

## **GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY - THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION'S MANAGEMENT OF FORMER PASTORAL LEASES**

The Economics and Industry Standing Committee inquired into the Department of Environment and Conservation's Management of Former Pastoral Leases. In particular, the inquiry investigated the department's:

- management of pest animals and weeds;
- preservation of pastoral heritage;
- opportunities for improved management; and
- consideration of the economic potential of non-pastoral uses for this land.

The Committee tabled its report on 19 August 2010.

The former pastoral leases managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) have been acquired by Government for addition to the State's conservation reserve system, in recognition of the fact that prior to commencement of the acquisition program, the ecosystems, landscapes, flora and fauna of the pastoral rangelands were poorly represented in conservation reserves.

The Government welcomes the inquiry's findings that the policy objectives of the acquisition program were sound and that the areas should be reserved under an appropriate *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* tenure.

The former pastoral leases now managed by DEC are spread across a large geographic area, and it is acknowledged that there are challenges in effectively managing such lands, often in remote locations. The Government, through DEC, is committed to managing these properties as conservation reserves in a way that contributes to sustainable communities and land use in the rangelands. There has already been significant recovery in vegetation and wildlife habitat across the acquired properties, as well as some development of nature-based recreation and tourism opportunities.

The Committee has made a number of findings and recommendations in relation to matters such as control of pest animals; animal welfare; communication and relationships with neighbouring pastoralists; and the maintenance of pastoral heritage. DEC acknowledges the need for improvements, and is committed to continuing to pursue these. For example, an audit of animal welfare risks on all former pastoral leases has been completed, and DEC has commenced the review of its *Good Neighbour Policy*.

The Committee also noted that, under its current budget, DEC would continue to experience difficulties in meeting its obligations in managing these properties. DEC has, through reprioritisation of existing resources, allocated an additional \$1 million per annum to the management of former pastoral leases, commencing in the 2010/11 financial year. This extra funding will contribute to increased wild dog control, infrastructure, fencing, the setting up of advisory groups involving neighbouring pastoralists and other stakeholders, and conservation works. Furthermore, on 5 April 2010 the Minister for Agriculture and Food and the Minister for Environment jointly announced the injection of \$8.82 million into the fight against wild dogs (\$5.17 million

over five years to upgrade and extend the State Barrier Fence and \$3.65 million for strategic wild dog control).

The Government's response to each of the Committee's 19 recommendations is given in the table below.

Recommendations	Response	Comments
<p><b>Department of Environment and Conservation's Acquisition of Pastoral Leases</b></p>		
<p><b>Recommendation 1</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation expedite the process for all former pastoral lease properties managed by the department to be reserved under the <i>Land Administration Act 1997</i>. The department should recommend that land be reserved under a <i>Conservation and Land Management Act 1984</i> tenure that provides for conservation and tourism management while allowing access to prospectors, fossickers and the resources sector.</p>	Accepted.	This is being pursued within Government, noting that a range of administrative processes are required and that Indigenous Land Use Agreements between the State and native title parties are likely to be required to address the future act provisions of the <i>Native Title Act 1993</i> .
<p><b>Recommendation 2</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation ensure the rights of fossickers and prospectors under the <i>Mining Act 1978</i> are observed.</p>	Accepted.	Discussions on this have taken place with the Association of Mining and Exploration Companies, the Amalgamated Prospectors and Leaseholders Association of WA and the Department of Mines and Petroleum, and this will continue during the reservation process.
<p><b>Recommendation 3</b> All caretakers on DEC-managed former pastoral leases should be required to have a firearms licence and Licensed Pest Control Operator (LPCO) qualifications.</p>	Accepted in part.	DEC will ensure that new caretakers engaged have such qualifications and will encourage and assist current caretakers to obtain these qualifications. Where volunteers and seasonal campground hosts are used for short-stay seasonal caretaking, or where no caretaker with these qualifications is available, this may not be achieved.
<p><b>Recommendation 4</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation replace or retrain all remaining tenants on its former pastoral leases to ensure that properties are staffed by caretakers with firearms and LPCO</p>	Accepted in part.	See the response to recommendation 3. It may be inappropriate to terminate current arrangements with individual tenants based on revised skill requirements which they may not be able to meet.

<p>qualifications.</p> <p>Priority should be given to replacing or retraining the tenants in homesteads located in the Kennedy Range/Mt Augustus National Parks and the south-western Goldfields.</p>		
<p><b>Recommendation 5</b></p> <p>By way of incentive to attract suitable caretakers, the Department of Environment and Conservation offer sub-letting arrangements which allow small portions of landholdings to be used for the caretaker's independent hobbies.</p>	<p>Accepted in principle.</p>	<p>As most of the former pastoral lease areas are unallocated Crown land, DEC does not have adequate legal ability to offer such arrangements. Where it is practical and appropriate to do so, DEC will explore with caretakers, on a case-by-case basis, opportunities for hobby use in keeping with the conservation purpose of the lands.</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 6</b></p> <p>The Department of Environment and Conservation not acquire any more pastoral leases until it has addressed and implemented the opportunities for improved management identified throughout this report.</p>	<p>Noted.</p>	<p>The recommendations in the report are being acted upon by DEC in line with this Government response.</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 7</b></p> <p>The Department of Environment and Conservation allocate appropriate resources to competently manage its former pastoral lease properties in a manner consistent with its conservation objectives and obligations to its neighbours.</p>	<p>Accepted.</p>	<p>DEC has, through reprioritisation of existing resources, allocated an additional \$1 million per annum to the management of former pastoral leases, commencing in the 2010/11 financial year. Furthermore on 5 April 2010 the Minister for Agriculture and Food and the Minister for Environment jointly announced an additional \$3.65 million for strategic wild dog control and \$5.17 million to upgrade and extend the State Barrier Fence. Resourcing will continue to be addressed in the normal budget process.</p>

<b>Good Neighbour Policy and Neighbour Relations</b>		
<p><b>Recommendation 8</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation bring forward its review of the <i>Good Neighbour Policy</i>, currently scheduled for 2012, to immediately review where departmental relations with landholders can be improved.</p>	Accepted.	DEC has commenced this review.
<p><b>Recommendation 9</b> Department of Environment and Conservation take action to expedite proposed changes to the <i>Conservation and Land Management Act 1984</i> that will provide legislative backing to joint-management plans with Traditional Owners.</p>	Accepted.	The <i>Conservation Legislation Amendment Bill 2010</i> was introduced into Parliament on 17 November 2010.
<b>Management of Pest Animals and Weeds</b>		
<p><b>Recommendation 10</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation conduct its future water source removal operations only during periods where abundant surface waters are evident and only after corresponding culling activities have been confirmed with relevant parties and neighbouring properties.</p>	Accepted.	This is an extension of current policy, consistent with DEC's plans for improved communication with neighbours. Implementation of this policy will always be subject to animal welfare and land degradation considerations.
<p><b>Recommendation 11</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation report on its water source removal policy and how this policy now ensures the humane management of affected animals.</p>	Accepted.	Procedures for the closure of artificial water supplies have already been revised to ensure animal welfare requirements are met. DEC will report to the Minister for Environment by 31 March 2011 and the report will be publicly released.

<p><b>Recommendation 12</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation ensure that all windmills closed on its properties are dismantled and monitored to permanently remove the risk of death or injury to humans and animals.</p>	Accepted.	This practice is already in place.
<p><b>Recommendation 13</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation include on its website an updated map of all active and deactivated water sources on former pastoral leases.</p>	Noted.	DEC will upgrade its website to include this information. However, travellers should be aware that mapped water sources in all areas of the rangelands may not contain water when visited or not be fully operational. Travellers should always carry sufficient water with them for their anticipated needs, as well as emergency supplies.
<p><b>Recommendation 14</b> Department of Environment and Conservation report within six months on the efficiency of its aerial pest management programs in the five zones with a view to reducing costs and reallocating its resources, where appropriate, to more effective local forms of pest animal control.</p>	Accepted.	DEC is committed to cost-effective, efficient and safe pest animal control and will report to the Minister for Environment by 31 March 2011, and the report will be publicly released. DEC considers that aerial baiting and shooting have a legitimate role to play in pest animal control programs.
<p><b>Recommendation 15</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation pay, and the government match, an amount equivalent to the Agriculture Protection Rates to the Zone Control Authorities for former pastoral leases now under the department's control. This funding is to be used, in the context of the <i>Good Neighbour Policy</i>, to help minimise the impact of feral pests on neighbouring pastoral properties.</p>	Noted.	Such payment is not a requirement of legislation, and DEC's current expenditure on pest animals and weeds on former pastoral leases exceeds the estimated amount that would be payable if DEC were liable for Agriculture Protection Rates. The Government matching of Agriculture Protection Rates paid by pastoralists is recognition that many pastoral leases operate adjacent to non-pastoral public lands. DEC and the Department of Agriculture and Food will jointly address the response that most appropriately maintains and improves collaborative pest animal and weed control programs. As stated in the response to recommendation 7, the Minister for Agriculture and Food and the Minister for Environment have jointly announced an additional \$3.65 million for strategic wild dog control, and \$5.17 million to upgrade and extend the State Barrier Fence.

<p><b>Recommendation 16</b> In the context of the <i>Good Neighbour Policy</i>, the Department of Environment and Conservation coordinate its pest animal and weed control programs on its former pastoral leases with the Zone Control Authorities to ensure the objectives of the department and the pastoralists are achieved.</p>	Accepted.	This practice is already in place.
<b>Pastoral Heritage Programs</b>		
<p><b>Recommendation 17</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation work with the Heritage Council of Western Australia to conduct an evaluation of all former pastoral leases managed by the department to determine which, if any, properties should be placed on the State Register of Heritage Places.</p>	Accepted.	DEC will expand on past work conducted with the Heritage Council in this regard.
<p><b>Recommendation 18</b> Appropriate funding is made available for the Department of Environment and Conservation for the maintenance of pastoral heritage on any of its properties placed on the State Register following the evaluation conducted by the Heritage Council.</p>	Accepted.	Funding is a matter for determination in the normal budget process. DEC already has a commitment to protect State Register assets on lands it manages.
<p><b>Recommendation 19</b> The Department of Environment and Conservation establish a protocol whereby local governments and historical societies are invited to record and remove for preservation items of heritage value from DEC-managed properties.</p>	Accepted.	DEC will work with these parties, and the Heritage Council, in relation to items of heritage value on former pastoral leases managed by DEC.