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HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr R Molhoek MP—Chair
Mr JT Barounis MP
Ms SL Bolton MP
Ms K-A Dooley MP
Mr JP Kelly MP—Acting Chair
Dr BF O'Shea MP

Staff present:

Dr J Rutherford—Committee Secretary
Miss A Bonenfant—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE CROCODILE CONTROL AND CONSERVATION BILL 2025

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 11 June 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 11 JUNE 2025

The committee met at 12.28 pm.

ACTING CHAIR: I declare this meeting of the Health, Environment and Innovation Committee open. My name is Joe Kelly. I am the deputy chair, now acting chair, and the member for Greenslopes. I acknowledge the traditional owners of this state and their elders past and present. With me today are: Sandy Bolton, the member for Noosa; Kerri-Anne Dooley, the member for Redcliffe; Barbara O'Shea, the member for South Brisbane; and Mr John Barounis, the member for Maryborough. The chair is temporarily unavailable.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings, and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I remind witnesses to press your microphones on before you start speaking and off when you are finished, and please turn your mobile phones off or to silent mode. I will now hand over to the chair.

CHAIR: Apologies for that.

BOOTH, Mr Simon, Program Coordinator, Wildlife Monitoring and Research, Wildlife and Threatened Species Operations, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

HERSE, Ms Karalyn, Manager, Environment and Conservation Policy and Legislation, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

KLAASSEN, Mr Ben, Deputy Director-General, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

LLOYD, Mr Kahil, Acting Deputy Director-General, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

CHAIR: I welcome representatives from the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation, who have been invited to brief the committee. I would, firstly, like to acknowledge the excellent assistance that the department has provided to the committee so far in its inquiry. We had a great day out in Cairns with local departmental staff, including Simon, looking at various waterways. We found the information very helpful in setting the scene and understanding the work that local staff do under Queensland's Crocodile Management Plan—thank you for that. I invite you to brief the committee, after which committee members will have some questions for you. I apologise for my late arrival.

Mr Klaassen: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee for having us here today. My name is Ben Klaassen. I am the Deputy Director-General of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships in the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation. With me here today are: Kahil Lloyd, who is the Acting Deputy Director-General for Environment and Heritage Policy and Programs; Simon Booth, who is the Program Coordinator in our Wildlife and Threatened Species Operations team based in Cairns working on crocodile management primarily; and Karalyn Herse, who is the Manager of Conservation Policy and Legislation in the department.

As the chair indicated, we have provided a written submission and follow-up information and hosted the committee up in Cairns for what sounds like a very productive and good experience for the committee. We are very happy to have facilitated that and look forward to continuing the discussions with you today. The department takes its obligations of managing estuarine crocodiles very seriously and the protection of public safety is always its highest priority.

Queensland's crocodile management program seeks to enhance public safety in areas inhabited by crocodiles by responding to public notifications of crocodile sightings and by moving problem crocodiles that are posing an unacceptable risk to humans. We have an education program to promote public awareness and the uptake of safe behaviour by people in crocodile habitat areas, and we undertake applied research, including population monitoring, to ensure future crocodile management arrangements are informed by the most up-to-date scientific data and findings. They are themes that have come out in the sessions you have had this morning.

In reviewing the bill before the parliament and submissions made by members of the public, there are three considerations I would like to bring to the committee's attention today. Firstly, the bill proposes that all staff at the proposed Queensland Crocodile Authority would reside in Cairns. At present, the departmental staff who implement the existing Queensland Crocodile Management Plan are distributed across the range where crocodiles live in Queensland. We have 21 specialist staff and they work across North, Far North and Central Queensland in Cairns, Innisfail, Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton to respond promptly to crocodile sightings, remove problem crocodiles, deliver public safety education and undertake crocodile research and monitoring. Given the large geographic extent of the crocodiles' range in Queensland, requiring the staff to reside in Cairns would increase the time it takes to respond to crocodile sightings and incidents and may have an effect of reducing public safety in areas away from Cairns.

Secondly, the bill provides for the culling and removal of crocodiles by the proposed Queensland Crocodile Authority. It is important to note that estuarine crocodiles are a protected species, listed as vulnerable under the Nature Conservation Act 1992, protected nationally under the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and protected internationally under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Queensland currently complies with all national and international requirements as our approach to removing and harvesting wild animals is approved under the Commonwealth's Wildlife Trade Management Plan—Queensland Crocodile Farming and Crocodile Egg Harvesting 2023-2028. This supports and enables current crocodile farming and the export of crocodile products.

The bill's objective is unclear in relation to the continued conservation and viability of the species in the wild, including whether crocodile and crocodile egg harvesting will remain sustainable. Actual or perceived unsustainable harvesting could jeopardise Australia's obligations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and, therefore, place Queensland's existing crocodile farming export industry at risk.

Lastly, aside from the establishment of the Queensland Crocodile Authority, the Nature Conservation Act, including the Nature Conservation (Estuarine Crocodile) Conservation Plan 2018, provides a statutory framework that already deals successfully with some core areas of the bill. These include: the need to protect humans from problem crocodiles; the conservation of viable populations of estuarine crocodiles in the wild; preventing the loss of aquaculture, fisheries, resources, stock and working dogs from problem crocodile attacks; and ensuring the commercial use of estuarine crocodiles, including egg harvesting, is ecologically sustainable.

I would like to address public safety, which was a key theme raised in the submissions. Public safety in areas inhabited by crocodiles is a priority for the department. No amount of crocodile removal can guarantee the absence of crocodiles in a waterway, nor can it assure that an area is completely safe to swim in or wade through. Crocodiles are a highly mobile species capable of swimming many kilometres a day, and it is common for a new crocodile to move in and take over the territory when another one has been removed.

The most effective way to ensure public safety is by removing problem crocodiles when they arise, raising public awareness of the risk posed by crocodiles and empowering individuals to behave safely when they are in and around waterways inhabited by crocodiles. The department's approach to management conservation is one of adaptive management that responds to the best available scientific research and monitoring, as well as the latest approaches to educate for safe human behaviour. It also relies heavily on collaboration with key partners and stakeholders, including local governments, the tourism sector, traditional owners and recreational water users. I would like to

further reiterate to the committee that, regardless of location or size, any crocodile displaying dangerous behaviours around or towards humans is targeted for removal. That completes our opening statement, and we will be happy to answer any questions the committee has.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Klaassen. I might kick things off. Does the department collect data around the circumstances which have contributed to crocodile attacks, both fatal and non-fatal? Do we have any further information about the types of attacks that have occurred and the circumstances that led to those attacks?

Mr Klaassen: We do collect data, and on our website you will find a list of the known attacks going back 30-odd years. That list includes fatal and non-fatal attacks, and that has a brief summary of the circumstances as we understand them to be. In some situations, it is not always clear how an incident has occurred, particularly where an individual either was not necessarily fully responsible for what they were doing or does not want to tell us what they were doing. Yes, we do collect that data and we can provide a link to the committee, if you do not already have the website.

CHAIR: I think we have that link.

Mr J KELLY: We have had a number of people note delays in response times by the department to reports of crocodiles. Are you able to provide any further information in relation to the department's response time if a crocodile sighting is reported on private land or on public property?

Mr Klaassen: Yes. We have what is known as our QWildlife app, and people can report sightings through that. We follow up on every one of those sightings very promptly to get some details as to what behaviour the crocodile is displaying. If it is identified as a potentially problem crocodile that is displaying behaviour that we would be concerned about, wildlife officers or rangers will go out and do an assessment.

I think some of the commentary that you have had has been around when a matter is reported and it might take some time to remove it after we do an assessment. We try to remove a problem crocodile within seven days, and the median is generally below three days. There are circumstances that need to be considered when you are trying to remove problem crocodiles. We need to ensure that our staff can do it safely. They are a dangerous animal, so you cannot put staff at risk. You need to consider the habitat and the environment from which you are trying to remove the crocodile and the approach you will take. Can you deploy a trap easily? Is it in a location where a crocodile will go into the trap? Where is it? When you trap the crocodile, what means can you use to transport it to a farm or another location? There is a range of factors that we need to consider that influences the time it can take to locate and trap a crocodile.

We try to do that as quickly as possible. Those that take an extended period are when the crocodile either is very timid or is very difficult to track because the habitat does not allow us to get fully into a location. We do not say, 'We can't find it.' We deploy resources and we try to trap them as quickly as possible when they are declared a problem crocodile.

Mr J KELLY: I just wonder what the purpose of the app is. I am looking at it right now. It does not provide much information on the sightings page. I presume I am not supposed to use this as a tool to think, 'There's been a crocodile sighting there, so I shouldn't go swimming. I should probably not go swimming anywhere in a crocodile zone.'

Mr Klaassen: We do not encourage swimming in areas crocodiles inhabit. The app is there for people to report sightings, and it is quite a simple process to say, 'Yes, I saw a crocodile in this location.' It has the technology to actually capture where you are when you are reporting the sighting. We will follow up, as necessary, to assess whether it is just a crocodile that is passing through or there is a risk or anything like that.

Mr J KELLY: For example, this one from a month ago just says 'Status: no further action'. As a member of the public, I do not know what has happened then. Should we have more information in this app about what has actually happened?

Mr Klaassen: That would require a lot more work behind the scenes. We adopt the view that, if it is a location where crocodiles should be and it is not displaying any signs of concern, no further action needs to be taken, and that is what it indicates.

Mr J KELLY: I notice there is one at Cameron Corner. I cannot imagine there would be any crocodiles out there!

Mr Klaassen: It would be highly unusual to have one out there. We do get false reports sometimes and the team follows up on those. We deal with those as we need to.

Mr JKELLY: Mr Booth, you spent a fair bit of time with the committee in Cairns. If we were to attempt to cull crocodiles, what level would we need to cull them to for waterways to be considered safe?

Mr Booth: I do not think there is a level you could cull them to and actually make that statement to the public. I think I mentioned to the committee when they visited that work was done last year in the Northern Territory—a published paper—that looked at the cost of culling crocodiles to improve public safety. I think the research showed that to reduce the rate of attacks by around 50 per cent you would need to remove at least 90 per cent of the crocodile population, which is just not achievable. Even if you left a handful of crocodiles or a small percentage there, at no point would we be suggesting or recommending people enter the water to swim. It is crocodile habitat. Crocodiles can move into areas undetected. They are very good at being ambush predators. I do not think there is a point at which the state could say a waterway is safe. If people chose to swim in crocodile habitat, that would be on them.

Mr JKELLY: It is my understanding there are significant populations in Papua New Guinea; is that correct?

Mr Booth: There are. Saltwater crocodile populations extend through Australia, the Pacific Islands, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and all up through South-East Asia as well. They are a mobile species. Our genetics data suggests that, while it was Queensland focused, crocodiles in the Torres Strait were linked to the western side of Cape York genetically. That suggests to us that there probably is a linkage of crocodiles, and although they may be slow moving between Queensland and PNG potentially that would be the other challenge. I think you heard earlier this morning about having to put a fence up to stop crocodiles at the Northern Territory and PNG borders. It is simply not possible to prevent crocodiles migrating into Queensland, even if you were to attempt to eradicate them as well.

Ms DOOLEY: This morning we heard from Deputy Mayor Lenore Wyatt from Mareeba Shire Council. She mentioned that in January this year a farmer in her council area reported to DETSI there was a problem crocodile on his property but, to date, nothing has been done about that. You have indicated that it is about a three- to seven-day turnaround from report to removal or something being done. Could you comment on that?

Mr Klaassen: I will comment and then I will hand to Simon who can give the specifics.

CHAIR: Can we just clarify: apparently the officers had been out there.

Ms DOOLEY: Oh, right.

Mr Klaassen: Yes, I was going to clarify. It is not correct to say that nothing has been done. There have been site visits and there have been attempts to locate the animal but there are some challenging situations there. Simon can give you a bit more detail on that specific example.

Mr Booth: In that example, I think we have had officers on site on at least 17 occasions following up that crocodile. It had been sighted multiple times and there have been traps deployed in the location. I would link back to comments Mr Irwin made to the committee earlier this morning—that is, problem crocodiles that are displaying unnatural behaviours and are genuinely a public safety risk are reasonably straightforward to get hold of. Crocodiles around Mareeba are at very low densities. We are aware there are reports of crocodiles and we have removed 10 crocodiles over the last 10 years from that location, one of which was a result of a compliance activity being unlawfully held.

In this instance, we are looking for crocodiles that are displaying natural behaviour. They are aversive to people and they are in an area at low densities that they can move around between creeks and private dams quite freely. The nature of the habitat and the very low density does make them quite hard to trap and remove from time to time. I would add that it is certainly not the case that nothing has been done; we have invested a lot of resources into that crocodile and we are in contact with the landholder there quite regularly. In the last 10 years, as I said, 10 crocodiles have been removed from the Mareeba area. I guess we treat that atypical zoning, having awareness of its uniqueness. Any report received is investigated and officers respond as swiftly as possible to attempt to capture the crocodile, however long that may take.

Ms DOOLEY: Thank you.

CHAIR: Just on that, the councillor also mentioned about wanting to expand the parameters of zone F. Is that a simple process under the current legislation? Is it something that could be considered?

Mr Klaassen: The zones are not in the legislation. They are in the Queensland Crocodile Management Plan. That plan is currently being reviewed and updated, and we have received a submission from Mareeba Shire Council which is being looked at as part of our review. We are looking at the zones at the moment and that will be released by the government in due course as to what the final outcomes will be.

Mr BAROUNIS: If a crocodile is found on private land, can the owner of the land request the crocodile to be removed?

Mr Klaassen: Yes. We would encourage the owner of the land to get in touch with the department and then we would have a discussion with them around the circumstances, looking at the zone the crocodile is in, the situation as to where the crocodile is located and the risk that crocodile presents, and then we would come up with a plan around what to do based on those factors.

Mr BAROUNIS: With the data that you are receiving, do you have to wait for private landowners to include the numbers in your data?

Mr Klaassen: In terms of the population monitoring?

Mr BAROUNIS: Yes.

Mr Klaassen: That is based on scientific assessment and some surveys that have been set up over many years under the guidance of Laurence Taplin. It looks across the range of habitat of crocodiles. It does not consider every single private property or location; it is more around the known locations where crocodile density and population is significant. An outlier on one property would not necessarily be something we are picking up. The scientific research is robust, and underpinning that we are confident that the population monitoring work that is done gives a very good estimate of crocodiles across the state.

CHAIR: As a supplementary question around the removal, what does the department do if you have removed a crocodile and then you cannot find a farm which will take it? In the case where they are allocated to a farm, is the farm compensated? Is there any financial arrangement between the department and the farm for taking the crocodiles or developing enclosures to manage them?

Mr Klaassen: I will get Simon to talk specifics. Generally, we have been able to rehome crocodiles. We have locations at our premises where we can hold crocodiles for a period of time until we do find a suitable location for them to go. You have to consider animal welfare grounds, in that you cannot transport them significant distances. We do not recompense the farms for taking a crocodile. They are generally willing to take them because it helps their ongoing farm interests. Simon might be able to give you any example of us not being able to rehome one. I am not aware of one but Simon might have more detail.

Mr Booth: I am not aware in the last 10 years of an instance where we have not been able to rehome a crocodile. We do obviously euthanise some crocodiles and that decision may be made by the delegate on the basis that we have exhausted all other options to catch a crocodile and its interest to public safety to do so, or it may be on the considerations of animal welfare and resource practicality where it may not be reasonable on the crocodile to transport it, for instance, from the Torres Strait by vessel to the mainland and all the way down the Peninsula Developmental Road to Cairns to find a facility. It can be done, but we also see instances where those crocodiles often die or suffer damage to internal organs due to having their weight largely on the internal organs when they are not suspended in water. We do euthanise on public safety and welfare grounds, but when we have captured a crocodile we have not had any instance that I am aware of where we have not been able to rehome.

Farms are still taking them but they are being a bit more selective. We are still able to place crocodiles and we certainly have not hit a barrier, so to speak, to place them. The conservation value for farms to pay is waived by the delegate to encourage the farms to take these crocodiles, but generally speaking they are being placed. If we were to remove more crocodiles under this bill, the challenge for farms would be that they would have a large number of subdominant or juvenile, especially male crocodiles, that are of no commercial value for the farm in terms of breeding and the farm would then be footing the bill for paying for a crocodile for 20 years or so before it may become of commercial use in a breeding context to the farm. That is where the challenge in the commercial context would lie for some of the farms.

Dr O'SHEA: Thank you for your briefing. We were talking with one of the other contributors about a comprehensive education program and that the Irwin family had suggested they would be happy to do a video for international and domestic flights as well as flyers for interstate travellers at

hotels, motels, camping grounds and caravan sites and programs in schools about awareness of crocodiles and appropriate behaviour. What sort of education is there now for people about crocodile behaviour to keep them safe?

Mr Klaassen: We have our big Crocwise program and that consists of a number of elements. We have dedicated campaigns that focus on tourists coming into the Cairns area in particular, through messaging at the airports and various public transport and through media channels as well. We use social media to get the messaging out. We have two dedicated people who work on Crocwise and they are producing resources. They are going into schools and doing educational activities. There is a program that tries to get the message out primarily to the tourists but also to locals around what behaviours are appropriate where they live. We see that as a very important part of what we need to do so that those people who do not have a good understanding of crocodile behaviour are informed of that and those locals are always practising safe behaviours. It is quite a comprehensive program.

Dr O'SHEA: Could you explain a bit more about trying to develop public safety devices to detect crocodiles in areas to give a warning for people who have to work in the water in that area?

Mr Klaassen: I will get Simon to give you the detail. We are working on a couple of options to deploy sonar to detect crocodile movement so we can actually identify a crocodile in an area and then have a process to alert people around that. Simon can give you the details as to where that is at.

Mr Booth: There are currently a range of projects we have been working on in that space. In terms of the sonar detection, for a number of years now we have been partnering with a company looking at developing underwater sonar that can detect crocodiles in real time and provide an alert, and we have published multiple peer review papers on that work so far. That has proved successful, with around a 96 per cent detection rate. We are currently looking at the project in terms of realigning it through the innovation division of the department and looking for opportunities within the private sector network so we can move forward with a technology similar to that to ideally a commercially viable product. We are actually meeting on that tomorrow with a pitch session from private entities in Queensland.

We also have another project running with James Cook University around digital video detection. That is looking at developing a camera-based system we can have on a mobile platform where we are having issues of conflict. An example would be the Napranum community having a lot of crocodile issues in recent times up on the cape. This would ideally be something we could deploy in locations like that. It would be a simple surface camera with an AI detection algorithm machine learning system that will provide a localised alert when a crocodile has been sighted in the vicinity. In addition to that, we are also working with the University of the Sunshine Coast looking at the opportunity for a crocodile deterrent. They are investigating natural and artificial methods of whether we can actually deter crocodiles from either entering or remaining in an area. That work is ongoing.

Similarly, another project we have is with the University of Canberra and it is nearing completion later this year. It is on what we call eDNA detection, which is the use of environmental DNA by taking a water sample to actually confirm a crocodile is in an area. We have taken samples from the water from the location in Mareeba and a few other instances to trial the concept. Basically, that is going through a process of taking a water sample, collecting crocodile DNA and checking if it is present in those samples. That is in the instances where we are getting cryptic crocodiles that are being reported to us and we are not able to locate them during physical night-time spotlight assessments. It gives us another way to confirm the presence or absence of saltwater crocodiles. That DNA assay is applicable Australia-wide for the species as well as just Queensland. It also excludes freshwater crocodiles. We know it is specific to saltwater crocodiles and will be highly effective in Queensland as another tool in the management toolbox.

Ms BOLTON: Going to farm capacity again, with the young males it is obviously a long-term commitment for a farm to be able to hold an animal for 20 years. We heard this morning that an enclosure was basically \$20,000. We also heard about the satellite farms in the Northern Territory. Has there been any thought by government into that because of the longevity of each crocodile and having to house them? With a life span of 80 or 90 years, it means if it is not full already it will become full. Are the satellites an option that are being looked at?

Mr Klaassen: At the moment, the satellites are not an option we are looking at. We are working with the existing farms to continue to see how they can go in terms of capacity. We know we are getting to a point where that is going to become an issue, and if this bill were to proceed it would be an immediate issue to work through. We know that we need to work with the farms around ongoing capacity and some options that government would consider to support an appropriate response that

prioritises public safety and ensures we meet our international obligations but also provides the farms with the right mix of resources and support to deliver a program that works. That is something we need to look at but we are not looking at satellites.

Ms BOLTON: Would that include grants for the existing farms to be able to build facilities to host?

Mr Klaassen: That would be a matter for the government to consider in due course on what the overall policy parameters might be.

Ms BOLTON: At different hearings, we have heard from traditional owners of the difficulties around totems. Some communities will become distressed when an animal is removed and about the consultation that should occur. What occurs now versus what could occur in the future?

Mr Klaassen: Certainly in locations in Cape York there is consultation with the community around a problem crocodile and what actions might be possible. You have to look at that through a couple of lenses. Yes, they are a culturally significant species with regard to totems but public safety also needs to be considered. If we do not believe that a problem crocodile can be safely dealt with, it is not appropriate to just leave it in the community. They are complex discussions that our staff have with local elders and communities. We try to achieve a balance that recognises cultural significance but, at the end of the day, public safety has to be paramount.

Ms BOLTON: In terms of the reporting app, are each of those dots representative of a report? Is an assessment done to identify whether it is five reports about one crocodile, or is it five crocodiles?

Mr Klaassen: They are individual reports, so one crocodile could be reported five times. There is no way of differentiating that unless there are images. The intent is that we want reports, and we encourage people to report them, but the numbers are not individual crocodiles; they are reports which could be multiple reports of the same crocodile.

Ms BOLTON: We have heard a lot from witnesses that more resources such as education are needed. Is there an outstanding area regarding the Crocodile Management Plan that you believe requires more resources?

Mr Klaassen: We have been successful in achieving additional resources through various government bids. We are doing the research, as Simon alluded to, on the detection, deterrence and sonar—I think that would inform future resource needs. If that is a way to enhance safety and provide real-time information, that would be something that would be worthwhile exploring but we are still going through the process in respect of the proof of concept but we have staff, we have an education program and we are continuing to deliver. As people have suggested this morning, the program has improved. It is good quality and people are generally comfortable with the work that is happening, noting there are always outliers where we cannot catch a crocodile but overall I think the program is working very well.

CHAIR: I have a quick final question. We have been told that the RSPCA cannot enter crocodile farms to monitor conditions. I am wondering if that is correct, and why crocodile farms would be an exception to any other form of animal husbandry?

Mr Klaassen: I have not heard that. I do not know if my colleagues here know anything about the RSPCA.

CHAIR: You can take it as a question on notice.

Mr Klaassen: It would probably depend on the legislative framework because RSPCA generally operates through DPI legislation, but let us take that question on notice and we will come back with some advice to the committee on that.

CHAIR: You said that there are statistics with regard to attacks and fatalities on your website.

Mr Klaassen: Yes.

CHAIR: I would be interested to see how many attacks there are annually that we know about.

Mr Klaassen: We can provide you with the link which has all the data. The last one was last year.

Ms DOOLEY: Are you aware of how many pieces of legislation would need to be amended if this bill were to pass?

Mr Klaassen: I might pass that to my colleague.

Mr Lloyd: Thank you for the question. I was waiting for a chance to talk.

Ms DOOLEY: Great.

Mr Lloyd: We have not done that level of analysis but there would absolutely be a range of different legislative frameworks which we would need to consider through the bill, which mainly would be the interaction with the Nature Conservation Act and the regulations under that framework. There would be implications with the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act that we would need to work through and then we would need to consider the frameworks in Queensland—some of ones which you mentioned such as around the Department of Primary Industries. There would be quite a fair bit of work for us to do over the couple of months the bill provides as a timetable to do that. That would be a body of work that we would need to look into.

CHAIR: Thank you for your time.

KATTER, Mr Robbie, Member for Traeger, Parliament of Queensland

KNUTH, Mr Shane, MP, Member for Hill, Parliament of Queensland

TASSELL, Mr Brad, Senior Policy Advisor, Office of Shane Knuth MP

CHAIR: Welcome. With leave of the committee, I would also like to invite Robbie Katter to join us. Is leave granted?

Mr JKELLY: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you. The member for Hill held attended the public hearing that the committee held in Cairns in early May and has also provided a written response to the issues that were raised in the submissions that we have received during the inquiry. There have been nearly 200 submissions, all of which will be published shortly. Shane, I invite you to make an address on any outstanding issues by way of reply or speak to any other issue that is relevant to the bill, as this will be the last public briefing that we will hold before commencing our draft report.

Mr Knuth: I want North Queenslanders to have a say today with regard to our crocodile bill. Different information has flowed back to us. Some submitters say the bill is flawed, it is distorted and it is fake news, but the aim of this bill is to place greater value on human life, rather than crocodiles. The intent of the bill is to claim back our waterways which we have lost because of government inaction year in year out. I will read some submissions that detail real-life experiences that really hit home the seriousness of the crocodile problem. This is from the Deputy Mayor of the Cassowary Coast Regional Council, Nicholas Pervan, which I will table. He says—

People no longer feel safe to access public waterways whether it be creeks on Private or Public land that were once safe to access. Beaches along the North Queensland coastline and are seen as tourist destinations are now covered with signs exposing tourists the risks and dangers of crocodiles that are in our waterways.

Carla Grieve, the owner of the Tinnie Shack in Mission Beach, says—

I've owned this company for over 25 years and there has been a massive amount of public concerns raised over the crocodile population increase and threat to human life and animal life, I am also the wife of Dean Grieve who was attacked by a crocodile in Port Hinchinbrook in 2004 where a four meter crocodile launched onto the back of our houseboat and tried to take my Husband ... it is imperative that this bill be passed to protect human lives ...

The personal opinion of Peter Darby, the President of the Rockhampton Water Ski Club, is—

With the Fitzroy River now hosting the rowing in the 2032 Olympics. The future Olympians are being developed on the Fitzroy right now, as well as future national champion water skiers among other sports.

However, over the last 20 years, as the crocodile numbers and sightings increase, the recreational use of the rivers has decreased as the fear of a human/crocodile interaction has grown to the point that it now threatens the viability of recreational clubs, meanwhile, social recreation is almost non-existent.

He goes on to say—

There is always a study or scientific document which defends the crocodile.

I have also found many issues in these studies which don't support the decisions that are being made around crocodile management.

In my opinion there should be a study of the social and economic impacts that crocodiles are having on recreation, sport participation and tourism.

Belinda Santarossa says—

The crocodile population in Far North Queensland is OUT of control.

... Crocodiles are in higher, colder fresh water streams where they have never been before. They are adapting these conditions because of the over population. My teenage son LOVES to fish and I would prefer he was out fishing the creeks and drains than at home playing computer games but I fear for his safety when we have 3-4 m crocs living in drains and sleeping in cane paddocks. Something has to be done ... it is only a matter of time before more lives are lost around the Silkwood/Kurrimine Beach area.

Dr Coyle, who practices in the Cairns area, said—

Only a few years ago the Mulgrave River was very close to Cairns and was the site of such activities, swimming, kayaking and ... stand-up paddle boarding.

... For a few years now these areas have been encroached upon and inhabited by crocodiles, making use of such areas quite unsafe.

...

A local tourist group was also using the Mulgrave river for paddle boarding and kayaking tours and have had to cease ... because of the incursion by crocodiles.

...

It is ridiculous that areas of enjoyable rivers such as the Mulgrave have been left to crocodiles ... For the sake of our young people who need river access for enjoyable safe water activities, please keep crocodiles out of the waterways, such as the Mulgrave River ...

In addition to these accounts, a submission from the Local Government Association of Queensland representing all councils was submitted, noting that—

... the main purpose of the Bill is to '... place(s) greater value on human life by responsibly reducing the risk of crocodile attacks as much as possible' and '... aim(s) to eliminate from ... waterways any crocodiles that pose a threat to human life, while continuing to protect crocodiles from becoming extinct as a species.' 1 To achieve its purpose, the Bill proposes to establish the Queensland Crocodile Authority and supporting Advisory Committee.

The submission went on to say—

... the LGAQ has no opposition to the Bill.

But it notes that—

... the Advisory Committee's membership, as proposed in the Bill, does not include local government representation. As the level of government closest to the community, local governments are acutely aware of the relationships between their communities and local crocodile populations, and as such, the LGAQ believes that the Advisory Committee would benefit from local government representation.

I fully agree with this. It is significant because it clearly demonstrates the widespread support for the bill, the importance of the Queensland crocodile authority and the role of the advisory committee that is set out in this bill. This coincides with what was pointed out in an excellent submission from the Carpentaria Land Council where they state—

CLCAC believes that the Advisory Committee must include at least 3 members who are an Aboriginal person, or a Torres Strait Islander person, who has experience with crocodiles. Indigenous people should be integral to the provision of advice about crocodile management to government agencies.

I 100 per cent agree with this. It could be easily amended to take into account these considerations. However, as a part of the bill, the advisory committee consists of seven people or more. I see that it will be of benefit to have more Indigenous representation—there is always one—but also someone who is also a member of the Local Government Association of Queensland. The CLAC agree—

This will facilitate better access and relationship building between authority staff and various indigenous organisations and other stakeholders.

They also agree—

... the business premises of the authority must be located in Cairns along with the director and staff residing in Cairns.

Mr J KELLY: Given the advice and statements we have heard, both on our site visits and in hearings, around the fact that even if we went down the path of culling you could never consider a waterway to be safe, what level of culling would you be proposing?

Mr Knuth: One of the things that the bill spells out is zero tolerance for crocodiles that are situated in populated waterways. That is set by the crocodile authority. That is agreed by the crocodile authority. In terms of crocodiles that are on people's farms, they can contact the crocodile authority to have that crocodile removed. That is a big aspect of the bill which has been a big issue during today's hearing. With zero tolerance for crocodiles on farms, crocodiles are able to be removed to a croc farm, a croc sanctuary or the crocs are to be culled. With the massive croc population across Queensland at the present time, it is going to be difficult for a croc farm or croc sanctuary to take all these crocs so culling is the best option, particularly to make our waterways safe and protect people from crocs.

Mr J KELLY: I grew up in North Queensland. If you look at stingers, we have always had to take precautions around the ocean. A politician can declare zero tolerance on stingers, but you are never really going to be able to achieve that so you have to adjust your behaviour. Why should we consider crocs to be any different to any other environmental hazard?

Mr Knuth: I read out one of the submissions to this bill where the lady stated that a croc launched out of the water and tried to grab her husband out of a houseboat. Stingers do not launch out of the water. What we are seeing right now is that there are that many crocs that they are pushing their way up the waterways into the small streams where mums and dads could take their six-year-old or seven-year-old kids. Now they have three-metre crocodiles swimming amongst them. It has come to the point, and this is why it is so important that this bill has been put forward, that these crocs have pushed right up that they are now in the bore drains of the cane farms, they are in the dams of the cane farms. Belinda Santarossa, a cane farmer, basically said that she is concerned that her kid could

go into a bore drain on a farm and be taken by a croc. This is the severity of the situation and why I have put this bill forward. It has not just been the click of a finger—this is a 10-year process hearing the concerns coming from our communities up there in North Queensland.

Ms DOOLEY: The committee understands that the current management plan is around freshwater crocodile management, but your bill actually excludes freshwater crocodiles. Can you explain why you have done that?

Mr Knuth: With regard to the management plan, there are issues with freshwater crocs in public waterways such as Lake Eacham, which we would like to see removed, but the big issue that we are seeing is as was mentioned down in the Fitzroy River where they came across a five-metre croc. It is so much better to target that five-metre croc. There was a 4.3 metre croc removed from the Fitzroy River where they are going to have the Olympic rowing competition. It is best to focus on these crocodiles rather than freshwater crocodiles. The freshwater crocodiles no doubt have a bite, but there has never been a strong interest in removing the freshwater crocs unless they feel that they are a threat in lakes and waterholes that are used by the public.

Ms DOOLEY: You also express a goal of bringing it back to acceptable risk. What is your definition of acceptable risk?

Mr Knuth: This is debatable. I am 58 years old and I had the honour and the privilege of swimming in most of the waterholes between Townsville and Cairns. We had never thought about crocodiles. One of the businesses at Port Douglas was asked the question what it was like back in the eighties and nineties when tourists would come and say, 'Can we swim?' She would say, 'Yes, you can, but be wary of crocs.' She said there was a risk but it was an acceptable risk. Now they ask her, 'Can we swim?', and she will say, 'You will die!' We want to get to the point where it is an acceptable risk because when it is an acceptable risk there is less chance of a crocodile launching out of the water and trying to grab a person on his houseboat. You hear mums who are concerned when their kids go luring across the river. They are saying, 'I am worried that my son will not come back,' but all he is doing is throwing a lure along the riverbank. We want to be able to get to the point where their sons can go out and throw a lure along the riverbank like they used to.

Ms BOLTON: We have heard a lot of evidence from witnesses that there is no statistical evidence that removing or culling crocodiles is going to improve safety given they move around. In the explanatory notes you refer to recent studies. Would you be able to provide those studies to us that support that culling and moving crocodiles makes it safer?

Mr Knuth: Can you repeat that question?

Ms BOLTON: In the explanatory notes to your bill you rely on recent studies as evidence that a combination of killing and relocation to farms and sanctuaries is the best way to achieve the policy of safer waterways. Do you have those studies that you can provide?

Mr Knuth: I do not have that on me at this present moment.

Ms BOLTON: No, but could you provide that to the committee?

Mr Knuth: I can provide them on notice, definitely.

Ms BOLTON: Yes, please. You said with the authority that people on private properties could have crocodiles removed, but from everything we have heard that can already occur just by calling. We have heard the timeframe is roughly three to seven days to removal except for, obviously, an oddity. What is the difference? I am still not understanding the difference between what occurs now and what would occur with the authority.

Mr Knuth: One of the things that is very important to understand is that there will be a reduction in crocodiles, particularly in the populated waterways. We have the populated waterways where people kayak, or try to kayak, where we have the surf lifesavers whom we want to protect when people are launching their boats, which is very important. This is about zero tolerance. You have the other aspect of this in regards to the farmland. There are three aspects of the bill relevant to farmland. They are so stressed out having these crocs in their bore drains, in their creeks and in their waterways.

Ms BOLTON: But do they call the department for removal?

Mr Knuth: They have. They have tried, but to them it is a complete waste of time.

Ms BOLTON: Why is that?

Mr Knuth: Because it just does not happen. The department might say they come out. With regard to people seeing crocodiles and reporting crocodiles, they know it is a complete waste of time so people are not reporting crocodile sightings anymore. Back in 2010 there were 176 reported croc sightings in Queensland and there was a massive uproar. When people saw crocs then, because

they were fearful that they are going to come back in our waterways, they reported them. Those figures showed the 176 croc sightings. The figure in the last two years has been around 1,200 croc sightings, but people are not reporting those croc sightings. They are not even reporting crocs that are launching at them or showing aggression towards them while they are in their boat or fishing because they know it is a complete waste of time. However, when it comes to putting forward a crocodile control bill, they are crying out for some form of action. Just remember that I had put forward a bill back in 2017. It was debated and the government at the time did absolutely nothing. That problem is worse now. I am trying to do something for the people of North Queensland and the people who want to see Olympics in Rockhampton. That is why I have packaged this together.

Mr Katter: Just to add to what Shane said, we are just trying to give practical outcomes here. If this did not go through and you say, 'How about the department do what it has been doing better,' that would be completely unacceptable. One example I will give you was that I was at Noosa one Christmas holidays and I got a desperate phone call. I am not the member for Cairns, but they had tried everyone. They called me. I was calling the minister and calling the department people. I think it was three or four phone calls. Around Christmas there was a big salty at Lizard Island, I think it was. It was stalking where the workers were. They were complaining. That is one of about three or four examples I could pull out of the memory bank. There are multiple examples of where there is frustration. They build a culture where people go, 'What's the point?'

Ms BOLTON: Is that someone at the other end is not answering the phone?

Mr Katter: You could only speculate, Sandy. I would say it is an ideological thing—leave them alone. There was also a report from one of the tourism operators where the lady was taken up at Daintree. They said for weeks that that croc had been stalking the beach. They had reported that. It took a lady's life.

Mr Knuth: Just to add to that too, Rollingstone Creek was people from Townsville's and even Ingham's favourite place to go and enjoy fresh water coming from the rainforest. That creek has been swum in since time began. There were two three-metre crocs in that waterhole. Young people up to 12-year-olds looked down and thought what might have been a croc. Eventually it was reported and it came back that the croc was not showing aggression so we they would not remove it.

Mr BAROUNIS: What are your thoughts about the educational programs already in place with regard to this issue?

Mr Knuth: We hear today that we need to educate people and put up more croc signs. There is an admission now that there is a croc problem. The reality is that the people in North Queensland do not want to be educated on how to be crocwise. They want to see the crocs gone at all costs by whatever means necessary. They want to be able to enjoy skiing on the Johnstone River like they used to, spearfishing in the Tully River, to swim at Ross and Locke and the places that they used to. That is what they are crying out for, not to be educated, not to be told not to walk too close to the beach water especially with your dog because you are likely to lose your dog or you could go with it. They want to be able to enjoy those beaches, they want to be able to enjoy those rivers, they want to be able to enjoy those waterholes, they want to be able to go out and row without the fear of a 14-foot croc that stalked and threatened the lives of women rowers going back three years ago. They want to go out there and enjoy rowing like they used to. This is where North Queenslanders want to get back to. They do not want education. They do not want more croc signs. They want those crocs gone so it takes away the risk and the threat.

Dr O'SHEA: Is there anything that could be done in the current framework that would allay people's concerns?

Mr Knuth: With regard to the current framework, I cannot answer that, that is why I am introducing this bill. All I can see with the present framework is that it is not working so something has to change to make the framework work. It is up to the government now to make a decision on making that framework work. That is why I have put this bill together: to make the framework work.

CHAIR: We are over time so we are going to need to wrap things up. Thank you for your appearance today and for the work you have done on this bill. This does conclude the briefing. I thank everyone else who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I note there is one question on notice from the member for Noosa. We will need that response by Friday, 20 June. I declare this public briefing closed.

The committee adjourned at 1.31 pm.