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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SA Bennett MP—Chair
Mr NJ Dalton MP
Mr RI Katter MP
Mr GR Kelly MP
Mr JR Martin MP
Mr TJ Smith MP

Staff present:

Dr A Ward—Committee Secretary
Dr K Kowol—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—DEPARTMENT AND QUEENSLAND AUDIT OFFICE; CONSIDERATION OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT 1: 2023- 24—MANAGING INVASIVE SPECIES, AND THE QUEENSLAND INVASIVE PLANTS AND ANIMALS STRATEGY

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 30 April 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 30 APRIL 2025

The committee met at 11.32 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public briefing. My name is Stephen Bennett. I am the member for Burnett and chair of the committee. With me here today are: James Martin MP, member for Stretton and the deputy chair; Nigel Dalton MP, member for Mackay; Robbie Katter MP, member for Traeger, who will be with us shortly; Glen Kelly MP, member for Mirani; and Tom Smith MP, member for Bundaberg, who will join us in a moment.

Today we will receive briefings on the status of the Auditor-General's *Report 1: 2023-24—Managing Invasive Species* and the development of the Queensland Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy, which falls within the committee's area of responsibility. These briefings aim to deepen the committee's understanding of this portfolio and key initiatives in the sector.

I would like to begin by thanking the Auditor-General and the director-general for making themselves and their teams available today. This briefing 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.

I remind committee members that officers are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking an opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House.

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. Please turn your mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

BROWN, Mr Darren, Assistant Auditor-General, Queensland Audit Office

COOPER, Mr Joel, Director, Queensland Audit Office

VAGG, Ms Rachel, Auditor-General, Queensland Audit Office

CHAIR: I now welcome officials from the Queensland Audit Office. Auditor-General, I invite you to introduce yourself and your team and provide a brief opening statement.

Ms Vagg: Thank you and good morning. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Queensland including the Turrbal and Yagara people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the committee on *Managing invasive species*, which was tabled in July 2023—so before my time as Auditor-General. With me today is Darren Brown, my Assistant Auditor-General, who leads our performance audit function; and Joel Cooper, our Director who led this particular engagement.

This audit assessed how effectively state and local government entities were managing invasive plants and animals. We audited the then department of agriculture and fisheries, the department of environment and science, and local councils, and consulted with stakeholders across Queensland's biosecurity system. We included all invasive plants and animals in the scope of the audit but did not perform a detailed review of the programs and outcomes for all species.

We looked holistically at the planning and frameworks for how entities identify and assess invasive species risk, the controls they put in place to manage these risks and how they measure performance. We used a range of different audit methods to collect evidence including site visits, interviews, surveys, document review, data analysis and engaging subject matter experts.

Invasive plants and animals can have significant impacts on our economy, environment and health. Invasive species are estimated to cost the Australian economy between \$5 billion and \$7 billion each year, and the risk of new species arriving on our shores is a constant threat. In Queensland, state and local governments, land managers, relevant industries and the community all share responsibility for managing invasive species. This partnership model means that entities must effectively plan and coordinate their activities at a national, state, regional and local level. While many state entities and local governments are managing invasive species, greater leadership, oversight and planning is needed to improve coordination and effectiveness of this effort. This is important as borders and geographical boundaries have no relevance for species.

Biosecurity Queensland, now part of the Department of Primary Industries, is responsible for leading the state's biosecurity system. In our audit we found that its leadership was not as effective as it could be because it had not clearly articulated how it would deliver this role. Delivery is the responsibility of multiple levels of government and, therefore, effective coordination and oversight is critically important.

Queensland's Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy 2019-2024—and we note that has been updated—aims to reduce the impact of all invasive species but does not assess whether some entities, particularly remote councils, are at risk of not being able to deliver their responsibilities. Some state and local councils have mature systems and processes to assess the risk of invasive species and prioritise their activities, but others do not. Biosecurity Queensland did not have a documented framework for assessing and prioritising the risk of invasive species. While it did prioritise its effort, it was difficult to determine whether its focus was always on the right species. We found that they had not published risk assessments for wild dogs and feral pigs which are two species that have a significant impact on the economy and the environment.

Detecting invasive species early and keeping them out of Queensland is the most effective way to reduce their impact. This has been a successful focus but it is obviously not always possible. Biosecurity Queensland also needs to improve leadership for responding to established species in Queensland including setting priorities and coordinating activities. In many cases the management of established species, such as feral cats and pigs and weeds like lantana, is the responsibility of local councils. Biosecurity Queensland does not always assess their effectiveness and understanding if additional support or coordination is required. Over a third of councils that responded to our survey reported low to very low levels of coordination and collaboration with the state government in managing invasive species.

Fire ants are one of the worst invasive species in the world. Biosecurity Queensland has worked hard to slow the spread and eradicate them which has contributed to the rate of spread being significantly less in Queensland than in China and the USA. However, despite these efforts, the infestation has continued to grow. At the time of our audit, back in 2023, we found that eradication efforts had isolated and limited success. We also found that inadequate containment boundaries as well as uncertainty and delays in funding had slowed treatment to control the spread of ants and eradicate them. The ongoing effort to try to eradicate fire ants will take considerably more commitment.

We made eight recommendations to improve how entities assess, prioritise and mitigate the risk of invasive species, design their strategies, use data to inform their decisions and report their progress. I note that you are meeting with the Department of Primary Industries after this discussion and they will be best placed to provide an update on their activities. I am happy to take any questions the committee has on this report.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Auditor-General. I will turn to the member for Stretton for the first question.

Mr MARTIN: Your audit discusses the lack of reporting on the progress and outcomes of programs for individual species. Are you able to say more about this and whether you found any examples of good reporting processes?

Ms Vagg: I will refer that one to Darren.

Mr Brown: The reporting on individual species was sporadic. Some programs had better reporting than others which meant that, in terms of being able to coordinate specific risks and risk profiles across the state, it made that a bit difficult. Similarly, reporting on different council boundaries and different council areas was sporadic as well. The ability to coordinate and get a collective holistic view of how particular programs were working or not working was impacted by that sporadic data capture and data reporting.

Mr DALTON: Thanks for your update. I believe there is an Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy 2025-2030. Have you examined that? Do you see any improvements or do you have any comments that you can make on that strategy at the moment?

Ms Vagg: We are aware that it has been issued. It was issued after our audit was tabled. While we are aware of it, we have not assessed the strategy itself. The outcomes from it are the key pieces to ask questions about. When a strategy is certain, then it is actually looking at how that strategy is delivered, and effectiveness is measured from that. Overall, no, we have not assessed it, but that is something to ask the department about.

Mr DALTON: Coordination obviously seems to be the major thing that you have mentioned several times. A token of that is something that might have been seen in that strategy, but I have not looked at it. Do you have any comments on that?

Ms Vagg: No. I have no further comments on the new strategy itself.

Mr SMITH: I note that the department in their response was I will not say scathing but let's just say did not agree with certain elements. For example, the Audit Office reckons that they have over prioritised funding for cluster fencing as compared to funding the control of feral cats. How did the Audit Office respond to that and what internal reflections has the Audit Office done to maybe view that they could have erred in some of the recommendations that they made? Has there been any internal reflection?

Ms Vagg: Seeking advice and feedback from our agencies as we audit them along the way is critical for the success of the reports. We want the reports to be balanced and fair and have recommendations which are able to be implemented and be effective. That ongoing consultation is really quite important for us. It does not mean that we always agree at the end of it. I think that is important to recognise as well.

In terms of our reflection, we, of course, reflected on that process and we have had discussions with the department and the previous director-general about that particular response. If we step back from the recommendations in the report, really what the report is saying is that the department should have an approach to identifying and prioritising their response. I think that still stands. They need to have that particular approach in place which is risk based.

They also need to step back, understand their role in the coordination of a multi-level government operation and one that works with private sector owners as well. It is understanding Biosecurity Queensland and the department's role in the whole system of delivery, articulating that clearly within strategy and then setting success measures and measuring their performance against that. I think those particular elements of the report stand strongly and have been accepted by the department.

Mr G KELLY: Auditor-General, since the release of the 2023-24 Auditor-General's report on *Managing invasive species* we have seen increases in funding commitments from both the federal and state governments in respect of fire ants. Has that additional funding helped to bring in the containment zones?

Ms Vagg: One of the recommendations in the report is that the department sets effectiveness measures: so how do they know whether they are going to be successful with the targets they have set. Then the question is: when there is additional funding has it been successful? Post this report that would be a question for the department and we have not followed that up.

Mr KATTER: When you were doing this report, would it fall within your scope to ask whether or not the funding is commensurate with the problem? To add some context: you might be talking about the competency of the department but it is pretty hard for the government if there are 24 million hectares of prickly acacia that is out of control and not much being done. Do you make any commentary around that?

Ms Vagg: With all of our audits we look at the objectives that are set—what are the outcomes that the department is trying to deliver and the programs they have in place to deliver them? It could be programs within the department; it could be funding they provide to other agencies and the like. If we have some indications that there could be issues with them being effective we ask questions about why. That could be access to resources or skills. Access to funding. could be one of those things. That is where we work quite closely with the agencies to understand the why—why hasn't something happened, why isn't it being effectively delivered and that may be one of the 'whys'. In terms of making recommendations around funding, we actually see that as the responsibility of the agencies to then advise us that that is one of the issues and the processes that they can undertake to seek more funding, if that is one of the reasons.

Mr KATTER: Did that report look at the irregularities around checking sentinel cattle herds?

Ms Vagg: I will have to check with Joel.

Mr Cooper: No, sorry. We did not look at specific individual invasive plants and animals and do a deep dive into specific species—other than obviously fire ants, which has a dedicated chapter.

CHAIR: Considering the recommendations of the Auditor-General when this report was done and considering that Fisheries leadership, fire ants and biosecurity were all called into question then the department rebutted, then the Auditor-General took the step of rebutting that rebuttal. Have we ever had an example of this in the last five years where we have had such pushback from a department about what is seen as a scathing Auditor-General's report?

Ms Vagg: I might answer that before I refer to Joel or Darren. The department actually accepted our recommendation. To be clear: department accepted the individual recommendations that were made and, therefore, we expect they will be actioning those recommendations. I think there are some comments provided by the previous director-general about some of our thinking to do with this particular audit. We often have robust discussions as we are going through an audit process; they are just not often included in the report to the parliament—the letters to and from the department. So yes, discussions happen with nearly every audit it is just often not published in the report to parliament itself. We give directors-general and those accountable for the reports the opportunity to write whatever they want to in those letters and we publish them as they are to give them the right to respond publicly to the report. In terms of other examples, I might turn to Darren.

Mr Brown: There has been in the past—I am not sure whether it would be in the last five years—the odd occasion where an agency has provided information in their response where they questioned some aspects of our report or our findings. There has been the odd occasion where the Auditor-General has felt the need to set the record straight in relation to specific aspects of the contents of those particular letters.

CHAIR: Considering where this is now and the issues of biosecurity and other things in Queensland, a follow-up invasive species audit is not on the work plan; that would be a fair comment?

Ms Vagg: That is correct.

CHAIR: So we have to wait until 2027 for reconsideration for it to be included—I am not trying to pressure you but that is the way it would normally work?

Ms Vagg: Typically, that is right. If we do spend a lot of time in one area we give the departments an opportunity to have some time to respond. It does not mean we do not check on how they are going in terms of implementing the recommendation. We have an annual self-assessment process where we write to each department and ask for an assessment about whether our recommendations have been implemented or not. Then each year we give a report to parliament that gives an indication of how the department thinks they are progressing in terms of implementing the recommendations.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about public sector leadership models. From the report it appears that the former auditor-general and the former director-general have different ideas about the types of leadership models in biosecurity. Are you able to expand on that with the committee, and what is the QAO's approach to public sector leadership models? I would think there are multiple different leadership models across the public sector; do you assess them with one checklist, or is it on a case-by-case basis?

Ms Vagg: The method of delivery is up to the accountable officer of each agency. What our audits do is focus on the outcomes of those particular models. If we can see an aspect of a model that can be improved, we make recommendations for improvement. We are agnostic in terms of the model of delivery; it is actually the effectiveness of that model that is presented by that particular director-general. In terms of the recommendations in this report, it is all about the better coordination and leadership of the department—it was not actually espousing a particular view about the model to be implemented.

CHAIR: The work plans that are on the website are very exciting and reflective of a modern Queensland. When you talk about writing to the directors-general, looking for comments on an annual basis and the reporting process that is tabled; it will not necessarily be reflective of the invasive species this year. Would that be a fair comment?

Ms Vagg: It is going to be included this year. We have given the department an opportunity to respond and implement our recommendations. In the 2025 report we will have an update on these particular recommendations. In terms of the forward work plan and the things we will focus on in

future, we are consulting on that now. We have been meeting with each of the directors-general and leadership across government to understand whether we should make any tweaks to that particular plan and that will be out for consultation soon, including with parliament. We intend for that to be tabled before 30 June.

CHAIR: Some of the other Auditor-General reports coming before the committee talk about regional Queensland. It must be hard to see the financial impacts of some of the issues affecting particularly regional Queensland and then how you report on things like how regional cities are performing. I think the next one we have coming before the committee is about regional investment and regional decisions. It will be really interesting to see how invasive species issues are impacting the financial positions of more remote communities.

Mr G KELLY: The recommendations in the report involve DAF strengthening its leadership and coordination role in biosecurity as well as reviewing the Biosecurity Act 2014. How has the department actioned these recommendations and what is the progress?

Ms Vagg: It is probably a question for the director-general rather than us. We will report the status in our 2025 update report but that would be a good question for the department.

CHAIR: We have run out of questions, gentlemen. We will let you get back to your busy days. Thank you very much for your consideration of this issue and we look forward to hearing more from you in the future.

Ms Vagg: Thank you very much for your time.

BOLTON, Mr Graeme, Director-General, Department of Primary Industries

FARRY, Mr Tim, Director Invasive Plants and Animals, Department of Primary Industries

HOMDEN, Mr Michael, Executive Program Director National Fire Ant Eradication Program, Department of Primary Industries

PEROTTI, Mr Enrico, General Manager Invasive Plants and Animals, Department of Primary Industries

REID, Mr Michael, Acting Deputy Director-General and Chief Biosecurity Officer, Department of Primary Industries

CHAIR: We now welcome officials from the Department of Primary Industries. Director-General, as always we appreciate you and your team's time. We invite you to make an opening statement after which the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Bolton: I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we gather today, the Turrbal and Yagara people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to extend those respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are joining us today. Good morning, committee. I would like to also acknowledge you and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will let my colleagues introduce themselves.

My name is Graeme Bolton. I am the Director-General of the Department of Primary Industries. By way of an introductory speech, Queensland's primary industries are the backbone of our economy and the heart of our rural and regional communities. In 2023-24, our primary industries were valued at \$22.66 billion and contributed approximately \$16 billion in exports. Our primary industries employ more than 376,000 people across the entire supply chain, which is almost 13 per cent of Queensland's workforce. It also directly supports more than 41,500 primary industry businesses.

As you would be aware from the earlier briefing today, last night the Queensland government commenced consultation on a 25-year blueprint for the future of Queensland's primary industries. The draft *Primary Industries Prosper 2050* was co-designed with nearly 280 representatives from across the portfolio. The blueprint represents a fresh start for primary industries in our state and supports the Queensland government's ambitious target of boosting Queensland's primary industries output to \$30 billion by 2030.

The blueprint will be supported by a series of rolling five-year action plans that will focus on sector, regional or specific issues and opportunities. A strong and robust biosecurity system is critical to protecting our existing primary industries and the economic value they bring to the state, our future growth aspirations, the environment and our way of life for this and future generations. Biosecurity is an absolute priority for Queensland due to its proximity to neighbouring countries to the north, our expansive coastlines, our extensive incursion pathways through a globalised community and our ideal climate for the majority of the world's most invasive pests and diseases.

The reality for Queensland is that we are often responding to concurrent biosecurity incursions but we are considered national leaders in this space. Operating under the legal framework of the Biosecurity Act 2014, the department, through Biosecurity Queensland, enforces measures to prevent the entry and spread of pest and diseases. I am grateful for the examination of the invasive species management system by the Auditor-General and the recommendations of the Queensland Audit Office *Report 1: 2023-24—Managing Invasive Species*. The former department of agriculture and fisheries accepted the recommendations within the Queensland Audit Office report.

Since then, substantial work has been undertaken to complete several key initiatives and improvements in response to these recommendations. The Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy 2019-2024 has been reviewed and was re-released as the Queensland Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy 2025-2030 in January of this year. This represents a significant step towards addressing the recommendations of the Queensland Audit Office report.

The revised Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy complements the Queensland Biosecurity Strategy and provides a frontline operational focus to guide the prevention and management of invasive plants and animals in Queensland. The revised strategy outlines the role and responsibilities of key partners in the system, including the leadership role of the Department of Primary Industries. The revised strategy also highlights challenges and provides practical solutions.

Biosecurity Queensland continues to support the community, industry and local government in meeting their general biosecurity operations including through providing information on best practice management, undertaking prioritised research and development of effective management practices, providing tools to support the assessment of risk posed by different invasive species and providing tools to determine the feasibility of control and management objectives.

The National Fire Ant Eradication Program released its Fire Ant Response Plan 2023-2027 in 2023 which aligns with the recommendations of the Queensland Audit Office's report. The Fire Ant Response Plan focused on strengthening containment and compliance and intensifying program led and community treatment. The Fire Ant Response Plan also implements a change of governance to align with other national biosecurity emergency response arrangements to leverage established processes and procedures that will improve accountability to the national cost-share partners and support efficient and robust decision-making.

The department also continues its work in leading and coordinating Queensland's biosecurity framework including specific biosecurity threats. In March of this year, the Queensland government announced new regionally focused action plans to better coordinate and tailor integrated programs for the management of feral pigs. This included an additional \$1 million to support the implementation of the regional feral pig action plans.

Last, and by no means least, to strengthen Queensland's biosecurity front line the Queensland government announced \$50 million for 100 new frontline biosecurity officers. These new roles will be established—and we recruited two from within our regional communities—and will help respond to the specific needs and threats of that region. Recruitment for three regional biosecurity leads commenced before Christmas and is being finalised. These regional biosecurity leads will work with the councils and Regional Organisation of Councils within their regions to identify the priorities of each region and inform the next round of recruitment for our frontline biosecurity officers.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. We welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about the department's response to recommendation 3. Essentially, the department said it is developing KPIs for managing invasive species and it is also working on determining whether amendments to the act are necessary to cascade those KPIs down to the local council level. I was wondering whether you or someone on the panel could expand on that for the benefit of the committee.

Mr Bolton: Absolutely. Thank you very much. I will start by giving a high-level overview and then I will hand to Mr Perotti to give a more detailed answer. In regards to the review of the act, it was reviewed in 2019 under the former department of agriculture and fisheries. At that point it was determined that no further changes were required. Having said that, we have not yet had the opportunity to brief the new Minister for Primary Industries on that review and potentially what other options this government may wish to examine further. In regards to specific points around recommendation 3, I will hand to Mr Perotti.

Mr Perotti: One of the key pieces of work that we co-delivered with the stakeholders was the Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy 2025-2030. That strategy provides a key framework that guides the prevention and management of invasive plants and animals in Queensland. This gives us a framework over the next five years. The strategy highlights a shared purpose, so it really defines key responsibilities for all parties; clarifies the roles of each player; identifies challenges; and explores practical solutions. There are even case studies on how the system works. It also provides numerous examples of best practices. This strategy aims to deliver targeted actions for everyone to protect Queensland from the impact of invasive plants and animals. The main framework for that, the main foundation, is collaboration and working together to manage invasive pests.

The strategy clearly defines DPI's role in leading and coordinating Queensland's biosecurity system. It also includes who administers the strategy. We work with the Queensland Invasive Plants and Animals Committee, which encompasses a lot of stakeholders including local government and industry representatives et cetera to manage that strategy.

Mr DALTON: Can you tell the committee more about the various stakeholder committees within the biosecurity system and what were the findings of the review into DAF's position within them? Were any terms of reference altered as a result?

Mr Bolton: I am not particularly familiar with which terms of reference you are referring to? Can you be more specific about what committee that refers to?

CHAIR: The stakeholder committees that were created within Biosecurity.

Mr Bolton: I see, in recommendation 1. I will hand to Mr Perotti to answer that particular question.

Mr Perotti: We have numerous committees because, as I was stating before, we work collaboratively with the stakeholders. One of them is the Queensland Invasive Plants and Animals Committee, which includes industry, AgForce, QFF, LGAQ and NRM Regions Queensland et cetera, so it is quite a big group. They own the Queensland Invasive Plants and Animals Strategy along with us. We did review the terms of reference for that committee and we are going to review it again in a future meeting. We will consider new terms of reference in our main meeting with the QIPAC.

We also have the Statewide Oversight Group with representation from working groups convened by local governments such as Regional Organisation of Councils and regional pest groups. In relation to the Statewide Oversight Group, we have reviewed their terms of reference and this is really our interface focus on local governments because we want to work hand in hand with local governments to meet this challenge in managing invasive species. We have reviewed the terms of reference and we are going to work again with them to review the co-investment framework that was published in 2014. We are working through that avenue to review that framework.

Apart from that, we have the state land pest management committee, which includes government departments and government owned corporations and the Department of Defence. This is the department working with other state agencies to manage invasive species. Again, we have reviewed the terms of reference in that space.

Last but not least, because wild dogs are a major issue, we have the Queensland Dog Offensive Group with representation from AgForce, local governments, NRM groups, the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions, DETSI—the Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation—and the Queensland Conservation Council. That is solely focused on the management of the feral dog problem. Again, we have reviewed the strategy and the terms of reference.

Mr SMITH: Mr Bolton, recommendation 2 states that DAF—

reviews the Biosecurity Act 2014 in consultation with stakeholders, to ensure it has the necessary clarity, authority, and responsibility to ... lead, coordinate, and enforce Queensland's biosecurity system.

Has the Audit Office provided any indication as to which relevant sections of that particular act they are asking to be reviewed? It seems a very general, broadbrush statement for what is quite a detailed piece of legislation.

Mr Bolton: That question might have been better posed to the Auditor-General in the previous session.

Mr SMITH: I wonder if the Auditor-General has communicated to the department what specific parts of the act they believe need to be addressed?

Mr Bolton: There is no more detailed communication than what is in the report.

Mr SMITH: They might need to audit themselves on that.

Mr G KELLY: Graeme, I will ask the question again. Since the release of the 2023-24 Auditor-General's report titled *Managing invasive species* we have seen increases in funding for fire ants, with funds being committed from both the federal and state governments. Has the additional funding helped in bringing in the containment zones?

Mr Bolton: As the committee might be aware, the National Fire Ant Eradication Program is a nationally cost-shared funded program which is funded by the Commonwealth and all the other states and territories. There was a fairly significant independent review undertaken—and the report of that was handed down in 2021—which included a range of findings including that the eradication is technically feasible subject to some changes in the program, scope, strategy, budget and governance. In regards to those changes, they have been implemented. We have now a new fire ant program. We have a much more defined strategy about how the eradication zone is being managed and defined.

In addition to that, I would like to thank the member for the question about increased funding. Earlier this year the Queensland government announced a further \$24 million for aerial treatment within the suppression zone. That is above and beyond what has already been committed through the national cost-shared funded program. This is work within the suppression zone where we would be looking to treat large areas, particularly of our primary industry landholders and other large landholders that are unable to treat themselves. I might hand to Mr Homden to provide a little bit more detail about the revised strategy for the National Fire Ant Eradication Program.

Mr Homden: In terms of the scope of our new funding and our efforts, the new response plan, which was formed in 2023 going to 2027, has allowed us to continuously concentrate our efforts on this invasive pest which, of course, if left unabated, would expand. We have contained that to an area of South-East Queensland. We continue to effectively bring up strategies that will force greater enforcement activities, including what the director-general has just mentioned in terms of additional funding for suppression. Suppression is extremely important to the overall activities.

The level of infestation in these areas to over 220,000 hectares has been identified as areas which are high risk for us. Dealing with those is critical to the overall efficacy of the program, and we are carrying onwards the technical feasibility of eradicating by 2032.

Mr KATTER: Director-General, I think this is the third time you have been in front of the committee and biosecurity has come up. To me it seems the outstanding issue is under-resourcing, but it is never really raised on your side—perhaps it is not your place—but that seems to me to be the elephant in the room. You have 24 million hectares of prickly acacia, which hardly gets any air time at all. It is barely being addressed out there and the funding is nowhere near what is needed to even control it. I have said prickly acacia but you could pick anything—pigs, cats, ehrlichiosis on the dogs and all the herds of cattle. It seems to be under-resourced everywhere, particularly in the rural areas.

Mr Bolton: The biosecurity environment or space within Queensland is very complex. We have multiple threats right across the landscape and they do differ from region to region. They have different levels of prioritisation in the various regions. Part of the funding that was announced is to fund \$50 million and 100 new frontline biosecurity FTEs. We will be looking at how we work closely with local governments, the Regional Organisations of Councils they form and the landowners within those regions to better understand what are the priorities for biosecurity within that region and then how do we collectively develop up a strategy and response to better manage that particular thing. In the north-west it might be prickly acacia, in the south-west it might be cactus, in parts of coastal Queensland it is potentially feral pigs. Rather than us trying to determine for stakeholders what those priorities are, we are going to put resources on the ground through that new funding, those new FTEs, and work collaboratively to co-design response plans based on the regions which pick up some of the recommendations from the Queensland Audit Office report around greater leadership and coordination.

Mr KATTER: I accept that. I do not doubt you will do that effectively from here on in. I would say that was also—I forget the name of the fellow you had at Cloncurry—the response when I was first trying to learn about this issue. In the context of prickly acacia I said, 'What do you actually do?' and it was, 'We're giving advice and trying to coordinate.' That was 10 years ago and I am not too sure we are much further ahead on that issue. At some point the layperson just wants to see treatment and effectiveness on the ground. There is a lot of talk of plans and things, but we need to see some action.

Mr Bolton: Under the Biosecurity Act, every single landholder has what they call a general biosecurity obligation.

Mr KATTER: I understand.

Mr Bolton: They are required to manage invasive plants and animals on their property. That can be a big challenge for some landholders. Some do it really well; others not so well. The whole intent behind these new officers and the new regional-based action plans is to get people together. The old saying is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, so by working collectively and coordinating efforts and investment, we will get better returns to better manage these invasive species.

Mr KATTER: I think a lot of complaints are fairly made; for example, national parks put the weeds on there. Would you agree you have to be sensitive around language such as, 'This goes back on the landholder and they have to do this'? If Queensland Rail is not maintaining the grader grass or something, it is coming on their place but you are saying they have to keep on top of these weeds.

Mr Bolton: As Mr Perotti mentioned before, we do have an engagement committee with state land management and all entities, including the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation as well as the Department of Defence. The general biosecurity obligation applies to everyone. In terms of things like the feral pig initiative that was announced in March of this year, we all individually undertake different control actions and we invest different amounts of money. The intent moving forward is that we will corral all of that into one coordinated approach so that the same money is getting put in there, but we are getting a better return on that investment. It does not matter whether you are a landholder, a council or a state or Commonwealth government, there is an expectation that you will all play a role.

Mr KATTER: In my view, the effectiveness and competency in rolling out these plans comes with boots on the ground. That has been a real problem. Probably for the last five years I have heard, 'Yes, we're rolling out so many biosecurity officers in Cloncurry,' but even if there was, there is still clearly a deficit there commensurate with the size of the problem. Was that identified as a problem, trying to get people out of offices on the coast and more out into some of these areas? It would appear to me that part of the effectiveness of trying to deal with some of this is that a lot of problems exist in those remote areas.

Mr Bolton: To a certain degree, yes. As I said before, under the Biosecurity Act everyone has a general biosecurity obligation. That means that if you are a council, a landholder, a grazier or a primary producer landholder, you have an obligation to do work on your land. It is not about the government coming in and doing work for all of the stakeholders.

Mr KATTER: I know that. I just meant coordinating and things like that—having someone in the district who knows everyone and not someone in Rockhampton or Townsville who comes up intermittently.

Mr Bolton: Absolutely, very much so. The absolute intent is that we are recruiting these 100 new FTEs from within the regions (1) because we can get better people on the ground who know their backyard better than someone coming from external; and (2) we have a better chance of getting them to go to these regional communities. If you try and recruit from the coast and bring someone west it is a big culture shock. I was born in Mount Isa. I grew up in Mount Isa and on the coast and North Queensland. I know what it is like to live and breathe in regional Queensland. It is not suited to everyone. If we can recruit from our regional communities, we are keeping jobs within local areas. Generally, you do not need to worry about housing; they already have housing. Second, but by no means least, they know their backyard and the priorities of stakeholders and those relationships which are going to be critical to making this work.

CHAIR: The Auditor-General's report talked about the previous invasive animals and plants strategy not meeting expectations around the capacity and capability of local governments to do their work. I am just interested in your comments about relationships with local governments and increasing their capacity to play their role, particularly in regional Queensland.

Mr Bolton: A key component of our refocus or refresh within the department is really looking at how we work with a collaborative approach with all stakeholders, particularly councils. Councils are our biggest partner in terms of delivering on-the-ground action, whether it is through our biosecurity framework or even through our broader primary industries economic portfolio. They know their communities better. We are doing a lot of work—and I will hand across to Mr Perotti in a moment just to talk a little bit more about what that work is—around that capacity building within local government, and it does not matter whether it is in feral pigs or the fire ant program.

CHAIR: Just before we do that, there are a couple of things I am interested in. Deficiencies I have witnessed locally are about the capacity of councils to help landowners with baits and other activities, particularly with things like lantana and other things on the road verges that you drive past anytime you drive north or south. I am just interested in local governments and their role. Are we increasing their capacity as well as we go forward?

Mr Bolton: We are certainly increasing their capability in terms of training. In terms of increasing capacity and funding support, no, not directly. Only, as I said before, under the Biosecurity Act every landowner has a general biosecurity obligation, and that includes councils where councils own land, whether they are road verges on local roads or parks and that sort of thing. Councils do play a strong support role in some of those broader community or private landholder activities such as baits and attenuating and other activities. We support councils where we can. I will hand across to Mr Perotti.

Mr Perotti: We have quite a few initiatives to assist local governments in enhancing their capacity to manage invasives. One is an initiative called backing local governments. We have a team that is working on a three-year project to try and work with local governments to assess what the gaps are, what the needs are and then try to assist them in providing tools to manage their issues. Another key role that we are playing is developing management tools. We have a significant research capability that provides tools like biological control agents to manage specific invasives. There we work with a statewide oversight group which has representation from local governments to try and prioritise what research projects we need to get on the road to manage these invasives. That kind of frames some of our work. We also have training activities like weed management master classes, for example, for giant rat's tail or other weeds where we work with local governments and train them about the technologies that exist to manage specific regional pests that are of concern for local governments and stakeholders.

CHAIR: What is the participation rate from local governments in that training? Are you happy with the uptake, or could we be doing more to help promote that?

Mr Perotti: We can always do more. I must say, the uptake has been quite successful. We have also videorecorded some of the master classes so they are available offline if you wish.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about reporting. I think it is recommendation 8: that the department focus on reporting outcomes as well as outputs. The department's response is that a new reporting performance framework has been introduced. Can you expand on the way reporting will happen in the future with fire ants?

Mr Bolton: I will give a high-level overview and then if needs be Mr Perotti can provide further detail. As Mr Homden mentioned before, in 2023 we implemented the new eradication program or response plan. It includes a range of changes, including a change of governance to align with national biosecurity emergency response arrangements, and several mechanisms to measure and report progress and outcomes and assure independent expert advice and assessment of its activities. This includes periodic public reporting against strategic review recommendations, quarterly annual reporting on progress and outcomes, and regular governance reporting on delivery progress, program finances, risks and issues.

Mr Homden: It strengthened our governance process, effectively. We report directly through to the national management group, but there are a series of points where we review issues and risks and we are able to deal with them directly. We are doing it through public reporting but also internal reporting as well up to our cost share partners. We rely heavily on the expertise that is brought about from the national arrangements, particularly around scientific support, and many of the other insights into the program development and where we are going in the future. We use a risk and assurance committee, which is part of the national arrangements, and also a consultative committee, which looks closely at our arrangements and indeed our effectiveness in the program thus far.

Mr MARTIN: If I could just ask a follow-up question about what specifically the department is referring to when it is reporting outcomes.

Mr Homden: Under the response plan there is a series of what is called risk triggers which we are measured against for ongoing effectiveness. We report that through the governance arrangements. Because we have scientific support for the consultative committee et cetera, we are able to test. The national arrangements as well test the efficacy of the program and our continuing progress.

Mr Bolton: Some of those indicators include the number of treatments and the areas of treatment. They are probably the two key indicators.

Mr DALTON: My question is more to do with the recruitment of biosecurity officers. How are we going with that? Secondly, do you think there are enough people with those qualifications who will apply for those positions?

Mr Bolton: We commenced recruitment just before Christmas with three regional director roles that are based in the northern, central and southern regions. I do not have the exact number, but we did receive a large degree of interest in those particular roles, so it has taken a little while to get through that process to shortlist, interview and now appoint the successful candidates. In terms of the degree of qualifications, we can take on board a range of different people with different qualifications. We can even provide some with an industry base because it is not all about professional streams. There are outdoor streams or technical streams as well. We do provide additional training through Biosecurity Queensland for our frontline officers to get authorised under the Biosecurity Act to undertake their various compliance activities.

Mr DALTON: Will regions be informed when they are getting those biosecurity officers? How do we know that we have one in the Mackay-Whitsunday region?

Mr Bolton: Once we have these new regional leads in place, the next step is to sit down and work with the Regional Organisation of Councils within their respective regions and then collaboratively understand what are the key priorities for them in that particular area and then what are the options or opportunities to better treat and respond to those. Off the back of that, that will inform our resourcing. We will know what types of people we need where and then we will be doing that recruitment, which will be very open. It will be publicly announced. We will be recruiting overtly from within those regions. People will know that we are actually recruiting from within the community and why we are doing it.

Mr DALTON: I wanted past tense, as in once they are recruited will we know? Will it be publicised? Will there be announcements?

Mr Bolton: We will certainly keep them up to date and the minister may absolutely wish to publicise those as we progress those appointments. Operationally, we normally would not necessarily make a song and dance of it, but the minister, given the impact that this will have on the ground, may like to communicate more broadly to the stakeholders.

Mr KATTER: Teasing that out, you were saying about partnering with landholders. I have long felt that there are opportunities to incentivise landholders into concessions or the like to participate in that. As I was saying with prickly acacia, people say that they have to clean it off their place but you guys were the ones telling them to plant it 50 or 60 years ago, so who is really responsible? We can go through all of these scenarios, but I just feel that there are some opportunities there. Is any of that discussed at this level and through these strategies?

Mr Bolton: Unfortunately our landscape is littered with those past decisions which still continue to haunt us, whether it is prickly acacia, cane toads or rabbits, and the challenge in front of us now is how do we better that?

Mr KATTER: Yes, and I did not want to focus on the past.

Mr Bolton: Certainly for me there will be those opportunities to look at how we use these pest resources as a potential economic opportunity. The committee heard earlier today around sustainable aviation fuels and other biofuels. Prickly acacia might be very suitable as a feedstock, so they are part of the opportunities that we will be looking at through the blueprint and through the regional action plans in terms of what those future opportunities are across the whole of portfolio. Something that might be viewed very much as a waste now might actually be part of a very valuable feedstock to support a new industry with new products.

Mr KATTER: So you do link those? There is that biochar stuff at Richmond where they have that pilot factory to convert the prickly acacia into biochar. Do you get active in that space?

Mr Bolton: Yes. My understanding is that we played a role within that as well to help support that when they brought that in—

Mr KATTER: Good.

Mr Bolton:—and that will be absolutely part of what we are looking at moving forward underneath the regional action plans.

Mr G KELLY: Graeme, the western country has just gone through a one-in-100-year flood and you guys did a great job with preventing the opportunity for fire ants to get out into that country, because obviously if they did we would have lost it. Something I have always wondered is how do you get on in and around those close-knit areas the likes of Ipswich and further out in the Scenic Rim? Do you have landholders who will not let the department on their land if there is a recognition that there are fire ants in those areas?

Mr Bolton: We do have small pockets of our community, whether it is Samford, Ipswich, Logan and even Caboolture, where there is a minority—and it is a very vocal minority—who do not want us to treat their property. Unfortunately we have to because part of the eradication program is that we just cannot take a chance that we leave any stone unturned. A lot of people say, 'We've lived here all our lives. We've never seen fire ants.' Most fire ants are not visible to the naked eye until they are really well established and then you start to see the fire ant mounds come up. They have a very high ability to hide and avoid detection, particularly from humans. Part of that eradication program is that we have to treat every single square kilometre of that eradication zone and we have to do it a minimum number of times to give us that 95 per cent certainty that we have eradicated fire ants and then we can continue to move in.

Under the Biosecurity Act, we do have compulsory entry powers for treatment. There was probably a little bit of media last week where you may have seen that some landowners did resist the efforts of our officers to treat land. We do work very closely with the Queensland Police Service and unfortunately one of the residents did obstruct both ourselves and the police and they were arrested as a result of that. That was really unfortunate. Our absolute first preference is that we want to work with the landholders to understand what their concerns are. Some are concerned about the types of chemicals that we use and the perceived toxicity of those. The type of chemical used is an insect growth regulator, so what it does is it stops the queen ant from reproducing and then the ant colony collapses because it can no longer support itself. It is the same active ingredient that you see on flea collars for your cats and dogs.

To give you a bit of an idea of the quantum that we are talking about, we are talking about half a flea collar for a football field size, so it is a very small amount but it is highly effective and targeted to fire ants. It is made up of a corn grit and soy oil, which is very attractive to fire ants in particular.

Other native species will pick it up, but longer term if we do not get rid of fire ants the native species will be eradicated. They are now competing with the fire ants. Other concerns are things like impacts on livestock. There is just no scientific or medical evidence to support that this is harmful to livestock. With regard to bees, bees are just not attracted to it. Again, there is no scientific evidence to support that. We work with landholders to understand what the concerns are and try to educate them. If we can tailor our treatment activities to get around what their concerns are, we will absolutely do that. If it is just being obstructionist for the sake that they do not want us on that property, we are going to have to find a way to do it regardless unfortunately.

CHAIR: Does the department of environment sit on your committees in relation to the management of state and national parks?

Mr Bolton: I think the short answer to that is absolutely they do.

CHAIR: So they are part of your strong committee process?

Mr Bolton: Yes, they are.

CHAIR: Would you be able to, for the committee's benefit, talk about some of the risks to Northern Queensland? We probably do not hear about it much because of the isolation, but what are the risks, sea borne or land borne, that possibly could infect the northern part of Australia and spread if we do not contain it?

Mr Bolton: As I mentioned in my opening statement, Australia is in a unique position where, because of our isolation, we do not have a lot of the invasive animals and other diseases that the rest of the world have. Our proximity to Papua New Guinea through to Indonesia and other parts of South-East Asia make it a really ideal gateway for the movement of some of our animal diseases, and I am thinking about diseases such as lumpy skin disease, foot-and-mouth disease and African swine fever. Should those diseases come through, that will likely be done through human assisted movement given that particularly meat products and pork products are heavily traded within Papua New Guinea and the Indonesia region, and that is likely to be the gateway that we have coming down into Northern Australia. We work very closely with the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Border Force to make sure that any movement of people also safeguards the potential risk of introducing biosecurity hazard into Australia through the Torres Strait and into Cape York.

CHAIR: Are the cases of Panama race 4 in the north of Queensland still being contained?

Mr Bolton: Yes. I was up there just a little while ago post the floods that happened in Ingham in February this year and met with some of the banana growers up there. That is actually one of the great success stories of both the department but also the industry. It has been a shining example of a collaborative approach between the department and the Australian Banana Growers' Council around how they manage that property to contain that particular disease within the Tully Valley where it is currently located. I do not have the exact figures, but we have had very slow rates of expansion from that disease to the point now where we have other parts of the world asking us for advice about how we have managed that. I do not know if Mr Reid would like to add anything further to that?

Mr Reid: Thanks, Graeme. We currently have four IPs at the moment with Panama TR4. As Graeme mentioned, we have just established the cooperative governance group with ABGC and Plant Health Australia and Biosecurity Queensland where we have authorised officers with the Australian Banana Growers' Council on the ground working with local people and local producers to undertake further surveillance to understand how disease is spreading and what needs to be done to address that. Certainly the role of government in that case will be if we do come against any noncompliant behaviour to be able to support that through reinforcement action, but at the moment it is a shining example, as Graeme also mentioned, of a world-leading example of managing this disease.

CHAIR: What about cane smut? Are there any examples in Queensland where we do have identified cane smut disease? There was a breakout in Bundaberg 10 years ago, I think, of cane rust, smut or something.

Mr Reid: Currently to my knowledge, no, we have no outbreaks of smut. Also to the previous question in terms of risks in the Torres Strait, in addition to the animal risk we do have Oriental fruit fly of which we see seasonal outbreaks with human assisted movement from Papua New Guinea, so we are currently undertaking eradication activities up there for that as well.

CHAIR: Director-General, when we met on the Gold Coast at the conference about feral pigs we got introduced to the new commissioners who had been appointed. For the committee's benefit, would you be able to give us a brief overview of those six or eight that you have now appointed, and they are under the banner of an NRM group? Maybe you could explain those appointments and what their roles are?

Mr Bolton: I will ask Mr Farry to provide a bit more detail about that because he is incredibly knowledgeable about that particular initiative, but, yes, we have a number of feral pig coordinators who are working across Queensland. I think we have five in total to work across regions around how we better coordinate and integrate our treatment activities with councils, and that will integrate with the new action plans that were announced in March. I will hand over to Mr Farry for a more detailed response.

Mr Farry: Just to correct that, we actually have appointed six coordinators who are based across the six geographic areas.

CHAIR: Could you identify those geographical areas?

Mr Farry: There were two successful proponents under the Queensland Feral Pest Initiative. One of those was led by Desert Channels Queensland, which is a partnership amongst NRM groups particularly across the Far North, so it incorporates Cape York NRM, Terrain, Southern Gulf, Gulf Savannah and I think NQ Dry Tropics that are the main components of that. We also have the South West Regional Organisation of Councils which has a coordinator which incorporates parts of the Darling Downs as well, so it is like an expanded ROC which has previously existed for other reasons but it takes in the key production areas of the South Burnett and parts of the Darling Downs where domestic pig production is a predominant industry as well. A key focus of this was around disease prevention and being able to take effective action in relation to wild pigs—feral pigs—during times of disease incursion, and getting effective regional as opposed to locally based management action is a key focus, so taking it to that catchment level.

There are remaining areas. The existing coordinators cover about 86 per cent of the state. There are some areas that remain uncoordinated at that regional scale, keeping in mind that there is still local government coordination occurring which is the mainstay, if you like, of feral pig control across the state. With those three areas we are looking at funding opportunities at the moment and we are incorporating those areas also into this state action planning process which will incorporate the development of regional action plans focused and co-developed as the DG mentioned earlier, ensuring that local viewpoints and approaches are incorporated into those management actions. To the point about resourcing, we have undertaken some recent analysis of that work that indicates also that better coordination is required to have greater efficacy around our management actions and I think that this process of establishing these regional-based plans will go a long way to address that level of integrated and best practice approach.

Mr KATTER: The audit report talked a lot about leadership and coordination. Without necessarily passing judgement on any of that, I just wanted to use a working example to see how this gets addressed or worked with now going forward. Siam weed broke out in the Burdekin and it was alleged that it came from that Defence activity moving up and down there, but they did not want to own it. If you then go to the NRM groups and the council—council is probably the first call—they say, 'That's getting too big. It's going along the road and beyond our scope,' and then you go to the minister's office. I get what you are saying about this coordination issue because it is like, 'Who do you go to with this outbreak?' It is not massive on a state scale, but it is a growing problem. Would you acknowledge that, or you might give me some feedback and say, 'Actually, this should've happened through that process in terms of how that would normally be dealt with'?

Mr Bolton: I do not know that specific example so I cannot comment on how that was particularly managed. All I can comment on is my approach now, 11 months into this particular role. The team and I are very much committed to working through a collaborative co-designed co-implementation with all our stakeholders. An example of that would be the development of the blueprint. All the representatives within the portfolio—the primary producers from the whole of the portfolio sector, the supply chain, the manufacturers, the investors and the research institutions—came together with all levels of government to co-design that 25-year vision. Off the back of that, we will be following a very similar process for the regional based action plans.

An example that I could speak to of where we are using that relationship to take stronger leadership and build that productive relationship, particularly with the Commonwealth, might be the fire ant program. We had an outlier detection at Oakey on Defence land and we worked with them very carefully. Once they understood what the priorities, concerns and issues were, they became one

of our biggest champions in terms of being proactive around the management of their property and their assets and making sure that the fire ants are contained where they were found and, more importantly, not spread from within the fire ant restriction zone.

Mr KATTER: I did not really ask this before but who would take the lead? Let's say we have another outbreak of Siam weed tomorrow and it is fairly significant. Do I ring the local DPI?

Mr Bolton: It probably depends on what the particular plant, animal or disease is. I might hand it over to Tim to give you more of an answer.

Mr Farry: I suppose what we really need to be clear about is the arrangements within Queensland around the biosecurity response and the fact that Queensland operates within a national system also. Whenever there is a new detection of an invasive species in Queensland, one of the requirements is the initial reporting. If a landholder reports that to the state, or even to an authorised officer in the local government, they have met their obligation under the legislation to report that new pest. We are then required to go through a process nationally to record and report the detail, and then we go through an investigation phase. That generally determines the extent of the incursion. On that basis, there are national systems, processes and committees. We spoke earlier about a consultative committee for the fire ant program. A similar one has been established for environmental biosecurity—so for weeds and pest animals as well. That will meet and consider the new detection.

The process then advances to determine technical feasibility to eradicate the pest. If the extent of the incursion, or the size of it, is beyond the resources or the capability of any particular party, there is an opportunity to consider it across the entire country. Each state and territory is then asked to commit to an ongoing eradication attempt. If that is not feasible, we look at other options. It is about the ongoing management responsibilities. Again, that comes down to effective partnerships and relationships, particularly about containment.

Some things do not meet the criteria for a national response but are highly significant at a state level, so we will continue a process to address those within the resources. Again, when we are talking about resources, the necessity is the partnerships. It is too great for any one party to basically take responsibility, or provide the resources, for it. In that way, there is generally a coordinated approach of shared resources to address that, even if containment or asset protection as opposed to eradication becomes the way forward.

Mr KATTER: It elevates to national biosecurity, but if it is not big enough it comes back down. Does it deliberately come back down?

Mr Bolton: It really does depend on what the issue is. What Mr Farry outlined is for a new species, pest or disease being detected and how it then gets—

Mr KATTER: New to an area or district or just new altogether?

Mr Bolton: No, new entirely. For something like, say, Siam weed, which is considered established within Australia and cannot be eradicated, it then becomes a local management issue. Under the Biosecurity Act, it would be the responsibility of the landowner to manage that particular species, whatever it might be. If it was deemed that it was not being done effectively, that it was potentially posing a risk, the Biosecurity Act allows us to undertake compliance activities. Our first action is always around education—working with landowners and councils to understand what the issues are and what they can do to better manage whatever particular pest they are dealing with.

Mr KATTER: Let's tease that out more. If I am a landowner and I have found Siam weed, I could say, 'It's not cost effective for me to work this.' I cannot see the government coming in and kicking me off the land because I am not maintaining it. Everyone loses out in that equation. It would have to be pretty tight around the—

Mr Bolton: It is a really good question. I think part of the leadership role of the department is to work with industry to better communicate the impacts of not taking action. If we use red witchweed as an example: the sugar industry initially were a little bit reluctant to get involved, but since I have come on board they understand that the economic impact of doing nothing is quite significant. It is the same with other types of pests—we need to be more clear about the cost of not doing something and how we can work together to support each other and educate others on the need to take action.

Mr KATTER: Thank you.

Mr G KELLY: Graeme, you can probably work out which way to go with this question. At the northern end of the electorate, we have Carmila and Sarina and the sugar cane growers right up to the beachfront. There is no doubt that it is a pretty busy area for cropping. Since I have been doing this job, one thing I have noticed is we talk about the infestation of pigs in such a small area. It is

unbelievable. You do not get it until you actually see it. There is no doubt that the cane farmers up there work hard to control them but they are not winning. They are not winning at all. When you see that 450 pigs have been shot over a couple of days, or in one morning's three-hour shoot, that is a lot of legs on the ground. One thing I did not realise but now understand is the amount of damage that the pigs do to not only mangroves but also turtle hatchlings. They plough up the beaches like a rotary hoe. That is something I never knew much about at all until now.

There is \$1 million of funding for pig eradication through you guys. Is there any other way to fight the issue with other departments in the future because there is environmental destruction to the mangroves and the turtles? The pig infestation is over and beyond and, as was brought up before, I am really concerned about other diseases coming in and not being detected until it is too late. Is there a plan moving forward to stop that from happening?

Mr Bolton: Absolutely. As I said, I have been in this role for 11 months and in the first six months I did a lot of travel so I could listen to stakeholders, councillors, growers and primary producers on the ground to understand what the key issues are. One of the top things broached with me when I was in Far North Queensland, in Central Queensland, on the Granite Belt and in the south-west was feral pigs. That has really been the impetus behind reshaping what we are doing and how we are doing it.

It does not matter where you look up and down or across our state, we have individuals doing a lot of work in this space. We have individual landowners investing heavily in trapping, shooting and baiting. We have councils doing their own thing. We fund councils and other landowners to undertake feral pig eradication. The department of environment is doing its work and the Commonwealth is doing its work, but it is very disaggregated. It is just uncoordinated.

The intent behind these regional action plans for feral pigs is to bring all those stakeholders together and understand the regional challenges for that area because they are all different. I know the Mackay region very well. It is a beautiful part of the world and the national parks and other waterways there pose some big challenges. It is very different from the Granite Belt where strawberry growers are having problems with feral pigs.

This is about understanding all those regional issues, what will work best for them and how to pool that money. We still have the same amount of funding and respite into that management but we want to do that in a coordinated way. If we track it, we will know that if we do this amount of shooting and this amount of baiting at this time of the year we will get this level of return. That needs to become our core business for the next 10, 15 to 20 years.

What we find particularly with feral pigs is there will be an outbreak. For the last couple of years, we have had a really good environment for the pigs—good food and good water. Because they can travel a long way and they have really high fertility rates—they have multiple litters throughout the year—their ability for population expansion is significant. To have a long-term impact, we have to remove a minimum number of the population every year. As soon as we turn our back, they will come back. It is not something that we can eradicate, unfortunately. We very much need a concerted and coordinated effort to make sure that we are doing the best we can.

That was the whole reason behind the regional action plans for feral pigs. The \$1 million funding that was announced is to invest in new technologies. We are also doing a lot of research into other biological means. Some of the NRM groups are looking at things like aerosol-based contraceptives—when a pig goes past, AI identifies it as a pig and sprays an aerosol on it which then basically puts the pig on the pill and stops it from reproducing. There is a whole heap of new technologies. We are not unique in the world. Europe and America have massive feral pig problems—different types of feral pigs. We are all facing similar problems. Our goal is not to reinvent the wheel. We are looking at what others are doing, what is working and how we can adapt that for here.

Mr G KELLY: Thanks, Graeme. I learn all the time. In my country, it gets drier in winter time and the pigs come out. In the cane country, the cane is ready to harvest and that is the worst time to go hunting because you cannot find them. In the summer time, they like the sweet crops. It is different—horses for courses of how you do it. Thanks for that.

CHAIR: Thanks, everyone. That has been very informative, and I appreciate everyone's time here this morning and this afternoon. We will conclude the proceedings today and I thank you all for the information you have provided. Thank you, Bonnie and Hansard, once again, and the committee secretariat, as always. It is always a pleasure. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. Again, thank you very much for the information. We really appreciate your time, thank you.

The committee adjourned at 12.58 pm.