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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

TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2017

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Committee met at 2.02 pm

CHAIR: I declare open the Agriculture and Environment Committee's public hearing in relation to the inquiry into invasive weeds and their control in Queensland. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, but I do remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I remind those present today 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.

Mobile phones and electronic devices should now be turned off or switched to silent mode. Hansard is making a transcript of the proceedings. The committee intends to publish the transcript of today's proceedings. Those here today should note that the media might be present so it is possible that you might be filmed or photographed. Before I call the first witness, I thought I should let people know where things will go from today. We will have further discussions as a committee around all of the visits that we have done and the hearings that we have held in Brisbane, we may consider an additional hearing depending on our discussions, and then we will be producing a report. We intend to get that report done in the not too distant future with some recommendations coming out of that.

PRATT, Mr Michael, Deputy Mayor, Barcoo Shire Council

CHAIR: Welcome Councillor Pratt. Would you like to make a brief opening statement before we cross to committee members for questions?

Councillor Pratt: I have a little bit to get through and I promise I will not be more than 10 minutes, if that is okay. Firstly, thank you very much for the opportunity to present a case here from the Barcoo shire. It is great to see so much interest from your level in a problem that we have been facing and dealing with for many, many years. What I wanted to do was to give you a brief overview. You probably have a pretty good understanding of the prickly acacia problem right now, but I will quickly run through it as a general reminder and a bit of an update and then how Barcoo shire see there is a potential solution that could be adopted as a way ahead.

Firstly, in my overview, most of the comments and statements here are also referenced in the printed document you got from Barcoo shire in our submission. I have broken it down to an economic cost and an environmental cost. I will turn to the economic cost of prickly acacia. As you know, there are 23 million hectares spreading on an average of 800,000 hectares per year across Mitchell grass downs. A 25 per cent canopy decreases Mitchell grass by 50 per cent to 16 million hectares in that category. A 50 per cent canopy will destroy the Mitchell grass—zero Mitchell grass. There are 7 million hectares currently affected to that level.

The carrying capacity of this Mitchell grass downs country is one animal equivalent per 10 hectares. The carrying capacity has been reduced because of prickly acacia by 2.3 million head. The 23 million hectares of prickly acacia affected country will carry 2.3 million head of cattle at one animal equivalent per hectare. The amount of country that is infested at these various levels has reduced the cattle herd throughout that region of 2.3 million head, which is a carrying capacity, back to 1.7 million head because of prickly acacia which is 570,000 head of cattle that can now not be run on that prickly acacia affected country. Peter Whip from PRW Agribusiness, a consultant in Longreach, states that going on the five-year average, the gross margin return per head of cattle is \$350. You multiply 575,000 head by \$350 and it is a \$203 million loss to the beef industry in cattle sales alone per year. Using 2007 cattle prices, selling 575,000 just say, for instance, steers at \$800 gross margin is a loss to the beef industry of \$460 million. That is in cattle sales only, not including the flow-on costs—the trucks that cart the cattle out, just for one small example.

Another economic cost is the reduction in capital land value of the 23 million hectares. An estimate of \$37 per hectare reduction in property values, so \$15 an acre, equates to a \$850 million reduction in land value. Of course, the flow-on effect of that is that the councils in those regions are having a reduction in their rate base. Other comments from agents are that affected properties are hard and slow to sell and that will only increase as awareness and the effects of prickly acacia increase.

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Other economic costs, of course, are increased running costs. As Errol referred to before, you have to bring in a helicopter like Naomi to clean paddocks out. Obviously with the control costs of prickly acacia you have got a much bigger pest animal impact. Kangaroos, I know from personal experience, in prickly acacia country just send that cattle mad. Whenever they hear a vehicle the cattle are on the move because the kangaroos just get them moving.

Going on to the environmental cost, which is just as important: Mitchell grass and other native species choked out, zero ground cover, increased run-off and erosion, water turbidity increased, choked waterways, diverting flow, eroding banks, haven for wild dogs and feral pigs, can lead to the demise of the small native animals, for example, the Julia Creek dunnart. It eventually becomes a wasteland devoid of biodiversity, as you would have seen today. It is just not good.

That is an overview of the cost of prickly acacia. I would like to move on to how Barcoo shire sees there is a potential solution to this problem. As you are well aware, Barcoo shire has not got a big prickly acacia problem thank God, but we have had experience in areas that are badly affected by prickly acacia. That is why we are so hell-bent on making sure we do not end up in the same boat. Within the shire council we are now heading towards a vision of becoming WONS free in 2020. We are going to eradicate all weeds of national significance within the shire by 2020. That is our goal. That is achievable, but we will need a certain compliancy level to be able to achieve that. I will go on to that shortly.

The Land, Water and Animal Management Committee has been formed, of which I am the chair. Our RLO, our rural lands officer, has conducted an online survey to determine species location and area affected. We are raising awareness of the problem within our community. We are conducting a field day shortly. We are seeking cooperative assistance from DCQ, DAF and the like and we are working to develop a compliancy document which will be a local law. We have yet to finish that. As I said, we have a pest management policy in place, we are working on what we call a property WONS—weeds of national significance—eradication plan template and working on a local law that we can use for the compliancy issue. The RLO will consult with every individual landholder within the shire to complete a property eradication plan template which will have to be affordable and have achievable milestones at a compliancy level and if exceptional circumstances prevail, obviously through ill health or drought, there would be a proviso in the compliancy document to deal with that issue.

Assistance will be provided by DCQ and DAF regarding options for control—grazier best practice, that type of thing—and, importantly, we see the issue of cattle moving onto other areas carrying seeds can be prevented to some extent by issuing a WONS free certification to all the landholders who have either eradicated the plants or do not have the plant on their property. They would use that certification when they are selling stock, when they are selling their property and also taking agistment stock on so that they can be guaranteed to remain seed free.

That is how the Barcoo shire would like to embark on dealing with the issue of WONS within our shire. For better or for worse, I have elected to extrapolate that to within a regional situation encompassing the gulf and the Lake Eyre catchments. As you are all aware, the current and past attention to prickly acacia and parkinsonia has been fragmented. We have different entities of organisations working on different protocols, different requirements, different goals. It has been very much fragmented over a long period of time. To be honest, DCQ are now making a lot of headway within certain parameters. Unfortunately, they will never have—this is speaking from Barcoo shire representation—the capacity required to eradicate prickly acacia right across the whole landscape. That is beyond the scope of an individual organisation. We therefore need desperately to bring an alliance together of all stakeholders to deal with prickly acacia.

Just moving on, to form the alliance, which will encompass the Lake Eyre and gulf catchments, currently we now have a commitment from the RAPAD group of councils, which are seven that represent this whole Lake Eyre Basin area, a commitment from DCQ, Biosecurity Queensland and AgForce to form an alliance representing the central western part of the state and we are meeting on 12 July. Then once we get those initial talks sorted out and we have a clear direction of where we want to go as an alliance we will invite the Southern Gulf NRM group and also the North West Queensland ROC to join us and we will create an alliance that will represent the whole prickly acacia affected region of the Mitchell grass downs country.

I would hope that an incorporated entity will be formed. There is a lot of work to do, I realise that, but the aim initially is to engage a consultant to undertake a financial analysis of the true cost of prickly acacia. Until we have a figure there it is pointless, to my mind, to go to the government and say, 'This is the problem that is costing the community X amount and so we need X amount to help deal with it.' It will raise the awareness, because it was not until there was awareness of the problems with the Great Barrier Reef that all of a sudden there was a worldwide focus on that and the money

flowed. I credit Mike Berwick, the head of the RGC, with a lot of that. That is what we are looking at here. We have a pest that is invading the Mitchell grass downs country, taking over another icon, and we need to raise that to perhaps not quite reef status but we really need to raise awareness that we are losing an actual icon unless we take different actions.

A consultant needs to be engaged to do an independent study of the true cost of prickly acacia to the community. The entity will develop a strategic WONS management plan obviously focusing on prickly acacia and parkinsonia. From that also an operational plan will be put in place. There will be an operational plan for the region as a whole. However, we are well aware of the fact that not every landholder, not every shire, sees prickly acacia in the same light. Some see it as a threat, some see it as a huge issue to deal with, others do not give a damn, others see it as an asset. That is possibly why we are in such a mess now because not everybody sees it as a problem.

Therefore, what I am hoping will happen is each shire will have a choice. Barcoo has elected to eradicate the plant. Other shires in the north, where I do know for a fact that not all landholders and not all councillors see it as a problem, may well elect to adopt a policy whereby it will be contained and/or eradicated. Within those particular shires some landholders may elect to eradicate, others may not. As I said before, when you have a pest management plan that has compliancy capability, every property within the Barcoo shire will have to fill out that pest management property plan and it will be compliant.

As an example, if we have about six properties in the Barcoo shire that have got prickly acacia then the owner will draw up a pest management plan with the RLO and assistance from DCQ. Now, if the owner of that property has not got a lot of resources—financial, whatever—it does not really matter because he could elect to put in place a 20-year eradication timeline with achievable milestones. If he has a big problem and it is going to take a long time to fix it, give him the time to do it but if he does not meet those achievable milestones that is when the shire will have the capability of moving, issuing a pest notification to him and failure to heed that would require council to move in with a contractor to deal with the problem and bill him with his rates accordingly.

What we are hoping to do is set up a model within the Barcoo shire that can be extrapolated to every shire within the prickly acacia area. Without having that compliancy capability is a total waste of time. You cannot just go in and say, 'Right, we are going to solve this. We are going to make everybody do this or do that.' That just does not work. You really do need to take a small-steps approach and address every landholder as an individual, every shire as individual within its own right and then deal with the management of these issues accordingly. In time what will happen is Longreach shire might say, 'Well, Barcoo has eradicated, why can't we?' Winton shire I know are very upfront. They are doing very, very good work in controlling prickly acacia and I can see them electing to eradicate it. For Richmond, Hughenden, McKinlay, it is big problem right across there. I do know Hughenden is very proactive and they may elect to eradicate it and that will really put the pressure on Richmond and Julia Creek. It is the same at the property level. If two properties have an equal amount of prickly acacia and one bloke says, 'I'm going to eradicate it', and then all of a sudden his place is worth arguably \$15 to \$30 more in value, it is just peer pressure, and monetary value will really push the issue more than compliancy, but we still have to have that compliancy in our back pocket.

I have pretty much covered everything. If a landholder elects to take the containment option instead of the eradication option he will be compliant to have a 200-metre buffer zone around his property extending one kilometre up all the drainage lines off that property. That is just a pipedream. That is what would be, in my opinion, ideal because if he wants to have his weeds let in but he cannot impact any of his neighbours or anybody downstream he really will have to embark on a buffer zone around his property and let him live with his weed problem and let the marketplace determine his future.

The entity would also hopefully employ a full-time equivalent project manager. It will be of a scale where you would need to have people totally committed to this goal, to this new entity, and also perhaps an extension officer who would work with the RLOs and the DCQs and the like. That was a fairly long-winded brief introduction.

CHAIR: That is fine, Councillor Pratt. Do not apologise. That was all very useful. I have a couple of quick questions. I think the committee would appreciate being updated after 12 July as to the progress of your meeting. That would be of great interest to us. In terms of the alliance that you talked about, will the NRM groups be involved in that process as well?

Councillor Pratt: Currently we have BQ, NRM groups, local government in the form of RAPAD and AgForce all committed to join the alliance. I have all that documented. I have a letter from Jim Thompson from the RAPAD board. We have those four interest groups nailed down at this stage.

CHAIR: You talk about compliance capability. What are you looking for there? Are you looking for something specific from state government? What is your vision in terms of that?

Councillor Pratt: Not necessarily. We have, within local government, with the Biosecurity Act now, the capacity to develop a local law to deal with a pest problem that we consider has to be dealt with at a certain level. What I am trying to say is that if there is a potential problem going to impact on our shire, either ecologically or economically, we have the capacity to draw up a legal local law that we can use as a backup to our pest management plan.

Mr MILLAR: That is fantastic. I think you have put a lot of thought into this. I can tell you that as the local member I will be working with you to try to help you wherever I can. We need solutions. We can all sit around and see what the problem is and say federal, state or local government should be doing something, but you have actually got a plan in place and I think that is incredibly impressive. I am very supportive of what you are doing. I do have a couple of questions. There has to be a little bit of ownership by the state as well. We cannot expect local government to do all the heavy lifting. Unlike what people think in the South-East or on the coast about their councils, councils in Western Queensland, I am sure Robbie would agree with this and so would Pat, lift well above their weight and take on a lot of responsibility. What part does the state government play in this plan? There has to be some sort of support somewhere. What do you want from the state government to make sure that this is enforced or the plan is in place?

Councillor Pratt: To my mind, the responsibility of prickly acacia lies with all levels of government, landholders and the community in general. I tend to think, and everybody here would agree, that it has been around for a very long time and there has been very little action to deal with it appropriately for lots of reasons. Therefore, the responsibility in dealing with it now lies with the community, including government et cetera. From the government I do know that I would like to see most of the focus on developing better biocontrol agents because to my mind the only hope of eradication is biocontrol, to be honest. The cost of eradicating prickly acacia with either mechanical or chemical means is totally beyond the capability of a country the size of Australia. That is probably being a little bit over the top but the taxpayers of Australia will not see it in the same magnitude as we do and it will never get reef status and awareness. However, we do need a biocontrol agent to eradicate it, in my opinion.

The other thing the state government can do, obviously, is to continue, as an example, exclusion fences. If you can wrap up a section of country and prevent the influx of seeds from travelling pigs, emus, which carry a heap of the seeds, all these animals that can cross over a barrier and you set up an exclusion zone, it becomes a new biosecurity managed area and it gives people incentive to turn to eradication, and it has the flow-on effects from wild dogs and we all know about the sheep industry problems. That is another thing that the state can do. It can continue the research and then we need more upfront, on-ground support for our RLOs when it comes to the compliancy issues because, as we are all well aware, the rural lands officers are people from the community. I know in the Barcoo shire, which has a very small population, there is a fellow who owns a business in one of the small towns and his neighbour is the RLO and this fellow that owns that business has a property that has a bit of prickly acacia on it. It is bloody hard. You cannot expect those RLOs to deal with the compliancy issue. That is where we would like to see Biosecurity, an independent officer, come in and say, 'Well, I will give you a hand with the enforcement role.'

Mr KATTER: That was outstanding. It is probably the best education I have had from a council in terms of a way forward. I am very complimentary of what you have put together. That is something from a government's point of view that we can look at. Lachlan nailed it before in relation to the state having a role. We had a big call in Hughenden yesterday about support for biosecurity officers to take some of the heavy lifting. I will put that in the form of a question. There were some comments made yesterday, and I know you have family in Julia Creek and you know those areas where perhaps there is a little bit of a different dynamic to where you are in Barcoo, there is a bit more tension between the two groups, and then the local council blokes who are going out there sometimes do not act with the same enthusiasm because there are those tensions, where the feeling was if you had the state officers there they would be more inclined to use their authority a bit more. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Councillor Pratt: I know with, they used to call them, the tree police I could see a role perhaps looking at a tree from a different angle, a different type of tree, but something along those lines with Biosecurity. What was your other question?

Mr KATTER: That was really it. Most of it was probably comment and it sort of followed on from what Lachlan was saying. It was in the context of the comment yesterday that there is a bit of a problem at the local level to the point where your job can be compromised as a council officer if you have a few councils that are—I do not know a better way of saying it—pro prickly acacia.

Mr MADDEN: First of all, Councillor, what you are proposing is excellent. I will be very pleased to see where you end up with that. Have yourself or this new group considered making an application to the state government to change the category of prickly acacia? Currently it is 3; the only real requirement is not to distribute it from your property. Is that something you have considered?

Councillor Pratt: Yes, that would be one thing for sure, Jim. It is just small steps at this stage because we are talking about changing a ship that has been sailing in a certain direction for a long, long time and we are trying to catch up to it with a little rowboat. It is a matter of raising awareness and working diligently forward, but certainly we have to take the right people with us as we go. I can see it being achievable, but it has to be in a form that is acceptable financially for councils. I know from experience that once you start to round up a problem it becomes infectious. For Barcoo shire to be able to claim weed-free status, that kind of elevates us. For properties to be able to say, 'We're weed free; we don't have a biosecurity issue,' would be a big tick. If I am looking to buy country, it would be a place that I would seek out.

Mr MADDEN: I wish you well.

Mr WEIR: I think what you are setting out to do is wonderful. It sounds like you have given it a lot of thought and consideration. You mentioned biocontrol. Do you think there are people out there looking at this problem and thinking, "This is going to cost me a lot of money. I'll sit back and wait for the magic solution to come along in the form of a biocontrol'?"

Councillor Pratt: Yes, I have no doubt, Pat. I would not be resting on my laurels with that because, as John Robertson will tell you, they have tried a lot of biocontrol agents and none of them have been host specific because prickly acacia is an acacia tree and there are plenty of them. Mimosa, for one, is native to Australia. The problem with the biocontrol agents they have tried to date is that they have not been host specific, however, we will wait and see. Certainly even if you have such a massive problem with prickly acacia, you will still have some paddocks that will only have a minor infestation, so you can embark on eradicating in those paddocks and containing it within other paddocks.

We really do not have the time, but I am taking the DCQ board and DCQ members out to another property between here and Aramac tomorrow. It is owned by a family that have moved down from Croydon. They bought a place that has a lot of prickly acacia on it, the same as Naomi over here, and they have gone in with a grader and a loader. They got a big steel cable from Mount Isa Mines, and they are pulling it and stocking it with sheep and goats for control. I will be very interested to look at that property tomorrow and do the economics.

I have asked Doug Brock of Croydon General Store, who owns a property up there, as well. He has not elected to get any assistance from anybody. He has gone and bought himself a couple of machines and a big steel cable. He is pulling it and stocking it appropriately with sheep and goats. I know from my experience at Julia Creek and Richmond that a sheep property has never had a prickly acacia problem. Since the sheep have left that region of Australia, the prickly acacia has just exploded. The sheep will nip it in the bud and digest the seeds. That is the beauty of sheep and goats.

CHAIR: Thank you, Councillor. I appreciate your passion and your time with us today. We all certainly hope you achieve that goal by 2020.

BURDEN, Mr Dominic, Chairman, Desert Channels Queensland

KOHLER, Ms Leanne, Chief Executive Officer, Desert Channels Queensland

WIGGINS, Mr Simon, Acting Operations Manager, Desert Channels Queensland

CHAIR: Leanne, would you like to start with a short opening presentation and then we will go to questions.

Ms Kohler: Thank you for this opportunity to present on behalf of Desert Channels Queensland. For a decade DCQ invested funds through grant processes through landholders, but in 2013 we recognised the need to more strategically invest in weed control to ensure that the outcomes that the community was seeking were going to be met in a timely way. We believe that there is a solution to prickly acacia in the Mitchell grass bioregion that involves everyone. By everyone recognising their roles and responsibilities, we believe this weed can be eradicated and that landholders will benefit from improved gross margins which will have a flow-on effect to our rural towns.

Desert Channels Queensland has had to challenge accepted thinking in the development of the program, and we recognise that this can be an uncomfortable space. However, we believe that setting the policy outcome as eradication has stimulated innovative thinking and the development of many new ways of dealing with this problem. If the policy outcome for the Mitchell grass downs is correct—as we think it is—and eradication is the desired outcome, then there are obligations on landholders, NRM groups and local government and government, and this will require each group working together with a common focus. This program fosters greater partnerships than any other program we have previously seen. We believe that this is achievable, desired by the community, embraced by industry and needs to be delivered for this region to help unlock its regional potential.

Mr MADDEN: I would like to thank you for your hospitality today. What we saw was enlightening. What is the best way that NRM groups can interact with local governments? What is the key to good interaction between the two authorities?

Ms Kohler: I think the best way is by communicating and sharing operational plans and having an understanding of what the strategic direction will be, what each of our decisions is regarding the weed itself. Certainly from our perspective we have worked very well with Winton Shire Council in this regard, and it was really through having that joint approach and the fact that there was the open sharing of information and knowledge and education.

Mr MILLAR: Leanne, in your submission you outline the difficulties faced by local governments in fulfilling their responsibilities under the Biosecurity Act. We just heard the plan that Mike is taking to Barcoo and then to RAPAD to fulfil their responsibilities under the Biosecurity Act. How can that plan and Desert Channels work together? The way I see it is that Mike's proposal is to put some rigour behind making sure that people comply with their responsibilities as landholders. Desert Channels is doing some fantastic work right now in destroying the tree, which we want. Can we see both Desert Channels' and Mike's plan working together, and how do you feel about that? What do you see would be the successful outcome there?

Ms Kohler: Dom might also have a thought on this, but from my perspective I think we would embrace local government having a stronger enforcement model where required. We certainly would not promote that everywhere, but when it is called upon it is required so we would support that. I think that all the organisations in the region need to work together to beat this weed, so in my mind that needs to happen but we all have a role to play in it. There are set places for each of us to do this and I think that, provided each organisation or industry or NRM group does their task well, you have a greater chance of success.

Mr Burden: I have a gut feeling we have the basic architecture there. Legislatively I think it is an enormous problem, but I feel that if we can get to the point where everybody is fulfilling their role and is resourced appropriately to do it and has that common objective in mind, we will be able to deliver what our region needs, and that is what it comes down to. We have to get past the point where we are battling with the scale. I think we can demonstrate that you can control this on a big scale; it is getting everybody doing what they should be doing and resourcing it appropriately to do it. I get a sense we are really close to achieving that, but we need a bit more oomph behind us.

Mr MILLAR: I cannot let you go without getting a response to this question. Leanne, Dom and Simon, if we suddenly made you Premier and Prime Minister for one day, how would you fix this problem? What sort of funding do you need? Is there a funding plan required? What do we need to eradicate prickly acacia in Queensland?

Ms Kohler: I would start by renegotiating the role for a week. I may not get it all done in a day. DCQ is more than aware that what we do in the Mitchell grass downs is a solution. We do have a sequential plan broken down into weed zones to combat that. You would have all been aware that for a while now we have been asking for \$40 million from the federal government over eight years, and that was to do the sequential weed plan process in the DCQ region. When I say \$40 million people think that is such a lot of money, but it actually is not. The co-investment under the program is topped up 50 per cent by the landholders' cache, so there is a great buy-in in the program. We already know that what we are doing in the Mitchell grass downs actually works and we are eradicating it from the paddock. I do not think there is a program out there that has more landscape scale change regarding prickly acacia than what we are doing at the moment.

Mr MILLAR: For the record, that is \$5 million a year. I know that \$40 million over eight years sounds like a big number, but it is a measly \$5 million a year to bring it back. From Mike's figures, you are looking at hundreds of millions of dollars in production that is out of the market at the moment, yet \$5 million a year would potentially fix it.

Ms Kohler: Yes.

Mr KATTER: We went through a fair bit this morning. The main question in my mind right now is how do you integrate that with what Southern Gulf is doing in my area? This program that you have is great. As we discussed this morning, it is imperative to stop it going back down the Diamantina system. We have a fear of it expanding into the gulf. We are a lot more advanced in places like Julia Creek. Maybe you could explain to us how you integrate with what they do.

Mr Wiggins: Historically, the programs have been quite separate. Funding pushes you that way. You create these new programs and if they are new and fresh, then they are funded. The only thing with the DCQ program is it is a long-term thing where we just slot in new funding, but it also allows us to slot in new partners. What we are seeing in the eight properties that Leanne alluded to this morning that have become part of the Good Neighbour Program is that they are on the border between the two organisations. They straddle the boundary. The DCQ board prioritised those as being ones that we will put forward in this round. Southern Gulf is bringing forward their GIS mapping staff so that they can start to learn how we do things. That is the start of the integration. We have learned a lot of lessons. It has been a relatively hard road learning everything, but it is relatively easy now to pass that knowledge on and allow people to take it forward.

The one thing that is critical—and I would just add to the funding model that Leanne has talked about—is that while you need funding for eradication, we also need funding for monitoring and compliance. That needs to also be part of it. While we are killing it, we need local government to be resourced to do the compliance but we also need funding for BQ to do the additional science and monitoring that we need. There is a role for everyone in this, and if we all work together then I have no doubt that we will get this across the line.

Ms Kohler: We have already started having discussions with the Southern Gulf board. Peter and I went up there and presented in November or December last year and we attended their AGM and their community forum. At that meeting they agreed to start talking the same language as us in terms of eradication, but they have also recently adopted our five steps to eradication pathways. Just getting some of the common language between the two groups has also been very beneficial. Through conversations between their CEO and myself they have recognised that we have the more mature program, and they would like to learn more about how we get that up there. We already have 133 landholders from up north who have registered on our books to have this program go there, and that is a huge number of landholders from another region to have registered for the program.

Mr KATTER: I remember my dad referring to the old Sunmap seat, one of Queensland's most prized assets described as the open Mitchell grass plains, and that is how it used to be described on the map. Most of us here love it and are pretty gutted to see this 20-million hectare incursion of prickly acacia growing on it. It offends our environmental values. If you go to the coast, all you ever hear about is the Great Barrier Reef. I think that Desert Channels have been instrumental in raising the profile of prickly acacia. Do you get frustrated that it is not seen for what it is, which is an enormous environmental catastrophe that has not been picked up by the media east of the Great Divide?

Ms Kohler: I think we will probably all answer that question.

Mr KATTER: If I can just clarify that question. You are more science based people and we are politicians and councillors, but I guess I am asking for an assessment of the impact on the environment. Does it qualify for a much higher profile in terms of the environmental threat?

Mr Wiggins: There are 25 rare and threatened species in the Mitchell grass region, and a couple of people talked about that this morning. As we lose the Mitchell grass we lose those species. Their habitat becomes lost. Equally as significantly, these areas become a pathway for pest animals, be they dogs or pigs, so we get a double threat. While we get lost production—and that has been a focal point for a lot of people—there are 25 rare and threatened species in this bioregion that will have no home. There is not much that we can do about that unless we can maintain the Mitchell grass. They have evolved to be in the open grasslands; they have not evolved to be in a monoculture of prickles. We also know that where we get coincidences of dogs and pigs is along those very dense lines. They get protection. They do not have to travel through open areas where people see them and shoot them.

Mr Burden: The only thing I might add is that there is an element of urgency to this as well. This is spreading rapidly. The good news is it that, as you have seen, each individual plant is quite easy to kill. This is a logistical exercise that needs resourcing and people. It needs organising and funding. As you can see, the funding is well leveraged with private investment, so if you can leave here with a sense of urgency that would be fantastic.

CHAIR: We have heard much discussion about stock movement, but you used the phrase 'workable stock movement protocol'. Can you outline what that might be and how it might work?

Mr Wiggins: There has been some really brilliant work done by Biosecurity Queensland staff out of Charters Towers. It reconfirmed work that was done in the mid-1990s. There are properties now that are implementing some of those strategies, which is to make sure that your stock do not leave the property if they are carrying seed. There are some very, very dedicated people in DAF and BQ who have also joined with us recently to talk to some of our landholders about building the next step of that, which is property based plans. They are still looking for a catchy name, but essentially it is about how to manage this weed while you are eradicating it. You are not going to eradicate it overnight, but you still need to deal with all the difficulties of normally managing stock on a grazing property in Western Queensland. It will take us some time to get that right and it will be different for every property. The other issue, of course, is when you are moving stock off the property how do you tell the vendor or the purchaser what the weed status of the stock are?

CHAIR: In the earlier open discussion one gentleman talked about lands inspectors inspecting leases for compliance with lease agreements. Do you have an opinion about that approach and whether or not it happens in other states?

Mr Burden: To give you a bit of background, I have worked in the pastoral industry in South Australia, New South Wales and a little bit in WA. Those states all have some form of established and resourced monitoring and compliance program. They are part of the furniture in the rangelands, and every landowner fairly expects that the way they manage their chunk of Australia is not entirely up to them. There are community expectations that have to be met as well. That has been my experience.

It has been quite successful and it is rare, but now and then noncompliance is taken through to prosecution. While it may be dramatic at the time, from my personal perspective that whole system protects all people that are doing the right thing and it creates more voluntary control of pest management issues, if that is what they are, or pasture protection issues generally. Some of those bodies in some states also share responsibility for managing issues like stock routes, so they tend to be regionally based. They might straddle multiple shires, but in summary I think there are some learnings there that we could possibly look at.

CHAIR: Your submission also talks about an industry certified market incentive being more effective than enforcement. Can you expand on what you are thinking about there?

Ms Kohler: From the work that we have been undertaking with prickly acacia, the people who have achieved weed-free status or made significant investments have also been willing to consider the possibility of putting a holding paddock on their property to spell stock coming in and out. From our perspective, if industry were to give it some sort of market based incentive, accreditation, or there was something that those landholders actually gained from the process because they have already made the social commitment and the financial investment, we think that would also be another step to get people on board.

CHAIR: Sort of like a Heart Foundation tick, so to speak?

Ms Kohler: That is exactly what we described it as, yes. That also brings around enforcement, because you need landholders to keep that holding paddock clear every year, but the people who have already made the investment will certainly do that, I would suspect.

Mr WEIR: I was very impressed with the tour we did this morning, thank you. One thing I could not help but notice was where the bore drains used to be, and as some of these have been capped and taken out of commission that would seem to present an opportunity to jump in and do something about this, would you agree?

Mr Wiggins: It is absolutely critical. While we talk about coordination between local government and NRM, we also need to talk about coordination between the various government programs. Weed control in areas where there are open bore drains is fundamentally more difficult than areas where you have closed off the bore drains, so there is huge opportunity for the continued program under GABSI which has the intent of removing all these bore drains being well aligned to the kind of work that is being done in the Mitchell grass areas. We have to get to the stage where bore drains are not dumping water into creeks and running then for long periods because they are a continued movement source of seed. Once we get that done, the ability for us to be able to control the weeds massively increases. There has to be a sunset on weed control. You have to be able to finish it. If you have the bore drains open, it just makes it much more difficult.

Mr WEIR: Just to add on to that, that became apparent to me. If this does go further downstream and if it does get into the Channel Country, when you see the spread out from those bore drains it makes you shudder. In terms of take-up, you were talking about the number of landowners up north. Given the results you have been getting, is that encouraging more people to participate in your programs?

Ms Kohler: Yes, it certainly does. We are receiving calls every week about people wanting to register and all we can do is let them know that we will be coming to a weed zone near them some time in the future, because that is all dependent upon funding. We are getting calls from other regions and we have just been approached by some interstate colleagues who were also wanting to adopt the program their way, and they are going to come up and have some tours with us later in the year. There is certainly no shortage of people who want to join. While it was very challenging in the early days, the runs on the board speak for themselves now and people are actually seeing what is being achieved.

CHAIR: You mentioned in your submission that it was really only late last year that you had the beginnings of coordination between Biosecurity Queensland, yourselves and Southern Gulf NRM. With regard to the alliance that Councillor Pratt was referring to earlier, does that fit into that coordination and how do you see that moving forward?

Ms Kohler: It does fit in with that. The reference I made there happened last year in October. There was agreement among DCQ, Biosecurity Queensland, NRM and Southern Gulf. That is when we all started to say, 'How can we pull this together and start some coordinated activity here?' That happened last year and that is what we have been working on since.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance here this afternoon. We greatly appreciate it and thank you very much for your tour this morning. It has really helped to increase our understanding.

ROBERTSON, Dr John, General Manager, Invasive Plants and Animals, Biosecurity Queensland

CHAIR: John, did you want to make a brief opening statement?

Dr Robertson: Yes; thank you, Mr Chair. Prickly acacia, as you are aware, has been around for a long time. It was first introduced in the late 1800s with some seeds from India exactly around this area in Barcaldine and concern for it has been going on since, I think, 1926 as far as I know right through to the present time. It was really around the 1950s that herbicide trials began to try and control it in many of these rangelands, even though there were others who thought it was a good idea to keep it going. The state government really started in the eighties when the Tropical Weeds Research Centre in Charters Towers started to do trials on mechanical clearing and other things, so we have seen a number of programs throughout that time.

One notable one was the SWEEP program, the Strategic Weed Eradication and Education Program, which lasted from 1995 to 1998 and over \$2 million was spent at that time, which was a considerable investment. While that probably did a lot of good, it probably was not long term enough as we understand to make sure that kept going. It was listed as a WONS—Weed of National Significance—in 1999. That allowed it to have a federally funded coordinator which was hosted within the DPI at the time. They tried to coordinate activity. A strategic plan was developed which is still current but probably needs reviewing now. That certainly got some action and some profile but, again, it is such a big problem and such a long-term problem that we are still in this situation today.

From what we saw and heard yesterday and today, there is some really great work going on. There is some fantastic work by DCQ, by Southern Gulf and others. I really applaud the work that has been going on and now the alliances that we are talking about that really have to be the solution to some of these issues. There are some big challenges in this. It is on such a large scale. There are multiple levels of participation within that, with some not being able to really make that commitment and others doing a really good job, as we heard, at their own considerable expense. The challenges that we have are the longevity of the seed. Our research is showing that it is at least 14 years. I think I heard someone say they have had regrowth from pods after 20 years, so we are talking about issues in that we are in this for some period of time. While the residual chemicals allow us a certain time, you do not know if you have true eradication from local areas within that time frame, so it really is important.

Biosecurity Queensland, as I say, has been in this space through research and other activities for some time. The War on Western Weeds that we heard a lot about yesterday was an initiative out of Biosecurity Queensland a few years ago. We put \$1.88 million towards it, and there were a number of things in there. One was developing new tools, and we have heard about some of those new tools, and another was the misting that we heard about today, and we are working closely with DCQ on furthering those trials to see how these new techniques work. Some of those techniques have been developed by landholders themselves, so we are encouraging that innovation. It does not have to be just government led.

With regard to the Good Neighbour policies, we have three case studies of those: Flinders, which we heard a lot about yesterday, and they have taken it even further, which is great; Muttaborra, which has really been going on lately, and that will work in close with the DCQ work that is going on there; and Richmond shire, and that is nearly complete there. The Good Neighbour Program is a really good demonstration of how people can demonstrate their general biosecurity obligation in the sense that if you do not have the resources to do the whole lot of your property at least the bare minimum you could do is protect your neighbours from getting it and making sure you had a fairly good buffer zone, and that is where I think we get a good buy-in. There has been good buy-in to that and as they see it is maybe not as hard or as cost prohibitive as they thought before they can conduct more work on their property and make sure they get that complete removal through other programs themselves, as we heard yesterday, or through the programs that DCQ are running, for example, or Southern Gulf NRM. That will grow over time, and I think that that is a really important thing.

If you look you will see that we have looked at new biosecurity science. We have done a lot of work on, as I say, seed longevity. We have been looking at seed movement through cattle and worked out that it is roughly eight days that seed will still survive. The other thing is looking at seed maturity. Whereas before we thought it was only a few months that seed pods were mature on the tree, recently we have shown that it might be over six or seven months and even some of those green pods are viable. In terms of the whole notion of whether you have a seasonal thing with this, it is really year round if you think about it. We have also been looking at biocontrol opportunities since the late 1990s. We have been all over the world. I counted up yesterday that we have at least 15 different agents out

of probably a few hundred that we have looked at, but they have not really taken off. Of course the thing with prickly acacia is, as Mike mentioned before, there are so many native species that we have to deal with. If there is any notion that the bugs might jump across to the native species, they are just ruled out straightaway. It is a long-term thing. With all of the trialling that occurs both in Australia and now with partners within India and also South Africa, it is not going to happen quickly. We will keep going on it, but it is not going to happen quickly.

We also work in with others such as CSIRO, UQ, the Northern Territory and others looking at the prickly acacia dieback. The War on Western Weeds program is something that we have been doing and it will continue for at least another year yet and then after that we were able to get some money under the Commonwealth ag white paper to do some rollout of all of that information that we have learnt, and from others as well, to bring that in to roll it out to landholders. I really applaud the work and the model that Mike is talking about and what we have been talking about recently with DCQ and Southern Gulf to think about how we look strategically at this. It is such a big thing to tackle and each of us have been trying to tackle it. I think all of the methods that we have applied are complementary and it is just a matter of us having that bigger plan and, like Mike said, making sure that everyone has a role in that and we can do it. Thank you, Mr Chair.

Mr MILLAR: John, this is a question I have asked before, but where does Biosecurity Queensland sit when it comes to prickly acacia? Do you believe in eradication or containment?

Dr Robertson: It is a good question. As a state organisation as Biosecurity, the term 'eradication' is really at a national level or it is at a statewide level, because our eradication programs, as you are probably aware, are nationally cost shared and it is all about eradication. If you cannot prove eradication, you do not get money for it. That is the first definition that we have. In terms of prickly acacia at the moment, I would say that I do not think we are in the position to eradicate it entirely from the state, but that does not mean that we cannot localise or regionally eradicate it. I applaud if we can do that, and that is where I think we are talking about at the moment. If that leads to statewide eradication, fantastic.

Mr MILLAR: Given what we have seen today in terms of the successes of what Desert Channels has been able to undertake here and given the real threat, as we heard from a few people here today, on the headwaters of the Channel Country and the way that prickly acacia does move—whether it is through cattle movements or through water movements—if it gets into the Channel Country then that is frightening and that is heartbreaking. That is a national icon. They talk about the Great Barrier Reef as a national icon, but to us out here the Channel Country is a part of our national icon. Would we not need to be looking at working at a way to get eradication on the mind of not only Biosecurity Queensland but every single grazier, every single NRM group and every single council in prickly acacia areas that we have to eradicate?

Dr Robertson: I agree with the whole notion of the Lake Eyre catchment and Mitchell grass downs as really important assets. Leanne Kohler referred to the discussions that we had earlier. That is really about eradicating it from those areas. That does not mean Queensland as a whole, and again I will stress that if that extends to Queensland as a whole and we can get there, well, great, let us do that, but certainly eradication on those really important regions such as those catchments, yes, why not. We should be stepping into that space now.

CHAIR: We heard a fair bit yesterday about the Good Neighbour Program. Is that a program that state government departments could or should participate in if they are in a council area that is trying to implement that policy?

Dr Robertson: We would help out without a doubt. As I say, that was something we kicked off. It is in three different areas. They are all taking it up, particularly after the success up in Flinders. If that can be rolled out in other areas that is fantastic.

Mr KATTER: There has been a bit of talk in the last couple of days about having biosecurity officers on the ground. I am sure you have your constraints. Do you have any officers on the ground who do this sort of thing maybe down in the south-east anywhere? Are there historical positions? Can you see that being practical or is that something new that would have to happen within your organisation?

Dr Robertson: In Biosecurity we deal right across the biosecurity spectrum, from prevention and preparedness right through to established pests like this. We do not have any officers in the invasive species area, it is mostly around catching people with boa constrictors that if they got loose we are in real problems or new weeds or weeds that we do not necessarily have in Queensland that we are trying to prevent. We do help out local government in many ways in the compliance area in teaching or providing whole packages of how you undertake compliance. I will say compliance not

enforcement because most of the time, and what we have shown particularly in areas like wild dogs, is if you simply undertake an investigation or a discussion with people who are supposedly non-complying you get 90 per cent voluntary compliance after the first discussion, them knowing that it could go further than that. The mechanisms in the Biosecurity Act allow you that step to go through. It is not about sending someone to court, it is really about having that discussion in the first place. Ourselves being able to do that sort of work involved in some of those requests we have heard over the last couple of days, we certainly would not have the resources to do that. We could work in partnership with local government to build that compliance.

What we have seen in other areas like wild dogs is people do not have the capacity. What we have heard in the last day is really about people either not having the financial resources or the wherewithal to do that. That is not discounting some people do not do anything. It is really about how you approach that. The big stick I think is not necessarily the first way to go. A lot of it is showing people that they can achieve their obligation, an obligation in the first case like the Good Neighbour Program, and once they see they can do that usually most do it even further over a number of years. It is really about giving them the capability. Some of what Mike is doing, for example, I think is fantastic because you will get that peer group pressure going on to push people into things. Leanne is finding now that people are coming on board. You have to allow that to happen and allow people to really undertake that themselves with some help. If in the end there are some who do not do that, fine. That is where you need some compliance action.

Mr MADDEN: A previous witness has talked about a protocol that was developed at Charters Towers called the stock movement protocol. Do you have any knowledge of that and what was envisaged by that protocol?

Dr Robertson: The stock movement protocol was all about knowing, based on the science, the seed passage through animals and allowing the quarantining process by saying, 'You need to quarantine your stock before you sell it.' Good management practice says that you quarantine them once they arrive on your property. The trouble with that is that it is good practice, but like any good practice people, if they are committed, will actually go by it, but I see trying to get actually some compliance on movement of stock that are carrying prickly acacia seed is probably the biggest issue because it spreads by water but it probably spreads much, much further and much, much quicker by transport in animals.

Mr MADDEN: Where I live we have signs on the road talking about not transporting soil because of fire ants and we have signs on the road telling people not to transport hay because of fireweed. Is public awareness, billboards on the road telling people not to transport stock that have been in prickly acacia infested areas without quarantining them first, something that would be practical?

Dr Robertson: We could do that. I think you would have to go much, much further than that. The volume of movement of cattle and just the time that anyone can transfer cattle to different properties is a huge issue which we need to, I think, address at a government and industry level and community level.

Mr MADDEN: One other thing I wanted to talk to you about was Tebuthiuron. We have been educated about the price fluctuations of Tebuthiuron. Is there something that the government could do to bring the price of Tebuthiuron pellets down?

Dr Robertson: I am open to any suggestions, but I suspect that is really a company decision. The big pharmaceutical companies make those decisions. They are international companies. You could certainly try to influence them.

Mr MADDEN: What about subsidies, even freight subsidies; is that something that is possible?

Dr Robertson: It may well be. I am probably not the person to ask about that, but it may well be.

Mr MILLAR: An issue that was brought up today and we have heard over the last couple of days and, in fact, we have heard for a long time is biocontrols. I know there have been a few released and they have not done what we needed them to do. There are two parts to this question: are we ever going to get something that will work and, because we continue to talk about biocontrols, are we falling into the trap where people will say, 'I will wait until the biocontrol comes along. I will not poison and put buffer zones in and start to try to get rid of this. I will wait for this magical biocontrol which is going to come along.'?

Dr Robertson: To your first question, I am not sure. It is one of those things that we will keep on trying but I am not sure we will ever get an agent. I think it is your perception of an agent. I think most people think a biocontrol will be one thing that comes in and just wipes out everything.

Sometimes that does occur. *Cactoblastis* was a beauty and everyone thinks of that one. Acacias are so much different. I would hope we do. It will be a few agents that do it. We are getting some promising things, but these trials take years and years and then you have to go through and get the permission to do it. I hope that we might have a couple, but I am sorry I cannot answer your question straight out like that. I cannot foresee it.

The second part is maybe there are people, I am not aware, just sitting back saying biocontrol can do it. It comes back to that whole thing about most biocontrols are not silver bullets at all, they only just help you out and give you a bit of breathing space where you can come in and actually use other techniques, whether it be herbicides or something else to clean up and really get on top of it.

Mr MILLAR: In the wool industry noogoora burr was an example. We had noogoora burr in Emerald as well and *Sesbania*. We got on top of it and on top of it and on top of it. You hardly find any of it where I live at the moment because we continue to get on top of it. My concern is with a bioagent or a biocontrol we are going to have people say, when that comes along, it will be a free gift and it will magically waft into my place and take out prickly acacia.

Dr Robertson: I am still waiting for the *lantana* silver bullet because I must spend every weekend spraying *lantana*. I think probably just as many agents have been released for *lantana* and it does not work.

Mr MADDEN: In defence of the researchers who are working on *lantana*, perhaps that might be covering a much bigger area were it not for those agents. We are well aware that if there was no work done on fire ants they would be in Newcastle by now. What are the pros and cons of reviewing the categorisation of prickly acacia and also is this something that is better dealt with by local laws rather than through the Biosecurity Act?

Dr Robertson: That is a good question. I think if we start to make it a higher category, a category 2 declaration, that really commits everyone to do something about it on their property otherwise they are in breach. As we have heard, it is pretty hard for some people to actually achieve that. I really like Mike's approach where you have to deal with it, and we talk about the Lake Eyre catchment, on a regional basis. Let us do that, and if you have been so successful that you have been able to knock it way back or even eradicate it let us up the declaration then. At the moment what are you going to do? You will not achieve it anyway and by doing that declaration I do not know if it gets you much further. You need to have a few steps before it.

CHAIR: Say a whole council area adopts the Good Neighbour Program and many people go well beyond that and clear their entire blocks, if you then have one or two people who drop the ball for a few years for whatever reason is that where we should be looking at enforcement in those areas of trying to get everyone doing the right thing?

Dr Robertson: I think so because obviously you have provided the support, you have given them an ability to demonstrate their obligation. Then if they have not taken it up, even through their local peer group pressure and they have not taken up the assistance, then obviously they are not taking it seriously and I think you then apply some compliance activities to say, 'Okay, are you aware?'. If they do not voluntarily comply after that hopefully you are getting down to a small number and then you can probably do something about it.

CHAIR: One witness this afternoon described this as a logistical issue, which I thought was an excellent way to describe it. Do you think Biosecurity Queensland is in a position or is the right organisation to be playing a coordination role in terms of rising to the logistical challenge this issue presents?

Dr Robertson: That is a good question because I have often thought about that myself. I would certainly want us to play a key role in coordinating or facilitating, but I do not necessarily think we would have to lead that. Again, if we take a regional approach I think that is probably the best: who is the most appropriate in the regional context to actually take a lead. That is not meant to be me butting out on my part, that is really about saying who is the best to do that. In terms of the model that Mike has put up, I do not think we are necessarily the right person for that. I think there are much better public figures, if you like, or organisations that can lead it. I would certainly want us to have a key part in it and be extremely supportive of it.

CHAIR: People have impressed on us over the last few days the significance of the threat to Mitchell grass downs and the Channel Country. Is this threat something that Biosecurity is aware of, takes seriously and is promoting in the workings of government as a very serious threat that needs to be very high up the priority list?

Dr Robertson: Certainly. That is what kicked off the War on Western Weeds. That was really the push for that. We have been lucky in just getting some money, as I said, for an extension of that through the agricultural white paper. That was the push to get that. Prickly acacia is big. I went for a field trip to Willowbank down near the back of the Gold Coast. A lot of the cattle come from all over the state to the abattoirs down there and there is prickly acacia growing there that we have knocked on the head. What you are dealing with is stuff all over. If we do not get on top of it in this area, as we have heard, we have got it across the country. It is important.

Mr MADDEN: This is probably a technical question, it is just to do with the Biosecurity Act and the category 3 weed. As I understand it, with a category 3 weed you are not allowed to remove it from the property. If a property owner allows stock to leave that have seeds in their digestive system, is that in breach of the Biosecurity Act?

Dr Robertson: Essentially it is. You have just got to be able to prove that it was the case. I probably should have said you can bring in a new regulation, you have just got to be able to police it. Movement of seed in cattle is extremely hard to determine, either end of that, and that is where the best you can do is try to clear your property of it and then just go through really good quarantine processes.

CHAIR: Thank you for coming along. I would like to thank everybody who has made contributions over the last two days, particularly the significant number of people who travelled very long distances to participate. We are greatly appreciative of that. We realise that many people have given up a lot of productive time to participate and we hope that it will ultimately contribute something significant to dealing with this problem. I would like to thank you all for coming along today. I declare this hearing of the Agriculture and Environment Committee formally closed.

Committee adjourned at 3.31 pm