

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

**INQUIRY INTO PASTORAL LEASES
IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT KALGOORLIE
MONDAY, 4 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 11.03 am**Mr ROSS WOOD,****Goldfields–Nullarbor Rangelands Biosecurity Association Inc, sworn and examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the committee I welcome you to the meeting. Before we begin, would you like to take the oath or the affirmation?

Mr Wood: Either.

[Witness took the oath.]

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

Mr Wood: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: These 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. Please be aware of the microphone and try to speak into it. 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 for 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.

Mr Wood, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make to the committee?

Mr Wood: Yes. I am here today representing several organisations, I suspect, and in a general way. I was pastoral manager of a very big pastoral company on the Nullarbor up until about seven years ago, which arguably could be said to be the biggest fenced sheep station in Western Australia, if not Australia, where we ran up to 120 000 sheep over the property of 19 000 square kilometres, all behind fenced conditions; and that allowed us to do that and it is still operating out there without the enormous problem of wild dogs. I am also the executive officer of the Goldfields–Nullarbor Rangelands Biosecurity Association Incorporated, which is the RBG set up to manage the biosecurity issues of the goldfields–Nullarbor, and the common that is called an RBG. It is basically taking over from the roles that the Department of Agriculture and Food and the Agriculture Protection Board have previously done, on a more community-based process. I am also the coordinator for the Kalgoorlie Pastoral Alliance, which is a private company set up by the pastoralists around Kalgoorlie in an endeavour to combat the wild dog problem by seeking an opportunity to fence their properties with a loan from the state government. I am really just a conduit also for pastoralists in the area from Wiluna right down to the Nullarbor. Because I deal with them over such a large variety of issues—feral animals, weeds, cactus, all sorts of things—I pick up on the whole deal and therefore I offer myself to be of use to you as a receptacle of knowledge.

The CHAIRMAN: Tell us about the Kalgoorlie Pastoral Alliance; when was that formed?

Mr Wood: That was formed about two and half years ago. The pastoralists around Kalgoorlie approached me to find a way to help them out of the issue of wild dogs. Wild dogs have decimated—I think you have heard here plenty of times—the goldfields pastoral industry, and

because of my background and perhaps my thought processes, they approached me to find a way to build a fence. They had come to the realisation that the only way that they could possibly reinvigorate their industry around Kalgoorlie was to build a physical barrier around their properties and to try to keep out our very bad neighbour, who is called UCL, and his problems. In general every property that faces UCL has probably the worst neighbour that they could possibly face because he is underfunded, no-one takes any responsibility for what goes on out there and in fact most government departments look for ways to stop you controlling the feral animals or weeds that emanate from there. So he is really the worst neighbour you could come about, and I believe that that Pastoral Alliance came about because of desperation, that they needed to have someone that could lobby government and do whatever. And because of my background in many fields, I suppose, they approached me to do it. We formed a private company, because we thought that would be the best vehicle to do so.

[11.10 am]

We then raised seed funding from the pastoralists to do a cost–benefit analysis of a fence, which was the first—we had to go through a series of steps to do this. We did a cost–benefit analysis. That gave us a positive outcome to take to government. Then we approached the government after we wrote quite a good project up to explain what the problem is. That has been presented to the Premier, and it was received quite well by the Premier because he understood what the problem is. Basically, in a nutshell, anybody can get rid of flies in your kitchen during the summertime and the spring. You just run around there and constantly hit them with Mortein and whatever, but if you get damn sick of doing that, what you do is you put a flyscreen up, and that is the most effective way to keep wild dogs out of your operations. Anyway, we wrote a project and we got a commitment from the state government prior to the last state election to build a fence and to support the Kalgoorlie Pastoral Alliance’s endeavours. Now, since then we have had quite a lot of trouble with various organisations standing on the hose and making it difficult to progress that, but we are still progressing it.

The CHAIRMAN: You say you had a commitment from the state government to build the fence.

Mr Wood: Yes, from the Premier.

The CHAIRMAN: In what terms was that commitment given?

Mr Wood: Well, the commitment was to assist the Kalgoorlie Pastoral Alliance through the biosecurity fund of \$20 million that was set up to build a physical dog fence, the terms of which are still under—obviously, we are negotiating with the state government and the Premier directly to try and get a clarity around the terms that that loan might be given to us, because we asked for a long-term loan at low interest to be able to build it back, and we agreed to pay back half of that loan over a long term.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: Ross, just from outside, as you have not got a perpetual lease on these properties—it is a state asset—why would you not look at that fence material coming from government and you guys providing the labour and building it instead of encumbering your station owners with further debt?

Mr Wood: Well, we approached the state government. We needed to put skin in the game, I suppose, to show that we were committed to do it. I mean, plenty of people can go out there and say, “Well, okay; we want a grant to do such and such”, but if you are prepared to put skin in the game and be prepared to pay back a loan over a long period—okay, be it favourable—then that shows the commitment of the pastoral industry. What we are asking really from the government is the same sort of commitment back from government to say, “Well, look, do we want this pastoral industry out here or not?” It seems to me that it gets back to that same old problem of being a landlord. The state government is a landlord for an enormous amount of country—the UCL and the pastoral lands of Western Australia—and it obviously cannot manage the whole lot by itself or

through its own endeavours, so it needs to have pastoralists out there managing it for them in a manner that is at least consistent with at least keeping the weeds and pests and everything out of it. So I think there really needs to be a magnificent change in dynamics from government to say, “Okay; look, we actually want to encourage pastoralists to be out there”, and that leads on to all these other issues here that we are faced with with the leases and things. We need to get that encouragement. We actually want pastoralists out there managing the properties, because that is the best possible way you could do it. All those people that are around here are all here because they genuinely love being and living and bringing up their families in pastoral areas in the outback. That is a great life, and all of us that have brought up families—and I have—in the outback know it is a great way to live and it is a great thing. We can communicate back to you people that we can look after the properties for the state government, and if you are a landlord, you should be looking to encourage your tenants rather than bashing them over the head with the poorly thought and, I believe, naive type of lease agreements that are out there. I am a landlord of various properties myself, and I would not go to my tenants and say, “These are the things you can’t do”, without showing them what they can do. You know, be nice as a landlord and you will get a better result.

Hon DARREN WEST: DAFWA—what is your presence?

Mr Wood: I have nothing to do with DAFWA, except I operate out of their office.

Hon DARREN WEST: Okay.

Mr Wood: The RBG is—do you know what an RBG is?

Hon DARREN WEST: Yes.

Mr Wood: Right. Well, the Goldfields Nullarbor Rangelands Biosecurity Association is the RBG for the goldfields and Nullarbor, and my role in that is that I am just the executive officer of it. I organise all the aerial baiting processes and also the new endeavours that we are doing dealing with pests, like weeds such as invasive cactuses, and camels. So I am sort of like the conduit to make some of those things happen.

Hon DARREN WEST: Do you know if there is a DAFWA presence in the area and what do they do; how many staff?

Mr Wood: Yes, there is a DAFWA presence. It is very, very, very much diminished. There used to be a very dynamic office here in Kalgoorlie, with probably 10 or 12 people working in there. Right now I think—correct me if I am wrong—there are about two biosecurity officers for the entire rangelands of Western Australia.

Hon DARREN WEST: How long a period are we talking for that change?

Mr Wood: For that to have happened? Probably in the last seven years it has just been on a downward spiral, and the last biosecurity officer left this office here in Kalgoorlie a couple of weeks ago permanently. So that is the end of it. We do not have a biosecurity officer here for the whole goldfields–Nullarbor area. There is no-one that anyone can go to government and say, “We’ve got a problem”, or whatever. This is the agriculture department, and yet we have a Department of Parks and Wildlife with probably 20 people around there, and we do not have a department of agriculture with—there are two people, I think. There is a lady that does the mapping for the entire state just based there that has not a specific role in Kalgoorlie, and we have an office girl there who does accounting for the whole department of agriculture, not specifically anything to do with here, and we have a general person called Jim Addison, who is involved all over Western Australia as a technical officer, and Mac Jensen, who is in charge of all the camel projects in Western Australia, but it is not specifically goldfields–Nullarbor oriented.

Hon DARREN WEST: His projects are controlling camels or —

Mr Wood: Yes. He is part of that camel project.

The CHAIRMAN: You talk about that the dog fence certainly would alleviate the dog problem.

Mr Wood: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the situation with the camel problem? Does a dog fence stop camels?

Mr Wood: A dog fence can stop camels inasmuch that it is a boundary fence—you know, it is a line in the sand. It does not physically stop them, but it is somewhere where you can say, “Well, when they get to this point, they’re there”, you know, and you need to control things up to there. If you just have an open gate, everybody walks in. If you have a fence there, at least they come up to a fence and then they might wander along the fence, but the process with controlling camels along fences is basically that you should continue to cull them very heavily and out from a fence line, but it is a line in the sand as far as camels are concerned. Camels will come through and smash everything, and there needs to be a constant line in the sand there, and then we work back into the interface area all the time, controlling camels and shooting them out so that they are not—I mean, it would be great to be able to get rid of them right across the whole of inland Australia, but I do not think that is practical today. We do not have the opportunity to do so, so at least we should be patrolling and keeping them out of that area, because once they get established into pastoral areas, it is so hard, because they smash all the infrastructure and they have access to water. It is reasonably simple to control them in the outback because there are only a few watering points that they can operate out of, and the people who shoot camels know where those are and they can keep on going at them.

The CHAIRMAN: The current methods that are being used to try to keep down the dog population, they are not working.

Mr Wood: I would not think so.

The CHAIRMAN: And why is that?

[11.20 am]

Mr Wood: There is a difficulty in controlling dogs in that you need everybody to be participating and that means all pastoralists, all mining companies—everyone that has anything to do with the pastoral area. But it also means that that neighbour that I was referring to, UCL, needs to do his part as well. There are no opportunities to really cull heavily into the UCL because the Department of Parks and Wildlife are charged with administering and controlling things in UCL but have no funding to be able to do so. So, they prevent us going out and managing our own control projects into UCL. They say, “You can do that little buffer here and that little buffer there”, but they have a basic misunderstanding that dogs can just keep on travelling. The more that you clean out the areas within, then they just continually reinvade.

The CHAIRMAN: So Parks and Wildlife do not have an active dog eradication program?

Mr Wood: No.

The CHAIRMAN: And you are not allowed to go into UCL to conduct a dog eradication program?

Mr Wood: No, we are just gradually starting to encourage them. We did up until recently, when we had a biosecurity officer here, run an aeroplane around the outside of the pastoral boundaries in a joint project with DEC to aerial bait there. We did that once a year, jointly funded by DEC and ourselves, but quite minimal. It was only sort of a token effort, really. They kept lifting the bar to the point where they said we could not continue to do that because we were not using a twin-engine aircraft and we did not have the right authority to be there and all the rest of it. So, we made a decision as an RBG to say, “Okay, you do it yourself then and we’ll just try and keep you honest.” But they came back to me the other day and said, “We actually don’t have all that many funds to do that, so we’ll only be able to do a very partial program on that.” That is the thing; they are underfunded for doing that, yet they have the ability to be able to prevent us doing the projects out there ourselves. I think if we were given the opportunity, we could go and do a massive job out

there because we know where those dogs are breeding and all sorts of things, but we are not allowed to go out there and poison them and kill them.

Hon DARREN WEST: You said they were sort of making a token effort, and we would clearly want—ideally there would be—a meaningful effort. Can you give us an indication as to what that might run to in terms of costs?

Mr Wood: Yes, I can tell you exactly. We put in about \$25 000 worth of effort this year to controlling UCL with the plane and they claim that they spend \$200 000 a year in controlling wild dogs on the goldfields–Nullarbor.

Hon DARREN WEST: Sorry?

Mr Wood: You see they have a dogger as well, but he wanders over an enormous amount of area. His cost direct to DEC would be about \$135 000 I would say.

Hon DARREN WEST: So, to make a meaningful control, like, if they had to do a half-decent job on the dog problem in the rangelands, how many doggers? How much would the contribution need to be?

Mr Wood: I think that if they were prepared to put in \$1 million worth of effort and also get their foot off the hose as far as allowing us to go into the areas that we know are the breeding areas of wild dogs and keep those numbers down specifically, then I think we could probably get somewhere. I administer a fund at the moment of around about \$700 000 a year where we do our aerial baiting. We buy 60 tonnes of meat a year and do an aerial baiting. I employ several doggers to go out there and do sporadic attacks into where —

The CHAIRMAN: Could you just explain to me what a dogger actually does?

Mr Wood: Yes. He lays baits and lays traps where possible, but more and more it is just a baiting process with doggers, simply because they cannot get back. You need lots and lots of doggers to make a difference. There used to be something like 16 doggers operating out of Kalgoorlie probably 15 years ago, run by the APB. Today, I basically manage two doggers to operate over the entire area from Wiluna to the goldfields, and that is not a full-time job for any of those persons. I can only give them contracts for little bits of the worst possible areas. So, we do commando attacks into those areas that are the worst.

Hon DARREN WEST: Just to sort of make it clear again: you reckon \$1 million a year would fund seven doggers, on those rough figures?

Mr Wood: Yes.

Hon DARREN WEST: If you had seven doggers and you were able to do what you reckon you need to do in terms of getting into crown land and sort of not be opposed by other agencies, you feel as though a meaningful contribution could be made to the problem?

Mr Wood: If the Department of Parks and Wildlife were able to contribute \$1 million and we had \$1 million, I think we could certainly make a big impact into this whole operation here. That is not to say —

The CHAIRMAN: So it is actually \$2 million.

Mr Wood: Yes. The pastoralists already contribute to that \$700 000 that I administer; the pastoralists contribute half of that and the other half is matched dollars by the state government and also we get \$100 000 a year from R for R.

The CHAIRMAN: If you were to embark on that sort of dog eradication program, do you see that there are any issues with environmental groups in relation to a program such as that?

Mr Wood: There are always environmental groups that do not like the use of 1080, for instance, and myself; 1080 is a horrible substance because it is a cruel death for anything. But we have no

other tools; there are no other tools. One of the tools that was very useful was using residual chemicals in the past, like strychnine, and I think that was probably one of our most successful tools because it was long lasting, whereas 1080 is a poison that is non-residual, which means that it lasts about two or three months. It can last longer, but two or three months, which means you have to keep going back and doing it more and more and more. The problem with baiting is that baits will kill dogs, but we have not yet found the ability to encourage every dog to pick up a bait—the attractiveness of that bait. They will walk past baits one day, and the next day they will eat it. We know damn well that dogs will be killed by 1080. We have lost so many of our own domestic dogs from 1080 that it makes us cry, but this long-term effect of trying to continually bait with 1080 is a problem because I think that probably within the next 10 years we will be struggling to even have the ability to use 1080. That is why I think a lot of people are convinced that we have got to go to a physical barrier, which is a much more sensible idea because it means less use of those poisons.

The CHAIRMAN: And is 1080 a problem for other animals—native animals?

Mr Wood: No, that is the beauty of 1080; 1080 does not affect native animals to any great extent because there is a natural immunity to 1080 in our native animals.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Can I just take you back, Ross, to a couple of your comments about the lease? You were saying as a good landlord that it is probably the language in the lease that is being utilised and probably government as the landlord is—you know, maybe we need to do some work on the way we are doing that. I take that on board completely. What are your comments, in view of that, of how the Department of Lands have managed the renewal process of the leases, and also in terms of industry's engagement back with the department? How has that worked or not worked?

[11.30 am]

Mr Wood: I do not think it has worked very well. The process of renewal of this lease has been going on for a long, long time—long; it has been painful. Ever since I have been in the pastoral industry I think we have talked about 2015 being D-day; that is when everything is going to happen. It has just dawdled along and dawdled along, and admittedly there was, I think, potentially from pastoralists earlier on a perception that if they hung off long enough they would get this Holy Grail of perpetual tenure. I do not really know whether that is really what we should be asking for. I think the original lease that pastoralists had was not all bad. The problem with the original lease is that it became dated inasmuch that it did not account or allow for year 2000-type agriculture, and the year 2000 agriculture needs to be able to diversify. No-one has the answers for what would be the best diversification out in the rangelands, but I think the opportunities need to be given to pastoralists to be able to find what they can possibly do on there. You cannot say that all the pastoral lands are the same or have the same value or carrying capacities or anything, and not all pastoralists have the same abilities or the capital inflows to be able to do it. So each property wants to be able, I believe, to diversify in whichever manner they can make it work, and therefore let commercial reality take place. To do that best, I have put forward several times that the permit system is cumbersome and very awkward for people to try to work amongst. Really what we should be saying to pastoralists is, “You have this property, you are responsible for it. We obviously don't want you to be clearing it or damaging it unnecessarily.” But we should say to them, “You should take one per cent of that property”—which can be verified by aerial photography very simply—“You do what you need to do there as long as it is sensible. Put a case to us that you would like to try this on this one per cent of the property”. That might sound like an enormous amount of country to some of you, but if you took into account what people are already doing with roads, yards, airstrips, woolsheds and homesteads and all the rest of it and what mining companies are able to clear and dig holes in and all the rest of it, it is actually a very small part of a property. If you said to them, “Well you select the best part of that property and harvest the water, do what you can do, grow whatever you like on that one per cent,” that would not be all bad.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Has that impacted on native title? How would you do that?

Mr Wood: I think the process of native title will preclude really any change of title to Western Australian leases. That is my view. I think it is too hard, because unless you have a very strong federal government that is prepared to overturn this whole process of native title that has been dragging on for years, I do not think it will ever change. I think there will just be this continual eroding of the thing, and therefore I think the state government needs to accept the fact that it cannot change native title; it simply wants to renew those titles and just work on the diversification and allow pastoralists, just by regulation, to do a little bit more on those places and come out with a sunny face and say, "Look, we actually want you out there and we want you to be managing our land as best as possible. We want to be good landlords and we want to give you the best opportunities." The lease presented to the pastoralists just recently, I thought was absolutely naive in that it just appeared to be such a confrontational document that nobody could pick that up and say, "Gee, these guys really want us to be here."

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: I completely concur. I think without pastoralists managing the land for all of Western Australia, you would have a disaster on your hands, so I agree.

Mr Wood: I think the government really wants to come out and be really bold and say, "We want pastoralists out there and we want to give you a good lease that will encourage you to do the best possible things on it."

The CHAIRMAN: On that note, I think we will stop your evidence there and thank you very much for coming and explaining your story as well. I have learnt a bit more about the dog problem than I knew before I got here this morning.

Mr Wood: I was just presented, just before I spoke, with a set of documents here. They just asked me if I would have the opportunity to table that.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it a document you have prepared?

Mr Wood: No; they have.

The CHAIRMAN: No, I am afraid we cannot accept it.

Mr Wood: Would you allow me to just mention what it was about?

The CHAIRMAN: Look, I am afraid not. It is not your document, and so therefore I cannot really take evidence from you that is not your own evidence. I am sorry about that.

Mr Wood: That is all right; we will go about it in another way.

Hearing concluded at 11.35 am
