

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

INQUIRY INTO PASTORAL LEASES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 2013**

SESSION FOUR

Members

**Hon Liz Behjat (Chairman)
Hon Darren West (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Nigel Hallett
Hon Jacqui Boydell
Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson**

Hearing commenced at 10.41 am**Dr BRIAN WARREN****General Manager, Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group Inc, sworn and examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: If we could just go through the formalities. I am not sure that you have been in the room when I have been introducing my colleagues on the committee. My name is Liz Behjat. I am the Chair of the committee. I represent the North Metropolitan Region. Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson is from East Metro Region; Hon Darren West, from the Agricultural Region; Hon Nigel Hallett, from the South West Region; and Hon Jacqui Boydell, from the Mining and Pastoral Region. As you can see, we have got most of the regions covered, except the South West—but we do not rate them anyway!

Dr Warren: They are far away, aren't they!

The CHAIRMAN: If I could ask you to take an oath or an affirmation, please, Dr Warren?

Dr Warren: Certainly.

[Witness took the affirmation.]

The CHAIRMAN: You will have signed a document entitled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you read and understood document?

Dr Warren: I do, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. A transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, please quote the full title of any document you refer to during the course of this hearing for the record, and please be aware of the microphone and try to speak into it, and ensure that you do not cover it with papers or make noise near it. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. If some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today's proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise you that publication or disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute a contempt of parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege.

Dr Warren: Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: They are the formalities out of the way. For the benefit of the committee, Dr Warren, could you explain the role and the activities of the Rangelands NRM?

Dr Warren: Yes, I can. I have given you a sheet there which summarises that. I thought that might be the quickest and easiest way of achieving that, but I do have a few points that I will just make —

The CHAIRMAN: Please do.

Dr Warren: — and particularly try to emphasise why I am here. I would like to restrict my comments, as much as I can today, to the first two points in your terms of reference, particularly the first one, as you might appreciate. I do not have such a good understanding of the latter two and I am really referring generally to issues that relate to environmental management across pastoral leases, so I will be more comfortable with that.

The CHAIRMAN: We are very happy for you to speak to the things that you have knowledge of and not speculate on those you do not have knowledge of!

Dr Warren: I will try and make sure I do not! Rangelands NRM, as you see, is an incorporated association and it was set up about 12 years ago under the Natural Heritage Trust with federal government funding at the time. It has continued since under other forms of funding and we still go. We are particularly interested in this inquiry because there is good evidence that says land-condition decline is occurring across much of the rangelands. I have provided you with some information there which summarises that quite briefly, or the information we have quite briefly. That is not referenced, so if you need more information or better information, I can provide it, but it is just an indicator of what I am talking to you today. Now, the loss of the soil, flora and fauna resources and damage to cultural aspects of the rangelands is important to us because our brief really is to assist land managers across the whole region to achieve good environmental outcomes while they are utilising their land for productive and cultural purposes. In this context, obviously the pastoral industry is quite critical to us. It is a critical stakeholder. They manage about 45 per cent of the area that we have some responsibilities in. There are about 450 of those businesses, and currently I think we work in some way with perhaps 100 of them. Obviously we do not cover the lot, but we do have a significant number of contacts within that industry, and it is important to us that we maintain those and continue to work with them. We see the pastoral land and the animal and plant species within the pastoral areas as being important natural resources, and so again, that helps get this inquiry into our remit, I think, and our area of interest.

One of the issues that are affecting us at the moment is the rundown perhaps of services from state agencies to the pastoral areas. It is putting us in a position where there is some pressure coming on for organisations like Rangelands to provide support to pastoral businesses in areas that we are sometimes not particularly comfortable with. Particularly if you want to maintain or return land into production, then quite often there are some best-practice, land-management issues that do not also relate directly to good environmental practices, so we are trying to work clearly with the pastoralists we work with to match both the need to get back to the higher levels of production and also manage the environment.

The CHAIRMAN: Dr Warren, could you be a bit more specific when you say there are state agencies who have run down their services?

Dr Warren: I should have said on-ground services, but yes.

The CHAIRMAN: On-ground services. Can you give us some specific examples of which agencies and what it is that has exactly happened?

Dr Warren: I guess the two that we deal with most and that are most closely associated with the pastoral businesses—we have been closely related to—are the Department of Agriculture and Food and the Department of Parks and Wildlife. The Department of Agriculture and Food has a limited number of staff in the field anywhere now. I cannot tell you the number exactly, but certainly when we work through our region, our contacts probably only number two or three people in the department of agriculture that actually also work in conjunction with us. State agencies have always been important partners to us and will remain so, but it is now quite difficult to find people in the field that can be part of our programs and support our programs, too. The Department of Parks and Wildlife has changed quite significantly in the way it works in some of the regions, particularly in the more southerly regions. I guess the Kimberley still has quite strong support. But the level of influence with Parks and Wildlife has declined because of some issues that they perceive in the way they actually want to work with land managers. Pastoralists are uncomfortable when dealing with those two state agencies, and I get that expressed to me quite frequently. I have to say here—I do not have strong evidence—but I suspect that the stick is not particularly well liked and the carrot has sort of disappeared pretty much.

The CHAIRMAN: That is an interesting analogy. Please continue.

Dr Warren: I was going to say that the conflict between maintaining or returning pastoral land to productivity and to improve productivity and profitability conflicts with best land management

practices, and we are trying to work with pastoralists to develop a systems approach to rangelands management that is based on land system function rather than specifically on notional stocking rates or interventions that directly address degradation. I think that is our key point to this inquiry: we believe that without support for change, the pastoral industry will continue to do what it has always done and will continue to achieve what it always has. As you can see from some of that information I have there, I think the decline is quite significant in some areas, and I cannot see that being turned around unless there are major changes to actual on-land practices.

[10.50 am]

We have been in the past quite supportive of the rangelands reform agenda, and I might refer to that a bit later on. I am not quite sure where that is going. It seems to have stalled, and I think that is a shame because it certainly had some good principles aligned with it that I think are important if there are changes to be made. As I indicated, through our programs we are aiming to support a quality-assured process directly linked to understanding and managing land systems in a sustainable way, rather than just through end-point assessments of ground cover or plant cover at a limited number of worn sites. Although they are important, I think there are other ways of actually ensuring that land management is more appropriate to the land systems that are in place on the different pastoral leases. We believe we can assist with these objectives through supporting that landscape function analysis. As I indicated, we are working with about 15 per cent of land managers now, and we hope to be able to maintain that. We have a land-systems analysis tool called ecologically sustainable rangeland management, or ESRM for short, which is based around landscape mapping and whole-property planning for environmental and production benefits, and we see this as being critical into the future. We would like to draw your attention to the fact that these tools are available. They do not have to be from us, but there are many others, too, that need to be considered in future management of pastoral land and pastoral leases.

You have undoubtedly had many critical issues put to you from an environmental management perspective or a natural resource management perspective, which is where I am coming from. I think there are three key ones that are important to consider and must be considered as part of any new lease agreements, and that is the management of total grazing pressure. I am sure you have heard the words somewhere before. But certainly the understanding of that, I do not think, is perhaps as good as it could be and the importance of that is perhaps not stressed as much as it could be. The influence of native herbivores and the feral animals—goats, camels, horses, donkeys or whatever—is not necessarily separated from the impact of the domestic animals, and that needs to be done and to be managed in some way for environmental outcomes. I think there is an issue in some parts of the rangelands through poorly planned and uncoordinated invasive-species control at a landscape scale, and I believe that it is absolutely critical that the regional biosecurity groups receive the support and effort put into them that is required to get them all up and functioning effectively again. I know there are a few now that are starting to come on stream and are doing a good job, but I know there are also several that we have had a bit to do with that are struggling to get through the phase between when they were previously looked after by the Department of Agriculture and Food and the new model where they are to some extent independent. That has to be fixed. It is critical that they are brought on stream and given the strength they need as quickly as possible, I believe, for that invasive species control to be effective again.

One of the other areas that I think is critical is the opportunity for rangelands pastoral lease managers to have access to alternative enterprises. I imagine you have also been beaten around the ears by that quite enough, so I will not say much more other than opportunities from things like carbon farming or stewardship and potentially biodiversity offset programs in the future would have a very positive effect, you would hope, on the dollar bottom line as well as on the environmental outcomes from pastoral lease management. I think I might leave it there, thanks, Chair. If you have questions, I would prefer to deal with it that way. I had a few other comments but I think I have probably just said enough at the moment.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: Thanks for that, Dr Warren. Obviously you are a federal-funded body.

Dr Warren: Pretty much. We have got some state funding, too.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: How closely are you working with the old DEC-type organisation? From what you said, it just seems to be a doubling up of a lot of the work, and from our prior hearings there is a lot of groups. How much funding is going into all this monitoring and with what results?

Dr Warren: I am not quite sure I understand, sorry.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: You have got your organisation, the NRM, the state organisation, and then you have got all the smaller bodies out there all doing the same thing. How much collaboration is there between you and are you sort of coming in on the one direction?

Dr Warren: We are trying very hard to. We see that as one of our key roles, actually, to try and ensure collaboration and facilitate groups working together. We are quite a small organisation people-wise. We have funding this year, I think, of around about \$4 million in total. Nearly all of that is from the commonwealth and, as you indicated, there is a bit from the state, and we have some other resources, too, but not much. We tend to be brokers and we have been largely brokers in that we work with the state agencies and other smaller community groups to try to encourage them and support them to undertake activities on-ground. We have not delivered in the past very much ourselves. We do a little bit more now, but we still tend to be quite focused on working with other groups to try to ensure that the skills are developed in the communities and that there is potential continuity of activities into the future that way. That is one of the reasons why we are concentrating very much on what we call our sustainable pastoralism program, which is with pastoral land managers to try to develop their skills, encourage them to look for opportunities to change and to ensure that once Rangelands is not there, which it will be the case one day—we have no pretensions of being around forever anywhere—that they will have the skills and the willingness to try new things to actually continue themselves. So we try to enable that. We work with state agencies, rather than compete. We try very hard to ensure that there is no cost shifting, and in general we have very good support and have had very good support in the regional areas; it is just that now there are relatively few people.

Hon DARREN WEST: Just on diversification perhaps, Brian, if I might. You sort of touched on it there at the end, and you are quite right that most people have brought it up in what they have said to us. You touched on a few examples there. One of two main issues we are finding with diversification is that the permits go with the person rather than with the property, which entails some difficulties when it is time to sell, but also there seems to be a rule, if you like, that pastoralists have pastoralism as their primary industry and diversification projects need to be of a smaller scale and produce less income. Is that something you would like to see changed?

Dr Warren: I think it would be good if the pastoralists actually had control over what they chose to do provided the advice to them was good around that, too. From my dealings and workings with pastoralists, I do not think any of them really want to go away from being livestock producers. I think it is what they are. But they would like to have the opportunity perhaps to have an income—I guess Mr Smith was talking about it earlier in a couple of locations—but to be able to do some other things. I think there are opportunities around carbon farming, as an example, where you might shut up a paddock or part of your total land area to farm that—I guess to a level where it is worthwhile—but you manage the rest of your business as a pastoral enterprise. This is perhaps closing some of the poorly productive land or degraded land up to let it recover and produce a few dollars, and you can still potentially graze it. You need to manage it; you cannot just close it up and leave it anyhow.

Hon DARREN WEST: The reason that I am asking is that many, many pastoral leases are unviable in terms of pastoralism now. That severely hampers what options you have got, because you have to make more money out of pastoralism than you can make out of diversification, like

tourism or a perhaps small horticultural operation, say. I mean, I see it as an opportunity. I just wondered if that is the way you would tackle it.

Dr Warren: Yes, I do. I do not know the numbers again—I am sorry—but I am told that through the southern rangelands particularly there are actually a lot of pastoralists there that work off-farm and most of their income is coming from other businesses.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: Just quickly, Brian, how much satellite imaging do you do in correlation of weather events to give you sort of up-to-date snapshots?

[11.00 am]

Dr Warren: We actually do not do any. If we want that sort of information we would go to Landgate or Department of Parks and Wildlife, or someone like that. We do not have that facility. I actually was asked to raise the issue of using remote sensing to monitor rangeland pasture conditions. In saying that, there needs to be quite a lot of effort put into that, but we do not have that resource. In the work we do through ecologically sustainable rangeland management planning, we would either use a satellite image or an aerial photograph in that process. At the present time we are only doing very small numbers, but in the past there has been about 100 and something of those plans done, I think; so it has been used quite extensively in that way. But as far as actually monitoring or tracking change—sorry, I should say there is a group, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, that we have worked with for about five or six years in the Kimberley on the EcoFire project. They use it very extensively, but we are actually funding them to do the work rather than doing it directly. It has been critical to that fire-scar analysis work they have done. There are a number of other projects like that.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: Some of the things that are available overseas, from a federal government perspective, why are they not being introduced into Australia or particularly Western Australia?

Dr Warren: I do not think I can answer that adequately, I am sorry. I suspect that there is perhaps not the funding around, in the northern areas particularly, to do much more, but I cannot be sure of that. I could just add, I suppose, that Rangelands NRM WA is part of an alliance with the other regional NRM groups in Australia who have rangelands country. There are about 14 of us, I think, in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and the NT, and we have been pushing the federal government for some time to actually purchase and make available to all the rangelands areas the land-sat imagery going back a large number of years. There is some progress on that front, but they are going through another funding-cuts audit at the moment, so I am not sure whether that is going to drop off the radar or not, but that would be good if that was available.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Brian, I just have one question. I wanted to take you back to your comment about the on-ground services from DAFWA and the Department of Parks and Wildlife. Based on your feedback from the pastoral industry, what on-ground services are required? If government was looking to invest back to provide that support, what would it be?

Dr Warren: I am not sure that I can answer you adequately on that. I worked for the department of agriculture for 10 years sometime back. While I was there, they were going through the process of withdrawing extension-type services. I can see why that has happened and I cannot see that returning, but I do think there are the social-support activities that perhaps need to be considered. I think there is a lot of technology available which would have cost an enormous amount of money to develop, which probably has been extended to pastoral businesses over the last 20 years or more but has not been picked up. I suspect that in many cases, even if you had an extension service promoting it now, it still might not be picked up, because I think there are other issues related to non-adoption and change than just having the knowledge or facility to do that. I think there are a whole lot of social issues involved. I think pastoralists would probably say they would like more extension services, but I am not sure that is really what they are asking for sometimes. Again, it is

more a personal opinion than fact, but it seems to me that perhaps it is the social-support network and things that are more important.

The CHAIRMAN: I think that has completed our questions this morning. Thank you very much for appearing in front of us so we can get another little piece into the jigsaw.

Dr Warren: Thank you for your time. I appreciate that.

Hearing concluded at 11.04 am