania asked via your department in April 2026, so just a few months ago, to send the department an invoice for the second part of this \$20,000 funding. I'm advised that Legacy have received the first lot of \$10,000 and they've stated that they haven't been paid the outstanding \$10,000 and neither has Launceston, but I'll read to you where it gets a bit tricky, okay? This will make more sense.

To remind you, I asked a question around whether or not there was - I'll read the whole transcript, this was Mr Gregory:

Through the minister, we have provided funding of \$20,000 a year to Hobart and Launceston Legacy for a number of years. That was increased at \$30,000 a year this Budget, so the \$240,000 is \$60,000 over the four years of the forward Estimates.

My reading of that was that it was a one-off payment of \$240,000, but we found in Estimates it wasn't. I stated:

It reads as \$240,000 for Hobart and Launceston Legacy. You usually give them \$20,000 a year anyway. That's been increased by another \$10,000. That still doesn't add up.

Mr Gregory said:

No, it's \$30,000 each year, so \$60,000 over four years, so that is \$240,000.

Then Mr Gregory confirmed:

It's a one-off payment of \$240,000 - it's not a one-off payment of \$240,000. It's \$60,000 a year shared between them for four years.

Legacy have only received \$10,000. They're yet to receive the other \$10,000, and then they wrote a letter to the department asking about the additional \$10,000 - I hope this is all making sense - and it says:

Thank you for your follow up. We note your query regarding the potential increase to the grant referenced in the Budget Estimates hearing in November 2025.

At this stage, we are seeking confirmation on the status of this measure, including whether it has been formally approved and how it will be implemented for existing funding agreements.

Should any changes be confirmed that affect your funding, we will contact you to discuss next steps, which may include a formal variation in the existing agreement.

PUBLIC

That was in April of this year. It was confirmed in Estimates last year that both Launceston Legacy and Hobart Legacy would receive \$30,000 each a year in \$10,000 instalments and both of them have only received \$10,000 each. It's been agreed they will receive another 10, but the third lot of 10, making it up to \$30,000 each hasn't been released. I hope that all makes sense.

CHAIR - I just remind members about the -

Ms BUTLER - I know, the time.

Mr PEARCE - Can I get the question again?

Ms BUTLER - I can read the whole thing through again.

CHAIR - Look, I know it's important, but yeah.

Mr PEARCE - Thank you for the question.

Ms BUTLER - Are they going to get their extra \$10,000?

Ms GRAY - Through you, minister, I'm advised that the funding is definitely \$30,000 each per year, an increase of 10, and if there has been an issue, we will address that this week. I'll seek to have a look at the letter and work out what the issue is.

Ms BUTLER - Because I contacted them just before we started this hearing to say, 'Has that money gone through to your account? Just want to double check before I ask the question.' Launceston's only received \$10,000 and Hobart's only received \$10,000, and they believe that the other 10, the additional - they're waiting on \$10,000 each, but they believe that other 10,000 they were promised and confirmed in Estimates last year may not be happening.

Ms GRAY - Through you, minister, we will make direct contact with both of those organisations as well.

Mr PEARCE - Are you happy with that?

Ms BUTLER - I am, because we have to be very mindful that apparently the original \$20,000 funding, one for Launceston and one for Hobart, that was apparently to make up for changes in the retail trading hours for Anzac Day, and that was where that original funding came from.

Mr PEARCE - Okay.

Ms BUTLER - It has quite a history to it. It shows that they probably haven't had a funding boost for a long time, doesn't it? Thank you.

Mr BAYLEY - Are we taking that as three questions, Chair.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, yes.

Ms BUTLER - Yes, it is.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Ms Butler's being very generous. Mr Bayley.

Mr BAYLEY - Thank you, Chair. Minister, you spoke of the Veterans' Wellbeing Vouchers and I understand and hear from veterans of their value and I'm interested in the take up. I'm interested in how much is allocated to the Veterans' Wellbeing Vouchers. I know it's been \$50,000 in past years. What is it this year? Is it the same? You've identified it's a \$100 voucher or there's eligibility for two \$100 vouchers, noting of course that a gym membership or pool membership is usually significantly more than that. I think for, say, the Aquatic Centre in Hobart, it's about 17 per cent of the membership.

Have you had any feedback about the effectiveness of it in terms of the \$100 and \$200 vouchers and have you given consideration to maybe allocating fewer of them of a greater value to veterans so that they can subscribe more fully to a gym or a pool or some kind of health facility. Do you understand that what I'm saying there?

Mr PEARCE - I get it. Just so you know, in terms of the numbers that you're looking for. In the 2025-26 year to date, 856 vouchers and 856 have been redeemed. The value of that is \$84,701.50.

Mr BAYLEY - Is it capped? \$100,000 a year

Mr PEARCE - 100,000, yeah, I'm right.

Mr BAYLEY - Okay. It was \$50,000 a couple of years ago. Is that correct? You've doubled it.

Mr PEARCE - Yes.

Mr BAYLEY - Good

Mr PEARCE - If you start chasing your tail, that's probably not too far out. As years go on and as long as the system remains there, I have a feeling that more will take it up because if we start changing the goal posts and making rules different each year, it's very difficult to have that as an established - because whether they use that for its intended purpose or not, I don't know but it's probably at the right time.

Mr BAYLEY - What is the probity around that sort of thing in terms of what that \$100 grant is used for? Is there probity around that? Is there some kind of acquittal on behalf of the veterans?

Mr PEARCE - In terms of acquittals do we look for much?

Ms WILLCOX - The vouchers can be used with approved veteran activity providers. That provides that assurance that I think you're after. One of the key premises is it's for community organisations largely - for recreational activities. It doesn't just need to be sport, but they are approved.

Mr BAYLEY - Do you approve them or is it DVA approved and you piggyback off their approvals?

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - I don't reckon DVA would.

Ms WILLCOX - No, I don't think it involves DVA. It's probably through our program, but we could clarify that if you'd like.

Ms GRAY - I can provide some additional information. Activity providers register with Service Tas, and it's administered by Service Tas.

Mr PEARCE - Yes, that makes sense.

Prof RAZAY - The Give Me Shelter Report 2023 estimates veterans are nearly three times as likely to experience homelessness compared with the general population. These men and women have served Australia with dedication and sacrifice and deserve to be comfortably housed.

What progress has been made under the Veterans' Acute Housing Program to deliver additional homes to meet the needs of veterans and their families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and do we have data on the number of Tasmanian veterans in need of crisis accommodation?

Mr PEARCE - So the program that you speak of is an RSL program. So whilst I don't, that's not under my remit, I will applaud and I will recognise the great work that RSL do more generally and specifically around their work with emergency housing. Having discussed this at length with RSL, with both the CEO and the President, their aim isn't to establish long-term housing for our veterans. In fact it's quite the opposite. So it's designed for acute, for somewhere for them to get their life back together. But it's important, and they recognise this, and I'm chuffed that they actually have put this into place, is that the support measures that they're providing around that person once they enter that emergency housing is around getting them back into the workforce and getting them back on their feet.

The very best thing that we could give our veterans in my opinion is a job, is a purpose, to keep their family together, and keep their self-esteem alive, and this does all of those things combined. So, well done to RSL. There's also, I believe, a state government contribution to that effort. Yeah, so, you raise a really valid point, and for whatever reason that is, you know, it doesn't really matter, the fact is that we're putting steps in place.

We're putting \$1.8 million just to clarify, just to get that on the record, \$1.8 million into that particular program from the Tasmanian government.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you, Chair, and thank you, minister. I appreciated Dr Razay's earlier question about employment strategy and your answer to that, and so my question is tangential to that. Minister, the face of our veteran community is changing. We now have a growing number of younger veterans who might be many years away from retirement and are seeking to build careers, raise families and contribute to their community here in Tasmania after their military service. So it's a reflective question for you. How are those needs different from those previous generations? We've talked about the employment strategy, but also from your own experience, I'd just love to explore with you what you think we can do perhaps hand in hand with the Commonwealth and ESOs to ensure that we really do provide support services for that changing veteran population, the younger veteran.

PUBLIC

Mr PEARCE - Yep, and it's a brilliant question. So in my particular case, I come from the Royal Australian Corps of Signals. I was in Signals Intelligence, electronic warfare. The people, the young people, that I work with are smart, you know, they're tech savvy. These are, young kids that would, you know, I've seen them change, you know, geo-orbital satellite orbits, you know, they're smart cookies. But the trouble with it is when they exit Defence, you'll often see them unemployed or doing some job that is well below their station. I believe that, in my heart of hearts, that we don't genuinely translate the skills, knowledge and attitude, as well as experience that we learn in the Defence Force, across instances of civilian life because sometimes they differ.

I talked to Lieutenant General Natasha Fox. She is Head of Defence personnel. She's from the west coast of Tasmania, she's born in Rosebery, and I've got a hell of a lot of time for her. She says the same thing and the articulation, translation between Defence skills and knowledge into civilian words.

The other aspect, Chair, is it's not just the words that we use, it's the way in which we interact in the military level certain way, and whilst everyone in parliament, I appreciate the fact that they excuse that in me, sometimes for a younger person that's difficult. You know, you've got to you've got to fit back in. So, integrate. So, those integration skills are important.

It's important that we consider the entire family as well. So, those kids have got to go to school, and if your kids aren't happy, then that's stress on the parents. All of these things combined, it's not one thing or another, but it's an ecosystem of considerations that we need in a layered approach so that we can make that transition more seamless.

Mr FERGUSON - Thank you, minister. I'm not asking a new question, but I'll just invite you to reflect on that amazing answer and allow that to permeate through your department and the way that our representatives engage with our ESOs, because that kind of thinking really will change practice and help our families.

Ms BUTLER - Minister, as we were just discussing, Tasmania has the highest proportion of veterans per capita of any Australian state, and as such veteran support is not a niche policy, it's a significant social and community responsibility and I think everyone at the table understands that. We support attempts to strengthen veteran employment pathways and we also understand that employment remains one of the strongest protective factors for veterans, especially transitioning from military service, providing purpose, stability and connection to community. Can you advise how much federal funding has DPAC received to provide employment for Tasmanian veterans through the Royal Commission recommendations to date?

Mr PEARCE - I'd have to take that notice. We wouldn't have that, would we?

Ms BUTLER - I think I know the answer but I want you to confirm it.

Mr PEARCE - Share.

Ms BUTLER - It's my understanding it's about \$540,000.

Mr PEARCE - Can I get back to you? Can I take that on notice?

Ms BUTLER - Sure.

PUBLIC

Ms BUTLER - Next question. That's nearly half the veterans portfolio funding and that's what come 2029-30 will be. That'll be more than what your government's allocating the forward Estimates for veteran funding. How is that - when was that decision made to hold on to that federal funding and run employment services through DPAC because I know that your veterans employment strategy runs from - started in 2023 and was meant to end in 2027 - but the final recommendations of the Royal Commission - they weren't finished and then the funding wasn't allocated till - well, it was finished in 2024 and then the final allocation of funding apparently is quite recent. How were you funding from 2023, the Veteran Employment Strategy?

Mr PEARCE - I might throw that one to you, Mel, if you're across that.

Ms GRAY - Through you, minister, we have state funding available for the employment strategy. That is around about \$150,000 per annum for the employment strategy and that funding went to build the employment portal.

I have held the veterans portfolio previously and was not in it for a couple of years and now have the absolute honour of being back in this chair. I'm not aware of any employment funding that's come through the Royal Commission. We work because the central policy agency has intergovernmental relations. We're responsible for all royal commissions, the disability Royal Commission, the recent one established on anti-Semitism and social cohesion. I'm not aware of any specific employment funding through that avenue, but that's not to say it hasn't gone to another agency, so we will take that on notice and try and see the source of that half a million dollars.

Ms BUTLER - It's my understanding that each state was provided a certain amount of funding for each state to roll out employment services for veterans and that was part of honouring the recommendations of the Royal Commission into veteran suicides, that was one of the recommendations. It was quite a hefty or quite a significant amount of money, so I just want to know what's happened to that funding. Also, I know that there were other groups such as, say for instance, RSL Tasmania or more kind of veteran-oriented, not government oriented groups that may have been better placed to provide those employment services with their own connections than DPAC or Veterans Affairs. I really would like to keep unpicking what's happened with that funding and then why - because I know RSL Tasmania, for instance, they already provide amazing services for so many veterans, and they've got all those fabulous connections through all that hard work and grit.

Are you aware of any approaches or negotiations for employment services to be provided outside of DPAC and to be provided by veterans for veterans?

Mr PEARCE - I'm not. It would be recommendation 72.

Ms BUTLER - Can I write a few of those as questions on notice?

Mr PEARCE - Yes, I am happy to do that. Mind you, I'm not going sort the machinations of the DVA out. If there's something simple that affects Tasmania, that's certainly in my remit.

Ms BUTLER - It's allocated funding from the federal government from the Royal Commission findings and employment services as you know how important they are to provide that transitional support for veterans.

PUBLIC

One of the reasons why I tweaked onto it was because when I looked up the Veteran Employment Strategy in the portal, I noticed the date was 2023 - 2027 and I thought these recommendations came out after that strategy was obviously put together, and I knew there was a new pool of funding that had been allocated for that.

Can I ask under that 2023-2027 Veteran Employment Strategy, are you going to review that strategy and see if it was effective and is there another veteran's employment strategy under way for beyond 2027.

Mr PEARCE - Yes. The question you ask is one of already spoke of. We have spoken about reviewing that and making sure that we have hit the mark.

I made a mistake. I said 72, it's 85, is the recommendation for employment that's where that'll be out of the Royal Commission.

Ms BUTLER - Do you think the strategy has been successful and will you measure that effectiveness?

Mr PEARCE - The answer is yes and yes.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, I have to admit I didn't pick this up or identified in the federal budget, but obviously media is reporting today that the annual monetary limit for allied health services to be provided to veterans is now limited to \$5000, which I know we can all appreciate would disappear and evaporate pretty quickly. What are your thoughts on this and what can you, as the Tasmanian Minister and the Tasmanian government do to pick up some of the slack that may be let go here in terms of this new cap?

Mr PEARCE - I'll turn to Mel in a second. Mel will talk about the relationship we have with the Department of Health and some of the role-sharing ability that we have there. That's one aspect and I'll get you to cover that in a minute.

But in terms of the \$5000 cap, I would urge that more flexibility be given. There may be a majority of veterans that don't need any, but then there might be one veteran that needs twice as much. That flexibility that needs to be handled by -

Mr BAYLEY - In terms of exemptions from it.

Mr PEARCE - In terms of someone making a decision. This happened a few years ago and I think we were in government when we turned our recruiting agencies over and we contracted them out and it was an absolute disaster. I mean, you learn a lot in hindsight. It's always 20/20. It was almost like an AI approach to human resources, and it was a disaster. I hope this is not another one of those. I hope for that veteran that his Captain doesn't have any allied health apart from the \$5000. I hope there's a human being involved in the chain.

Mr BAYLEY - Making decisions and understanding their needs.

Mr PEARCE - 100 per cent.

Mr BAYLEY - And being able to exceed that cap and authorise it.

PUBLIC

Ms GRAY - Through you, minister. We advocate with the Australian Government all the time around prioritising the needs of veterans. Obviously the capping here of the allied health services and changes to the Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme are disappointing and are clearly the responsibility of the Commonwealth government.

I can provide some information on what we're doing at a state level, not to directly address that, but the fact that the veterans are a priority population group in the Premier's Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategy. The 20-year preventative health strategy will also continue that clear priority of veterans as a population group. Our team in Premier and Cabinet is responsible for working with agencies to negotiate Commonwealth funding agreements. We have the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Funding Agreement coming up. Jodi has just been front and centre of the national health reform agreement negotiations. You know, we will do what we can to advance and get the best outcomes for Tasmania through those negotiations.

Mr BAYLEY - Have you a sense of what some of the impacts might be of this on individuals? Do you have that level of, sort of, understanding of the population and the cohort that would be relying on this allied health service?

Mr PEARCE - I'd say it'd be relatively high given my experience compared to other states and territories. Tend to see older veterans, hence, you know - thanks, Demo. They tend to call Tasmania home. You see them in the bush. You know, you see a lot down the west coast for instance, places like that, for their own reasons, I might add, but they're the ones that coincidentally need the -

Mr BAYLEY - Need the help.

Mr PEARCE - Yeah, exactly.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, last October I attended the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize presentation for the first time and you were there. This is a competition for years 9 and 10 students in Tasmania in honour for Frank MacDonald, who was Tasmania's last serving World War I veteran. I was just amazed by the experience and the life-changing experience they had during their visit through Anzac places in Europe. I feel it's so important for our young generation to know about the Anzac spirit. I feel: why don't we spread that to our like, young kids, you know? But I think it's important to know their history.

Mr PEARCE - 100 per cent. I couldn't agree more. I want to acknowledge the fact that you weren't the only politician there. There were a lot there. Those kids need to see us as well, as politicians, I mean.

From my perspective, you can see in the raw emotion that's in the eyes of those children, you know, it does change - and these children, these young people, these young Tasmanians, they're not just the slackers. These are the ones - they're selected. You know, they've got to demonstrate effort and a number of other selection criteria before they're selected to go on these trips. I know the Chair up there has been involved in one of those trips as well, so you understand, Chair, the significance of this.

In terms of getting that out to schools, that's my job and I want to spread the gospel, but I think every politician should be doing that. I really do. It's also important that at the end of that, we capture that because the benefits of that is infectious to other children and it sets - no

PUBLIC

better lesson is ever taught than from a third party; a child teaching another child. It's a different form of pedagogy, and I want to capture that, too. So, we send them away, they have this life-changing experience, they learn about their ancestors, but they learn the congruence of all these primordial skills and values that we have as Australians and that Anzac spirit.

We don't want to lose it either, and we want to reinvest that. So we can force multiply that if we put them in front of their school, so there they learn another skill, which is communicating with others.

Do you see what I'm saying? It's a program for life, and if we can get more of it going, I think that will be infectious. So, thank you for raising it.

Mr FERGUSON - Thankfully, minister, we didn't need to call on your assistance when the War Memorial at St Helens was carelessly and recklessly damaged, but we did think we might need to, but after that event, I want to give a moment of praise to Dobson's Monumental Works down here in the south that stepped in and just took care of the whole repair job. No cost to the St Helens RSL or the council. They did a terrific job.

I mention that because we were considering whether we should ask for some kind of emergency access to the Teddy Sheean VC Memorial Grants Program. We didn't need to do that, but I do wish to ask you about it and what it's doing at the moment. We've now had the grant fund for some small number of years, and what's the future of it? Importantly, how can we, as MPs from all parties and Independents, help to promote it to eligible organisations going forward? Could you give us a sense of when the rounds might be coming out, for example? Thank you.

Mr PEARCE - Thanks for raising this important grants program, the Teddy Sheean VC Memorial Grants Program. It's been funded since 2014 as a tribute to the bravery and the sacrifices made by Tasmanian sailor Edward (Teddy) Sheehan VC. The Teddy Sheean VC Grants provide ex-service organisations and clubs with grants to support veterans with wellness and service, minor capital works, purchasing equipment, and constructing, maintaining, and repairing war memorials, as in the example that you provided.

Applications for the grant is via the Services Tasmania website, to make it easier, and in 2025-26, 11 of these ex-service grant organisations were successful recipients. Now this totalled \$100,000. I'll go through those in detail, if you like. First of all was the South Arm RSL Sub-Branch, awarded \$10,000, and that \$10,000 went towards construction and dedication of memorials to Tasmanian military nurses.

Mr BAYLEY - Hear, hear. I went to that. It was fantastic.

Mr PEARCE - Oh, good.

Mr BAYLEY - They have something set up to recognise Aboriginal soldiers.

Mr PEARCE - Indigenous servicemen and women? I'd love to hear that. War animals, and I spoke of that probably on the day I was at Campbell Town speaking on that. Peacemakers in the South Arm Memorial Park. I'm glad you went to that.

PUBLIC

- The Military Brotherhood Motorcycle Club. Tasmania's North Sub-Branch. They got \$9008, acquiring equipment to support phase 2 of their firewood. They cut firewood and deliver it to needy veterans. Good on them.
- The Forth Valley Lions Club - \$6635 towards upgrading the Forth Valley Cenotaph.
- Tasmanian Ex-Service Men and Women Association got \$12,729 for repairing the RSL Club and upgrading their kitchen equipment.
- The RSL Sub-Branch, \$10,000 towards purchasing a barbecue trailer.
- New Norfolk Sub-Branch, they got \$10,000 for repairing the roof on their club building.
- Maydena, \$15,256 towards upgrades of the club rooms and replacing equipment.
- The South Riana Memorial Hall, and the last time I was there, half a dozen of the older ladies came out of the kitchen and thanked me very much, it meant so much to them. One lady, tear down the cheek, South Riana Memorial Hall, \$6264 for the purchase of new kitchen equipment. You know, it meant so much to them.

Ms BUTLER - Are you done? Sorry.

Mr PEARCE - I've got three more. I'll mention the sub-branches: so Kingston Beach got some money, Ulverstone RSL, and the Veterans' and Families' Centre. And all that stuff went to really good causes.

Ms BUTLER - Minister, we are aware that the Frank MacDonald Prize funding comes out of Veterans' Affairs portfolio, and I raised it last year, and I do agree with Prof Razay - it is a wonderful trip and wonderful experience. But as has been raised with myself and probably yourself and a few other members here, that funding, veterans don't attend that trip anymore and groups such as RSL Tasmania are asking for us to have a relook at whether or not that funding for that trip that goes to only a few students, and yes, one or two, really, or maybe even four or five, they really benefit from that. Rather than focusing solely on opportunities for a limited number of participants, there may be merit in exploring how Veterans' Affairs' education funding could support, potentially, according to RSL Tasmania, statewide school education program, veteran engagement in classrooms, remembrance curriculum resources, regional school outreach initiatives and greater direct connection between young Tasmanians and the veteran community.

Now, they've raised this for quite a while now, because they're very interested in seeing Veterans' Affairs money being spent for veterans services that have a meaningful outcome for veterans. I think the Frank MacDonald Prize has turned very much into an education program for school students about veterans. So, I think we should look again at whether or not that funding should come out of Education. It's a wonderful trip, but veterans aren't going on that anymore. If RSL Tasmania and those stakeholder groups are saying, 'Let's spend this money better and run some great education programs that all students across Tasmania can benefit from, not just one or two who write fabulous essays.'

Mr BAYLEY - Or pay for it out of the Education budget?

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Ms BUTLER - Yes, or pay for it out of the Education budget. Can I have your take on that?

Mr PEARCE - And you'd support that, as a member of the opposition benches?

Ms BUTLER - Well, I talked about this last year as well -

Mr PEARCE - And I took your advice, but what I will say is, and Prof Razay summed that up perfectly in his last response, in his last question, and he talked about the Anzac spirit and how we need to teach that.

Ms BUTLER - Have you been on the trip yourself?

Mr PEARCE - I haven't been on myself on the trip.

Ms BUTLER - Usually a member of parliament does go along, and that comes out of the Veterans' Affairs portfolio. Wouldn't that be better off going into education programs for school students in Tasmania?

Mr PEARCE - Well, we word that up as well. We stopped that. So it's all about the kids, and it's all about them getting the experience, just like you spoke of, Prof Razay. I hear your point.

Ms BUTLER - Yeah, and it's coming from those stakeholders. It's not me just being an awful politician. It's coming from veterans.

Mr PEARCE - And many of those, I mean, you know, as a result of previous members that have gone on that trip that said, this one, you know, it may be closer to us than others, given the recommendation that this is about the kids and it's not about the pollies and the adults. We should push them to the front.

Ms BUTLER - Can I ask what's happened with the funding -

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired. The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the Minister for Education at 8.00 a.m. tomorrow.

The Committee adjourned at 8.27 p.m.