

This is an uncorrected proof of evidence taken before the committee and it is made available under the condition it is recognised as such.



AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr GJ Butcher MP (Chair)
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mrs J Gilbert MP
Mr R Katter MP
Mr JE Madden MP
Mr EJ Sorensen MP

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen (Research Director)
Mr P Douglas (Principal Research Officer)

PUBLIC BRIEFING—EXAMINATION OF THE NATURE CONSERVATION (MACROPOD HARVEST PERIOD 2016) NOTICE 2015

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 20 APRIL 2016

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 20 APRIL 2016

Committee met at 11.02 am

CHAIR: Welcome, gentlemen. Before we start can we make sure that all cell phones are switched off or onto silent mode. I declare this meeting of the Agriculture and Environment Committee open. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this meeting is taking place today. My name is Glenn Butcher. I am the member for Gladstone and I am the chair of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. Other members with me here day are Mr Stephen Bennett, the member for Burnett and our deputy chair; Mrs Julieanne Gilbert, the member for Mackay; Jim Madden, the member for Ipswich West; and Ted Sorensen, the member for Hervey Bay. Mr Robbie Katter has not joined us yet but hopefully he will shortly. These proceedings are being transcribed by our parliamentary reporters and broadcast live on the parliament of Queensland website. I welcome everyone who is watching today.

The purpose of this meeting is to assist the committee in our examination of the Nature Conservation (Macropod Harvest Period 2016) Notice 2015. The notice was tabled by Dr Steven Miles MP, Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and Minister for National Parks and the Great Barrier Reef on 16 February 2016. We are hoping today's briefing will give the committee a better understanding of how the quotas and the areas for the annual roo harvest in Queensland are worked out and whether the policy that the notice gives effect to is sound. Our particular interest in the macropod harvest notice stems from other work looking at drought assistance in rural areas. Unfortunately, I was not part of that tour, but most of the committee members were.

The committee has heard from graziers that very high numbers of kangaroos in these areas are putting enormous pressure on remaining grasses and water resources in those areas. The committee's report on this notice will assist the parliament when it considers whether the notice should be disallowed. The final date for parliament to move a motion to disallow the notice is 12 May 2016.

Today the committee will be briefed by officers of the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, and I welcome you, gentlemen, today. Can you please both state your full names and positions for the benefit of our Hansard reporters today?

CONNOR, Mr Andrew, Executive Director, Industry, Development and South Queensland Compliance, Department of Environment and Heritage Protection

HILL, Mr Chris, Director, Industry and Development, Department of Environment and Heritage Protection

Mr Connor: Andrew Connor, Executive Director, Industry Development and South Queensland Compliance.

Mr Hill: Christopher Hill, Director of Industry Development.

CHAIR: Thank you, gentlemen. Can you please make a brief opening statement in relation to this matter?

Mr Connor: Certainly. I thank the committee for the invitation extended to the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection to brief it on the commercial harvest of macropods in Queensland. Harvesting of macropods in Queensland has occurred for over 150 years. Today the commercial harvest employs approximately 2,000 Queenslanders and is a multimillion dollar export industry. Most workers within the industry reside in rural and regional areas of the state.

The primary stakeholders for the commercial macropod management program are meat and skin processors, dealers who buy harvested macropods, and harvesters. Primary producers such as graziers have a keen interest in the program since it has the potential to reduce grazing pressure by macropods and provide meat for dog baiting programs.

Non-government organisations such as the Queensland Wildlife Preservation Society and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Queensland recognise the benefits of the harvest conducted by professional shooters that reduces the impacts of macropods on crops and pastures. Some animal welfare and animal rights groups are opposed to the commercial harvest and actively lobby against it.

The Commonwealth regulates the export of macropod products in Australia under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. To gain export approval for products made from native species, a wildlife trade management plan is required under that act. The Department of Environment and Heritage Protection administers the harvest of macropods in Queensland in accordance with the *Wildlife trade management plan for export: commercially harvested macropods 2013 to 2017*. The overriding goal of that plan is to provide for the sustainable use of macropod species covered by the plan in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

The harvesting of macropods in Queensland is regulated through the Nature Conservation Act and its subordinate legislation. The Nature Conservation (Macropod Harvest Period 2016) Notice 2015 is a piece of subordinate legislation that is produced annually. Its primary function is to set the harvest areas and quotas for the three commercially available species. In addition, it sets conditions with respect to humane shooting and minimum weights and sizes to which harvesters must comply. If necessary, a notice can be used to halt the commercial harvest for particular areas or times in response to declining populations.

There are three main aspects to the macropod management program in Queensland: One, monitoring populations; two, setting quotas; and, three, managing and regulating the harvest. Three species can be harvested in Queensland, being the red kangaroo, the eastern grey kangaroo and the common wallaroo. Since 1991 the Queensland government has conducted an annual program of aerial surveys by helicopter to directly monitor populations of macropods. The methodology used is widely accepted by the international scientific community. Indeed, the Queensland government is recognised as the steward of one of the longest running continuous monitoring programs of terrestrial vertebrates in the world.

There are four harvest zones in Queensland. There is a non-harvest zone where there is no quota and then we have an eastern harvest zone, a central harvest zone and a western harvest zone. The harvest zones are based around the long established harvesting areas in rural Queensland. Most harvesting occurs in the central zone. While comparatively less harvesting occurs in the western and eastern zones, they are important to many businesses and some local communities.

Management of the harvests is facilitated by setting quotas for the number of animals that can be taken. The quotas are based on the population estimates derived from annual aerial surveys. Quotas are set for each species in each harvest zone. The quotas set are based on population modelling that is established by leading academics in Australia in the field of ecology. They have proven to be safe over the last three decades and are used by all Australian states with an export based macropod industry. The maximum quotas of 20 per cent for red kangaroo and 15 per cent for the eastern grey and common wallaroo are used in the central zone. Due to less industry activity in the eastern and western zones, more conservative quotas of 10 per cent of the estimated population are used for all three species.

All harvesters must have a licence issued by the department and abide by the national code of practice for the humane shooting of kangaroos and wallabies for commercial purposes. Harvesters must also purchase tags from the department to attach to harvested animals, which is an important component of ensuring an accountable program. A compliance team conducts both desktop and field activities to monitor and enforce compliance with the legislation.

In addition to the commercial harvest, lethal damage mitigation permits are also issued by the department in response to applications from landholders who are suffering damage to primary production. The issuing of these permits is limited to a maximum of two per cent of the population estimate for each species. It is a condition of the permit that macropods are taken in accordance with the requirements of the national code for the humane shooting of kangaroos and wallabies for non-commercial purposes.

Consistent with the Queensland government's policy of assisting landholders manage macropods where they are causing loss to agricultural production, the proportion of the estimated population for each species available for damage mitigation permits was increased from one per cent to two per cent in 2015. While drought conditions continue across Queensland, the following arrangements for damage mitigation permits remain: lethal damage mitigation permits are issued for up to 12 months as opposed to the previously shorter period of six months; the need for an on-site inspection by the department has been removed during the current drought declared period; EHP staff have been assigned to deliver a seven-day turnaround on macropod damage mitigation permit applications; and the information has been made available on the department's website to assist landholders to complete applications and understand the damage mitigation process more efficiently.

Despite a significant increase in landholders applying for damage mitigation permits in 2015, the total take under the permit system remains below the allowable quota. That is for the damage mitigation permits and the commercial harvester quotas. For commercial harvest, our quotas last year were only 25 per cent utilised on average. That is the end of my opening statement. I would invite questions from the committee.

CHAIR: Thanks, Andrew. That was a very thorough opening speech. I have a couple of quick questions. You say the quota has not been fully taken up. Obviously the landowners are suffering, and the committee heard quite a bit about the numbers of kangaroos that are on properties. Are we finding that the owners are culling more with the tickets to do it?

Mr Connor: Certainly there has been a dramatic increase in the damage mitigation permits applied for and issued. So the number of kangaroos taken under that arrangement has increased. There is still allowable quota based on what we have set in our population estimate and quota-setting process.

CHAIR: Can anyone go and get one of those licences, or do you have to be the actual landowner with the concern of his property? Just say I have a gun licence and I like shooting things. Can I go and get one of these licences and just go out and do what I need to do to help my mate on a property or whatever?

Mr Hill: You need to legally be able to have a gun. You can then apply to the department to get the damage mitigation permit on behalf of the landholder. You need to be able to legally use a gun in Queensland and apply to the department for a damage mitigation permit. That would usually be the landholder, but they can allow people to operate under that licence on their behalf. Whoever is doing the culling needs to comply with the code of practice for humane shooting for non-commercial purposes.

CHAIR: Thanks for that. Not being a person who has ever gone out and shot a kangaroo or anything before, just say a professional misses—and I see reading through the report that the ones we send away are not accepted if they are hit in the chest or whatever. For my benefit, what happens to those macropods that are in that situation? Is there a way they treat them?

Mr Hill: The code of humane practice requires the harvester to kill the animal with a head shot through the brain. If for whatever reason they fail to do that, the code requires them to take every practicable measure to put the animal down. If they have to do that, though, in terms of the commercial harvest that animal is not allowed to be part of a commercial dealing. They have to leave it in the field. For the code for non-commercial harvesting, similar animal welfare constraints are there.

Mr BENNETT: I was interested to hear that you have increased the 12-month mitigation permit. With the aerial surveying and, in your words, the best practice of establishing numbers, there was some discussion that we had in some other inquiries about whether it is twice as onerous to get an annual permit and whether there is the capacity for it to be self-assessable. The department has the capacity to say, 'We are going to pull that self-assessability back.' In regard to drought mitigation permits, are you able to make a comment about your considerations and flexibility about applying for permits in a drought situation?

Mr Connor: I am just thinking that it may delve into the area of policy. The permit exists and it is established by legislation. I am happy to take that question on notice, though, if I could provide a follow-up answer.

Mr BENNETT: Thank you. Just to clarify that, we have a wonderful aerial survey monitoring program that would statistically give us confidence that we could monitor the number of macropods in these harvest zones across Queensland.

Mr Connor: Correct. As I said in my opening statement, it is internationally accepted. It is a methodology that has been used for many years and it has been demonstrated to be safe for both the estimation of populations and the setting of quotas and also the sustainable conservation of the species, which is important to the industry, too. It is used in every state in the country.

Mr BENNETT: If I could ask a supplementary question about the mitigation permits? The two per cent, that is set at what is believed to be the statistical number in a particular area of that boundary of a farm, or a grazing lease. Is two per cent about conservation? We are allowing commercial harvesters up to 15 per cent and 20 per cent in other areas. I wonder why it is only two per cent when what we have seen is quite devastating in terms of the competition for grazing and water in drought.

Mr Hill: The two per cent is two per cent of the total estimated population for each of the three commercially available species. The scale at which we estimate the population is best thought of as a regional scale. It does not really estimate the numbers in particular properties; it is done more on a regional scale.

The initial one per cent and then the two per cent is set in the wildlife trade plan rather than Queensland legislation. It was a requirement of the Commonwealth originally and—I am speculating here—but I am assuming that it is a way of managing the interest groups that have concerns about the whole idea of a harvest and culling. It is to make it clear that there is not an unlimited capacity. I think, by increasing the non-commercial quota to two per cent, that demonstrates that there is some flexibility there if necessary.

Mr BENNETT: On that particular subject, I think the problem we heard—and if you cannot comment because it is policy I will make it as a statement—and where we travelled to witness this, of course, is that the commercial harvesting had dried up and effectively there was nowhere for the commercial guys to have their boxes. In effect, they had a 15 per cent commercial take that was not being taken up, but they still had that two per cent mitigation capacity. It was a double-edged sword for them. There was no commercial activity that could be taken and they could not really deal with what was seen to be a two per cent take. I take your point. Where there is no commercial harvesting, it is posing a problem. You can take it as a statement if you do not want to comment.

Mr Connor: I can make a comment on that. The one pertinent thing, without getting into the policy aspects of the percentage, is the observation that neither the commercial nor the damage mitigation permits have been exceeded. We have not hit a ceiling with respect to the ability to apply to take those animals.

Mrs GILBERT: Based on your knowledge and information about the population of the macropods, are they becoming more prevalent?

Mr Connor: Certainly, the population fluctuates significantly over time. Generally, the patterns seem to align with our weather conditions. In times where we have healthy rainfall, the kangaroos have the capacity to increase in population quite rapidly. Conversely, when we have moved to drought conditions, we have also observed dramatic decreases in population.

Mr SORENSEN: Can you just explain to me a bit more about the shortening of harvest periods and what that means?

Mr Connor: Sorry? The shortening of the harvest periods?

Mr SORENSEN: Yes, it states—

Shortening harvest period

... This section applies if the chief executive intends to amend this notice to change the end of the harvest period to a day. ...

Mr Connor: The provisions allow for the chief executive, who would be monitoring progress of the harvest—we are aware of population estimates; we do this on an annual basis. Our population surveys—correct me if I am wrong please, Chris—happen between May and August each year. We will be collecting data associated with next year's quota while the current quota is being managed. I do not believe that it has ever been used, but the ability is built in that, if we were to collect information to suggest that we were in an overharvest type of situation, we have the ability to take corrective action once we have evidence of that.

Mr MADDEN: I was interested in what you had to say about the industry being in existence for 150 years and having 2,000 workers. Would you be able to estimate the value of this industry as a contribution to the Queensland economy?

Mr Connor: I do not have a specific number with me. Again, I would be happy to take that on notice. We did estimate it in our opening statement to be a multimillion dollar industry to Queensland. Again, it is something that does fluctuate. Several years ago we had access to strong Russian markets for export. Naturally, in periods where we have access to those markets, the industry will be worth more to the state. That is an important thing that we come across in discussions with people within the industry. They would love to see access to further export markets to stimulate growth of the industry.

Mr MADDEN: Could you take that question on notice—the value of this industry to the Queensland economy?

Mr Connor: Certainly.

Mr MADDEN: I am also interested in a breakdown of the value of the industry in terms of skins as opposed to meat. As you said, the value fluctuates. Could you provide that for over the last five years, just to get an indication of that fluctuation?

Mr Connor: I am certainly happy to take both aspects of that question on notice.

Mr MADDEN: Thank you very much.

CHAIR: In terms of the damage mitigation permit—and this is just for my information—if I have applied for a damage mitigation permit for my property, how do I know what my one per cent and two per cent is? You said that the number is taken from an area, not just a certain property. Do I get that information off the department so that I know how many I can knock over on my patch? You have one per cent of the whole area but you are only interested in what is happening on your property. If I have 400 on my property, but the number that I have set is 400 for the whole area, can I take out 400? How does the next guy know and how does the next guy know?

Mr Hill: I am not directly responsible for the administration of the damage mitigation permits. I might not be across all the detail, but my understanding is that the landholders can estimate or provide a number to the department in terms of the number of kangaroos they have or would like to cull. Then the department will assess that, issue the permit, and at the same time record the number for which the permit has been issued. I think the landholder can ask for or make the case in terms of how many they need to cull. That number is then aggregated upwards to track how we are going against the overall quota.

CHAIR: Basically, it is self-assessable on your own property? If you say, 'I have 400 kangaroos that are currently roaming on my paddock and I want to get rid of half of them,' is that what would happen? You would say, 'I need to get rid of half of them,' or would the department say, 'No, that is not within the boundary.'

Mr Hill: That is the level of detail—I am not exactly sure how the wildlife officers conduct their assessment. Again, we could provide that information if you wish.

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Connor: If I could just make a comment about that aspect of your question around a landholder understanding the two per cent for their part of the property, in terms of the quota for the damage mitigation permits it is a percentage of the overall population of the species. It is definitely not an estimate of the population within the landholder's parcel of land. In terms of how the department manages the quota, we would do an assessment. At this point there is an assessment based on what the landholder has applied for. Each of those applications is assessed on its own merit. The department is the responsible entity in ensuring that we do not exceed the quota that we have provided permissions for.

CHAIR: Thank you for that.

Mr BENNETT: Annually, the department does a review of numbers and allocations. Does that also apply to the size of the animal as well? Have we seen any changes? I see that the minimum weights and minimum skin areas are specified. Are they consistent annually, or do we see a change?

Mr Connor: What I can comment on—and I might ask Chris to add some further detail—is that it is part of the annual notice. We include the provisions around the size and the skin. Those elements of the bill are established in consultation with the industry. In some respects there are a couple of beneficial components of having a minimum size set. One is that, from a reproductive point of view, we are allowing the animals to grow to a mature age where they can reproduce. Secondly, for meat processors they are accepting carcasses of a sufficient size to make it worth their while in terms of processing the meat.

Mr Hill: I think you asked about had there been changes. We collect information on the average weights coming into the chiller boxes and there have not been any significant variations that we have detected recently.

Mrs GILBERT: Could you inform us of how our practices here in Queensland compare to those of the other states?

Mr Connor: I think there are some similarities. All of the states develop their plans and programs in consultation—and I think this is correct, Chris, and correct me if I am wrong—but with an endorsement from the Commonwealth. With the monitoring program in terms of population estimation, I think that Queensland is considered to be a leader in the field. In terms of the size of the harvest, Queensland is also a leader in the field within the country. The policy principles and approaches behind each of the programs on a state basis are quite consistent.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. We have no further questions. That brings the committee's meeting today to a close. I thank you very much for coming along and answering our questions and your statements. Thank you very much.

Mr Connor: We thank the committee for the opportunity.

CHAIR: There were questions on notice: the value of the industry to the economy of Queensland and the breakdown of meat and skins. Thank you very much, gentlemen. I call today's meeting to a close. Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 11.31 am

PROOF