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AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr JP Kelly MP (Chair)
Mr R Katter MP
Mr JE Madden MP
Mr LL Millar MP
Mr PT Weir MP

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen (Committee Secretary)

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS OF INVASIVE PLANTS (WEEDS) AND THEIR CONTROL IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 19 JUNE 2017

Hughenden

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Committee met at 4.23 pm

CHAIR: I declare open the Agriculture and Environment Committee's public hearing in relation to its inquiry into invasive weeds and their control in Queensland. I will not go through all of the introductions again. Thank you very much to those people who came on the tour with us. It was very useful. Witnesses at today's hearing are not giving evidence under oath, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I remind those present that these proceedings are similar to parliament and are subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Hansard is making a transcript of these proceedings and the committee will publish the transcript of today's proceedings. Those here today should note that the media might be present, so it is possible that you could be filmed or photographed.

HACON, Mr Robert, Private capacity

HARRINGTON, Mr Scott, Private capacity

CHAIR: I welcome Mr Robert Hacon and Mr Scott Harrington. I ask you both to start by stating the capacity in which you are appearing today.

Mr Hacon: I am a third generation grazier.

Mr Harrington: I am here as a representative of graziers of the Julia Creek region and also for AgForce.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for making yourselves available today. I believe we are going to start with a brief presentation and then we will go to the committee for some questions. Take it away, Robert.

Mr Hacon: This is part of an experiment I am running. I have about probably 70-odd trees that I have poisoned at different strengths with different types of poison, but this is a picture of one with Tebuthiuron where I put enough to kill the tree. It is quite a big tree really. I put 20 spoons at the base and 10 spoons spread around, and you will see in the next photo the number of seeds. You can actually see the seeds on the ground underneath it now, and look at all of the big trees in the background. They are very big prickly acacias—quite big prickly acacias.

In the next photo look at what is on the ground underneath this tree, and this is what I am trying to do. This tree is highly stressed. It has been poisoned and it would not have had two inches of rain on it, yet that Tebuthiuron is working and the tree is nearly finished. The next photo shows prickly acacia on my place—Nelia Ponds—that I have poisoned. I poisoned it last year and it is starting to show the effects. This is Alick Creek. That is a high-level bridge. The water does not go over that bridge because that is a railway bridge but comes right up pretty close to it, so you can imagine the amount of floodwater that goes across that country. All of those trees are big trees and the cost of killing the prickly acacia along there is quite large.

In this photo the water goes over the top of that old road bridge there and it goes right up to the top of that road bridge there. That paddock I call Blueys paddock and I poisoned that whole paddock the year before last and, as you can see, it is a pretty good job. Most of the green trees left there are native trees and all the rest are gone. This photo here is that same paddock again looking out. You can see there is a lot of dead prickly acacia over that country, and they are quite large trees. In this photo it is the same again in the same paddock with more along the same creek line and more dead prickly acacia. In this photo is another paddock that I cleaned up a number of years ago. I was not really doing it properly when I started out doing my program, but you can see that I have had a very good kill and prickly acacia dissolves into nothing after about five years. It just disappears. Because I have done the whole paddock, there has been no regeneration of seed around this water point. Tebuthiuron is what I have used.

In this photo is another paddock and this shows you the difference—my country at Nelia Ponds and another at Spellery Creek over the fence. I am on the top of the water shed here. I have cleaned my country up and you can see what the problem is next door. My country was exactly the same, Hughenden

only it does not look in the photo because it is all dead and straggly and a lot of it has fallen over anyway. Here is another photo of it. That is possible to do with a little bit of government support and a little bit of incentivisation. It is not very difficult to do, even at that stage.

Mr MADDEN: Robert, are you just using basal treatment along the creek lines?

Mr Hacon: This is only Tebuthiuron pellets. That is it, nothing else. That photo is looking from the Spellery side back into my country. You can see that there were a lot of trees there, and I have done it myself with two backpackers and a lot of it on my own, and I have got that paddock clean. I tell you, gentlemen: it is possible. There it is again in this photo. This photo shows what happens when prickly acacia dies naturally in a well-watered position. The comeback is enormous. As soon as you get a little bit of rain, that is what you get that comes to the funeral. It is really quite spectacular. If there was Tebuthiuron there, there would be none of that. If the pellets were on the ground, there would be none of that.

This photo shows Euraba and is similar country to probably what you have seen here. This is heavy blacksoil country. It is like my country at home. This photo shows a pristine creek line—not one prickly acacia or parkinsonia, and look at the Mitchell grass. That is after four years of drought. It is in pretty damn good order. You have had a look around and there is no comparison. There is a cost to some of this other country and it just amazes me. This next photo is Euraba again—pristine Mitchell grass. That is it—pristine Mitchell grass. This is just upstream of me—my next-door neighbour, and I will not say who it is—and look at the creek line. All of the natives are choked. There is hardly a native left in there. The prickly acacia has completely choked it out. As you can see, the prickly acacia is working its way out on the downs with the cattle being the seed vector.

This photo shows the fence line through the creek there. You can see what problems you have in trying to look after a fence. In this photo find the fence. There is a fence there. It is very difficult to see, but there is a fence there. Just upstream of me this country should look exactly the same as my place at Euraba. Which would you rather own? That is a question because this is what we are looking at and this is what we want to prevent, because if you took all that out that would be first-class Mitchell grass country. Prickly acacia has caused that. This photo is around the water—bore drain fed, which we should not have anymore but we still have—and the cattle just keep spreading the seed out from the water and destroying the country. You cannot tell me it is any good.

This photo shows a yard that I used to put cattle into when I used to walk cattle from Euraba into Nelia to put on trucks. You could not get a beast anywhere near it now. It is just completely overrun with prickly acacia. This photo shows another example of trees that have died naturally from poverty, from drought. From the bit of rain that came along last year, look what came to the funeral. This is what we are up against, gentlemen, and the Tebuthiuron pellets are the best thing we have at the moment for getting on top of this problem, because you would not have that with the pellets.

I have been poisoning in Alick Creek with Tebuthiuron. I know I have had a little collateral damage but not a lot. If you take out the shade cover of the prickly acacia, look what comes back. That is coolabah, and it comes back fairly quickly too if the creek has a number of prickly trees around it. If that creek line had coolabah or whitewood along it, I would not poison anywhere near them. I would just put a mark on my GPS and come back and poison with Access or diesel around the tree.

This photo shows the future of mopping up. When you get the country like that—clean, and these ones have come up because we had a bore head blow up on us and we had to redo the bore and it is around the yard, so we had a lot of regrowth of small prickly acacia—this is how you can mop up a whole paddock with a chopper like this just flying over. It has a little chute underneath and he just presses a button and—bang—it is gone. You can do thousands and thousands of acres like that very quickly. For the cost of a day's mustering or about \$5,000 I mopped up about—it might have been more—15,000 to 20,000 acres of country for the cost of one day's chopper hire. That is pretty good value. When you break the back of it, that is what you do or should do. This last photo shows us filling up the chopper with the Tebuthiuron. You can see the machine goes down that chute and goes down to the other side where the pilot is and he just looks over the side of his seat and presses the button. They are the photos. I hope they all mean a little bit to you. Are there any questions about any of that?

Mr MADDEN: Robert, at the beginning you said that you trialled different rates of the Tebuthiuron. How did you find the recommended rates to the rates that you trialled?

Mr Hacon: I am in the middle of the trial at the moment, so I cannot answer that question. I am going to photograph those patches over the next number of years and see how much return we do or we do not get, because I know that that is in a particularly good area to grow prickly acacia. If it rains, we will see just what sort of a return we get. I do not expect a lot, especially where I put that

extra amount around the periphery. I put enough on the tree to kill the tree and then I put an extra half amount around the periphery of the tree just to see what happens in the next three or four years. I am going to photograph it twice a year so that I have evidence of that.

Mr MADDEN: That is great. Well done.

Mr WEIR: With the seeds that are left there, you say that Tebuthiuron takes out those young ones when they come up. How long is the seed viable for? How long can it lie on top of the ground for?

Mr Hacon: That is a million dollar question, but I believe there are some seeds viable for around about 10 years from my understanding of it, and I have been around working with it for a long time. With patches that I have taken out, you have to keep returning to them. This normally only happens in well-watered areas. Usually on the downs it is about five years and that is it, and a lot of it a long way before that. If you do a good job to start with, you can get on top of it very quickly.

Mr KATTER: I stand corrected. I thought it was 20 years the seed was viable.

Mr Hacon: You thought it was 20 years?

Mr KATTER: Yes.

Mr Hacon: I think that is drawing a little bit of a longbow.

Mr KATTER: Yes, but it is good to hear that. That was just going off what I have heard. Can you talk to us a little bit about the stock handling? If you take the liberty of cattle, do you have a little paddock that you will clean out for 10 days or something?

Mr Hacon: I do believe that it is everybody's responsibility to clean their cattle out before they move them. Just how long that is I am not sure, but I think the department says it is around about seven days. I think 10 days would be more than enough and I think everybody should be responsible for presenting cattle free of prickly acacia seed when they are selling them, unless they are going straight to the works or something like that.

Mr KATTER: Is it getting worse? In terms of the people who are spending money on it, is it getting worse around the place?

Mr Hacon: It is still getting worse; it is not getting any better. There is not enough clout.

Mr MILLAR: Rob, congratulations on what you have done there. I think that is fantastic in cleaning that country up. Being a primary producer myself or coming from that background, costs are always what we want to know about. Have you got detailed costs of what that was per hectare or per acre?

Mr Hacon: Yes, I have a costing right here. This might not be perfect, but I think it is the best. I do not think anybody has come up with anything quite like it.

Mr MILLAR: It is a ballpark.

Mr Hacon: Right, a ballpark figure. I have employee hourly wages of \$18 and day wages of \$144; owner/manager hourly of \$62 or \$496 a day; the buggy I have costed out at \$70 a day, and I had one buggy; ATV at \$50 a day; Toyota at \$80 a day; and petrol a litre at \$1.40 and diesel a litre at \$1.10. For project 1, which was a project I did on Nelia Ponds, it worked out to be an area of 1,864.2 acres or 754 hectares. I was given the Tebuthiuron for this. This was light infestation of prickly acacia. I poisoned 8,180 trees—we counted every tree—and that ended up to be 41.5 grams of Tebuthiuron—

Mr MILLAR: Per tree?

Mr Hacon: Yes, per tree. It was 5.4 acres per one kilogram of Tebuthiuron.

Mr MILLAR: Do we have an acre amount, a hectare amount or a tree amount?

Mr Hacon: Cost per acre is \$4.75.

Mr MILLAR: So \$4.75 per acre?

Mr Hacon: Cost per hectare is \$11.75 and a cost per tree of \$1.08. The total cost of this was \$8,866.

CHAIR: Rob, you are referring to some documents there. Are you able to table those documents?

Mr Hacon: Yes. I can table that.

CHAIR: Leave is granted. We will have a copy of those, thank you.

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Mr MILLAR: We can go through them too, but I think you have got it down to \$4.75 per acre or \$11.75 per hectare.

Mr Hacon: I did another project here on the heavy prickly acacia and that ended up costing around about the same per tree, 93 cents, but the cost per acre went up to \$42.88 working the heavy prickly acacia. That is along the creek line.

Mr MILLAR: What was it?

Mr Hacon: \$42.88 an acre.

Mr MILLAR: You have answered my questions so thank you.

Mr Hacon: That was for 190 hectares.

Mr MILLAR: I would say it is well worth the investment.

Mr Hacon: Well worth the investment, yes. A lot of this country we were mustering with helicopter, now we can fly around with a bike. If you use a helicopter it takes you half the time.

CHAIR: For someone like myself not familiar with any of this, how has that improved your stocking rates and that sort of thing?

Mr Hacon: It has to improve it quite a bit. It has to make it easier to manage. I do not know whether it has affected me too much in terms of stocking. That would be a very difficult question to answer because it gradually sneaks up on you. I really cannot answer that one, but managing the country and looking after the fences and your costs, yes, it has to bring them down substantially. My costs are up at the moment just trying to beat some of it, but I am in trouble because it is all upstream of me. That is my biggest headache.

CHAIR: If I am looking to buy a property and I look at two properties, yours and the one next door, the investment that you have put into the control of this weed must pay some dividends in terms of the sale price if you went down that path.

Mr Hacon: Enormous dividends because you can run my place with yourself and your wife and one jackaroo, and maybe employ someone else occasionally. It is just so easy and yet if you have your country smothered with prickly acacia you cannot do that and you cannot run the cattle anyway.

CHAIR: Scott, did you want to make any statements or comments before we ask you some questions as well?

Mr Harrington: Just to give you a little bit of background, I am third generation on the land in the same area. We have expanded in the last 20 years and we have bought original country that does not have any prickly acacia. It has become quite a job to keep the prickly acacia out. On our new country we have done some work, but not to the extent that Robert has. I hope you people can realise the amount of energy, money, enthusiasm and organising it takes to do that. It is a massive job.

You were lucky enough to drive through different areas today with different densities of prickly bush, but a lot of that country along Alick Creek made it look very open and the area along Alick Creek that Robert has worked on was in a water channel that runs most years—not every year, most years—and spreads enormously. There is a lot of subsoil moisture and their roots get down so they are healthy trees and they take a lot more killing.

In my time in the bush I have been through a lot of different problems. We were predominantly sheep. We have been mixed up with noogoora burr with sheep. Rust was brought in, probably after you fellas' time, but that determined whether we were viable or not viable producing sheep in the north-west. We used to have to spray and make tracks for the sheep to get through to get to water. I was not in the prickly pear age, that was before my time, but the same thing happened. That took over a lot of country and they developed something, a bug, and got rid of that.

We have been through the change of industries from sheep to cattle for one reason or another. We have been through the B-Tech scheme. There was a lot of research done with that and a lot of work and that was all cleared up. We got rid of brucellosis and TB out of the northern herds, which was very rife. We were in the business where we had to kill a lot of cattle at times that came up with the disease. We were compensated for it, but it was still a pretty gut-wrenching thing to do if you like an animal.

The prickly bush, as you have seen, is a prolific grower, especially if it gets water. It started off in some of the drier areas in the central part, but it has developed and gone up our gulf river systems. They get much bigger rainfalls, much more reliable rainfall, over a long period of time. Those areas are far more inaccessible. If you get a map of Queensland and look at the leases, the prickly bush
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started off where the leases are about as big as the top of my pen or smaller and it is going into leases that are this big now in comparison. A lot of those places where those rivers go up into the gulf, the country is pretty well inaccessible, they get over it with a helicopter to muster it, and there is a lot more water. From a certain stage nearly every year from here to the gulf is covered, a vast majority, with water so it is going to really explode. It is there everywhere now. It is not thick in a lot of places, but it is about. As you have seen from the seeds today, they are prolific seeders.

I have seen the rust in the noogoora burr. A lot of people are really concerned. You can see the concentration of work that a lot of individuals and organisations are doing to control—I do not see it coming to the point of eradication—prickle bushes. There is an enormous amount of money getting spent on it. Biological control is something that everybody talks about and we are all concerned about how slow it is or how little we are hearing about it or what is happening. I fully understand. I was on the War on Western Weeds committee and I have been down to the area where they are doing the work. It is scary the lack of resources, the lack of personnel and the lack of money being put aside to combat prickly acacia, given the scale of it and what landholders themselves and government bodies are putting into it to try to control it. From my point of view and from the point of view of other producers I have spoken to, that is something that needs to be looked at, revised and revamped.

You fellas will have all that at your fingertips. There are papers going around with how much they have spent in the last seven years and it is pretty scary. People are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on this. You have been talking to a bloke on a little place that spent \$100,000 last year. They are talking about spending \$1.9 million over 10 years or something on research. A good scientist is going to cost that much. We do not seem to be directing funds and getting the right people into it. I fully understand it is difficult, they have got to go to India or Africa to get the bugs, but I do not think it is happening. Coming from a landholder position and talking to others and representing AgForce, I would like to see some more done in that direction.

Mr MILLAR: You mentioned biological controls. Obviously you were involved with the War on Weeds committee. What was the latest on biological controls? What was your hope? What was potentially going to be a silver bullet?

Mr Harrington: I do not think there is ever going to be a silver bullet. We heard earlier today that a landholder here has had what I think is rust in parkinsonia which has cleaned up quite a few dense areas of parkinsonia. I know that is happening. We have had a lot of die back in the prickly acacia on some of our country. We called in and saw a bloke just outside Hughenden on the way back today who has had a lot of die back. Some of that will be related to drought, I suspect. I do not know. I am not a scientist. I have been treating this for 20 years and I have put quite a lot of money up where it has been available, but the last five years have not been really easy. A lot of people are doing the same thing.

There are people that are not doing anything, but, by and large, people are concerned about it. The biological control would just be another tool and if it grew by itself it is an ongoing process that is not going to cost us. As you have seen here, it is an ongoing process for five or six, maybe 10 years. If you have a clean place and the fellow beside you is infected or infested with prickly bushes it is still a massive job to keep it out. I live on a place we have been on since 1935 and I have got one little neighbour who comes in on one corner which is about, I think it is less than, a 10th of our boundary. His is only 19,000 acres and we have 90,000 acres, but a bit of water runs out of him. The roos and the pigs and everything come out of there in the wet season because his country is a bit lower. It takes us up to 30 man days a year to keep that out. A lot of that time is just looking for it and spot spraying and whatever along channels, but that is a big expense. We are all talking about our neighbours and it probably sounds a bit harsh, but there are a lot of people, and Robert has been a massive example of that, doing it, but probably not to the same extent with the same energy. It is pretty interesting to have a look at Robert's maps here after he has had his discussion and see the intensity of his work.

CHAIR: I am conscious of the time.

Mr Hacon: I have a presentation to make if that is possible.

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Hacon: I am accompanied here today by my brother, George, a grazier from the Boulia shire. Making a priority commitment to the eradication of weeds, especially prickly acacia, the major weed in this area, is one passion we share. While infestations are not that common in the Boulia Shire, they are there, believe me, neighbouring George's property, Wirrilleana. All the floodwater running off the properties in this area end up in Lake Eyre. Do we really need to stuff up this iconic Hughenden

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habitat as well? I trust you have had time to absorb the absolute catastrophic mess that prickly acacia has brought to this district. This is the future for all of Queensland. Can you believe that a few of us still like this so-called fodder crop, prickly acacia?

There is another underlying reason here too, namely a plain lack of commitment. Commitment is a tough one. This is where our government must help and it must be bipartisan and ongoing. Taking responsibility and putting the right legislation in place will be an incentive to farmers and graziers to clean up their act. Self-regulation does not work. Protocols need to be put in place and enforced at the property level for the quarantine period to be completed. There is not one of us here residing on the land who could not spend at least two to three weeks a year poisoning weeds. The main ones around here are prickly acacia and rubber vine. This is the sort of commitment that is required to turn this catastrophe around.

All companies or larger private enterprises have the ability to put their mustering camp out for a few days in between mustering sessions with the minimum equipment to make a massive impact on these invasive weeds. Look at what is around my neck—a peg bag and a spoon. This is the minimum equipment needed to poison prickly acacia et cetera. Tebuthiuron is the most efficient poison we have at the moment. By using GPS technology and gridding the country like I have done on the map here you can get the job done quickly and efficiently. Other methods can also be incorporated with the GPS technology, like the Epple scatter gun mounted on a buggy or small tractor to speed up the process of distributing the Tebuthiuron pellets at a greatly increased rate. This is the best method I know of for clearing fence lines and around waters and well worth the extra expense.

Some of you will remember the horror of the TB and brucellosis campaigns. We were all meant to go broke as it was deemed to be an impossible task. It ended up being the best thing that ever happened to the cattle industry. That decision was not a popular decision by the government at the time but one that had to be taken. Unlike cattle, weeds like prickly acacia do not run away and hide, they just wait their turn to be poisoned. Please make the right choice: eradication not containment. I warn you that the decision will not be popular but it is a morally just and right one to make. Just think of the next generation. Do we really want them to be given the extra burden of cleaning up our mess? My generation, this government included, has not wanted to face the reality of this catastrophic problem.

It is a complete misconception to believe that all landowners with sheep profited by having prickly acacia. My father, who was a very successful sheep man—Scott's father too—was strongly against its introduction and because of his policy I have been able to keep Euraba clean to date. It is becoming difficult and more time-consuming because of the encroachment from neighbouring properties. Without government taking the tough unpopular decision now, I expect to see prickly acacia entrenched in every shire right to the outskirts of Brisbane and the Gold Coast by the year 2040—a mere 23 years away. Time goes by quickly. Make the tough decisions now.

My points for decision making are (1) government to take the responsibility for putting guidelines in place to stop the spread of weeds like prickly acacia, rubber vine, mesquite et cetera and this responsibility should be bipartisan and ongoing; (2) bring back the DPI into all shires with stock inspectors to monitor and control stock movements, quarantine periods in yards or in clean paddocks for all stock deemed to be carrying seeds, for example, prickly acacia, and large fines should apply for noncompliance; (3) rangers to be introduced into shires under the same banner as the DPI to advise landholders on the ongoing control of the weed eradication programs and senior rangers to be available to sign off on movement permits for cattle leaving weed infested areas; (4) restructure the NRM groups to liaise with stock inspectors and rangers in individual shires as NRM groups today have no clout and no clout equals little accomplishment or the power to get things done; (5) good neighbour policy to be enforced, fence lines bordering clean country to be kept clear to at least 100 metres and one kilometre upstream of a water course—prickly acacia seeds travel well with water movement—and again fines to be applied for noncompliance by order of a senior ranger if dispute arises; (6) shire councils to set a good example by cleaning up their yards, commons and road verge; and (7) CSIRO et cetera to keep researching for a biological control and development of more effective and target orientated poisons.

If these steps are followed a lot of country would be cleaned up in a very short time as these impositions would be enough to incentivise most. It is a win win, I believe. Infestations of prickly acacia are still not thick in the upper gulf and Channel Country and these areas must be addressed first. It is not so difficult in Channel Country, but there will be many more problems associated with the gulf if we do not start now. Julia Creek, Richmond and Hughenden's problems will pale into insignificance compared with the gulf's problems which will occur because of inaccessibility in the wet season, larger rainfall will speed up growth of much larger trees and many more numbers of these trees. The gulf is

poor country, so adding to the already high cost of mustering, fencing and general maintenance will make that area an unviable prospect in times of low cattle prices. It will be a pity to lose the present productivity of so much land. Tebuthiuron could be purchased in large amounts by landholders, shires and NRM groups if subsidised by both state and federal governments providing its complete use is monitored by the rangers in the shires. Properties in these highly sensitive areas should have first priority to such help and government funding.

Note here that it does not matter whether those deemed to be poor land managers are helped as in the scheme of things it is actually helping the more efficient neighbour who is following his legal obligations to keep his country free of noxious weeds and seeds. Costs will go down dramatically after the first year if done properly, but backup is essential. This is where helicopters with weed snipers come to the rescue. These are available and ready for work. For a little more than the cost of a day's mustering, thousands of acres can be gridded and poisoned. It is a great mop-up tool. Fox Helicopters Richmond and Cloncurry Mustering already offer this service. Rangers are to make sure that this compliance goes on at least every year until weeds are totally beaten.

As the more sensitive areas are addressed, priority can then be shifted to target the tops of watersheds back into the major river systems. Infested properties at the top of these watersheds should be encouraged to run their eradication programs sequentially in order to clean up an entire creek system to stop the transport of seeds downstream and reinfesting country already treated by the more efficient landholder. These programs are to be given serious consideration for funding. Land rentals could be reduced or waived for the duration of the poisoning as a major incentive.

Open downs country is easy to clear of weeds such as prickly acacia as getting around is not a problem. The regrowth of new plants on the downs is not great either if poisoned with Tebuthiuron. Remember, we have been complaining about the negative effects of prickly acacia since the 1950s around Nonda—that is not far from me. See Mr PA Thompson and WG Hacon's letter to the then premier in 1974. This all sounds daunting but it can and must be tackled. It is possible. Remember the next generation's future is in our hands.

CHAIR: Thank you for taking the time to present to us this afternoon. It has been very useful for me and I am sure it has been for the rest of the committee. Thank you for your passion and your commitment in this area.

BOARDMAN, Mr Andrew, Director, Environment and Regulatory Services, McKinlay Shire Council

MALONE, Mr Colin, Shire Ranger, McKinlay Shire Council

WALKER, Mr Neil, Councillor, McKinlay Shire Council

CHAIR: Welcome, gentlemen. I believe you want to make a brief opening statement, Andrew. We will then proceed to questions.

Mr Boardman: First we will table our witness statement.

CHAIR: Leave is granted.

Mr Boardman: Our shire is quite a small shire in terms of population, 1,000 people, and we have 41,000 square kilometres that we administer. I will go straight to our recommendations: They are (1) that the responsibilities of local government in relation to the Biosecurity Act are reviewed to ensure they are manageable to relevant local governments—this should be reviewed in consideration of the size, location, population, rates base and resources available to local government; (2) that the Department of Natural Resources and Mines allocate appropriate funds to ensure weed control programs are realised across the state, all state land, as only by leading by example will other entities follow suit; (3) that more state funding be allocated to Biosecurity Queensland to develop biological and new control technologies for the control of prickly acacia; (4) that if EHP does implement environmental programs within our shire, they ensure a positive impact on current and future DAF local government programs; (5) that all levels of local government form appropriate collaborative action plans for the control of invasive weeds and these should be area and species specific; (6) and that for the control of prickly acacia in the north-west region, in particular, actions should follow the good neighbour policy and that should be implemented and guidelines also around stock transport to ensure prickly acacia is controlled and the spread stopped.

Mr KATTER: There are many people in the room who are pro prickly acacia or do not want much action. Can you explain to us what some of the push back is in the shire? Some of those producers do not want to do much. What is the push back there?

Councillor Walker: From my point of view, I think for some producers the main push back is economic, flat line. It is just economic. They cannot do anything about it. It is not that they do not have to or do not want to, it is purely economic. They cannot do it. We do not want to come to a government department begging for money. We do not want to be seen to be doing that. We want a hand up rather than a hand out. That is a common phrase we are using. I think that the main push back is economic, bottom line. They have been through three, four, five years of drought. The problem is getting worse as we go on. When we get a couple of good wet seasons after a couple of dry seasons it gets exponentially worse. The main push back is flat line economics and then the main problem you get goes on from there. You have got your inspections and what to do about it. That is another thing. The main push back, to answer your question, is economics, flatly.

Mr KATTER: I have had it said to me that it is good to have a bit of it around and they push that argument a bit.

Councillor Walker: Did you ask them how much drought subsidy they got? They did not have any. I come from both sides of the spectrum. I work for a big grazing company. I am also on the shire council. I am very aware of both sides of it. I am aware if a grazier has a problem paying for it. I am also aware from a shire council point of view that we do have to meet our obligations as well. It is very hard from both ends of the spectrum.

Mr MILLAR: With every committee we look to try to gather evidence, but if I could make you Premier and Prime Minister for one day how would you fix this problem?

Councillor Walker: That would be a big honour. Thank you very much, I appreciate that. This is where you would start. You would come to the grassroots. Everyone spouts about money. I just stated to Robbie that money is the reason graziers cannot do it. It is no good throwing a million, \$10 million, \$200 million at a problem that you do not have a plan for. This is a big thing. I do not think anyone in this room here has a plan to tackle the problem. We are talking about acacia here, but the pest weed problem is not just acacia. You have any number of weeds across the whole spectrum. If I were Premier for the day I would start by putting actions in place that are enforceable. You can do whatever you want, but if you do not enforce it it does not work. It is as simple as that.

Mr MILLAR: Enforcement is key, and funds.

Councillor Walker: Enforcement is the key. You do not want to put everyone out of business overnight. As somebody said a couple of years ago, 'There's no way in the world the government would ban live exports.' Everybody said, 'There's no way in the world they'd do that,' and overnight it happened. We do not want to cruel graziers and say, 'We're not going to let you move cattle until you clean it up.' That cannot happen, but enforcement is the key within reason and you get plans to do that. It is possible. Col works in the field doing that sort of thing and he knows well that if we start saying, 'You've got to enforce it,' he is going to have to go to the gym and start building up because there is going to be a lot of push back from that.

Mr MILLAR: He looks good for it.

Mr Boardman: From my point of view, council is looking towards making sure we implement the Good Neighbour Program as Flinders have done. We think it is a great program. We think it is something that can contain boundaries. The only problem we can see is that you still have stock transport. There is still stock that do move a bit across the country. We are taking steps to move our shire in that direction and we are trying to do that, but we also need the government's help with the other side of things and making sure that there is clear enforcement.

I know at the moment it is up to local government. It is in the act that it is our role to do that. We do not have the resources to do it. We have 1,000 people in our shire. Our rate base is basically \$2.8 million a year, and that is nothing. To try to enforce this is almost impossible, and that is where we need help in our shire. We are trying to do the best we can with the resources we have. We are trying to put those plans in place. I think that Flinders have seen some very good results, and that is what we want to see in our shire as well.

Mr MADDEN: I am glad that the issue of stock movement has been raised in the forum here. It was also raised in forums we had in relation to giant rat's-tail grass, which has a very fine seed. It gets caught on the hair of the beast rather than going through the alimentary canal. It was suggested that one of the ways to address that when cattle are sold is a bill of lading with a declaration of the weeds on the property where the cattle came from. It is not the same as quarantine, but at least when they are buying the weaners or the store cattle, the buyer will know there is a potential problem with the cattle and then they can isolate those cattle. Do you think that is workable?

Councillor Walker: One of the things that was discussed not long ago was whether the seller or the buyer does the isolation. If you are the producer and you do not want it infesting your country, it is probably more practical if you do it. It does not matter what declarations come on; a horse can come onto your property from a contract musterer carrying seed and you do not even know it is there. You have your cattle and everything declared clean, but you can still bring it in like that. If you are a smart operator you would quarantine the cattle yourself if they are coming from infested country.

Mr MADDEN: In Europe when they had the foot and mouth outbreak there were incredible quarantine restrictions on the movement of stock. You could not even walk onto a dairy farm in Ireland without special clearance.

Councillor Walker: It was the same thing with the EI outbreak they had with horses a few years back. The government came in with spacesuits, they did the quarantine and they did everything like that to fix it. Robert spoke about the B-Tech program—I was part of that as well—the tick lines and all of these measures that came in. It is possible and achievable. It needs a mind to do it, but not a bloody mind at times.

Mr MADDEN: You come from a cattle property. Would you have any problem doing a bill of lading declaring that your cattle have come off prickly acacia?

Councillor Walker: No problem whatsoever.

Mr Malone: The biggest problem with declarations is you could fill out all the paperwork in the world, but it will not work unless there is some sort of penalty. The honest people are going to do it anyway, the same people that are doing it now, it is just that you have a bit of paper.

Mr MADDEN: It is one way to start the process.

Mr Malone: Yes, it is one way to start the process.

Mr MADDEN: Then quarantine might follow.

Mr WEIR: You mentioned your population of 1,000 with a rate base of \$2.8 million. How much of an impost is the control of prickly acacia on your rate base now?

Mr Boardman: We put about \$130,000 into it as a shire. In terms of percentage, it is probably five or six per cent.

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Mr WEIR: Was that for chemicals or—

Mr Boardman: That would be for programs on our own land: reserves, roads and all those areas. That is not to the public, but we do baiting programs as well for feral animals. In terms of invasive weeds it basically on our own reserves in that area.

Mr WEIR: If funding were made available, who would be best to distribute that and work out where the money goes?

Mr Boardman: That is an interesting one. Recently we have done a few programs that could have been done better through some drought funding and QFPI funding. There was an allocation of grassland that people could apply for. I think that was a great start and the council welcomed it. I believe it could have been better if we had had the Good Neighbour Program implemented before that so we could make sure it was strategically put out in a better way to stop the spread of things, but I think local government is in a good position to do that. NRM groups are okay, but they are not a statutory body. They are not meant to be doing weed control. Charles does a great job here and the work he does is amazing, but I think that it should be the responsibility of local or state government.

CHAIR: In terms of the role of the NRM, how do you see those groups fitting into a weed management strategy? Do you suggest that council is possibly better placed to drive things?

Mr Boardman: NRM groups are great on a regional basis—and this is not council's opinion—but my opinion is that they are filling in a gap that state government left. State government has withdrawn a lot of officers and they are just filling in the role that state government should be doing. They do a great job, but the state government should have been doing it. It is great that we have them there, because if they were not there a lot of the work that is being done now would not be done. They are doing a good job.

CHAIR: In terms of people who manage land, if they are good at managing prickly acacia do you generally find that they are good at managing all pest and weed infestations? Is it good at one, good at all; bad at one, bad at all?

Councillor Walker: I will jump in for Col. It is, because if you are controlling one thing you have your mind out for everything else. If you are looking after acacia, you are looking after dogs and you are doing the lot. I think a good land manager looks after everything. That is the definition of a good land manager. If you are not looking after anything you are not a good land manager. It is the same as a shire or a government. If you are not looking after everything you are not a good government, you are not a good shire and you are not a good land manager. It is as simple as that.

CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you very much for your time this afternoon. We greatly appreciate your input.

BODE, Mr Bill, Councillor, Flinders Shire Council

MIDDLETON, Mr Kim (Clancy), Councillor, Flinders Shire Council

YOUNG, Ms Robyn, Rural Services Manager, Good Neighbour Program, Flinders Shire Council

CHAIR: Robyn, I believe you wanted to make a brief statement?

Ms Young: Pests have a significant impact on human health, the economy, the environment and social amenity. The management of pests is the shared responsibility of land managers, industry, the community and all levels of government. In saying that, there are a multitude of reasons why land managers do not embark on eradication programs, including feeling that it is insurmountable, economically unachievable, differing priorities and the like. We all know that if we embark on prickly acacia alone we are presented with a long program with many years of commitment.

When one neighbour is seemingly doing nothing about their infestation and another is working tirelessly to control and eradicate it, conflict can often erupt. Flinders Shire Council addressed this with the Good Neighbour Program. The idea that as little as a 10-metre buffer zone around property boundary perimeters, each side of access roads and downstream on a watercourse and 250 metres upstream on a watercourse significantly controls and reduces one property's infestation from impeding on another is the principle of the Good Neighbour Program. The Good Neighbour Program is the minimum reasonable action that a landholder should take to control their infestation.

The Flinders Shire Council's War on Western Weeds project, in partnership with Southern Gulf, embarked on a pilot study to investigate if a boundary protection zone approach would work on a broad scale and the feasibility of establishing such buffers. The case study demonstrated that the establishment of property protection zones for pest management is relatively quick and easy with a low to moderate cost. Establishing the minimum buffer zone is both achievable and feasible. As a result of the positive results of the case study, council moved forward to implement the Good Neighbour Program. We were successful in applying for and rolling out drought funding.

The Flinders Shire Council implemented the program methodically and in a deliberate manner. From the case study we were able to establish a distribution methodology. Two appropriately trained staff attended all participating properties to help complete a basic property boundary weed management plan. This also opened the path of communication and allowed for some great extension activities. The Good Neighbour Program is promoted and discussed at all quarterly pest management meetings and it has been promoted at both the Sesbania Field Day and the local agricultural show. To date, Flinders Shire Council has 70 properties participating in the Good Neighbour Program, which is approximately 35 per cent of all properties in the shire. The initial expectation was 10 per cent per year, so 35 per cent is a very positive outcome.

Moving forward, the Good Neighbour Program concept has application to help properties to eradicate on property. Establishing Good Neighbour Program buffer zones on internal fencing and then treating selected paddocks and implementing a sound management program to avoid reinfestation will help properties systematically control their noxious weeds. The science and the data are sound. The landholders have the ability to implement the program, however, we cannot do this alone. Funding needs to be forthcoming to continue the good work. This was a jointly created program and the burden alone cannot be carried by local government and landholders. This program has the possibility to make positive impacts if given the opportunity to do so.

Mr MADDEN: You may not know this, but there is going to be a state weed symposium at Port Douglas in September this year. I hope to attend. I know that all of you cannot go to the weed symposium. What is the best way to get people like Vic Galea here? Is it videoconferencing or having mini weed symposiums in the area?

Ms Young: I think that having a road trip or something like that so it draws people in. You are still only going to get those people who are sitting in this room now. I do not know how to make others come, but most people in this room attend my pest management meetings every quarter religiously. I do not know how to make the others come.

Mr MADDEN: There is good work being done by DAF at Charters Towers. There is good working being done with biological and chemical controls—more biological control—with CSIRO in Brisbane. Questions were raised such as, 'Where are we at with biological control?' I will not say there is a magic bullet, because there is never a magic bullet, but it might be a multiple approach like it was with lantana. There were about 30 pests that got some degree of control over lantana. You say maybe a travelling roadshow?

Ms Young: Yes, a roadshow seems to be most successful with those sorts of things.

Mr MADDEN: With aeroplanes now, just like today, we left Brisbane at nine o'clock this morning and we will be back there at 2.30 this afternoon. We are here today and we will be in Barcaldine tomorrow, and it would be the same with three or four speakers. Is there a thirst for that sort of knowledge in areas like this?

Councillor Bode: For the converted there is.

Mr MADDEN: For the converted there is.

Councillor Middleton: I think you would find that a lot of people are converted. A lot of people do not come to meetings that do the work, and we are talking about 30-something per cent. When you look at the blacksoil area of our shire there are still some to come into it, but that is mainly our acacia problem. There are other pests too. I know we are just on acacia, but we have rubber vine and the like in the blacksoil in the basalt. We will stick with acacia today, but there are a lot of people with a lot of different pests.

Mr MADDEN: When I studied extension theory at UQ Gatton you always had this leading group—the innovators—and eventually the other ones followed.

Councillor Middleton: Yes. There are a lot of people out there who do it that will not come to meetings, but they will talk to Robyn and she will go and work with them if they are not going to come to a meeting.

Mr WEIR: Robyn, you talked about increased funding. How would you use that increased funding? What would you target?

Ms Young: We recently received \$230,000. We did not take anything administratively, so we have taken the burden of that on with our council money. Some \$200,000 went to the purchase of herbicide, and that was purely to establish those Good Neighbour Program boundaries, and \$30,000 went to the GIS mapping—that is, us putting people out on the ground and helping them create that boundary map and working out how thick it was and working out how much herbicide they needed from that. Moving forward, once people established their boundaries, then we could move on to a more internal project where they start to clear paddocks systematically.

Mr WEIR: Okay, so do a grid pattern.

Ms Young: Yes. Let us say someone has 40,000 acres and they have six paddocks. One paddock is not so dense; the other paddocks are all very thick. Research has shown that you start on the less dense paddock and get it cleaned up first and then move on to the thicker and thicker and thicker and we do that systematically by creating those buffer zones so there is no paddock-to-paddock transfer and you do a management program with your cattle, so, for want of a better word, you quarantine them before they go into that clean paddock so that you maintain that clean and just keep that process going systematically.

Mr KATTER: I heard it discussed before about classifying properties as clean and rating them and that to me is the start of recognising how that applies to market value. Has that ever been discussed at the council level or could you see a way that that could be implemented, probably not from council?

Ms Young: It definitely could not be implemented from council, but there is no reason a land protection officer or someone like that who is suitably qualified to make that—

Mr KATTER: Funded by the state?

Ms Young: That is right.

Mr KATTER: Would you see that as—

Ms Young: Incentive?

Mr KATTER: Yes. Would that make sense?

Ms Young: Yes, to have an A-class property as opposed to maybe a C grade.

Mr KATTER: You have the people in the room here who do it, but there have to be ways to give benefit to them.

Ms Young: Yes, the incentive.

Councillor Bode: One of our previous councillors on the biggest property up here on the downs managed to have it so that cattle coming off infected country did not travel through his country on the stock routes. They had to be transported through. He did have a couple of mobs come through and for the last five or seven years him and his son have been going along that stock route all the Hughenden

time getting up those old prickly trees that come out of the cattle because they had walked through and shat it all out on the way through. That is the trouble. I sell cattle on AuctionsPlus most of the time and on my AuctionsPlus details now I say, 'These cattle have no chance of getting prickly acacia.' My son says that I should not be doing that, but as far as I am concerned if they have not got seed in them they should be advertising the fact and they should get an extra \$5 or \$10 a head because it means the cattle do not have to be quarantined for seven, eight or 10 days to make sure there is no prickly tree going on to the next property.

Mr KATTER: Do you think you would be in favour of something like that if it was to happen?

Councillor Bode: Definitely, yes.

Mr MILLAR: Your Good Neighbour Program is working fantastically. Well done! You need to be congratulated on that. I think it is a great initiative and I think other shires need to take what you have done on board.

Councillor Middleton: If the bloke on the land is going to clean it up in the end, they should be able to get that bit of help and incentive towards doing it so it is not all off their own bat. If they are getting a bit of help, it just gives that bit of incentive. That is who is going to clean it up—that is, the people on the property.

Mr MILLAR: But having someone like Robyn committed to it glues it together.

Councillor Middleton: Yes, communicating and keeping it going.

Mr MILLAR: I think you should be congratulated on it.

Councillor Middleton: Yes. Robyn does a hell of a job, a hell of a job.

Ms Young: They are putting that on record!

Councillor Bode: I have a cactus problem at home with coral cactus. I get a lot of help from the NRM group Desert Channels, but that still does not show me how to find the little cactus plant the size of my finger. You have to wait for a couple of years to get it up so you can see the darn thing through the grass. I did a paddock down there which holds 90 per cent of what I have there. I have got it all ready to burn with the hope that it will cook all those little buggers. I also believe that cactus and any other succulents should be banned from sale in Australia—not just Queensland—because they are all garden plants all these ones that are starting to come out.

I had CSIRO doing a release of moss for parkinsonia at home. They worked well when the moss was fresh, but in the last 18 months they have stopped working and now I have to get in and poison the rest of the parkinsonia. I try not to poison them because I reckon the moss did a good job. They killed the ones they put them on, but they hardly moved off those trees so they were not working. They put three different sorts of moss out there.

Bore drains are still a major source of prickly seed where the bores are not controlled. I do thank the Queensland government for their promise of up to \$4 million for bore drain controlling. I have been on the Great Artesian Basin committee since before it was first incepted in 1989 or something like that. I actually did the first bore for them back in 1989, but there are still something like 160 or 180 bores that still have to be controlled and every one of those bores has a flowing bore going, especially up in the northern area in the gulf and all of north Richmond here. Every one of them is a major source of prickly tree seeds because prickly trees love to have borrow pits, creek lines and things like that. They are major seed factories. They do not grow many seeds up in the ridges because there is not enough moisture there for the trees to put seeds down, but the ones along the watercourses and borrow pits are a major source of seeds. Then also of course there are pigs and all the rest of the darn things.

My final point is TMR must be made responsible for their right of way for prickly trees. For right of way along the Flinders Highway here we have not been able to get funding from them—TMR. We have to do it ourselves. They are not doing it either. I believe down in the Longreach area they clear up to 100 yards or 100 metres each side of their right of way, so we need the money from TMR to fix up their right of way problems, or otherwise we should charge them. If we go in and do it, will they pay us? I do not think so.

Mr MILLAR: Send them a bill.

CHAIR: Robyn, that last point brings me to a couple of questions I have. In terms of other neighbours that you have, does the state government have much land in your shire? How do they go at managing that from the various departments?

Ms Young: We have a very active National Parks. They do a great job. TMR, as you mentioned, is not so great at clearing the roadways. We do as much as we can on our reserves. We had a full control program put in place last year.

CHAIR: Someone mentioned stock routes and moving cattle on stock routes. Has that happened much in this area?

Ms Young: We have had three movements this year, thanks to Councillor Middleton and the property you just went to. He brought them from the last one. Just because of the drought conditions, no, we have not, but the stock routes are a mess.

CHAIR: In terms of your program it seems like it has been reasonably successful. Has that success made it easier to recruit new people into the Good Neighbour Program?

Ms Young: We have just recently got one person that we were told we would never get, so that was a little bit of a feather in our cap.

CHAIR: Do you actively try and recruit people or do they come to you?

Ms Young: Initially they came to us, but we have continued in that we put out a flyer every month, Cooee, so we are constantly promoting it in that. I go to as many functions as I can and promote it, and then of course at the pest management meetings it is always the topic of conversation.

CHAIR: You said there was a research base around this program?

Ms Young: Yes, I have the study. Nathan March was a huge contributor to that. I also have our agreement, which does include a weed commodity declaration that was addressing that other question you brought up earlier about moving cattle.

CHAIR: If you are seeking leave to table that, is leave granted? Leave is granted. Thank you very much.

Mr WEIR: We are hearing that the pellet method seems to be the best. It is not something that you would want to go and do again, so the dosage rate must be relatively easy to understand. Do you hear of many cases of underdosing and it not being killed?

Ms Young: I have heard a lot of overdosing and lots of people putting their hand in and thinking that seven grams was a handful. With regard to every person who came in to get the Good Neighbour, we individually sat down and gave them an applicator. We showed them what seven grams was and explained to them how to apply it. A lot of people did not need that, but there were a handful who did and that was an important part of our program.

Mr KATTER: I have a follow-on question from that. As Mr Ford said earlier, when you get people out to work you get backpackers a lot with that. How feasible is that? If council is running teams or if you were with Southern Gulf facilitating these work groups, how practical is getting unskilled people in there to start from scratch?

Ms Young: It is not rocket science, but they have to be prepared to work. It is hot, stinky work. You are going to be out in the heat of the day, sometimes on foot and sometimes on a quad bike. There would be a little bit of training required, but it is doable.

Mr KATTER: If you left a fellow in a paddock and said, 'Seven teaspoons for that,' or, 'This much for that', do you find that they just dump a bit here and there or something?

Ms Young: That is right. You have to find people who are committed to the job, and there are people who do that for a living. We need to be mindful of that as well.

Mr KATTER: So it is not out of the question?

Ms Young: It is not out of the question, no.

Councillor Middleton: There would have to be somebody supervising them or they would just go and tip it all under a tree and have a sleep for the day.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing this afternoon. We greatly appreciate your contribution.

CURRY, Mr Charles, Project Coordinator, Southern Gulf NRM

CHAIR: Welcome, Charles. I believe we are going to have a short presentation to kick-off.

Mr Curry: I was just going to give you an introduction to Southern Gulf NRM and how we manage the program—just a brief one—and then go on to address some of the terms of reference of this inquiry. As you can see, we are a community based organisation. We do not have any statutory powers, as has been pointed out already today—much more than I would sometimes like—but we are tasked with strategic and sustainable natural resource management, planning and implementation in that southern Gulf of Carpentaria region of north-west Queensland where we are now. We are about 195,000 square kilometres which is 19.5 million hectares. That is a figure worth keeping in mind. In particular, we conduct extensive weed management campaigns across the region. More recently, I have been looking after the northern gulf as well, concentrating mainly on prickly acacia and rubber vine but also mesquite, parkinsonia, coral cactus, bellyache bush and whatever else comes along.

This shows a map that is spread all over the table. It probably annoys a few shires, and I do not blame them. As you can see, all of the yellow parts are where we are conducting prickly acacia projects at the moment. The purple is either rubber vine, bellyache bush or a bit of cactus. The brown parts are mesquite. It is the yellow part I am concentrating on. First of all, that little bit down in the south-east corner—there is a bit of a red line around it but not much yellow—is the core prickly acacia infestation. You have Hughenden over there in the far east in the bottom corner. As you can see, there is not much prickly acacia activity. That is because there is a containment line there that was set up in about 1999 when there were supposedly only about six million hectares of prickly acacia. Desert Channels has put out quite a lot of material and is talking 21 million hectares these days. Some people are even saying 31 million given how much it has expanded. If we are talking 19.5 million hectares, 21 million or 31 million hectares it is a lot bigger than our region. As you can see, there is a vast amount of prickly acacia. Robert Hacon alluded to the problems that could be faced in that lower gulf region. Where is all of our activity? In that lower gulf region. This map here is what the original 1999 map of prickly acacia infestations looked like in this core area here. That is a very old map. I had to photograph it on the wall to have an electronic copy.

Before going back to that lower gulf region, I just want to say what the state government funding has done for us. Some \$2.9 million in the last four years has gone on ground. That is four years. That is pretty good. It has gone down from over \$800,000 a year to \$600,000 and next year it will only be \$500,000, so that is a really serious drop. We are also getting other funding—a bit from the Commonwealth and also from some mining companies—but that has also dropped off. We have worked with over 100 landholders and land managers across the region and our projects have covered half a million hectares. That is still not much compared with that 21 million hectares that is now being touted as the area of prickly acacia infestation across Queensland. Some 450,000 hectares of prickly acacia and mesquite were treated in that time.

Just going on to the lower gulf, all properties in the lower gulf subregion are involved in the prickly acacia management program. It says there Kamilaroi which is about 100 kilometres south of the coast, so you can see it is quite a big area. There are a handful of properties which manage any infestations on their own, and I did forget that there is one property that we have not quite got on to yet. There are 22 lower gulf properties involved and many have been involved for up to 10 or 12 years. Major achievements have been made on around 75 per cent or roughly 16 of that 22 in stopping the spread and greatly reducing the density. Without all of this work, Robert's greatest fears would have been realised: there would be a massive core area out of control with prickly acacia.

We were doing all right, but in the wet years of 2009, 2010 and 2011 all properties suffered severe setbacks where population explosions have taken place, and the first one, I think, was 1974. Those three big wet years were bad ones with over 1,000 millimetres of rain in those years. Masses of regrowth came from the very extensive seed bank and a lot of people thought that they were right back at square one and we had not really got anywhere. That is why 60 per cent of our prickly acacia funding is still spent in the lower gulf. I thought we would have got back to basics and got back to the core area around Julia Creek, Richmond and Hughenden, but we have been concentrating a lot on buffer areas, especially in inland Richmond shires, and we have been doing a bit of work in Flinders, but nowhere near as much as we would all like.

That picture shows just an example of prickly acacia on one of the properties in the lower gulf. It is pretty nasty. That was one of the bad properties. A massive amount of Tebuthiuron has been put out there for over 10 years at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars virtually by every property, and this picture shows the same area but just a slightly different view. It has been pretty effective to

do treatment and then follow-up. This picture just shows how cattle move prickly acacia away from water points. I do believe that is on another Hacon property, but he has killed all of that. I am pretty sure that is the case.

I will now tackle the terms of reference—not me because our CEO wrote most of this, but we did collude for it. The first is the responsibilities of local governments in relation to the control of prohibited, restricted and invasive plants. It has been talked about quite a bit that the regional scale movement of prickly acacia is very largely associated with the transport of livestock. You could safely say that all 22 properties in the lower gulf were only infested one way—that is, from the seed in cattle bellies on trucks. A failure to take reasonable steps to prevent that spread is a clear breach of the general biosecurity obligation established by the Biosecurity Act 2014 and a focus for compliance action in the context of an overall containment and management strategy. That has been talked about quite a bit, but poor old local government has not been able to take on that task that has been given to them by government.

As I say, the capacity of southern gulf local governments means that insufficient attention is given to compliance action, including prosecution when appropriate. Apart from all of the reasons you have heard, mates do not want to be tracking down mates or family members and that sort of thing. I can understand it. This lets down the responsible producers and livestock carriers that do mitigate the risk of seed spread and it does impose significant costs on the regional community when new infestations establish. A strong argument can be made that compliance activities of this type would be better led by Biosecurity Queensland than by local government. That is our take on it. Tomorrow I am sure that you will find Desert Channels and its submission much stronger than ours, but you will cop that tomorrow.

The second term of reference relates to programs for the control of weeds on crown land administered by DNRM being effective. They fund us. All the funding from the state comes through DNRM, so I like to get on very well with those people. The area of land in the southern gulf region directly managed by DNRM is small and insignificant in relation to the management of prickly acacia. However, a substantial proportion of the region is state crown land held under leases administered by the department. We do not have to go into the contents of those leases, but one of them is to stop the spread of any weed at all really—any declared weed. One of our recommendations is the state should, in consultation with the pastoral industry, NRM sector and other stakeholders, undertake a feasibility study for the introduction of a rental discount incentive—something a bit like what Robbie Katter was talking about—for lessees who demonstrate progress in prickly acacia control and other aspects of sustainable land management relative to their lease conditions. That is all in our submission but much more detailed.

CHAIR: I was just going to say, Charles, given the time and this is in your submission, perhaps we should go straight to questions and we can ask you about your recommendations, because they are good recommendations.

Mr Curry: Okay, fair enough. I did have a few recommendations at the very end, but they are also in the submission.

Mr KATTER: Charles, you have worked up a really good name tackling this over 20 years or whatever time you have been at it.

Mr Curry: Yes, it has been a lot.

Mr KATTER: Yes. I have not read the submission, but where do you need that grunt not just outside of funding in the NRM but having monitoring and policing on the ground? How do you see that working? Do you have biosecurity officers in the towns? Do you have some suggestions in that regard?

Mr Curry: There were three or four land protection officers around this region when I started 18 years ago.

Mr KATTER: You coordinate getting rid of it, but then if you are growing that other stuff you want someone on the ground checking.

Mr Curry: A couple more of me would be helpful but, as I said, we have no clout. The poor old shires do, but I think the clout should be coming from what used to be land protection officers or stock inspectors. We have talked about this many times at gulf catchment pest task force meetings, which are attended by Biosecurity Queensland and also all the shires. It is virtually unanimous that the shires should not be doing this work; it should be left, out in this part of the world, to Biosecurity Queensland or somebody else from DAF—people with that clout.

Mr KATTER: I think the old property values used to be issued with a saddle to go out and do lease checks and everything in the old days.

Mr Curry: Were they?

CHAIR: Charles, there was mention that you do not have any statutory powers. Do you think that NRM groups should have some statutory powers? If so, what should they be?

Mr Curry: All 14 groups apart from Southern Gulf, because I was it at the time, voted to stay as a community group. Coming from Victoria, I thought there was a strong case for being a statutory authority, but then we would be part of the government and that is not what the other groups wanted. I guess we will stay as a community group because that is what everyone in all 14 groups want.

CHAIR: What were the advantages from your time in Victoria of the approach taken down there?

Mr Curry: You could issue notices and you could get a lot more work done on properties to clear the nasty weeds—the weeds of national significance. If they did not obey the notice that was issued, you would send in a contractor and charge the property owner. That was quite legal and understood. It just does not happen up here. It could, but it does not.

Mr MILLAR: It has happened once when Howard Hobbs was the shire chairman for Tambo. It was on wild dogs, and he went out and actually did it himself.

CHAIR: In one of your recommendations—the first one—you say that the Queensland government in collaboration with local government, the beef industry and other stakeholders should develop and implement an effective compliance strategy using legislative but also market based methods. What are you referring to there in terms of market based methods? You can take the question on notice.

Mr Curry: I think I might take that one on notice. I think Andrew Maclean, our CEO, knows exactly what that one was and I did not get a briefing on that one.

CHAIR: No, that is okay.

Mr MILLAR: Charles, NRM groups are absolutely important. Seeing your submission and the Desert Channels submission, this committee has not ignored NRM groups. In fact, when we decided to come out and do a tour out here, the first people that we wanted to talk to or help us organise from the area that I cover was Desert Channels. We believe that NRM groups such as Southern Gulf and Desert Channels are the key to actually getting this done, so please do not think that this committee would ever ignore anything.

Mr Curry: That is good to hear. We have always tried to work more closely with local government. It is not easy with funding arrangements the way they are, but obviously we cannot work without them.

Mr MILLAR: Rest assured, I will have the same conversation with Leanne Kohler. When we talk about prickly acacia, some of the groups that we think about are Southern Gulf and Desert Channels.

Mr MADDEN: Do you know what your corporate structure is?

Mr Curry: Yes. We have an independent chair and a board of five or six directors.

Mr MADDEN: Are you a company limited by guarantee?

Mr Curry: We are, yes.

Mr MADDEN: You are not an incorporated association?

Mr Curry: We were, but we became a company limited by guarantee 10 or 11 years ago.

Mr MADDEN: Do you have a chairman and a board?

Mr Curry: Yes.

Mr MADDEN: Where people are appointed for a number of years?

Mr Curry: Yes, a board no longer representing sectors, but more talents.

Mr MADDEN: Where is your board based?

Mr Curry: Mount Isa. They come from Mount Isa, Gregory, several in the McKinlay and one living in Townsville and Cairns.

Mr MADDEN: We were talking about your funding base. Can you explain where your funding comes from? Clearly some comes from the state and some comes from the federal government. Can you explain that?

Mr Curry: Yes. The Australian government provides funding through the National Landcare Programme for environmental type things, and that is about it these days. They used to provide core funding for our board, our chair and our CEO and business management. If we want to do anything on the ground we do not have enough money for that, so until that funding is restored we are in big strife. We are using money in the bank at the moment. That will last a year and a half to two years, but maybe there will be a new funding program in a year's time. The state did provide \$800,000 or \$900,000 for three years, then \$600,000 and now \$500,000 next year for weed management. I get paid out of that, so that reduces it considerably.

Mr MADDEN: Both federal funding and state funding has reduced and will reduce over time?

Mr Curry: It is not just reducing by not adding on CPI, but it has been cut quite considerably.

Mr MADDEN: That is concerning.

Mr Curry: Extremely. We do have four pillars: resilient landscapes—which is more or less me—pest management; community engagement; conservation and biodiversity projects. With the grazing element we have a grazing officer. If we did not have those four pillars we may as well not be here.

Mr KATTER: I want to go back a bit. I remember Nathan March saying that with 50 per cent cover it can recover, but there are numbers thrown around with regard to what you can produce off Mitchell grass plains. I know these are approximations, but do you have a bit of an idea how much this is costing in terms of productivity? It is good for us politicians to take that information back to government so we can say, 'This is costing you \$1 billion in lost productivity over 10 years.' Do you have any information like that? You should be able to quantify it if you have a rough idea.

Mr Curry: There are figures out there that describe all of that. Unfortunately, on a property-by-property basis we just do not have those figures yet. We have declared to the government that we intend to embark on that process on a property-by-property basis to try and get an idea of how much productivity has been lost. We have been working with certain properties for a long time with regard to how much they have got back because of our funding and their considerable in-kind contributions.

CHAIR: On page 7 of your submission you state—

Queensland NRM bodies are advocating for the establishment of a Queensland Natural Resource Management Council that would have the task of preparing a State NRM strategy.

Further in that paragraph you say that it is an approach used in other states and we are clearly lagging behind. In terms of that, are you suggesting that we should have some sort of an overarching body? We already have a peak body. Would that be a role taken on by that group which would have a statutory obligation to prepare an NRM plan; is that what you are suggesting?

Mr Curry: Yes. The original Regional Group's Collective is the overarching body for our NRM groups. I do not attend those meetings anymore, but obviously the CEO and the chair do and that particular statement has come out of that. They obviously want to get an overall NRM strategy in association with certain government departments, especially DAF.

CHAIR: On the same page in the same vein you mention in your recommendations that the Queensland and Australian governments should re-establish formal consultation mechanisms in support of natural resource management. Is that not happening at the present time?

Mr Curry: We get the impression that it is not, especially with these cuts to funding. I think they are unilaterally decided. I do not think that the Australian government and the Queensland government get together to formally decide that we are going to be slashed. It just seems to be happening by individual governments.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to appear here today.

EPPLE, Mr Brett, Private capacity

CHAIR: Would you like to make a very brief statement? Then we will ask a few questions.

Mr Epple: If you are looking for a template on weed control in Queensland, you cannot go too far wrong from what Rob Hacon said previously. He is absolutely on the money. I am going from my experience and what I found up in our area. I know there has been a focus on prickly acacia, but rubber vine is equally as bad, if not worse, up in our country. It will completely take it over if it is given a chance. We do not want to just focus on a couple of weeds. It is an absolute shocker there. When I first came onto that property it would have been 75 to 80 per cent rubber vine and 25 per cent prickly acacia. It was absolutely shocking, and I would not want anyone else to step into that role and have to try and do something with it. I wonder how country can get to that state in the first place. How was it allowed to get to that degraded level? I am pleased I bought it, but if you had second thoughts you would wonder why you would bother.

Local governments are trying to do a fantastic job and I fully endorse the Good Neighbour Program. I have had a bit to do with it over the last few years and I am completely behind that. As I stated earlier, we are lacking enforcement measures and I think that has to come from the state government. Councils have been very unwilling to put notices out on landholders because they have to live in this area. They have friends and in the past they could have owned country themselves. It is something which I think the state government, through their representatives, could get into and start doing something.

In my experience there has been a complete lack of enforcement measures in the last 20 plus years I have been in the pastoral game. Absolutely none. We hear time and time again that good people are doing good work that has been unravelled by people doing nothing. Where do you go? What do you do about it? Who do you see? There is no mediator you can go to and say, 'This is the end result. Let's sit down and talk about how we are going to get there.' The last thing you want is to fall out with your neighbours, because at the end of the day you all have to try to get along and you have to try to coexist, but there comes a time where you have to take a stand on things. In my experience, landholders have had a free rein to do as they please to the country they are leasing or own freehold. I do not think that has necessarily been a good thing, as you can see by the weed burden. Having said that, a lot of landholders are not completely to blame for the problem. They have bought into country, like myself and a lot of other people, and they are faced with a fairly huge problem there.

We have touched on cattle being transported all over the country, and that is something that really seriously needs to be looked at. It is fair enough if they are going to the meatworks, but apart from that I am not sure how the state government would look at it. Either they say cattle that are going somewhere have accompanying documentation that says they have had access to prickly acacia or, more to the point, they are de-pastured at the property they come from, emptied out, and they are free to move on transport. I know that the Northern Territory government is all hung up about bovine Johne's disease. That is by no means their biggest problem, with cattle going up full of prickly acacia seed. One day they might realise, but we will have to wait and see about that.

There are landholders who abide by the Land Act—and when you buy a property you sign up to abide by the Land Act—but they have been continually undermined by neighbours who do not choose to use control measures, and that just creates a neighbour-against-neighbour problem which is no good in any industry.

I personally feel there has been way too much focus on wild dogs. There will be plenty of people who would argue against that, but this is a business, after all, and you just cannot cherry-pick your problems. You have to take them all on board and address them in order of their seriousness. As it stands, the full burden pretty well falls totally on the landholder's shoulders. They have to absorb the herbicide cost, the labour and the machinery. That is a huge burden. I have an idea that perhaps governments could subsidise herbicides for use on weeds of national significance, which could bring it back to being a little more affordable. Having said that, it just cannot be open slather. It has to be properly policed by someone from state government, you sign a legally binding document saying this is what you are going to do, and you are inspected yearly or every two years, whatever it may be.

At the moment I feel there has been really no desire for the state government to do anything worthwhile about statewide control measures. It has pretty well been an absolute free-for-all, do as you please when you please. I feel that ultimately lending institutions will be calling the shots if the state government continues to do what they are doing—which is not a whole lot—with foreclosures, refusing to extend overdrafts or being unwilling to offer loans to purchase severely degraded properties. I think that is when you are going to really see some hurt in the bush. Once these

properties get to a certain stage where they are unviable, we are going to see that banks are going to start calling in their loans and we are going to see a lot of hurt in the bush. Probably not in five or 10 years, but if it keeps going the way it has it certainly will.

Lastly, we have all heard a lot about the Great Barrier Reef. Experts say it is going to take 10 years to recover, but if something is not done out here in the bush very soon this country will never recover. It will only continue to deteriorate. I am not sure how you swing the media around to start focusing on the real problems in this area, and it is not the Great Barrier Reef. In my opinion, this is the problem out here.

Mr KATTER: You mentioned the scattergun. You spend a lot of time on your property dealing with weeds and a lot of your money is invested back into that—

Mr Epple: Yes, it is.

Mr KATTER: Your gripe is with other people in the district. You are making sacrifices and there is noncompliance—

Mr Epple: Yes, noncompliance is an aching problem. At the end of the day someone has to be brought in to say, 'Look, we've had enough. There's some rogue operators out there. Time and time again they're not doing the right thing. We're sick of hearing it. We'll get it sorted.' Whichever way it is done, but it has to be sorted because this problem will not improve unless there are some compliance measures put in place somewhere down the track.

Mr KATTER: How long have you been on your property?

Mr Epple: Twenty-three years.

Mr KATTER: Would you say you spend a quarter of your time on the tractor managing weeds?

Mr Epple: At least. It is my No. 1 job and it will be until the day I leave there. There can be no other way. If I chose to turn my back on it, what good is it going to be to anyone down the track? Absolutely worthless.

Mr KATTER: You were doing some rubber vine on the river, and you know the policy is that you cannot use it in a riparian area.

Mr Epple: Yes, within 100 metres of a watercourse.

Mr KATTER: All the native trees were being killed anyway because you could not get—

Mr Epple: That is right. The trees are going to die anyway, whichever way you look at it. Rubber vine is going to climb up and choke it to death and you are just going to have a complete monoculture of rubber vine. You are allowed to burn these watercourses. All that does is burn the trees out, and of course the river red gums will follow. Once the fire gets up them, just haul them out and they leave a great hole in the ground which will swallow water and the rubber vine just springs up behind it. As harsh as it seems, you get a helicopter or a plane in and fly that bloody country, nuke everything and start from scratch. There is nothing harder than an Australian tree, and you would be surprised at what comes up in no time unencumbered by the rubbish that has been completely annihilated.

Mr MADDEN: I could just about cheer you on with everything you said. I think we are on the same page when it comes to the movement of stock. I do not want to talk about the Great Barrier Reef because it is a bit political, but I used to be a weed scientist. If you get two weed scientists in a room, all you want to do is talk about weeds. It is something that is not spoken about enough.

With regard to your scattergun, I am a member of the West Moreton Landcare Group and we have a scattergun that we lend out. We mainly use it with lantana with high concentrations of glyphosate. What chemical are you using?

Mr Epple: Tebuthiuron pellets.

Mr MADDEN: It is pellets?

Mr Epple: Yes, it will give you a measured dose. Either an individual shot or you can hold the trigger down and you will get an automatic feed, which you will see in some of the photos here where it comes up. You kill one and thousands come to the funeral. This is where you get the residual from the Tebuthiuron pellets. It will take them out.

Mr MADDEN: Are you using them on a ground rig?

Mr Epple: Yes, in a buggy, tractor, wherever you can fit it; whatever is going to suit your country, really.

Mr MADDEN: Is it through something spinning, being thrown around?

Mr Epple: No, the machine is what is called a fluted roller, and every time you pull the trigger it has a little 12 volt motor and it just rolls over one, which drops out eight grams of pellets in the delivery line, and it is just there ready for you the next time you activate it.

Mr MADDEN: Is it a bit like a revolver?

Mr Epple: No, it is a very, very simple system. It is just sitting there in the delivery line, and the next draw of air when you activate the handgun shoots out a bunch of pellets.

Mr MADDEN: I hope you patent it and I hope you make a million dollars.

Mr Epple: I have not gone into the patenting side of things. I just want to get the best machine I can out into the market, a reliable machine, and hope people will put it to use.

Mr MADDEN: It is a scattergun and not a splatter gun?

Mr Epple: Scattergun, yes.

CHAIR: Brett, that brings us to the conclusion. Thank you very much.

Mr Epple: I would like to thank all you fellows for coming up and showing some interest, because God knows this region needs it.

CHAIR: I thank all the witnesses who have appeared here this afternoon before the committee, with particular thanks to those people who took the time to take us around your district this afternoon. It really does assist us greatly in our understanding. I apologise that we cannot give people as much time as we would like, but we have an allocated time frame in which we have to get through everyone. The information that we have gained this afternoon has greatly expanded on the submissions that have been made. There was one question taken on notice. If we could get the answer by 26 June, that would be great. The secretariat will follow up on that. I now formally declare this hearing of the Agriculture and Environment Committee closed.

Committee adjourned at 6.20 pm