



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE  
AND BIODIVERSITY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#))

**Members:**

**DR M PATERSON (Chair)**  
**MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)**  
**MS L CASTLEY**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 19 JULY 2022**

**Acting secretary to the committee:**  
**Ms J Cullen (Ph: 620 53016)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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## **Privilege statement**

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

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While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 9.30 am.**

**MULVANEY, DR MICHAEL**, Conservation Officer, Red Hill Regenerators

**KINGSLAND, MR ROSS**, President, Red Hill Regenerators

**KNIGHT, MS FRANCES**, Convenor, Hawker Landcare Group

**OATES, MR CHRIS**, Vice President, Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group

**SHEILS, MR PAUL**, Committee Member, Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group

**THE CHAIR:** I declare open this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity in its inquiry into environmental volunteerism. Before we begin, on behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the lands of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

This self-referred inquiry started on 14 December last year. The committee has received 30 submissions, which are available on the committee's website. Today, the committee will hear from 15 witness groups: Red Hill Regenerators, Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group, Hawker Landcare Group, Hackett Community Association, Griffith Narrabundah Community Association, the Friends of Blaxland Park, the Minister for the Environment and directorate officials, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Landcare ACT, SEE Change, Friends of Grasslands, Ginninderra Catchment Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group, ACT Wildlife, and the National Parks Association.

In the first session today, we will hear from Red Hill Regenerators, the Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group and the Hawker Landcare Group. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and draw your attention to the privilege statement on the table. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

**Dr Mulvaney:** Yes.

**Mr Kingsland:** Yes.

**Ms Knight:** Yes.

**Mr Oates:** Yes.

**Mr Sheils:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** We might go straight to questions, and I will lead off. In the submission by Red Hill Regenerators, I noted that it started in the 80s. I am not sure when the other groups launched. Reading through the submissions, I note that a lot of the groups started in the 80s. What is your perspective of the environment that created a space for these groups to generate then? Could it potentially be implemented now to encourage groups like yours to flourish and thrive?

**Dr Mulvaney:** Landcare started in that same decade. Red Hill Regenerators was the 76th Landcare group in the country. I do not know how many there are now, but there are thousands. It was part of a wider movement. Also, there were people in positions; the manager at the time, Tony Brownlee, was ready to take on board volunteers and was supportive. There was an initial backlash from workers, who thought we would be taking work from them, which proved to be completely and utterly false, because we have generated work for them. They are cursing us these days!

ParkCare started. I think we started with seven or eight groups, and now we have over 80 groups working on land management in the ACT. It has grown over time. There has not been a distinction between 1980 and now. It is not a case of nothing having happened since.

Very recently, there have been a lot of groups—the Narrabundah Griffith people will talk about it—who have only started in the last couple of years. They have been on urban open space, so we have moved a bit beyond the reserves.

In answering your question as to what is different, I do not think there is too much difference. It is about having people in the community with aims and outcomes, and people in government who can say, “We share those aims and outcomes; this is how we can support each other in a partnership,” and putting that in place. That is what works.

**Mr Kingsland:** The majority of our members are people who have recently retired. The age structure of the ACT is changing, and I think there are more of those people about. I think that is a factor that easily can be playing into it.

**Ms Knight:** I would like to add to what Michael was saying with regard to our group. It came out of COVID. For us, we only started two years ago, and it was a result of that immediate lack of community that going into shutdown created—that sense of isolation and the need to do something beyond, and to reconnect with the community in a way that was meaningful. Certainly, that was the driver for us. Obviously, in that urban environment, that is probably one of the things that is instigating a lot of urban type of land care.

**Mr Oates:** The Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group started in 1991. Initially, there were three women activists, most of whom are no longer with us. The motivation was simply an interest in the environment—being gobsmacked by the sheer beauty of being up on the ridge, which is absolutely marvellous, and we have pretty much gone on from that. What Dr Mulvaney said probably reflects, to a degree, our own experiences and interests.

**Mr Sheils:** I only joined towards the end of 2019. I was probably a bit typical. I had retired from work and I was looking for other interests, and I joined because I was interested in the environment. I had walked a lot on the ridge, but I had never thought of joining the volunteers up there until I met someone there and thought a bit more about it.

A lot of people use the parks for recreation, but maybe it does not come into their mind that it would be nice to contribute something towards the care of the ridge.

Maybe that is something that needs to be publicised more by the government. There is plenty of publicity about using the ridge and the parks, but maybe you could throw in a bit saying, “How about joining a ParkCare group?” It is a difficult question. People are working very hard now, especially those with jobs which involve more than the normal working hours and responsibilities. It is harder for younger people; maybe it is slanted more towards retirees.

**MS CLAY:** In the submissions, lots of different people said the same things, which generally means there is a lot of agreement on what the problems are, if not the solutions. I will pick three of them.

There seems to be a lack of coordination between the PCS and TCCS bits of government. The way that seems to manifest for a lot of our volunteers is with mowing. People seem to be trying to mark things on the mowing map or talk to their liaison and, despite doing all of the right things, the area they have carefully planted gets mowed over. That seems to happen a lot.

The lack of ability to do proper weed management with very simple power tools seems to be a source of frustration for many. It is causing particular problems when people are trained and confident in using those. Also, if they are older or if they have a disability and they have to do that manual work—I have done that manual work—it is pretty hard.

The other one is inconsistency across different agencies about using power tools, what types of chemicals are appropriate and whether you need to pay for contractors and that kind of thing.

Could you run through any observations or experiences you have had on those three things? They came through quite strongly for me.

**Mr Kingsland:** Certainly, I agree with the power tools issue. We strike some fairly large, woody weeds, and we work at them, but we do have some people who are users of motorised equipment which could help. It does seem inconsistent because the National Capital Authority approve it for some ParkCare areas that they are looking after, but we do not. I can understand the concern about safety. Obviously, things need to be put in place for that. I think there are ways around it.

**Ms Knight:** One of the things that I had noted with regard to power tools is that there is a real hesitancy to allow volunteers to use machinery of any kind. As has been alluded to, it is quite difficult to do weed management by hand, especially if you are being given a large area. To hire someone to do it is quite expensive. Usually, it has to be factored into the grant application. It makes it harder potentially to get a grant, if you have a \$900 contract fee set aside.

I wanted to talk more about the mowing. There is an inconsistency between getting a permit application to do something and that being immediately taken to the mowers. I did a laneway regen. Basically, I planted it out with natives. When I got the permit to do it, just to make sure, I contacted TCCS, and they did not know that I had a permit for it. They talked to the mowers, and it was supposed to go on the mowing map. I waited until they came back and confirmed that that had happened.

Literally the day after I built it, it got mowed.

There is this inconsistency in messaging. Also, there is no automatic process. If you get a permit to do an activity, there is no process to then make sure that all of the relevant areas are aware of it and that it somehow gets factored in. That has happened at the pocket park that we have been landscaping. Admittedly, after all of the rain, the grass was really high. The mowers came, and they actually mowed over some trees that had been planted by the urban treescapes section of the ACT. They dumped a whole lot of debris onto the gardens that we were building. They also dumped the tree guard.

With the mowing, I think it is because it is done by contractors. They have a job to do, and they come out and do it. But there does seem to be this lack of coordination amongst the mower contractors, the mapping and the obligations regarding an area that is in the process of being landscaped. The trees are small when they first go in, but there needs to be a bit more care with that type of thing.

That is certainly my experience with the mowers. It seems to me that there was a distinct lack of coordination between those kinds of areas regarding receiving a permit and all of the relevant areas being given that information.

**Mr Oates:** We have had communication problems. Part of the problem is that there seems to be a large turnover in our area of rangers on the ground. One of the problems—it is the same as Frances talked about—is the communication between our group, the PCS and contractors.

There is one instance where I was on the periphery, so I cannot talk about it in much detail, some back-burning took place on the ridge. We had asked the rangers to make sure that a certain area was not burnt. That did not get communicated to the rangers and they burnt the area. We have had talks with the PCS about this, and we think we may be able to resolve it.

One of the issues is that there needs to be closer involvement by group representatives in the contracting—in participating in some way in the contracting. There needs to be some sort of presence by ParkCare groups when the contracting is taking place. I realise that could be difficult; I realise there could be in areas where it needs to be thought about. I think greater involvement by ParkCare representatives when contracting is taking place would be a good thing.

**Mr Sheils:** I want to say something about the use of power tools. We did some work around an old dam, planting out new shrubs and grasses. We had the help of Landcare and a younger group brought in to do that; it all went quite well. We also have the ongoing care of that area, and there is a lot of phalaris that we have to keep out and try and keep down. One effective way of doing that is with whipper snippers. We do it with hand shears at the moment; as you can imagine, it is a slow process, doing it with hand shears, when you could use a power tool to control things like that. When you do plantings of trees or whatever, you then have an ongoing maintenance problem with keeping stuff out until there is some growth. Certainly, power tools would help in that situation.

**Dr Mulvaney:** The issue is that there is a border above, regarding where we are talking about at the moment. It is not so much that we do not have access to power tools, but if we need to remove those big Cootamundra wattles from the hill, how are we going to do that? The rangers can use their chainsaws, and you can concentrate on the smaller seedlings or whatever.

Basically, it goes to that question of communication. There is not that sense that we are in a partnership, that we have a shared goal, that we know who is doing what and that we are both going to deliver towards this common objective. We have support officers; they are really supportive, and things do work well. With the reasons why you get the mowers like Fran talked about, every group will have the same sort of story. It is because there is not a vision that is held across that branch of the directorate. There is no shared understanding of where things are going.

One thing that really gets my goat at the moment is that, with the breaking of the drought, everybody realised there was going to be a big flourishing of weeds. We thought, "All right, we've got to concentrate on the weeds." We put in hundreds, probably thousands, of extra hours in weed control. Both of your parties agreed to fund greater weed control, but when you look at the annual report, there has been a 20 per cent reduction in the area of weeds being controlled. So we have this partnership, but somehow it is not being held to the truth.

Similarly, I am involved in another group, Canberra Nature Map, where we have 5,000 people out there forwarding things on the list. Every year, we get about 100 or 150 reports of plants that are new to the ACT and are a very high weed potential. Again there was a position that was created to go out and control those new weeds. Just today, someone has put one fireweed plant in Watson that they have actually controlled. In the beginning, they were controlled, but they have not been going through our list or giving feedback to people. The volunteers who are putting up those really significant records are not feeling supported. We are either controlling them ourselves or they are still out there waiting to be controlled.

I do not want to give a negative view because volunteering in the ACT has been well supported and it has worked really well, but it can work better. It is about having that shared vision and acknowledging that we are of value, and that we are not just people cleaning up areas and pestering the people doing the mowing, if there are these extra values.

**Ms Knight:** Part of the communication issue relates to the people that we are communicating with within the government. With the volunteer coordinator, there is just him; he has no-one else. He is doing all of the volunteer groups, and he is amazing. He is a really lovely person and really supportive. But it is just him. They are doing what they can, but I feel that they are equally unsupported. I think that it harks back to what Mike was saying in regard to this shared vision. We have this vision, but do we actually believe in it? If they are not getting the support that they need to help us, there is a disconnect there, and it comes back to us, because we do expend so many volunteer hours.

If you look at how much that work actually added up to, there is an enormous amount of money being saved because you have volunteers out there. But it needs to be



shared within the government as well; there needs to be that same level of support happening for those people who are trying to help us. I think that is part of the problem.

**MS CASTLEY:** I think you have almost tied it up with a neat bow for me. My concern is that you are all volunteering so much of your time and that it is almost like you take one step forward and three steps back, sometimes, with regard to mowing over the gardens and cleaning it all up. Dr Mulvaney, you referred to a 20 per cent reduction in weed control. Can you explain that again? There was a promise made, and you guys work hard on this.

**Dr Mulvaney:** Generally, the budget has been about \$2.1 million. Because of the generosity of these two parties, it went up to \$2.5 million, which makes a big difference. But when you go to the annual report and look at the area covered, I do not have the exact figures but, from memory, when it was \$2.1 million they were covering 10,000 hectares of control, and now it is down to about 8,000 hectares of control. In terms of that 8,000, the percentage that is being done by volunteers has actually increased. So the disparity is even bigger than what those figures suggest.

**MS CASTLEY:** Who is responsible for that? I noticed in one of your submissions you said that there is concern about the turnover of rangers.

**Dr Mulvaney:** I think the issue here is that weed control got moved from the control of the rangers to the agricultural branch. I think that there has been a focus away from the areas in which we have been interested towards more agricultural problems. I suspect that is the reason.

**MS CASTLEY:** I am not quite sure which group said that there was a high turnover of rangers. I think it was Cooleman—

**Mr Oates:** I do not have any figures; certainly, we have experienced a high turnover of rangers over the years. We may have moved a little closer to having a bit more stability. The point we made in our submission was that we would like to see a bit closer cooperation. We have no problem with the rangers. The rangers, on the whole, are good, but they move. We cannot do anything about that. That is a resource problem. That is something that PCS has to think about.

We would like to spend more time with the rangers and spend more time talking to them. It would be a good idea, every time a new ranger comes on board, to have a meeting with our committee, or maybe with our broader group, to explain what our interests and concerns are, and hear what his or her interests and concerns are. We would like to maintain that relationship. If we maintained a structure like that, probably turnover would not be so much of a problem, because we would at least get to know the new person; we would get to know what their interest is and what our interests are. That is something on which we would like to see a bit more emphasis.

**MS CASTLEY:** On power tools, who is the blocker there? Is it TCCS that says, “No, you can’t use power tools,” or did I get that wrong?

**Mr Sheils:** No, it is Parks and Conservation.

**Mr Oates:** Yes, it is PCS. It is currently under consideration, according to the minutes from the last meeting. When looking at the issue of power tools, they may or may not be moving closer to some sort of arrangement. I think Paul has a better grip of this.

**Mr Sheils:** I think it was referred to OHS people, from the last minutes that I saw.

**Mr Oates:** Yes, so there would seem to be some sort of progress happening there. We do not know where it is going to go.

**MS CASTLEY:** We are just talking about whipper snippers; it is not like each one of you wants to arrive on site with a big chainsaw. Is that correct?

**Mr Sheils:** We are not going to use a bobcat, I don't think.

**Dr Mulvaney:** Originally, we were not allowed to use chemicals, and eventually that changed. I suspect that there will be an evolution towards using tools. I think it will come, but it is a matter of public servants being responsible for the risk, and it may relate to insurance. I do not think they are insurmountable issues. I am sure that you guys can sort it out.

**THE CHAIR:** In one of the submissions it was pointed out that it is not all about planting trees. To run these groups, you need people to write the grants, communication skills and lots of different skill sets. It is not all about the exact moment that you are planting out there. I would like to ask you all to speak to that. What sort of support do you need to facilitate the groups that you all run?

**Ms Knight:** Essentially, my group is me and another person, and I drag my husband into it when it comes to planting. Before Cath joined, I did everything. There was no support. Having some support would be awesome.

**THE CHAIR:** What support do you feel that you need?

**Ms Knight:** When it comes to the application process, that is an area where you can spend days trying to fill out an application. Often, there is a lack of continuity or communication regarding the requirements of the application itself and all of the other attendant requirements. Invariably, you will put in an application and find out three months later that you should have done something else. That is definitely an area that could be improved. There could be a better communication process, or the people that run those processes could be better informed about all of the other implications.

I will give a very quick example. All of my grants are on public land because they are all within the urban environment, yet I have submitted several grant applications, only to find out later that I also needed a bunch of different types of permits. When you go through the process of doing the permit, often there is this really interesting disconnect: "That's really unusual, you want to do something on public land." You have a grant to do it, and you are told, "We don't know how that works." I am thinking, "Hang on, I've got the grant." It asked me if I wanted to do it on public land and I said yes, and I am in the process of getting the land use permit application.

Now it is saying that this is a really unusual situation. I ended up in limbo for five months, waiting for them to work out if I could do something.

It was a really interesting situation because, as far as I was concerned, if I could apply for a grant, and it asked me that question, they had already worked out how that worked; yet I was told, “No, this is really unusual.” There was a real disconnect in that regard. Certainly, in those processes, you end up in a bit of a black box. There could be a bit more open communication and a bit more support about the implications of doing something, and how it all translates down the road.

**THE CHAIR:** We have time for one more comment.

**Mr Kingsland:** Building on what Frances said, in terms of getting permission to do plantings, it has been incredibly complex. We have to allow 12 months, by the time you get permission from Fire, from the rangers, for particular species and for various other things. We are taking the step of trying to say, “Can we get agreement on this range of plants in this particular area, at this particular time using this particular equipment?” so that we can have a two-year window where we can say, “All we have to do now is apply for grants.” It is about simplifying some of the processes and having a look at what should be relatively straightforward. It just needs to be a bit more coordinated and thought through.

**Ms Knight:** Certainly, when it is a process that is continuously being done and all of the groups are doing it, you should not be stuck in that kind of scenario.

**Mr Oates:** Yes, I think we would agree with Ross that there needs to be some sort of simplification. We work in a committee and with people allocated to jobs. That seems to work reasonably well. Again, there is the issue of simplification of the bureaucracy and the planning. I think that would be a very good thing.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you all very much for taking the time and for volunteering in the ACT. When available, a copy of the proof transcript will be forwarded to witnesses, to provide you all with an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. That closes our first session today.

**DENHAM AM, MR DAVID**, President, Griffith Narrabundah Community Association

**HOWELL, MR MAC**, Convenor, Friends of Blaxland Park

**MOBBS, MR CHRIS**, Chair, Hackett Community Association

**THE CHAIR:** We move to the next witnesses appearing today: Mr Chris Mobbs from the Hackett Community Association, Mr David Denham from the Griffith Narrabundah Community Association and Mr Mac Howell from the Friends of Blaxland Park. On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for taking the time to come today and thank you for your written submissions.

Please be aware that the proceedings are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. These proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you on the table. Could you confirm for the record that you have understood the privilege implications of this statement?

**Mr Denham:** Yes.

**Mr Howell:** Yes.

**Mr Mobbs:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. To start our questions off, one of the things that came through some of the submissions was having skilled facilitators to kind of facilitate between government and local community groups. I was wondering what you think of that, or what skill sets are required, or what interaction between government and different community groups would encourage this kind of relationship to prosper?

**Mr Denham:** I do not know about that. I was hoping that I would be able to say a few words.

**THE CHAIR:** Sure.

**Mr Denham:** That would raise a couple of issues which I would like to explore with the committee.

**THE CHAIR:** Sure; yes.

**Mr Denham:** Linkage with the government can always be improved and, I think, as Ross said, the process of planting trees is more complicated than it should be. You have got to allow for the width that mowers can go through and whether it is the right place and the right species, and all the rest of it. That takes a long time, and that is within City Services.

One of the recommendations that we had in here was that we have a detailed organisation chart to see who is responsible for these sorts of things in City Services, because what happens now is that there is one coordinator for the volunteer groups and that person is running around madly and probably stretched to the limit. It would

be nice to know who is responsible for what in City Services. What I do, if I get stuck, is I just go to Jim Corrigan—because I know him—and say, “Look, can you help with this?” But that is not the way to do it. Now do you want me to say something?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, please do.

**Mr Denham:** Okay. Thanks for the opportunity here, because I think it is really valuable that we can discuss these things. Griffith and Narrabundah—and, I am sure, you guys too—strongly support the volunteering program. We had five recommendations in our report. One was to review the way the metrics are carried out and why we are collecting them—is there too much; is there too little? That is a fairly straightforward review, I think, which should take place because there are valuable statistics in that.

But I would like to focus on the second, and that is the formation of more volunteer groups. What I understand is that, now, you have got a limited number of volunteer groups because of the staffing situation, and you really need more if we are going to cover the areas that are not covered by volunteer groups now. What happens is that, normally, a group would get together and say: “We want to do something here in this particular park because we live around it. We can get some money to do that.” We get a bit of money for it and then that volunteer group will focus on that particular park. It will not want to do another park 400 metres downtown or anything like that. So we think there should be a better mechanism for setting up more groups.

One of the things that we were looking at was whether the community councils and the associations within the community councils could not be classified as volunteer groups, because then that would open up a lot more throughout the whole of Canberra. There would be, obviously, an insurance issue here, but all these community councils are governed by an insurance policy which is set by the government and that is to, as non-profit volunteer organisations, carry out associated activities as declared. For example, Yarralumla and some of the other areas want to do the planting of all the bulbs and things out there.

So, really, it would be very good if the GNCA could be classified as a volunteer group, but I was told they could not. Therefore, we can’t put in. We have a couple of parks that we would like to get locals to do, and then have responsibility for them. That is the first thing. Do you want to discuss that first or go onto the second one?

**MS CLAY:** We may run out of time, going through that.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. Maybe go to the second one.

**Mr Denham:** Okay. The second one is that the funds that are usually available from government are for specific actions, specific outputs, and when you are looking at things like reserves and parks there are other things that go on. Although it is easy to get people to plant trees, it is not so easy to get people to pull out weeds, as you all know, or do the spraying of paths to keep the weeds down. So what I think would be useful would be to look at having a fund built into the budget for operational expenses, if you like, for the volunteer groups during the year—and for cleaning graffiti signs and all this sort of thing.

Then there should be a link to the minor works programs for parks. For example, we would like to put shade cloth over one of the parks, and we were told by the good minister, “It’s only the big parks which we put shade cloth on. We don’t put it over the little ones because nobody uses them.” Of course, nobody uses them because there is no shade cloth there!

With seats and paths, these sorts of things, somehow it is impenetrable trying to get through to this government about where the priorities are for putting in paths. We have a path in Wells Gardens that we would like to put in, and everybody says it is good. Even the people in City Services say, “Yes, we have put this on the list.” But we cannot find the list; nobody knows when it is going to be done. There needs to be some link in there, and there does not seem to be any link at present. So those are the two issues. Mac is going talk about mowers.

**Mr Howell:** Yes, a couple of things. I am a member of GNCA, but I am the convenor of the Friends of Blaxland Park. We have been very fortunate, our little group, and I want to thank the government and the people of TCCS for the support they have given us. When we formed our group, the suggestion was made that we should develop a master plan for the park. We got that done with the support of the BaptistCare people. We got a master plan done by Barbara Payne, who you are probably familiar with, and that included plantings, pathways, seats and lighting.

We were very surprised, actually, but very grateful, that during the economic stimulus program the paths all of a sudden appeared in our park. They have made an enormous difference to the park—the accessibility of the park. It is now a well-used and well-frequented park, where before it was not a particularly attractive space. So we are very grateful for that.

We are also very grateful for the support from the people in TCCS who have helped us with the tree planting and the trees. Both the paths and the trees are now complete in our park. It is our job now to maintain them. I was interested in the discussion that I heard before about the use of mechanical devices. In our volunteer group we have a few young people but mostly they are more senior people, and to get them on their hands and knees digging at weeds is difficult and not particularly efficient. It would be a big improvement, from our point of view, if we were able to use not chainsaws or stuff like that but just whippersnippers and mowers, which we all use in our homes. That would make our job much easier and much more efficient.

I have been trying to find my way through the process to get approval for some seating. I was in the process of preparing a submission to the last adopt-a-park grants program but was then told that seating was not something that would be considered under that program. I have been talking to various people about how to go about that but, so far, unsuccessfully. I had a chat with Minister Vassarotti at a function not so long ago and I have written to her, but we will see what happens. That would be something that is high on our priority list.

You may be aware that our park is adjacent to the Baptist aged-care facility. Since the paths have gone in, a lot of the residents there are now actually enjoying a walk through the park. A lot of them are on their frames and on walking sticks and there is nowhere for them to have a rest and take a seat, so that is something which is of

interest to us, and I would like to understand how we can go about applying or getting approval for those seats to be installed.

**THE CHAIR:** Sure. Thank you.

**MS CLAY:** I actually have a question for Chris.

**THE CHAIR:** All right. Do you want two minutes to give us your key points?

**Mr Mobbs:** Sure. Thank you, Chair. We are an incorporated body under the Associations Incorporation Act and, as such, we can auspice grants for groups. Over the last few years we have auspiced four grants and, more recently, two more grants under different programs of grants provided by this government.

It is fantastic having these grants. For a lot of groups, if you only ever deal with one program you might find that, when it comes to what they call the deed of the grant, that is just classical legal wording and you sign it, get the money and go and do the work. But in our position, where you auspice different grants, suddenly, when you go through them, you think, “Why are these terms and conditions different from this grant and this one?”

Different directorates have different wording, and I suspect that sometimes they operate in a parallel universe. It is very frustrating for volunteer groups. Most of the groups are doing the work on the ground, but there are always one or two people that have to do the administrative side—that is, apply for the grants, get the deed, sign the deed, manage the money, acquit the money, put the report in and all that sort of behind the scenes work. It is not up-front.

So our submission picks up on the fact that there are these inconsistent terms and conditions. Apparently, it is just one government here, the ACT government! I can understand that between the federal government and the ACT government grant conditions could be different, but in our submission the differences are quite amazing. I have looked at them even more recently, for an ACT heritage grant, and they have different conditions again. I can go into these a bit more, if you like.

**MS CLAY:** Chris, you have actually struck on exactly the question I wanted to ask you.

**MS CASTLEY:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** And you have made your point really well in your submission. Well done. That was very, very clear and very well put. I just wanted to tease it out. We have different terms and conditions.

**Mr Mobbs:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** They are all through SmartyGrants, and I would love to hear if you think the SmartyGrants platform is working. Then there are some of the differences: some of the grants require \$10 million public liability, some \$20 million PL and some require appropriate PL. I am assuming that the biggest problems, it sounds like, are

the differences in terms and conditions and the differences in insurance requirements. But I would also just love to check in to see if SmartyGrants itself is working.

**Mr Mobbs:** I used SmartyGrants recently and it was different from the last time. Again, I did one recently for a heritage grant and one for Adopt-a-Park. There were different conditions between those. In fact, I think the heritage grant one said you had to tick 18 conditions, or tick all these conditions. I ticked every one of them except one which was not relevant, and it said, “That’s not right. You have got to accept all of them.” I thought, “What is going on here?” So I ticked all of them and accepted it. Another interesting one is when it comes to auditing. This is a really interesting one. Can I talk about this?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** Yes.

**Mr Mobbs:** This is fascinating. This only came in recently. I have mentioned that we are incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act. Under that, a small association is one that has less than \$400,000 in revenue a year. They may have their accounts reviewed by a reviewer. This reviewer does not need to hold any qualifications; they do not need to be an accountant. Yet under the Adopt-a-Park 2021-22 grant the requirement was for provision of a copy of the relevant financial statement, certified by a registered accountant. That is for a grant of \$3,000. So why is it that when a body is incorporated you do not need a qualified accountant until you get over \$1 million worth of revenue?

For the Adopt-a-Park grant we got previously, you just had to send the receipts in. It is pretty obvious, if you have only got four or five payments, that you do not need a registered accountant to do that. This was a bit of a surprise for me because I had not budgeted for paying an accountant. I might find one who might do it on a pro bono basis—or maybe for a box of chocolates they might do it for us. But, again, there are these inconsistencies. That is with auditing. It is a really frustrating one.

The other one is insurances. One is \$20 million; another is \$10 million. Surely, one level of public insurance is required? Fortunately, with us, we are affiliated with the North Canberra Community Council, which has public liability coverage of \$20 million.

I would also like to say that these are just four or five grants dealing with government. On the ACT grants page there are nearly 60 grant programs. They are administered by 14 different directorates or agencies. A lot of those would be aimed at businesses; a lot would be aimed at community groups. I hope there are not 60 variations of deeds and terms and conditions for all those grants.

I would be asking, I think, a simple thing: that the program managers from all these programs, and the directorates, get their deeds on their laptop, go and sit in a room for a couple of days and thrash it out to come up with standard words for all the deeds and have that in place for the next financial year. Otherwise, volunteers are spending a lot of time unnecessarily going through, trying to understand the nuances, the different requirements. If your committee can make this recommendation and we can



get that, I think volunteers will be lot better off and get down to doing the thing on the ground that they really enjoy. Thank you.

**Mr Denham:** We would endorse that totally, and more.

**THE CHAIR:** Great.

**MS CASTLEY:** I have a couple of questions. With regard to that, you mentioned the community councils managing all the various groups. Is that what you were getting at?

**Mr Denham:** Well, it goes back to what Chris said with the—

**MS CASTLEY:** Yes.

**Mr Denham:** And it is very similar arrangements. The inner south one has seven incorporated bodies. The GNCA has an ABN and it is incorporated and all the rest of it, but it is within the umbrella of the community council, which has the insurance. So our insurance comes down through that. The question is: can that insurance cover volunteer groups that might be set up by, say, the Griffith Narrabundah Community Association or the Deakin, the Yarralumla or the Hackett one.

**MS CASTLEY:** Or Gungahlin; whoever. Okay. To follow on, Mac, you said that you did a master plan for your park and got your paths but, David, you are still waiting on paths. For your park, is that because you did not submit a master plan? I wonder if you have any comment on why that might be.

**Mr Denham:** No. This is just a little path in Wells Gardens. There is one little bit right through the middle of the park and that is the only bit that is not sealed between Narrabundah and Manuka.

**MS CASTLEY:** I see.

**Mr Denham:** We have put submissions in through the volunteer group and also directly through City Services. And nobody knows—

**MS CASTLEY:** Why or how—

**Mr Denham:** where it is in the list of priorities.

**MS CASTLEY:** But yours just got done?

**Mr Howell:** Yes, it got done, but that was part of—

**Mr Denham:** That was a special deal.

**Mr Howell:** A special deal, as part of the economic stimulus package after the original economic crisis about three years ago, yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** Okay. You need a special deal.

**Mr Denham:** That was a one-off.

**Mr Howell:** We happened to be there at the right time.

**MS CASTLEY:** Okay.

**Mr Denham:** Yes. We are not complaining about that.

**MS CASTLEY:** No, no. Not at all; of course not.

**MS CLAY:** We have actually talked about a lot of things. We had in the last session—and in this one, I think—the request for an organisational chart. Have we talked about that?

**Mr Denham:** Yes, yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** Yes, we did that in this one. That would be helpful.

**THE CHAIR:** We have had that in this one? Yes. I think that would be excellent. We have talked about new groups, which I had on my list, which is great. I very much understand that. I would not mind getting into new groups a little bit and hearing suggestions about community councils and residents associations maybe being used to auspice or encourage them. I think that is useful, although the community councils and residents associations are already a small catchment themselves.

I am wondering if there might be other ways. We have probably got areas where we have lots of long-established urban and park care or land care groups and areas where we have none. The areas where we have none probably also had pretty low residents association involvement during the council uptake. I am wondering if there might be another way to encourage new groups in areas where we do not really have much coverage.

**Mr Denham:** I do not know. We are just suggesting that if it is freed up then that might open it up a little bit.

**MS CLAY:** Yes.

**Mr Denham:** When there is \$21 million of the year value done, you would have thought that putting another person in to organise it a bit—because it is short of staff in that area—would be a good cost benefit.

**MS CLAY:** Yes.

**Mr Denham:** We would like to say, lastly, before we finish, that, as Mac has said, we would like to thank all the staff that we deal with in TC and City Services, because they have all been incredibly helpful and enthusiastic. They are really good at and committed to their jobs. There is no problem at all with working with them. But somehow we have got to improve that structure to make it easier and better. Perhaps start with this one, I think, of Chris's.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** A good, practical suggestion.

**Mr Mobbs:** One of the other submissions, the Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, No 24, again made the comment:

... different ACT agencies have quite different contractual requirements for similar grant projects (e.g. insurance cover).

So it is not just the Hackett Community Association here. It seems to be across the board. And, yes, these things would be easy to fix. I guarantee you that it would be fixed in a couple of days of work.

**MS CASTLEY:** And, given the value of the volunteers, the work that is happening across Canberra, it would be a small amount of effort, I imagine, for great benefit?

**Mr Mobbs:** Yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** And all the great work that you do.

**Mr Mobbs:** Also, it has got to save the staff time and effort. As I cynically said, they seem to operate in parallel universes. That is not a good use of public servants' time. I have worked in the public service. And you need to be getting consistent ways of doing things. The SmartyGrants portal needs to be consistent. I accept also that some grant programs may have unique requirements. Sure, but if they are unique to that program, put them at the end of the deed. Do not put them up early in the piece. That throws all the numbering out. As you can see in our submission, if you go through it, it will do your head in trying to understand where things come in and why they do.

**MS CASTLEY:** It would be great if we could consult with some of the groups that use the SmartyGrants portal often, just to get their feedback on what the portal would look like and what would help.

**Mr Mobbs:** Yes. It is a good idea.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you all for appearing today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you all, to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors. I do not think anyone took any questions on notice, so we are all good there. Thank you so much for your contribution to our community.

**Mr Mobbs:** Thank you.

**Mr Denham:** We look forward to the positive outcomes. Thank you very much.

**Mr Howell:** Thank you.

**Hearing suspended from 10.30 to 11.00 am**

**VASSAROTTI, MS REBECCA**, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Heritage, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services and Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

**BURKEVICS, MR BREN**, Acting Executive Group Manager, Environment, Heritage and Water, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

**ALEGRIA, MR STEPHEN**, Executive Branch Manager, ACT Parks and Conservation Service, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

**GAROFALOW, MR FRANK**, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Natural Resources Management, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

**McQUEEN, MS LAUREN**, Volunteer Programs Manager, Volunteer and Visitor Experience, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

**IGLESIAS, MR DANIEL**, Executive Branch Manager, City Presentation, Transport Canberra and City Services

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity inquiry into environmental volunteerism. The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and livestreamed. I think you will also note the privilege statement on your table. Can you confirm, for the record, that you have read and understood the privilege implications?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. Minister, I hear you have an opening statement.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** We will just keep it to five minutes, but please go ahead.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes, for sure. Thank you very much to the committee for inviting us to attend. We think this is a really great inquiry. The ACT government continues to strongly encourage and support environmental volunteerism in the ACT. Environmental volunteers make a significant contribution, often selflessly and without much recognition, to protect, conserve and enhance biodiversity in nature in the ACT. All Canberrans benefit from the work of these volunteers, which makes the ACT a better place to live. As the minister, I am extremely proud of the work of these volunteers and, on behalf of the government, I thank them for all the contributions that they make to protecting, conserving and enhancing the environment of the ACT.

Within Canberra, there is a strong network of environmental volunteers. Volunteering benefits the environment but also the participants, in terms of their physical and mental health, meeting like-minded people, gaining work experience and learning new skills. It encourages people to connect with nature while actively caring for it. The support and expertise of these volunteers also enhances the consistency in monitoring, and the management, over and above what can be provided by government.

Community stewardship of the environment reduces the likelihood of neglect and

encourages respect by others. As some examples of community activities, residents groups undertake weed control, plant trees, remove rubbish, control erosion, undertake environmental monitoring and educate their neighbours about the importance of the environment.

Environmental volunteers contribute to the ACT economy, providing an enormous benefit to government. The *State of Volunteering in the ACT* report found that volunteers contributed over \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy annually. A 2017 report from the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment estimated that volunteer activity in the ACT was more than 22 per cent of the total ACT government expenditure on the environment.

The ACT government environmental volunteers programs contribute to community-based delivery of environmental outcomes, stewardship of public assets, citizen science and participation in nature across several government priorities. Volunteers enhance visitor experience to our parks and reserves and inspire children in nature-based play and learning activities. Volunteering brings people together to build more active, engaged and inclusive communities. It enriches the lives of volunteers themselves, as well as those who benefit from their commitment to Canberra, its people and places. The ACT government oversees a range of volunteer programs, including ParkCare, urban land care and Waterwatch, that support successful environmental initiatives through significant community effort.

Volunteers have provided in excess of 50,000 volunteer hours a year to assist with the implementation of key environmental and conservation objectives. The parliamentary and governing agreement has delivered an increase in the funding for local environmental volunteer-based activities of \$3.2 million over this term of government. This involves an increase in the funding pool for community environment grants; increasing funding to the three catchment groups; increased funding to ACT Wildlife; funding of the Frogwatch program; and the expansion of the ParkCare program. The ACT environment grant funding pool has increased by \$115,000 per annum, bringing the total funding for the 2022-23 program to \$480,000.

Environmental groups such as ACT Wildlife, Waterwatch, the Ginninderra Catchment Group, the Southern ACT Catchment Group and the Molonglo Conservation Group have all benefitted from the financial investments by the ACT government. The government view is that looking after the environment is everyone's responsibility. We work in deep partnership with the community to achieve the important work of conserving the environment and enhancing our biodiversity.

I am really looking forward to any questions that you have. We have quite a team of people from across different areas of EPSDD, as well as Transport Canberra, who will ably assist me, because this is an area which goes over a number of portfolios.

**THE CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you very much for your opening statement. A lot of the submissions mentioned the relationship and engagement between the community volunteer groups and the government and how that could really be improved. I guess that is a point in the government's submission, and it is a clear priority, but it is not articulated. The Biodiversity Conservation Forum is talked about, but, broader than that, are you able to articulate how the government does engage with these

different groups?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. Certainly, from a systemic point, mechanisms like the biodiversity forum have been really important initiatives in being able to look at that broader level of what is going on and having quite a significant dialogue with government. From my perspective, I see that as a key element that was missing in the infrastructure or ecology of our engagement with the volunteers.

I might ask Bren to provide some further detail in terms of the operational work that happens, the support that is provided to volunteers and that relationship, because there are some opportunities for improving that. I see that we will also be ably assisted by other officials.

**Mr Burkevics:** Thanks, Minister, and thanks, Dr Paterson. I have read the privilege statement and acknowledge it. Thanks for the interest in this really great matter. I suppose I would echo the minister's remarks around the importance that volunteers play in the support of environmental matters in the ACT. Certainly, from my experience as an official with the ACT State Emergency Service, as well as a volunteer in that organisation, I could not highlight enough the importance of a strong and productive relationship between volunteer groups and government officials to further the work, and support the work, of volunteers. In terms of some initiatives that came into effect late last year, I will caveat that my knowledge of this space is about 12 days old so far.

**THE CHAIR:** Congratulations.

**Mr Burkevics:** Thank you very much.

**Ms Vassarotti:** So he has got it covered!

**Mr Burkevics:** I am rapidly getting up to speed, but I think, from looking at the initiatives of the directorate to provide a mechanism, what I would call the equivalent of a consultative committee is vitally important. Obviously, the unfortunate impacts of the COVID pandemic jeopardised and impacted on that face-to-face contact which is so important.

The Biodiversity Conservation Forum will provide a mechanism for moving forward together and will, essentially, provide that mechanism for volunteers and the leaders of those volunteer groups to have their opinions heard and to work together with government on potential work programs, priorities, issues of concern and safety et cetera.

I think we are due to schedule another meeting very, very soon. I know that the last meeting was in late 2021, so I think that meeting will be scheduled very, very soon. I will hand over to my colleague Mr Garofalow to talk about the last meeting, perhaps, and some of the learnings from the first form of the engagement.

**Mr Garofalow:** Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to come and speak to you today. We engage regularly with the various volunteer groups, both

ad hoc and scheduled. As an example, Landcare ACT are one of our peak environmental volunteer organisations. They are an umbrella organisation and they have a range of other groups under them. I meet with them monthly, with both the CEO and the chair of Landcare ACT, just as a catch-up. We can have scheduled agenda items, but we can also just have a conversation about what is happening in each of our spheres, so that we can keep that connection going and look for how we can work together. We certainly see the volunteer communities as partners and look for opportunities to partner with them.

On top of that, there are a range of other regularly scheduled wider groups, such as the Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Coordinating Committee. The majority of the peak environmental groups attend that meeting, and I attend that meeting. We all present on what everybody is doing and have opportunities to catch up and have conversations.

In addition to that, there are a range of more ad hoc but regular meetings about specific topics. An issue comes up where we might call together a group of volunteer leaders to have a conversation with us about that particular issue or another matter that might be happening. I also try to attend the board meetings and other meetings of the various groups, again on an ad hoc basis but as opportunity presents.

Recently, we were preparing early discussions around the development of a natural resource management plan. As part of that, we went on, basically, a roadshow, where we went out and had discussions with a wide range of environmental groups, as well as the broader community, about various issues: what are the driving issues of concern, and what are the areas that they think are going well that they want to see reinforced? We got a tremendous amount of feedback on that.

We also set up drop-in centres for the broader community. We had drop-in centres at, I think, about four locations across Canberra. We advertised those and were there, waiting for people to come in. We also set ourselves up at the Haig Park markets to, again, have passing traffic come in and have a conversation with us. We got tremendous feedback on what the key drivers and issues were for the community during those various events and activities. But, as I said, the main thing is that all of those peak groups understand that we are open for business. We invite them to come and have a conversation with us, via email, a phone call or catching up for a coffee. We are always there and ready to hear what people have to say.

**Mr Burkevics:** Dr Paterson, I am wondering if our colleague Ms McQueen would like to talk about some of those day-to-day engagements, from the point of view of a range of services. I think they are often some of the best forms of dialogue at a local level, where the work is happening on the ground.

**Ms Vassarotti:** I think it is probably worth noting that that is where their operational discussions are, where the rubber really hits the road, and I think that there has been real recognition of the need to invest in that area. Certainly, in the 2019-20 and 2021-22 budgets we have provided additional support for the ParkCare program in particular. That has included two additional rangers to coordinate community volunteer activities, which has been a real recognition of what we can do to enhance that relationship with our volunteers that we value so much.

**Ms McQueen:** I would like to echo what Minister Vassarotti has just said about the increase in the staffing capacity in our ParkCare teams. We now have, including me, five paid employees that support volunteers on the ground. This increase in staffing has meant that, instead of chasing our tails a bit, we actually have been able to improve more on the ground with the volunteer support that we were probably lacking a little bit for a while there, so it has been a really fantastic improvement.

In terms of our day-to-day contact, we have four streams of volunteering in the ParkCare program and our largest stream is our ParkCare Patch program. I know you met with a few of the groups from there this morning. We hold an annual planning session with our ParkCare groups. We meet with each of the groups individually, with the ranger in charge of their particular area, to work through what their plans are for the coming year, to make sure that we are meeting eye to eye, I guess, on those things and so that the priorities of that reserve, from the rangers' perspective and from the PCS perspective, align with what the volunteers were hoping to achieve in that space.

From there, we work out what support mechanisms they will need throughout the year to set that up. We also do quarterly meetings with all of our ParkCare areas, so we generally engage with each of the convenors for our groups at that stage. That is an opportunity for us to have a more formalised meeting, to give an update on where things are with PCS and for our ParkCare groups to raise any kinds of key concerns they may have.

That happens in our visitor and wildlife assist streams as well. We do a quarterly meeting to give updates on what is happening and to provide that space for dialogue. But, of course, we have a pretty open relationship with our volunteers. They know that they can come and reach out to us. We have some really good dialogue with some of our groups and some really open conversations, which is fantastic.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Probably a final comment that I would like to make in responding to this issue is that a key element of relationship is that it is about a relationship. I think there has been a real recognition that often volunteers are contributing their free time and they actually do not want to be tied up in a whole lot of meetings. So the commitment to increased funding but also consistent funding, particularly for our catchment groups and some of our key volunteer organisations, has been a really important element in supporting the capacity of our volunteer organisations to engage as well. I think that is an important piece of the puzzle.

**THE CHAIR:** I just have a quick supplementary. We are not post-COVID, but post-2019 there seems to have been a real flourishing of community groups in local neighbourhood parks. Is the government recognising that? How is the government supporting those newly formed groups, and what do you see is needed there to support those people?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes. I think it is a really great question. This is one of the silver linings, I suppose, of the situation where we were all at home and we really reconnected with our local spaces in an exciting way. We would see it as a real benefit. I think a program such as the environmental grants program is a really important element where we can start to enhance and build the capacity of those small groups. Part of that is also about connecting them with a more formalised group, in order to



provide them with some support. I think it is something that we really need to look at and encourage, but we also need to, in support groups, connect in with the work that is happening already.

One of the experiences that we had through the lockdown periods of COVID in particular was that we started to see a bit of conflict in some of the ways that people wanted to use their green spaces and their local parks. There were groups that had really looked after pieces of land, in terms of conservation and biodiversity, and they were quite concerned about some of the new activities that people were having a look at. I think government absolutely has a role in supporting that sort of community engagement. Particularly in terms of supporting new groups to build capacity, I think the environmental grants program is a really useful mechanism to do that. I will look to officials for anything we would like to add in relation to that.

**Mr Iglesias:** You mentioned neighbourhood parks and places. Within the urban footprint of Canberra we have literally hundreds of green spaces, and it is no surprise that in a lot of those green spaces there are people interested—because it is a sort of park at the end of the street, their local area. We have recognised that and, in addition to what you have heard about the PCS ParkCare investment, we have an urban parks and places ParkCare investment. It is a very similar concept; it is about getting people out into the parks.

For many people, their experience with nature is their local park. They do not go out any further. They see a real connection with the place they live and their green space. We have over 70 groups that are focused in these urban areas. In the past year alone, they contributed over 6,000 hours of work, which would equate to hundreds of thousands of dollars if it were to be done by TCCS staff. More importantly, it builds a connection, as we have heard thus far. It gets people thinking about their environment; it gets people thinking about what a great place Canberra is to live. And, all of a sudden, people's attention is the communal space, not necessarily their own backyard, so there are lots of positives there as well.

**MS CLAY:** Can I just ask a supplementary on that? Really briefly, Mr Iglesias, can you tell me: is TCCS on the Biodiversity Conservation Forum? Feel free to take it on notice. I am just wondering, because we have this big, top-level organisation that is chaired by the Conservation Council and EPSDD and we are hearing about a lot of problems with TCCS and EPSDD connection, so I would love if we could see, on notice, not the names but the organisations who have participated in that.

**Mr Iglesias:** I think we might be, but we will take that on notice to confirm.

**MS CLAY:** Yes, take it on notice. The information I am after, when you take it on notice, is which areas of TCCS and EPSDD are involved in that organisation, just so that we can see if there are any gaps of people who should be.

**Mr Iglesias:** Sure; we will take that on notice. My colleagues might actually have access to the terms of reference already, so we can peruse that during the hearing.

**Ms Vassarotti:** My understanding is that TCCS can be an invited attendee, but we will get some more information about that.

**MS CLAY:** Great; thank you. We have had a lot of comments about the sufficiency of rangers and also staff turnover. I think they mostly mean PCS rangers but, frankly, I think they probably also mean the TCCS urban land managers. There was strong appreciation for the recent increase in funding and for the two new positions. People really appreciate that.

But there is an ongoing concern about ranger turnover—which may or may not be a problem that government can fix—and various submissions saying that they tend to last one or two years. And then, of course, we have this longstanding expertise in the volunteer groups of people who maybe know the area for 20 or 30 years. A lot of suggestions have come through about that, including how we could get the volunteers to train the rangers and how we could get them to work better with them. Has there been any sort of engagement on what we do with the turnover?

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really good question. I think it is a bit reflective of the current world that we live in. It is interesting, because for people that go into areas such as parks and conservation, as rangers, it is more than a job. It is a passion. It is a vocation. I think I met Daniel when he was a baby ranger in the 90s. He has only just moved on, outside the service. So this is a group of people that are really highly motivated and care passionately about their jobs and their roles. It is quite a modern context that we see turnover. The reality is that, in terms of the great jobs that we have even within the Parks and Conservation Service, depending on where people's passions are, they will potentially move through different roles.

I will ask Stephen to talk about the work that parks and cons does in supporting the rangers. I assume that you are talking about rangers that are working within the Canberra Nature Park, where, I understand, there is a bit of turnover and where a lot of the volunteer groups do engage. I think it is a really fair comment that volunteer groups make in relation to the fact that this is their local patch that they have been looking after for decades. They do have incredible expertise. They have made a significant investment of their time and their resources in looking after it, so they have very valuable expertise to provide to the paid staff that are working in these areas.

**Mr Alegria:** Thanks, Minister. I acknowledge that I have read the privilege statement. As the minister said, the passion of rangers is not in question here. I also think that the mobility of our workforce is inherent in what we do. There are many opportunities for our ranger-level staff to act in higher duties and, obviously, to progress their careers. That does necessitate movement, and we think that that is a positive thing overall for the organisation to get more people, expand their experiences, develop their careers and meet their own personal development needs.

Of course, we totally understand, as the minister said, that that does sometimes present frustrations for the volunteers, when they have built a relationship with an individual, as well as with a place, and that individual moves on. They need to then re-engage and re-educate, for want of a better word, the new staff member that has come on board. I guess it is a continuous process, just like it is in the organisation, where we are always grappling with movements of people—and particularly in the pandemic, where the movement of staff and the unavailability of staff has been really quite a factor for us to manage, as it has been across many areas of the community

and government.

I think we recognise this. The main way that we try to manage it is through having a really good, overarching program and the policy in place so that at least the volunteers do not need to deal with the administrative burden and all that kind of thing. That is set. We have got systems and processes; we have got a team that is dedicated just to the ParkCare program, as they have in TCCS as well. We try to quarantine the volunteers from that.

We also try to do advanced planning so that the volunteers and staff have a shared understanding of what the priorities and expectations are for the coming year. That means that that also can be set aside and agreed, despite any staff movements that might happen. I guess, overall, we acknowledge that it is not ideal to have changes in the identity of a local person, but unfortunately it is unavoidable. We do our best to try to manage those impacts on volunteers.

**Mr Burkevics:** Ms Clay, a few reflections on Stephen's remarks. I think it is a real credit to the volunteers that they want to establish deep and meaningful relationships with their local ranger. I think that is a real positive. Certainly, it highlights the importance of good continuity planning, if you like, that, when staff ultimately do move on from their area to other areas or have career development, there is a good strategy to ensure that that continuum of relationship occurs. I think it is a real credit to the volunteer groups that they want to form those strong bonds and, of course, they are saddened when those bonds are temporarily disrupted, until the new ranger arrives and those bonds are re-established.

**MS CLAY:** Sure. Thank you. I wonder if Mr Iglesias has a comment to make about how TCCS maintains that and how individual volunteers might know who their person is and perhaps engage with and train up their person, particularly when that person is sometimes a contractor as well.

**Mr Iglesias:** Certainly. It is a very similar story. Sometimes we go through periods when we do get longevity, when an individual stays in the role for three, four or five years. It is a double-edged sword, because the groups get used to that person and build that relationship; then they feel a loss when they go. But there is considerable support provided to those people that undertake those roles.

From memory, I do not recall us ever having a short-term contract—less than a year, even. Most of the people that engage with these roles end up doing so for at least a couple of years. Sometimes, when there is a permanent vacancy, we do put someone in temporarily, and that person does not necessarily get it permanently, so there would be a short shift-time there. Generally speaking, you are looking at least at a couple of years, in my experience, that is invested.

**MS CLAY:** Does that apply to the mowing contractors as well?

**Mr Iglesias:** In relation to the mowing contractor, that is a bit different. In TCCS we have 1½ FTEs that are focused on supporting our community groups. I know that the incumbent has been there for well over 12 months; it might even be going on for two years.

With contractors that support a lot of the other work we do, they do come and go. Contractors, and the faces that are attributed to contract support, are different. That relationship is slightly different with volunteers. The main relationship is with that ParkCare coordinator, or the adopt-a-park coordinator. That is the first port of call, really, for volunteers. Contractors will change around a bit.

**MS CASTLEY:** With the 1.5 FTEs, the volunteer groups chat to those people and say, “We’ve got this great new area where we’re planting, regenerating; please don’t mow that area.” It goes on the map. There are 1.5 staff helping out with that, from TCCS?

**Mr Iglesias:** In the relationship with the group, if the group is as you have described, to follow your scenario, the anxiety in the group is that the contractor is going to come and mow the area that they are looking after. How it should work is that the coordinator has that conversation with the mowing contractor and says, “In this particular park, we’ve got this initiative; stay off it.” It should not be up to the volunteers to engage with the mowing contractor.

**MS CASTLEY:** I think there is some concern because it happens a lot that either that conversation is not happening or the contractor does not get the information. How are you fixing that? What is your plan?

**Mr Iglesias:** I have heard that as well since I have been in this role.

**MS CASTLEY:** Because the volunteers have boots on the ground.

**Mr Iglesias:** Absolutely.

**MS CASTLEY:** It is terrible to have their work—

**Mr Iglesias:** Absolutely; I understand that. There has to be an improvement in the communication between the ParkCare coordinator and the colleague that is running the mowing program, so that there is an understanding of where the sensitive areas are.

It is all about that communication, in my mind. It is not a difficult problem to crack. The difficulty is with the plethora of mowing locations, if you think about urban Canberra—thousands and thousands of mowing locations. It may be that our contractor—or, more likely, our own staff, actually, because if we are talking about the urban area, it is likely to be our own staff—might inadvertently mow an area that they should not. That can only be resolved by that communication process. We get it wrong sometimes, but I would hope that we have a commitment to get it right.

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really good question that both of you have raised. It is an area in which we think we can do more work. I want to highlight that we are going to start a new initiative—connecting people, connecting nature—which is looking at how we better map our urban open spaces, particularly from a biodiversity connectivity space.

Also, in terms of understanding where the important spaces are, we want to understand the spaces where we need to put more effort in, and to restore, in order to connect up that biodiversity. As part of that, we will be restoring 20 sites. This will be

a really important project, looking at how we connect up the volunteer activity and how we communicate better.

It is about having signage to explain that this site is not a site that has been neglected because we are not mowing it; it is a site where we are specifically looking at doing rewilding activities and looking at more natural spaces. There is quite a significant piece of work that is going to start, a collaborative piece of work across a range of government areas. It will connect with the work that TCCS is doing in terms of looking at its urban open space strategy, so that we can do this even better and be able to communicate across government, between government and volunteers and to the broader community, so that they can understand how and why we are looking after a piece of land in a particular way and how it connects in better.

**MS CASTLEY:** My concern is that the volunteers have raised that working across the departments is difficult; we have encountered that as well. But this seems to be a communication problem within one department, and I think it definitely needs to be looked at, in order to improve that. It is hard enough for volunteers as it is, let alone knowing that it is just one department that has a communication issue.

**THE CHAIR:** A lot of the submissions we received mentioned how to incorporate or encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in volunteering in the ACT. Just briefly, looking through our volunteering statement, it does not mention anywhere the need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which I find quite surprising. It does mention multicultural communities and people with disabilities. In terms of being the environment minister—and there are so many environmental volunteer groups—how is the government working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to encourage participation and engagement in environmental groups in the ACT?

**Ms Vassarotti:** That is a really good question, Dr Paterson; thank you for it. I think it is a fair reflection that you make, in terms of the fact that it is not really spoken about in terms of the government's submission.

Certainly, within the environment portfolio, the key mechanism where we have been looking to support our First Nations engagement is through the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee, which is a committee of Ngunnawal people that have come together, and it is supporting a range of activities and trying to embed First Nations knowledge into the work of EPSDD. That has also been supported with some significant enhancement of First Nations people that are working in the directorate, particularly through Ngunnawal ranger programs.

As part of the conversations that we have with the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee, how we connect in with First Nations people, and support and connect them as part of the volunteering experience, is really important. It is something that we need to do more work in. We have some fantastic First Nations leaders who are doing great work in this area.

I would like to acknowledge the work of Wally Bell; he is on the board of Landcare ACT and he is trying to foster that environment engagement. We have some incredible young First Nations environmental people doing some great work.

One of the real challenges for First Nations people is that we often look to particular people within the community to do everything. One of the comments around the Dhawura Ngunnawal committee is that there are people that would love to do volunteer work, but they are really busy with us. With respect to asking them to engage in a whole range of other areas, I am not sure whether anyone has any specific initiatives that we can—

**Mr Alegria:** Minister, you make a great point, in that there is a lot of call, particularly on the local Ngunnawal community, for a whole range of matters that are of interest to the directorate and the government. From a parks point of view, while we welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person to a volunteer program, our focus is very much on actual employment and getting people on the ground and paid to do the environmental work to which they have a connection.

We have a pretty strong track record of employing Ngunnawal and Indigenous people and providing them with training and development. That has been the focus of the parks service; those employment opportunities have been at the core. That is not to say that we would not welcome many volunteers. As you say, it is not a particular focus in terms of the volunteer program.

**Mr Burkevics:** Dr Paterson, they are really good reflections. One of the ongoing challenges for volunteer organisations is to encourage those from culturally diverse backgrounds. That is a very rich thing for volunteer organisations and something that remains very much a challenge and an ongoing priority, in order to expand the cultural diversity of volunteer groups. I do not think anybody has quite cracked the equation on that one, but it is something that we must continue to do, so that the volunteer groups are a reflection of not only their local community but the ACT in general. In terms of other initiatives, I will hand over to Mr Garofalow.

**Mr Garofalow:** There are a few things where it would be useful for you to be aware of what is happening. First of all, there is a dedicated Aboriginal ParkCare group that operates; there is one in Gungahlin. In addition to that, we have a range of other initiatives. There is a dedicated officer in an identified position whose role is to engage with the Aboriginal community and get them involved in natural resource activities and so forth. As Stephen mentioned, some of that is paid and some of that is volunteer. We run lots of events.

There are different types of volunteering. Often, some types are event based, and some types are where you go once a month to the same location and undertake activities. In a lot of the Aboriginal space it is more around event based. We have big activities which are almost training activities and opportunities, where a range of skill development occurs. We bring in elders to teach around some of the land management activities, traditional practice and cultural heritage elements. Those are held semi-regularly.

In addition to that, we meet with the community and try to find out what are the things that they like. As an example, we are working with the community to develop some bush tucker gardens, where there is food available that can be harvested by the community for ceremonial or other purposes, as they wish. We are also looking to

support a range of skill development, as I mentioned, in some of the cultural heritage type activities.

We run programs which are called future leader, future elder programs. With respect to people who are identified within the community that have shown interest in and skill to become future leaders of the Aboriginal community and engage with government, we can provide them with additional skills, in both traditional things like public speaking and other skills around managing intergenerational trauma and a whole range of other skills that would be significantly useful for community.

We also work closely with children. We have a range of programs, particularly in high school, where we get year 9 and 10 kids out on Country—again, working with elders to learn and gain additional skills and knowledge.

We work with ex-detainees, people coming out of the prison system, to provide them with skills to reintegrate back into society through culture. Senior leaders and elders get people out on Country and, through that process, rebuild some self-esteem and skill development. All of that is targeted potentially at future opportunities in terms of long-term employment through the skills and the opportunity to present those.

We have lots and lots; that is just the tip of the iceberg. We recognise that working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is critically important. In the volunteer space, it is particularly important because that can transition into paid employment. With respect to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we have to do it in a slightly different way because the needs and wants of that community mean that event based or specific program based is more likely to be the avenue that we go down to undertake that work.

**MS CLAY:** This is a very helpful format where we can ask a question and have EPSDD or TCCS answer it. It is highly recommended for other formats.

**Ms Vassarotti:** This is why we are here; this is what we want to do.

**MS CLAY:** We are talking to ACT Wildlife later today. They have made a pretty strong plea for a wildlife vet. I was not on the ECCB committee last time, but they have mentioned in their submission that the committee made a recommendation. I will read it out because I am sure we will not remember it:

The committee recommends that the ACT Government explore quantifying the injured and the loss of wildlife in the territory.

In the government response it said:

Noted. Quantifying the total loss of wildlife or injured wildlife across the territory is extremely difficult.

I am not hugely interested in that recommendation; I am more interested in the issue and the concern. It is really upsetting for volunteers and carers to be dealing with injured wildlife. They are telling us that maybe they call someone and somebody will not come until the next day. They have to deal with an animal that is in a lot of pain.

Frankly, an injured wombat sounds pretty hazardous to me; these people are brave. Often, when the vet comes, because there is no wildlife vet, the vet does not know how to treat that animal. They are often euthanasing, which is fine; sometimes they are applying inappropriate treatment for the wrong species because they are simply not a wildlife vet.

It came through in a couple of other submissions that, apparently, at some point in the past, there was a wildlife vet. The concern there was that the wildlife vet was an FTE taken from rangers and put into the wildlife vet, so I would also couch that on the basis that if there is a better way to deal with out-of-hours wildlife vet issues, it certainly should not be coming from another resource. Also, they seem to be relying on the kindness of private vets working pro bono at the moment. Have you got any thoughts on that?

**Ms Vassarotti:** Thanks very much for the question. I would want to recognise the incredible work that ACT Wildlife do. They are a very important organisation that do incredible work. The carers that provide care are amazing. I have spent quite a lot of time with ACT Wildlife.

Certainly, our response to the incredible work of that organisation was in terms of our funding support for ACT Wildlife. As part of that support to environmental volunteers, it included \$100,000 per annum for ACT Wildlife, which is ongoing funding, and that was in recognition of their incredible work.

There are always opportunities to do more. Certainly, with the provision of that support, we work with ACT Wildlife in terms of how they allocate those funds. I know that they have been doing some fantastic work looking at some opportunities in terms of new programs such as wildlife vet programs and facilities to support those. I will look to officials in terms of specific work that has happened in terms of engaging on the specific issue of a wildlife vet.

**Mr Alegria:** My comment would be around the priority currently given to vet services. There is a significant workload at Tidbinbilla, for example, in helping to manage the captive populations of wildlife that we have there. That is certainly a very large focus of the vet resources that we have. There is also a role for the government vet in matters of agricultural and biosecurity-type efforts. That has been where the main focus has been, in terms of actual vet resources.

I know from my previous roles that they have vet capacity at domestic animal services as well. That is not my field now. Certainly, there is a range of requirements for veterinarians in the ACT government.

The other part of this, I suppose, which is the less pleasant side, is that we do have the urban wildlife program in parks and conservation, which is designed to minimise the suffering of animals that are involved in, particularly, car accidents. We do have that 24-hour service in euthanasing those animals where required, where they have been hit by a car or otherwise injured. Of course, that is not ideal; we would love to be able to rehabilitate animals but, in many situations like that, we simply cannot do it, and the kindest and most humane way of managing that is through euthanasia.



We very much recognise the important role that ACT Wildlife play. I think their resourcing, as the minister said, has been significantly increased over the historic levels, which has enabled them to do a lot more work. As I say, the focus for us has been on our threatened species programs in particular, in terms of our vet resources.

**MS CASTLEY:** One of the submissions that we had was around getting permits to do work. I do not remember the detail, but volunteer groups have to fill out a form to say, “We want to do some work here, it’s on public land.” They put all the details in; then it goes off to the next bouncing ball. It then comes back and says, “Hang on, is this on public land?” or they say, “No, you have to stop because this is on public land.”

There is a lot of confusion for the volunteer groups in just trying to get little bits of work done here and there. What is the government’s plan to clear that up? Stephen, you mentioned that there is low admin for volunteers in some areas, but it would seem there is quite high admin in other areas. I would love to hear your thoughts on that.

**Ms Vassarotti:** It is a really good reflection. We all collectively want to make sure that we get volunteers out doing the work that they love to do, that supports our environment. Unfortunately, we are a bureaucracy and we do have to, primarily, manage risk, and ensure that we are connecting up and doing things in a way that is safe for volunteers and the community, and that it is linked up with other work of government.

I will ask officials to respond, in terms of that specific issue. I would like to make the comment that we are aware of the fact that, in some of our programs, we do have levels of admin. Certainly, one of the pieces of feedback that I heard a lot about was in relation to environment grants—both the application process and the acquittal process. It actually requires significant levels of work to complete.

In this round of environment grants, we did quite a lot of work in terms of streamlining that process. I cannot remember the reduction in numbers of pages, but even in terms of what we were filling out, it was significantly reduced. Particularly across our different programs, it is around having consistency. Also, it is around being able to provide good advice to community volunteers. People are really passionate; they look at all of the grants programs and say, “We’ll just put something in for all of them and see how we go with the lottery.”

There is work that we still need to do, and I have spoken to Mr Steel about it. How do we both line up the different programs that volunteer groups will be interested in applying for and be really clear that projects of this type are probably better suited to an adopt-a-park grants program as opposed to a specific environmental grant or a specific stream within the Environmental Grants Program?

**MS CASTLEY:** They were saying there is quite a discrepancy, and that there are no standard words. You mentioned the acquittal—one grant for \$400,000 and they do not need an accountant—

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** and if it is \$3,000, they do need an accountant. There is that

confusion for the groups, which is a massive admin overhead for them when they just want to get in and get the job done.

**Ms Vassarotti:** Yes. Certainly, particularly within the Environmental Grants Program, we have looked clearly at both the application process and that reporting and acquittal process, to reduce that, and actually make it proportionate. You are right; I think it happens across all governments, in all sectors: sometimes the little bits of money require huge amounts of accountability, whereas for a million dollars you do not have to do much. This was one of the really important things—providing consistency of funding for support groups, catchment groups and the like—so that they provide a bit of a backbone in terms of supporting those processes as well.

My reflection would be that we have done quite a lot of work in terms of the Environmental Grants Program. We probably have not got it right, and we will continue to work with community groups on how we can continue to improve that. But it is absolutely something that I heard really strongly, and I give credit to the team that worked quite hard to make a much more streamlined program. In terms of that permit process, I am not sure where that would sit.

**Mr Iglesias:** I have a comment. In terms of the operational side of things, there is definitely a difference between an established group coming in with a proposal or an idea about what they want to do next in a defined area to which they already have a connection, and a new group being formed who wishes to start something different. With the established groups, we have the processes in place. Often it is just a continuation. With a new group, we need to make sure that all of those things you mentioned, Ms Castley, about—

**MS CASTLEY:** This was an established group.

**Mr Iglesias:** Okay. I will leave it at that. But I think there is a difference.

**MS CLAY:** We have had a lot of really practical suggestions. They will not just be for environment grants. When people want money, it is about heritage, environment, Adopt-a-Park and TCCS. When people talk to us, they mean all of the grants. There was a strong push for standard terms and conditions; then, when you need different ones, you put them at the bottom, which sounded really sensible to me. Public liability insurance should be the same amount. Some require \$10 million, some require \$20 million and some require appropriate PL.

If you are trying to find someone to auspice you and you do not know which grant you are going to get, that is quite difficult. There was a strong call in the subs to tell people who have previously applied when a new round is out. That strikes me as being part of an automated email system; that might be quite easy to suggest. There are actually quite a lot of very practical suggestions. Do you think there is any chance that, across government, if we put those together and say, “Here are the things that people who use these have said,” that it might be implemented?

**Ms Vassarotti:** In relation to that, I think practical suggestions are great, and I think there are things that we can improve. Certainly, in terms of the grants programs that I administer, I would gratefully receive those. As I mentioned, a discussion has

already started with Minister Steel in terms of some of the opportunities to align. Sometimes, with things that look really practical and easy, because of a particular thing around a privacy principle or an IT issue, we will not be able to implement everything. Again, it goes to that user experience. People who are filling out these applications all the time will have great ideas. Yes, we are really open to and happy to hear it. We did focus on environment grants this year. Certainly, the heritage grants process is something that we need to have a look at as well. We would gratefully receive that feedback, while recognising that there might be constraints on a specific solution that people might have.

**Mr Burkevics:** Ms Clay, further to the minister's remarks, I was part of a grant discussion process a few years ago where there was certainly acknowledgement across government that the directorates are at a different level of maturity around the grant management, and that is reflective of the size of the grant pool that they are managing.

However, through that forum, there were a lot of learnings, from a very digital-based system—smart e-grants, for example—down to a very paper-based system. Certainly, with respect to sharing those learnings and observations, and particularly looking at it from a volunteer perspective—essentially, one portal, one approach, one set template—there is absolutely merit in streamlining it so that people understand the administrative requirements and can navigate through them quite easily. Ms McQueen might have some other remarks about grant matters.

**Ms McQueen:** I wanted to touch on the endorsement of works and approvals process that happens as part of grants. It also happens as part of our day-to-day work, particularly with our ParkCare patch groups. Any time we want to conduct a planting activity, we have to go through several stages of approvals. When going for grant applications, obviously, they need to show that they have support for the works that they are doing, which can create that barrier. Particularly with time constraints, we know that our volunteers are not solely volunteers; they have work, family and other commitments as well.

I wanted to touch on and clarify that, unfortunately, these approvals are part of our day-to-day business. We need to get approvals from our fire management unit, heritage, threatened species and different departments, to see, where works are proposed, that are both short term and long term, what those impacts will be on that local environment space. It is definitely something that we recognise in our volunteer community as being a barrier and a hurdle, and we are having conversations about it. Unfortunately, it is—

**MS CASTLEY:** If the group get the grant approved, when they want to start the work, do they have to go for more permit approvals?

**Ms McQueen:** Yes. Essentially, they would get endorsement for the works in order to go for that grant, to show that there is support from ACT Parks and Conservation Service to conduct those works. But when it comes down to whether they are getting the grant or whether they would just like to embark on a planting activity that is outside a grant process, they would still need to go through this standard process, which is something that our paid employees go through as well.

**Mr Burkevics:** There are a number of safeguards. I would assume as well, as mentioned, that there are a number of clearances from a safety perspective, a fire risk perspective, a heritage perspective, and that the good work that is planned is not causing damage in some other way. We call it a safeguard mechanism, to ensure that the works proposed are not going to have an unknown consequence.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you see that there could be ways to expedite that process? For example, if an assessment is done of a patch, so that we know what we will or will not plant in that patch, there could be perhaps an overarching fire assessment, so that it is all done before. That eases the flow through these different barriers.

**Mr Iglesias:** What you have just described is certainly something that we are looking at in the urban area. In the urban area, what may not be as obvious to volunteers is the huge range of considerations that may not be applicable in rural areas, like line-of-sighting for traffic, underground utilities, rules around playgrounds and what you can put around playgrounds, issues to do with species mix and whether it offends bushfire fuels. Some of these are not always obvious.

**MS CASTLEY:** Do they not put that information in during the grant process?

**Mr Iglesias:** It might be touched on. It depends on how good the person writing the grant is and how mindful they are of the issues. But we cannot capture every single—

**MS CASTLEY:** Asset.

**Mr Iglesias:** Yes, in a generic application. What we can do, though, and it is one thing that we are thinking about, for all of our different parks, is to be quite up-front and explicit, and say, “This park is recreational, but bear in mind we’ve got to have these considerations for these parks.” That could be something we could put on our website.

**MS CASTLEY:** It removes the barriers.

**Mr Iglesias:** Yes. That is something we are looking at, to try to make it a little bit easier for people to be aware of what they are going to need to think about up-front.

**THE CHAIR:** We might end the session there. I would like to thank everyone for attending today. I think we had one question taken on notice, so we look forward to receiving that answer. You will get a copy of the proof transcript, to check for any errors. Thank you very much for your time today.

**LEWIS, DR SOPHIE**, Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

**THE CHAIR:** We welcome our next witness today, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Dr Sophie Lewis. On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for appearing today and for your written submission. Please be aware that proceedings today are recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also broadcast and livestreamed. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement on the table before you. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, that is correct. I have read and understand the privilege statement.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. Dr Lewis, would you like to make some brief opening remarks?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, please. I have an opening statement. Thank you. I would also like to commence by acknowledging the care provided to this country by the Ngunnawal people. In our submission to the inquiry, we highlighted the work of environmental volunteers in the ACT and drew attention to the care that they provide for our environment and the community here. As such, we feel it is critical to pay close attention to and appreciate the skill of the Ngunnawal people in caring for this land over the millennia.

Earlier this year my office published a web report that showcases the work done by environmental volunteers in the ACT, and that formed the basis of the submission to the current inquiry. The 2019 ACT *State of the Environment Report* highlighted the extensive work of volunteers and community groups, to the great benefit of the environment here in the ACT; but a major gap was identified in the collection and management of data on those contributions and quantifying how citizen scientists and our environmental volunteers were contributing.

The web report aimed to address that gap. The first thing we did in the web report was that we noted how complex the volunteering space is. It involves many government agencies and non-government organisations and covers thousands of people. We describe this complex space as an ecosystem that includes those not-for-profit community organisations and the government agencies, and we present a comprehensive list of those contributing bodies and go some way to describing the relationships between all those people and groups.

We examined the contributions of those groups in detail and we noted that they provide immense value. That includes value tangibly, through on-the-ground efforts, but also through the more abstract contributions to community and wellbeing and all the other important things. During workshops with volunteers, they emphasised time and again that they do not want to be just statistics about what they contribute; they want to get out there and work.

We still went about focusing on assessing their contributions and we calculated that it would cost \$21.5 million each year if the ACT environment volunteers were paid for

the work that they do. They do not want to be paid for the work they do, they want to volunteer; but that goes to demonstrate how much they are contributing, through their actions, to protect the environment.

There were clear environmental benefits that were made by these volunteers, but, due to the many different entities in that complex ecosystem, it was very difficult to collect the information and provide a clear overall picture of the contributions being made to the environment by those volunteers. We highlighted that weed control is one aspect of land management where volunteers are consistently providing value to enhance the environment and we can go some way to measuring how they are contributing.

Overall, our report celebrated the work of volunteers and their contributions to the environment, but we also identified several opportunities for how that space could be strengthened and could work better, both for people and for the environmental outcomes. I am very happy to answer any further questions around those opportunities. I thank you very much for the information to talk further on this.

**THE CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**MS CLAY:** Dr Lewis, thank you very much. I really appreciated your report. The website format was extraordinarily readable, so thank you for that, too. That was a very good way to present it. I wanted to pick up on the volunteer recognition. You will be pleased to know that an awful lot of the submissions made echoed very closely what you said in your report, so obviously your consultation was pretty on the mark.

We have heard calls for volunteers to be able to claim expenses, which seems straightforward. I do not think that is the real nub of it, but we have heard that. We have heard calls for much better, genuine, deep recognition. There were a few comments made about \$21.5 million worth of contribution and they got two paragraphs in an annual report that did not recognise any of the specific work. We have heard calls for an annual event and awards and a bit of a mixer, and all of those things sounded quite positive to me. Is that what you mean by better volunteer recognition?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, absolutely; it is many of those initiatives that you have outlined. During the report writing we had stakeholder workshops and engagement with both government and volunteers and representatives from various organisations, and one of the things that came out was that, often, volunteers feel like their contributions are devalued.

They certainly do not want to be paid; they want to volunteer and they get a great sense of accomplishment and reward from that, but from the volunteers that we spoke to it was typical to hear people report that they felt that their value was diminished. They could be told what to do and they would do a task and that was the end of it. They did not hear how that had been used, how their contributions were contributing to a project.

There were all sorts of points where volunteers were feeling disengaged. Some of the things that came up were that a yearly event celebrating their contributions would be

very well received. Although there are other systems through which citizens and volunteers are honoured, this typically picks out one individual and highlights their contribution above another. That is fantastic to recognise a citizen of the year or someone who has achieved highly, but what volunteers wanted was not for their particular work to be acknowledged but the work of volunteers more broadly.

When we compiled the stories that backed up our web report, we had trouble finding people who were willing to put their hand up and be profiled. Everyone said, “No, no, it is not about me. You should talk to this other person, who has an extra 20 years of service on top of me.” Individuals do not want to be highlighted. They want to be highlighted for being representative of volunteers.

So that was one thing. There were certainly comments that small expenses being able to be claimed back would be particularly useful and remove a barrier but also make them feel like their time was valued—and their expertise, which is, you know, analogous to time. Then there was, really, the greater acknowledgement in the work—so, rather than having a generic sentence that pays tribute to volunteers, having more specific, detailed information would be appreciated in recognising those contributions.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. Great. There was a bit of a pushback across all of the submissions about the feeling that the management of volunteers is top-down from government and that government delivers expertise down, whereas in actual fact a lot of the expertise should be going the other way in this area.

There were a few individual ones. One that sticks out to me is that there were a few people who did not like, violently, the rebrand to ParkCare Patch; I think that was the term. Government changed what we called some of these land care groups to ParkCare Patch and apparently government did not talk to the people who were doing those activities. They do not like the new name and apparently were not told about it beforehand. Did you come across any of that pushback on what maybe is a top-down way to deal with volunteers?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes. We certainly found some of these things coming out in the surveys and the stakeholder workshops that we had. We did not specifically delve into that ParkCare renaming. That did not come up, surprisingly. But one thing around that recognition was that, in recognising the value of volunteers, it is really about redistributing the valuing of contributions. It is not that the paid workforce, through government agencies, has greater knowledge or expertise necessarily. It is about the people who have the experience, whether that is coming into the volunteer experience with an understanding of governance that they bring with them, or on-ground management, or whether it is built in the volunteer organisation, and that everyone has the potential to contribute to that environment and those programs, whether it is on a volunteer or a paid basis. So it should not be that top-down hierarchy or structure that you have suggested.

**MS CASTLEY:** You mentioned that one of the recommendations was appropriate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations. Can you talk about that?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** Is there not enough funding—what would you like to see—and the answer is always no.

**Dr Lewis:** I think a lot of community organisations feel that with greater funding they could certainly contribute a lot more in terms of management and on-the-ground programs, but really what that spoke to was the difficulty in planning within these organisations, with the uncertainty around funding. You know: can the expectations of that group be met with the resourcing provided and can that group function if the resourcing is uncertain? That is if they are planning beyond a financial year or if they are within a financial year and uncertain as to what their financial position is during that year.

The report highlighted—they are not formal recommendations—that the current level of support for volunteer programs and community groups was essential and that, really, we need more certainty about ongoing funding so that these groups can plan for future success and staff retention. The staff retention was a big one. It is difficult enough to keep on-the-ground programs going with uncertain funding, but particularly if staff are uncertain about whether they have positions or about some of the paid positions within those groups.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of our understanding of the environment, there is a lot of assumed knowledge there. For people who are coming from overseas, from different countries and different backgrounds, who have no knowledge of the Australian bush or the animals or the environment they are now living in, what do you think the government could do to encourage those communities—we have a very diverse community in the ACT—to engage in environmental volunteerism in a situation where they perhaps do not understand the Australian bush?

**Dr Lewis:** We did not specifically delve into what is lacking in terms of bringing people into the volunteer space. We essentially looked at what that space is at the moment. One thing that did come up is that there is not a single type of volunteering. In our report we have a page where, if people are interested, they can go and see what might suit them in terms of their interests and skills and capacities. There are all sorts of things from being in the back office looking at the financial statements, through to people who are out once a month weeding, depending on your physical capacity, your expertise and also the time available. There are all sorts of different volunteering opportunities available and some of them are highly expert—you need to be a very skilled expert in orchids to be able to contribute to a specific organisation—but some of them are certainly available to anyone who has any time or any interest in the environment.

I think, really, what we see here is that there is a misperception that volunteering looks one way. That is probably your more typical kind of weeding, land care, on-the-ground management that is someone who is available every week, someone who does not have full-time work or onerous care commitments and things like that to balance. But we did see that there are a lot of different opportunities. There is a huge demographic that is interested in volunteering, whether it is the young people contributing through Trash Gather or some of the younger focused land care groups. So for someone who was coming to the ACT and was interested in the natural



environment or interested in building their social network and wellbeing through volunteering, there are a lot of existing opportunities, or opportunities to create their own groups where people can come together and enjoy that kind of community.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MS CLAY:** I might just jump in, briefly. Trash Gather was interesting; the picture showed a much younger group of people than a lot of the other photos in there, and that was interesting. We have had a few suggestions on how to get more young people engaged. A few of the groups are doing work with existing youth groups. That seems to be the way to do it—like go to a school and establish a relationship there or go to a Scout group. Did you have a think about how youth engagement was going, or did you come across any suggestions or good examples?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes. There certainly is a large contribution being made in the environment volunteering space through older Canberrans. I think the first thing is to acknowledge that that is fantastic, that we get the wealth of experience and time that a lot of people have, and that they are deciding to contribute in that way. Some of the people that we highlighted are just phenomenal Canberrans who have boardroom expertise that they are bringing into a governance role in a community organisation.

I think that is wonderful, but it also means that there is a possible gap in young people who do want to volunteer and do not know where to place that time and effort. A lot of those connections, as you mentioned, are through existing groups or connections between junior land carers and school groups. There is certainly the possibility for reviewing that space and seeing how children and young people would be more likely to connect.

A lot of these groups are geographically focused, so they might be based at Mt Majura, Dickson wetlands, Holder wetlands or any other specific location. That might not be the way that a 25-year-old Canberran is connected—through a particular location they are deeply passionate about. It may be more about wanting to connect with other people who are in the same age bracket. Having an activity like Trash Gather that is more focused on contributing together, as a group of roughly the same age and like-minded people, might be a better way to do it, rather than being deeply passionate about an ongoing connection to one location.

**MS CLAY:** We have heard from a lot of people about the difficulty in getting approvals for new projects, and you talked through that a little bit. We have also heard about the reverse problem of communications, where a group has worked in an area and government does something in that area without telling them and they understandably do not like not being notified, so there is a bit of a disconnect with communication both ways there.

There are a few suggestions on whether people should have contact names, whether there should be better organisational charts, whether we need more paid volunteer coordinators in groups or whether we need more paid volunteer coordinators in government. Did you see that problem with the information flow and how to fix it?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes. As to how to fix it, that is a big question, but that certainly was

something that came through time and again: this issue around communication. Where relationships fell apart or partnerships and relationships became ineffective, for the most part, was around a breakdown in communication. That was something that came up time and again—and sometimes in a positive way, where groups and contact points or agencies within government were highly collaborative and worked very effectively and had built relationships. But there were other times where communication had not gone as well as expected, and programs had languished because of that.

Communication did seem to be critical for utilising the knowledge and the expertise of volunteers. We did not really delve into specific ways within this report to improve that, but we did highlight that making the best use of what is occurring in the volunteering space requires that these relationships and the knowledge that is exchanged between the two, between government and volunteers, is really invested in.

That came up in particular around the issue of ranger turnover; what was something that came up a lot. We did not look into why that was occurring or whether that was necessary, but that is something that many of the volunteers had difficulty navigating—what happens after rangers change over? Seeing as that is the system, can we develop processes to smooth that out so that we do not have to go back to square one or even further back in terms of trust in those relationships?

**THE CHAIR:** I was just wondering about the sweet spot between citizen science and government. One of the submissions talked about how citizen scientists felt very encouraged and supported in the ACT, but that there is a limitation to their ability to collect the data and expertise that is required—that type of thing. What do you see as the ideal relationship between citizen science and the government?

**Dr Lewis:** Broadly or in reference to any particular—

**THE CHAIR:** Broadly—like how to improve that collaboration.

**Dr Lewis:** We felt that citizen science data was one area that was really being under-utilised within the environmental management space, although Canberra Nature Map is very well known and that is an example of a citizen science project that is quality controlled and trusted to build programs around.

We did see, through these workshops, that that tended to be the only program. I suppose there is also catchment management, Waterwatch and Frogwatch, but, really, programs for citizen science had to be already well established before there was any kind of trust in the usefulness of those. There did not seem to be any system by which any other information could be used, introduced, trialled or highlighted as a pilot. Really, something already had to be proven to be useful, which means we might be missing out on a lot of information that citizen scientists can be providing. There should be systems in place to ensure that that data is of sufficient quality to be used, rather than just taking anything, but there is the chance that we are missing out on useful information from citizen scientists.

**MS CLAY:** It was actually on my list, too. It is an interesting topic because, on the one hand, you have real science, which is peer reviewed. A lot of checks and balances

apply to that. Then we have citizen science, which, obviously, when you are talking about really labour intensive field techniques, is probably the only way a government like the ACT government is likely to be able to get information in a lot of areas. Probably citizen science is going to be the best tool that we have.

What sorts of quality controls could be used? How do you imagine a government public servant who is not a scientist might be able to evaluate—or somebody who is looking at grants or looking at projects might be able to evaluate—what is going to be a really useful citizen science project without sticking the name “citizen science” on somebody’s random blog?

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, absolutely. I think you mentioned peer review. In terms of the traditional scientific information, where each piece would be peer reviewed, what you have for citizen science data is that the systems and processes around that data are peer reviewed. As to what assurances you have that information is valid, you have that reviewed and checked. There are independent audits to ensure that the whole system that you are using is of the standard that is required.

Rather than I take a photo and say that that is a particular endangered species and I have sighted it in a particular location and that is just accepted as fact, you have these systems in place to ensure that people are adequately trained and qualified who are overseeing the data, so that all the metadata, all of that information around the project, is of the standard that is expected. And that is something that has been done well, beyond the environmental citizen science space.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. We do that with Frogwatch, Waterwatch and the Nature Map quite well, so it sounds like we could do that in other areas, but we would probably need public servants who are skilled in being able to check those procedures.

**Dr Lewis:** Yes, I think you would, and, yes, that is certainly the case with Frogwatch and Waterwatch, where all of those procedures are in place and then they are checked and rechecked over time.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. Thank you. Dr Lewis, I think we have covered a lot of the issues. I did find your report a really, really helpful thing. I just wanted to reassert that many of the other groups reconfirmed things that were in your report, which I found particularly interesting. Your \$21.5 million figure now appears to be universally accepted across the board, so that must be satisfying, I imagine. Was there anything else that you took away from that work and from your contact with the volunteer groups that you are not convinced government has yet heard?

**Dr Lewis:** I think one thing that really came out from that, when we tried to quantify it more comprehensively than just that monetary value, was how difficult that was. We had expected that that would be a difficult task and not straightforward, but the fact that we had such difficulty in showing what those tangible benefits were, I think, is a remaining gap. Something that would really strengthen this space is if we had more public reporting on metrics relating to volunteers that are not simply: “How many volunteers are there?” or “How do we convert volunteers’ time into a dollar value?” It could be: “How much land is being cared for and what are the outcomes?” I think that would be something that would be hugely beneficial both for the

volunteers and the government, and for the community more broadly.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. You did mention that if that data were done it should be published and volunteers should be able to see it. That might feed into the recognition of their work, too, if they can see the actual metrics of what they are doing.

**Dr Lewis:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Dr Lewis. On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for your time today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you, to check if there are any errors. That is the end of our session today, so thank you very much for your time.

**Dr Lewis:** Thank you.

**Hearing suspended from 12.28 to 1.30 pm.**

**COOPER, DR MAXINE**, Chair, Landcare ACT

**PREUSS, MS KARISSA**, Chief Executive Officer, Landcare ACT

**CLINTON, DR BROOK**, Executive Officer, SEE Change

**THE CHAIR:** I will begin by welcoming you all to the committee inquiry today, the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity inquiry into environmental volunteerism. Please be aware that the proceedings are being recorded and transcribed and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

Our witnesses today are Dr Clinton from SEE Change, and Dr Cooper and Ms Preuss from Landcare ACT. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement on the table. Can I confirm, for the record, that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

**Dr Cooper:** I do.

**Ms Preuss:** I do.

**Dr Clinton:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Before we proceed, would anyone like to make an opening statement?

**Dr Cooper:** Thank you. Should we go ahead?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, please.

**Dr Cooper:** I have the honour of being the Chair of Landcare ACT. Thank you for hearing us today. Yuma. I would like to acknowledge that we are on Ngunnawal land. I would also like to just quickly say what Landcare ACT is. We are a peak representative body for community land care here in the ACT. With our members, we represent over 70 land care groups, and those groups are growing. That means that we have thousands and thousands of individuals caring for the local environments in our region, including our rural lands.

We have five founding members. They are: Southern ACT Catchment Group, Ginninderra Catchment Group, Molonglo Conservation Group, the Rural Landholders' Association, and Buru Ngunawal Aboriginal Corporation.

Landcare, across the nation, has a strong and long history of caring for our environment. It is noteworthy that today the value and importance of our land care activities are mentioned in Australia's *State of the Environment Report*, which I believe was released around midday. One of the authors, Dr Ian Cresswell, in a webinar that was released this morning, said:

We document that although Landcare has dropped funding over 10 years it still remains a critical on-ground activity.

I am pleased to say that, in the Australian *State of the Environment Report*, in figure 29, Landcare ACT volunteers doing bushfire recovery work in Namadgi National Park in 2021 have been profiled. So that links us, in a landcare sense, right through to the *State of the Environment Report*.

Another report that has just come across my desk is one called *The overwhelm of black and the joy of green*. This is about the 2019-20 bushfires. It was reported on about two months ago. It focuses on community wellbeing, and it states:

Research looking at the long-term impacts of the 2009 Victoria bushfires found that being part of groups was protective of individual mental health 3 to 5 years after the fires.

So land care is good for the environment, it is good for us as a community and that is being recognised now. On that, I will thank you for listening to me and hand over to Karissa.

**Ms Preuss:** Thank you. Thank you for this inquiry. We really appreciate an inquiry into environmental volunteerism. Good environmental volunteers are really at the core of what Landcare is about. As Maxine described, a lot of the work that we do is gathering opinions from land carers and then providing those opinions. Some of this has come through in our submission. One of the key things that land carers have been putting forward is the importance of cross-tenure consistency. There are Landcare volunteers who work on the City Services estate, there are the ParkCare volunteers who work within Parks and Conservation, and there are very different administrative models within the two of them. You may have heard this already today.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms Preuss:** One of the things that we are really strongly advocating for through this process is, in particular, the metrics of environmental volunteering and also having a single point of contact. We see that the commissioner's office potentially has a role to play, as does ACT NRM. Both of these are bodies that go beyond, really, Environment or TCCS. We have had some initial conversations with the commissioner's office around environmental metrics and the potential for including that in the ACT *State of the Environment Report*.

Another key point is a partnership approach, because, as you know, environmental volunteers offer so much to the ACT environment and do work that would otherwise have to be done, in some cases, by ACT government. So that partnership is really quite important. Sometimes environmental volunteers do not necessarily feel particularly valued for the work that they are doing. So there are opportunities. One of the recommendations that we put forward was an interdepartmental committee where people from each of the departments will address that cross-tenure issue, as well as bringing in community groups to try to look at how we can improve these partnerships and really value community groups. Part of that is communication and transparency around decision-making.

Resourcing is obviously another core issue. The funding for catchment groups has

been incredibly appreciated, as has been the second ranger position and the citizen science program. So that and the community having that longer term security of funding have been very appreciated.

One of the issues that is likely to come up, going forward, is that the number of groups is growing, which is just brilliant. Most of that growth is happening on the City Services estate. At the moment the investment in the catchment groups is more within the environment portfolio than in City Services. In our submission we detail that there was a small investment of funding from City Services into the catchment groups, and the large return that came from that investment, so I guess that is one of the areas that we would like to look at, going forward.

The diversification of volunteer opportunities is another critical one. We will be doing some work in this space from the start of next calendar year. We have got some funding through the Australian government—well, we have got a commitment of funding—through the commonwealth urban rivers program. That will include funding for Ngunnawal and Junior Landcare programs. It is something that was identified in the Greens' policies—the importance of Junior Landcare. We look forward to working on that, through that funding, and to linking with others working in that space.

The last point is really around environmental education. Another thing that comes forward constantly from land carers is that, really, to instil that environmental ethic we need to start with young people. There is a need for Junior Landcare, as well as broad community education. I think that is probably a nice segue into the work that SEE Change does as well.

**Dr Clinton:** Thank you for holding this inquiry and providing this opportunity. Personally, I have not been working in the community sector for very long, but I see a lot of potential.

SEE Change, firstly, is a local environmental charity that has been around for some time. Our focus is on climate action, and it is a bit more within the urban space compared to Landcare, for instance. That encompasses all of the things that fall under the banner of sustainability. Whether we are talking about waste issues, transport issues or household efficiency—you name it—there are so many topics that people can get involved with.

Dr Cooper touched on the aspect that this work is really valuable, not just for our local environment and not just for our global climate, but for our communities within Canberra. The people that are already volunteering in this space, and providing a lot of professionalism, a lot of expertise and a lot of effort, definitely need some more recognition. One thing that we like to talk about at SEE Change is the range of activities and ways that people can help. For those people that are not yet volunteering in this space, it would be good to have some mechanisms that let them know that there are endless opportunities to contribute.

I believe that many more people do want to contribute in this space, and sometimes they might need an opportunity that is structured in a slightly different way. For instance, our demographics here in Canberra cover double-income families a lot.

People are very time poor; they cannot necessarily spend an entire day volunteering on an activity, but they might be able to spend an hour here and there. The consequence of that is that it puts a little bit more stress on volunteer coordinators. Anything that people can think of to provide additional resourcing, or different training opportunities for volunteer coordinators would have implications for the whole of Canberra.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for those opening remarks. I will follow on from that, around the proliferation of little neighbourhood groups wanting to work on their little local parks and do planting there. I am interested in—similar to what you are saying—the different opportunities that people are embracing now, as we have the experience of COVID. Are there things that you think the ACT government could do that could contribute to that environment and creating an environment where those groups can flourish?

**Dr Cooper:** Absolutely.

**Ms Preuss:** Everything comes back to that community-government partnership. In a lot of ways, the community organisations are probably best placed to be doing that actual engagement with the community. We could have a group set up to have these conversations between community and government regularly. We have that informally at an operational level, but it would be nice to have something a little bit higher level and strategic, where there were discussions around, “What are the priority populations that we do want to engage?” and looking at how we can do that.

We are starting to have some of those conversations. In a lot of ways, the typical Landcare group gets together on a Saturday morning once a month. But we are looking at other ways of doing things. For example, we are creating an LGBTQIA+ group, and we are looking at what model that will take. That is more likely to be a roving group that will go to a number of different places. It is similar to the case of a young Landcare group. At the moment, the way that it is happening is that young people can join in with other groups. There is a Facebook page that allows them to know when these activities are, with other specific activities focused on youth. Definitely, there are things that the government could do. It is largely about identifying what the priorities are, and potentially supporting those particular priorities.

**Dr Cooper:** As a model, I would recommend, although it is a messy model, the community doing it for the community, with the community, in partnership with government—not the government doing it for the community and running the program, then inviting people. That, of course, is a beautifully efficient model, but it is the learning and the growing together in that less-efficient model that probably, long term, is a more committed model from the community.

**Dr Clinton:** Definitely, more can be done just in terms of promoting opportunities. I know that, over the last couple of years, there has been a little bit of embargo on promotion of certain grant programs and things like that, and outcomes from those grant programs because there has had to be so much COVID messaging. I have talked to people in the community, and one person asked, “Why doesn’t the ACT government do more in terms of fostering community gardens for growing vegetables?” Instantly, I said, “There is a grant program specifically for that,”



but people are not necessarily aware of it.

It is about using government communication channels, as well as using community partners to help with these kinds of communications, and having that as a supported activity. I feel that grants often completely forget about the communication aspect. It is very easy to provide a grant that covers capital items or other things, but those softer activities that are a bit harder to describe are still critical.

**Ms Preuss:** I think that is a really important point. A lot of what happens in the community space, in coordinating these, does require a facilitator or coordinator that is funded. It is sometimes very hard to provide the exact metrics that you get for that money, but it is basically the grease that makes it all happen. We have, at times, identified what those roles are. Funding those coordinators and those facilitators in committee organisations is critical. We have seen with the catchment groups the outcomes that occur when those positions are funded.

**Dr Cooper:** It may be that there is not a grant program that calls for a coordinator, so maybe you have to look at it with the community groups structurally, across the whole of the ACT, to say how this works. That is what has happened with the catchment coordination groups. It is a structural arrangement for them to facilitate things and go for grants.

**MS CLAY:** We have heard lots today, and lots of submissions all say very similar things, about the difficulty that the community and volunteers have in talking to government. There is not particularly good coordination between EPSDD, PCS and TCCS. Specifically, there are operational problems with who is allowed to use what chemicals, lack of permissions for power tool use, different standards applying to different grants from different agencies, and different insurance standards on those—lots and lots of operational barriers that probably all come down to not working in partnership with the community.

This is actually quite a different conversation than the one we had this morning, which focused on those individual problems. Dr Cooper, Dr Clinton and Ms Preuss, you have all talked about a community partnership where the community is leading; and, if there are more resources, those facilitator resources to be put into the community—not that there would be more government volunteer resources. Do you think that might be a way to deal with some of what are really communication problems and a top-down approach to handling volunteers?

**Dr Cooper:** It would be good to have some understanding, across government and across the community, about how to resolve issues—who to go to, and if it is in the community, what power the community members have. In terms of the Landcare activities, for instance, my colleague Karissa meets regularly with different executives within government and tries to put forward issues. But it is informal. It is a constructive approach, of course, and they are very constructive, because we have a good working relationship. Mainly, it is about formalising how you go about making a complaint and who could help you to look at it. Often a complaint that is shared can then be resolved, rather than a minute becoming a mountain after a time.

There must be a mechanism for resolving conflicts, I think, without necessarily

thinking it has to be writing to the government or the government doing it. I throw that open to you.

**Ms Preuss:** Yes, I think this points to governance issues. For some time, we have not had an ACT natural resource management advisory committee. That is about to be reinstated, which is wonderful. The terms of reference are yet to be drafted. It is still, in some ways, a little problematic that our regional body here within the ACT sits wholly within the environment directorate. In a lot of other jurisdictions, the natural resource management body operates cross-tenure and is able to engage with the environment directorate, the city services directorate—that type of thing. Something that is sorely missing here in the ACT is that form of governance that is able to liaise cross-tenure and with community. That is something that I would love to see come from this inquiry.

**MS CLAY:** We have the Biodiversity Conservation Forum, which is a new body that is convened by the Conservation Council and the conservator. It has a lot of groups underneath it. We are getting a bit of clarity from the directorates about exactly which bits of which directorates sit on that group. Do you think that group is able to deal with some of these issues or are you talking more about greater participation?

**Ms Preuss:** Potentially, but in terms of governance it has been a bit unclear. We have a conservator who is also a director with the environment directorate. At this stage TCCS has not participated in that. If we look at the terms of reference for that group, potentially, that could be a good place.

**MS CLAY:** I did ask that question this morning and TCCS thought they would go off and check whether they had been, or not.

**Dr Cooper:** Also, possibly a two-tiered approach, because in your local patch, that weed, or whatever you are dealing with, becomes your big issue. Every morning you walk and you have a look, and it is your big issue. When you are dealing at the conservator level, it is much more strategic across the whole landscape. That person's local priority may never reach your priority. But is there a way to look at whether we can help that local person in the local patch, and do things at the strategic level?

**Ms Preuss:** That is one of the things that is fascinating in our members council. At Landcare ACT we have our members council, which is comprised of 25 Landcare leaders. Those Landcare leaders come from the urban space, the rural space and ParkCare—the whole gamut of Landcare. It is fascinating how the issues in each of these contexts, that are often dealt with in isolation, are so common across the whole. One of the things we are working on at the moment is collating those into an issues paper and addressing those.

**MS CASTLEY:** I am interested in education and young Landcare. I imagine there would be a lot for younger people to learn from being in a combined group. Could you give me your thoughts on separating that out and what sort of education you are thinking about—schools, or just through community? What are your thoughts?

**Ms Preuss:** In terms of the broad community, there is a lot of education that is happening through the catchment groups, and places like SEE Change and the

Environment Centre, but there are definitely still some gaps, particularly in terms of younger people. We are talking here about preschool, as well as primary, secondary and tertiary. There really is that need for environmental education. A lot is already happening within the curriculum. What we are hearing from Landcare is that we would like to see young people interacting a little more with their local Landcare groups and in those patches. It would be very welcome for young people in schools to be coming out and learning more about their local environment.

**MS CASTLEY:** Is that something where you would hope the education department would hop on board and add to, or is there a push from you guys as almost an elective type of thing?

**Ms Preuss:** At this stage we have a commitment of funding for some youth activities, but that has not come through. We are hoping, once that happens, that we will be developing a reference group that will include people who have links with the environment—in the Education Directorate as well.

**Dr Cooper:** It is a partnership. We would hope that, as it evolves, it is not just taken up within the school system but that it stays as a partnership. I think the children get a lot out of, if you like, identifying with people outside who are doing things to provide counter models to what they might have. So it is not just within the school environment.

**Dr Clinton:** There is definitely room for specific programs and specific ways of structuring activities for different groups, whether they are younger people or people from different cultural backgrounds, for instance. When I talk about volunteer coordination and facilitating this grassroots action—touching back on Jo’s point about whether we want less of the top-down and more of the bottom-up—the aspect of culture is very important. People are coming along to any type of volunteering because they want a life-affirming experience. Culture then becomes a really important aspect.

If you are a young person, you have gone along to someone and you are surrounded by retirees, you might have a nice time but you might not feel that sense of belonging and that thing that draws you back again. At SEE Change, we are very willing to foster new groups as they spring up, and we hope that they start with a friendship base and push their passions through that opportunity to come up with all sorts of interesting things.

**Ms Preuss:** I think it really is important to look at what the motivations are for people to volunteer. We have partnered with the University of Canberra. There is a researcher from the University of Canberra who is doing research into the motivations and benefits of environmental volunteering. There is a survey out at the moment with environmental volunteers, getting their feedback in terms of why they volunteer and what they feel are the benefits coming forward. We would be very happy to share that, once that comes through.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, that would be great.

**MS CLAY:** When will that be?

**Ms Preuss:** The research is happening now. It would be later this year. I am not sure whether it will fit within your time frames.

**MS CLAY:** That is all right; send it through, anyway.

**Ms Preuss:** With Landcare ACT, we have a wellbeing program. We have found that that program has been really useful in engaging a broad demographic of people who may have been interested in environmental volunteering for a long time, but there have been a number of barriers in place. This program is working to address those barriers, both through helping people, step by step, to get involved in these conservation activities—sometimes through going on guided walks first and then becoming involved—and through training the existing coordinators of these environmental volunteer groups to look at what people experience as the barriers and how they can support those people to get through that.

**THE CHAIR:** In your submission, Brook, you mention that urban-focused climate action should not be politicised, and steer away from environmental activism and politics. Do you think that engaging more with the wellbeing side and the social side is something that should be promoted to broaden the scope of volunteers that do engage?

**Dr Clinton:** Yes, it is a bit of a trap to fall into identity politics, more than anything else. Naturally, because we are talking about climate change all the time, we draw to us a lot of people who identify as activists, but is that going to be putting other people off a little bit—coming back to that aspect of belonging, I suppose?

We try to create a really open atmosphere for people to let their guard down and have good dialogue with each other before launching into projects, for instance. That kind of activity, and facilitating those kinds of dialogues, does take a lot of time. You get back to the resourcing problem, in that we want to do this really carefully, and we want to be as inclusive as possible, but that may require more either in training of those people who are facilitating and coordinating these types of activities or sometimes in staff time. If staff are the ones who are already trained and can do these things well, we need to pay salaries.

**MS CLAY:** We have heard from a lot of the traditional Landcare and ParkCare groups, and some community associations, who talked about the generational nature of a lot of our activities on the ground. It involves our really skilled, time-rich retirees, which is fantastic, and how it is difficult sometimes to engage other volunteers. Young people was one group; also, First Nations, LGBTIQI or climate change—people are interested in an issue, not in the patch where they have been living for 20 years. That was quite interesting. One of the suggestions was that we should engage the community councils and the resident associations more. I wondered about that, because I thought that might be the same people who are already in Landcare.

Should we be tapping into SEE Change or existing community groups? Which groups should we be tapping into to engage different people? Should we be going to schools? How do we broaden that out to make sure that we are inviting, engaging and publicising land care activities to new people?

**Dr Cooper:** The workplace might be one where you get diversity. This is just an off-the-cuff thought: you could try and have some activities associated with a whole range of different workplaces and then back it up with activities directly in local communities. That would be a linking thing, from my perspective. When I have done that in the past, people who would normally not get involved then went on to become involved.

**Dr Clinton:** I am on my local community association. I think they are a great opportunity to hold a lot of that ultra-local knowledge. They can be a good conduit for different types of activities, definitely including ones that are relevant to that local area, the local environment and the natural elements of it. SEE Change always tries to be collaborative in everything that we do. That should include the community associations and councils.

**Ms Preuss:** The catchment groups are core to these discussions. Their core business is engaging the community and environmental volunteering. It is an issue of resourcing, to be able to broaden. At the moment they are receiving funding to do a lot of Healthy Waterways work and engage the community in Healthy Waterways. If they were to receive funding to broaden the demographic then that would really build on their existing skill set that has been developed over decades to do this work. I would see them being the first port of call.

**Dr Cooper:** Just supporting that, it is quite fascinating to be with them in a program where they are recruiting in the local neighbourhood. I am aware that you are talking to them next. You might wish to ask them the details of how they do that, because it is a definite art and they do it so well.

**THE CHAIR:** We will finish this session. Thank you so much for your time and for your contribution to our community. We will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript, and ask you to identify any errors that may have occurred. I do not think we had any questions taken on notice. Thank you very much; we appreciate your time.

**ROBERTSON, MR GEOFF**, Former President, Friends of Grassland  
**McGILP, MS KAT**, Executive Officer, Ginninderra Catchment Group  
**GIACON, MR JOHN**, Convenor, Emu Creek Landcare, General Member,  
Ginninderra Catchment Group Executive Committee, General Member, Landcare  
ACT Members Council  
**FRANCO, MS MARTINE**, Executive Officer, Southern ACT Catchment Group Inc

**THE CHAIR:** We will now hear from our next witnesses. On behalf of the committee, thank you for attending today and for your submissions. Please be aware that today's proceedings are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

Can I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and draw your attention to the privilege statement that is on the table. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

**Ms McGilp:** Yes.

**Mr Robertson:** Yes.

**Ms Franco:** Yes.

**Mr Giacon:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we begin, would anyone like to make a very brief opening statement?

**Mr Robertson:** I would. We are a group; we are self-managed and we do everything concerned with the environment, with a particular focus on our grasslands and woodlands, which are the natural ecosystems here, apart from the wet areas.

We would certainly like to see improved environmental volunteerism in the ACT. Obviously, it has a lot of health benefits, both for the environment and for the people who are involved. However, we believe that the government has always been a bit all over the place with this. There have been a lot of good intentions but not a lot of coherence.

We need to promote some sort of concept of nature in our city. There was a very good report on that put out by a previous committee, but it was shelved. The government should provide a vision of what that is. Unfortunately, this community, and Australians generally, do not have a very good understanding of nature and biodiversity. Everyone has some understanding of nature, but it relates to subtleties and things like that. We tend to think that planting trees is biodiversity; it is far from it, and often it is inappropriate. We should be looking at how we manage the broader area. We have all of these feral grasslands around; what can we do to bring them back to a state that is more aligned with the natural values here?

There needs to be a program—we really need this; I think it has been neglected—

to bring in First Nations people management principles and practices. Obviously, they would have to lead that. All of these things are there in an embryonic form, but there needs to be far more coherence.

Groups like ours evolve, self-manage et cetera. Too often, there is a concept of a volunteer being unpaid staff; they get to make the coffee and things like that. We have to respect volunteers and we have to build up their skills. But they should be building up the skills—again, it is not a government directive. When we talk about education of volunteers, that is terrific, but that needs to be managed largely by the volunteers.

We have a plethora of different agencies involved in this, and that leads to a lot of inconsistencies and a lot of arbitrary rules about what we can and cannot do. It is very frustrating, for example, for a volunteer to be told, “You can’t use tools; you’ve got to be careful using chemicals.” A lot of the people running these groups know those things; they can do it and manage it all right. Again, it should be a partnership.

Often, government staff are young. They move through the system. They are not particularly involved with day-to-day management of these things. We need to address that.

Getting back to the issue of what government can do, Friends of Grasslands have been raising a lot of issues for a long time, such as having a proper bush regeneration group within the public service, creation of seed orchards, community and school education programs, better mowing—everyone talks about that one—and much better data on biodiversity statistics.

My background is in economics and social statistics. In the environment we do not have any good, overall data. That is something that has been neglected for years. It is a bit complex, but that is something that we really should invest in. There are things that we need to invest in, such as a proper bush regeneration team and putting together proper data. They are the key things that I wanted to get across.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Robertson. Would anyone else like to make a very brief opening statement?

**Ms McGilp:** I will second everything that Geoff said. I think that probably applies to all of our groups.

**Mr Giacon:** Could I distribute this paper which I have prepared?

**THE CHAIR:** Sure.

**Mr Giacon:** I very much second what Geoff said. My aim, in working as a volunteer, is to support life and wildlife by creating a better habitat, by the work of the group and my own individual work, and by changing government practice. Part of what I will say will be about that second point.

Recently, the government put out *Gawari Ngilanmanyin*, which describes what good habitat would be like. I was disappointed that this was aimed at individual householders and private landowners, rather than saying, “This sets an agenda for

government.” I suspect that may have been deliberate.

I am talking about suburban, not parkland or reserves. With the current situation, government practice in older suburbs has created areas which I call the fairway capital. We have either heavily mown grass and trees, but a very poor understorey, lots of noisy mynas and not much habitat, or totally, or nearly totally, neglected areas. For instance, the first photo shows a strip between Eastern Valley Way and the owl. I have been walking over it for four years and I have never seen any government action on that strip.

There are some examples of good work with government. The photo on the bottom left shows a quarter of a hectare which, with Allan McLean, we designated “no mow”, and a whole lot of it is now just Themeda, kangaroo grass, with very little work needed. A lot of money is saved by not having to mow it, and it has created a great habitat.

The photo on the right on the first page was taken near Belconnen Way and, again, near Eastern Valley Way. At the front I have put some stakes there, totally unofficially, and the mower people have gone around it. Further down, I put stakes, and they got mown over. Some of you would have seen the photo of the blue-tongue that also got mown there. To me, there is absolutely no reason why the area in the photo on the bottom right should not be designated “no mow” by the government. There should be a government scheme which says, “We’ve got all of these trees growing up; they are not costing you anything, except a stake.” There are a whole lot of trees like that, all around that area.

Over the page, one of the other things I am keen on is water-sensitive urban design. The photo shows an area at the corner of Eastern Valley Way and Belconnen Way—totally natural flooding, but there is also a whole lot of leaf litter. At least two of the people here have been there. It goes down the drain. This could easily be turned into a much more permanent but still ephemeral wetland, and save a lot of organic material going down the drain. But every time I have discussed that, for the people who approve such plans, it is a matter of saying, “No, you can’t put that in your Emu Creek plan because it’s something that’s off the plan.”

Overall, for a better urban habitat, government needs to have an active role in that, including detailed planning. I will not say anything about weeds, but I will give signs as an example. Signs are really important. If you have something that says, “We’re going to do more mowing,” some people will say, “Fantastic.”

People need to understand that that is destroying habitat; it is expensive and it produces carbon dioxide. We need signs about things like grasslands, woodlands and so on. But the current process is that you apply for a grant, which takes a lot of effort, and you may or may not get the grant. When you get the grant, you have to get someone to design the sign for you. You submit it for approval, it often goes backwards and forwards: “No, this doesn’t meet government policy.” You get it modified and then you print it.

To me, it would seem to be much saner and less expensive for the government to say, “Let’s get together with Landcare ACT”—the people who were here in the last



session—“and design a few signs which we can get to everyone; we can flood Canberra with these signs, saying why this area is ‘no mow’”, rather than saying to each individual group, “You go through this messy process.”

Governance structures and culture, from my perspective, need to change. There should be less focus on risks. I have been told, “You can’t have that pond at the top of Page, because some drunk walking home could drown in it.” I have heard that more than once from government people. I am thinking, “There’s a hell of a lot of water around Canberra, if people want to drown somewhere.” Look at things like having a local liaison person. Have a big depot which covers a whole area, and someone who is a brand-new mower operator can be told, “You’re going to do that.”

The last point, down at the bottom, really surprised me. On this ACT government Facebook page, it says that 38 hectares of conservation area are mown. The government mows 4,000 hectares—100 times more—and it is doing nothing, as far as I can see, to regenerate it.

As a volunteer, I love the area that I am working on; people say it is fantastic. But when I see that the government controls 100 times more area, I would be hoping for much more direct government action—the sort of planning that Geoff was talking about. What is the government regeneration plan?

**Ms McGilp:** On behalf of the Ginninderra Catchment Group, we currently have 29 volunteer groups across Belconnen and Gungahlin. I want to start by thanking the ACT government for the funding that we have received for our organisations. It has been a huge acknowledgement of the great work that all of our environmental volunteers do.

I also want to acknowledge the incredible support that is provided by PCS ParkCare and TCCS urban parks and places volunteering staff. They do amazing work. However, I think that these ACT government staff are limited in their ability to support on-ground environmental volunteerism, due to several policy issues that Geoff and John have already touched on.

I will take the opportunity to highlight some of the key recommendations that we provided in our submission that we think could address some of these policy issues. Firstly, overall, we would like greater support for on-ground volunteers through flexible partnerships, which Geoff and John have already mentioned, so that we can better value-add to the work of the environmental volunteers and the ACT government.

We would like to see the ACT government develop a policy to allow trained volunteers to utilise power tools, as this is considered best practice land management in a lot of situations. Our groups largely focus on weed control across pretty much all of our sites, and this requires the use of tools like brush cutters. We would also like a policy for Landcare volunteers working in larger city services reserves to use additional herbicides, not just glyphosate. Again, this is in line with best practice land management across Australia and the world.

We think that the current restrictions are putting volunteers in a position where they

are forced to undertake strenuous manual weed removal, which is ineffective and also creates unnecessary physical strain on our volunteers, many of whom are in older demographics.

We would also support an improved weed management approach across the ACT. As I said, the vast majority of environmental volunteer hours go towards undertaking weeding in a lot of these spaces, with some of our groups spending up to 90 per cent of their total hours on weed removal work.

Some of our recommendations that we have provided include an ACT-wide weed management plan across all land tenures. That would also be in collaboration with the surrounding New South Wales councils. Obviously, the ACT is not isolated; we have our surrounding regions that we need to think about.

Another is providing greater consideration of future weed management and potential future weed species, and looking at a review of the current species that are listed in the municipal infrastructure standards, which are used as a guideline for planting, primarily by city services. We would like that to look at excluding plants that we know are current or future weeds in a lot of our natural spaces.

In addition, we would also like a greater focus on biodiversity and ecological values across all land tenures, with specific improvements on city services land, as John has already mentioned. Many of the current land management guidelines for city services actually quite significantly inhibit the work of our environmental volunteers across a lot of our sites. A lot of these volunteers are just seeking to improve the biodiversity and amenity of their local areas. Having these road blocks come up makes the work harder for these people who are already putting a lot of their own time and resources into doing this work for the community.

Some key areas of focus that we think could improve biodiversity and land management would include improved management of native grasslands and designation of no-mow areas, which includes things like reducing the frequency and ensuring that mows are undertaken at the correct time of year.

I believe that a lot of these guidelines are currently written down somewhere, but we often see very little follow-through into actual land management practices day to day. We frequently find grassland sites that have been mowed multiple times in a year, even though they are listed on ACTmapi as native grasslands.

We would like sufficient training for mower operators and land managers to reduce the weed spread which inevitably creates more work for a lot of our volunteer groups. We would also like a greater focus on water-sensitive urban design, as John has already addressed, and a greater focus on broader biodiversity plantings, including shrubs and native ground covers, rather than just being limited to tree planting and canopy creation.

We believe that the knowledge held by our environmental volunteers in Canberra is world leading and can significantly add to the environmental work that is done by the ACT government across all land tenures. But to do this, we need an improved partnership between volunteers and the government. Policy changes are stated in our

recommendations, and there are quite a few more that we provided.

**THE CHAIR:** We are about to run out of time. Martine, we are hearing from you via telephone link. I am really conscious that I have not given you an opportunity to make an opening statement as well.

**Ms Franco:** I do not need to make an opening statement.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. We do have a 15-minute break after this session, so we could run a little bit over time. Landcare in the previous session said that you all have fantastic environmental recruitment strategies, and it would be really great to hear how you recruit volunteers.

**Ms Franco:** Our recruitment happens mostly at public events. We hold quite a few stalls, and we collaborate with the Parks and Conservation Service and Transport and City Services to run stalls and promote volunteer opportunities. Because the three catchment groups are across tenure organisations, we can recruit to groups; as you have heard, Ginninderra has 29 groups and we also have 29 groups, but they are across different land management tenures.

Those events do pick up quite a few people. Getting people to stick to volunteering once they are in the system can be slightly difficult, and the entry into volunteering can be slightly challenging. Mostly they are done through public events and partnership arrangements. Many of us have longstanding partners with organisations like Intrepid Landcare and lots of other community-based organisations as well. Those partnerships often yield small groups of volunteers, like youth, when we need them.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you quickly outline the challenges in keeping volunteers?

**Ms Franco:** Part of it is that we have an ageing population in our regular, longstanding stewardship groups. For Southern, at least half of our groups have been going for over 20 years. They become very small groups of older people, and they do lots of weeding activity. That is the principal land management job that they have to do; they love it, and that is why they do it. Recruiting when there is not a variety of activities can sometimes be an issue.

Sometimes it is very hard for people coming into the system to know where they are best suited. That is an issue with different land tenures. TCCS and PCS have different policy arrangements in the way they treat volunteers. That can be quite confusing for volunteers, in knowing where they should go, what they should do and what is the environment that is best suited to them.

Volunteering, by its nature, is people giving up time that they do not necessarily have. That in itself is a challenge across the whole volunteering sector. Other people's personal demands can very easily get in the way of volunteering opportunities. The type of volunteering that we like to encourage is stewardship, meaning people get that sense of place, and a sense of ownership and commitment to a particular piece of land. Often it is one that is right near where they live. But that requires, every single month, having a working bee on that site. Often, only certain age brackets are available with

that sort of regularity, and that is why personal commitments often are a little bit more pressing for younger people, and we do not see as big a recruitment of younger people in stewardship. Things like COVID in the last two years have thrown us out really badly, when we could not gather at all. That can be an issue.

The other issue, of course, is staffing to support volunteer activities. While you might get a lot of keen bodies out there, you definitely need to have organisations like the catchment group, in partnership with the land management agency, to support those volunteers on the ground. If the support is not there, you might not end up with the right tools on the site, you might not get approvals for the day and you might not see the impact of your work in the context of other land management going on for the area. Kat made reference to how important the partnership with the land manager is, and planning, as a collaborative thing, between government and community is really important to get that sort of consistency.

**MS CLAY:** To reassure you, we have heard a lot of people saying exactly the same things—mowing where it should not be mown, not being able to use power tools, different policies regarding when different pesticides are used on weeds that cannot be treated in any other way, removal of logs that were agreed to be left as habitat, the problem of tree species selection, and multilayered habitats. These are common comments in our 30 submissions, across the board.

There also seems to be a common thread coming through that, with PCS and TCCS. Most of the difficulty in communication and partnership seems to be with the TCCS coordinators. That seems to be coming through quite clearly. There is also a big yearning by the community groups and the actual volunteers to have a partnership model, not a top-down model. There is a genuine acknowledgement that we need more resources and more people coordinating; we need to do this better. But I am slightly nervous, as a member of a parliamentary committee, because I could see us looking at this and saying, “Clearly, we need a whole bunch of public servants doing this,” but I am starting to think that maybe a partnership model is different.

Martine, I was interested to hear you say that the Namadgi partnership was done well. Can anybody tell me about good partnership ways to do this so that we look after our volunteers, get these policies better and this implementation better and so that we work with TCCS better?

**Ms Franco:** Absolutely; I can elaborate on that. We have been working for 20 years in partnership with lots of different land agencies, and our catchment groups have as well. The partnerships that work well are when the community organisations get treated as a genuine partner in the room, not a random community member. It is about having recognition of volunteers in organisations like ours that have been in this space for a long time, treating them as a genuine partner and thinking of innovative ways and opportunities to engage them. That is when we see the strong partnership work.

The reason that the Namadgi partnership works well is that, right from the onset of the project, we were working with the manager at Namadgi and saying, “Where do you need help; how can we support you in managing volunteers onsite in the bushfire-affected areas?” That early planning and early engagement with our organisations, as organisations trusted by our community because we have been in

them for so long, is really vital.

A key part of that is recognising that our staffing is often extremely consistent and long term, and our volunteers are on our committees running our organisation, and they are very long term. Strengthening the relationship with our types of organisations, the small not-for-profits that are umbrella organisations, means that the government will end up with good long-term outcomes and better reliability in engaging volunteers in the long term, and stronger stewardship models.

For us, lots of volunteers talk about ranger churn being an issue. There has been a lot of lobbying to get more money for more rangers and more government positions, but when those positions are moved through other tasks in government—because that is just the way government employs people—ranger churn becomes an issue. Volunteers feel that they are collaborating with a ranger, they give them all of the knowledge they have for that site; then the ranger moves on and they have to do it all again.

If the catchment groups are given a little bit more power to be able to be that middleman between the community and the rangers, we can take care of some of that inconsistency in communication, and we can support some of the longevity in those relationships that is needed to look after those pieces of land well.

TCCS did fund catchment groups to build stewardship groups one year, and in that one year we had 14 or 15 new groups formed. At the moment—I do not know if you have heard this yet at this hearing—we have a boom happening in people wanting to volunteer in small pocket parks and urban open space. The catchment groups have a lot of member groups, and we support them and know them well, but we will reach capacity unless we get better support from TCCS in supporting those groups to happen. In partnership we can do that together, but we do need additional resources from TCCS, particularly.

**Mr Robertson:** It seems to me that TCCS is a new player in this area, and I think the others have learnt from experience. We have talked a lot about mowing, but the subtlety is that, in the area we are doing, we are trying to encourage more mowing. Mowing is a tool, but often what we are talking about here is mowing everything down to that level, whereas grass needs to grow and it needs to collapse. Fires are something that we have not mentioned, but that is another thing. We have to manage that biodiversity.

The last comment was that the catchment groups can be somewhere in between the rangers and the group, but we have a very close connection with our rangers. You have to be careful about that, too, because all of these are very subtle things, and if you have a hard-and-fast rule, we do not want to push the rangers away. We still want recognition that these groups have skills, and they should be able to lead and be partners.

**Mr Giacom:** There is a big difference between the parklands and the urban lands. There is no corresponding person to rangers. There is one person who is the liaising person, I think, across all of the ACT.

**Ms McGilp:** Yes. There is only one urban parks and places volunteer coordinator, and

I think he manages over 60 groups across the ACT, so he is probably also quite under-resourced.

**THE CHAIR:** We are right on time. If there are any further issues that you would like to raise, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the committee. I would like to thank you all for appearing today. When available, there will be a proof transcript sent to you, which you can check for errors. Thank you very much for your contributions to our community.

**Hearing suspended from 2.32 to 2.46 pm.**

**BUTCHER, MRS LINDY**, Volunteer, ACT Wildlife

**THE CHAIR:** We will move to our next witness today, Mrs Butcher from ACT Wildlife. On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry.

**Mrs Butcher:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I would just like to remind you of the privilege statement and draw your attention to it on the table. Could you confirm, for the record, that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes, I do understand.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Before we begin, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes, I would. I can read through what I submitted, but I also have some additional notes that I brought with me today and I have brought copies for you.

**MS CLAY:** We have read your submission.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, so just the additional notes would be fabulous.

**Mrs Butcher:** Okay; I will just go through the additional notes. Thank you. First of all, thank you very much for having me. I do appreciate that we have this opportunity. I am a volunteer with ACT Wildlife, and the wombat coordinator. Some background to the submission: in 2021t, volunteers and staff of ACT Wildlife responded to almost 13,000 phone calls from members of the public about wildlife issues. Many of these were resolved just with advice from our phone operators—and our phone operators include our two staff who are currently paid for through the \$100,000 a year for the next four years that we were granted in the last budget. Many thanks.

About 3,000 animals were brought into the care of our volunteers and some 50 per cent of those were released after being rehabilitated. That is actually an impressive number in the world of wildlife rehabilitation. It tends to be quite a bit lower, having successful releases. Another 40 per cent died or were euthanised after they came into care.

We recognise that the nature of wildlife interactions with the urban interface means that wildlife will come off second best. Animals are hit by cars as they move around their environment; they hit windows and buildings; they lose tree hollows to clearing and storms; they are taken by domestic animals or they come to grief when they set up their homes in human habitats, so we often get possums in roofs. In spring we have rosellas that have nested in roof cavities and then the parents are disturbed and we end up with the babies. It is this intersection of wildlife and human habitat in this lovely bush capital that means that we are in great demand as volunteers.

There are also an unknown number of animals that our volunteers do not see. I noted

in my submission that I raised this at a talk here last year and there was a recommendation made out of that:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government explore quantifying the injured and the loss of wildlife in the territory.

I do not know whether that has been started.

**MS CLAY:** I followed up on that, because I saw that in your submission. The official government response was:

Noted. Quantifying the total loss of wildlife or injured wildlife across the Territory is extremely difficult.

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** That was the government response to that, and we put that to the minister, but I will wait until it is my turn to speak.

**Mrs Butcher:** Okay. Adding to that, I work with science students as a mentor, and we have just undertaken a survey of, I think, 15 of 35 private vet clinics in Canberra to find out just how many wildlife they have brought to them from members of the public. In approximately six weeks—and that was incomplete data—they had 83 animals brought to them by members of the public. That was four vets over six weeks, and all but five of those animals were euthanised. So there are a lot, and that is just the tip of the iceberg.

There are a lot more animals than come to our volunteers, so this gives an idea of the size of the problem. For us, the biggest problem is the lack of access to a vet for these animals that we see. When they come to us, our volunteers assess them for their injuries, their viability, and whether or not they have the possibility to be rehabilitated and released, because our licence is very explicit: we must rehabilitate to release. We do not have the option of rehabilitating and keeping as pets or sending to sanctuaries, so we have to make a decision early on about whether or not our volunteers have the capacity to rehabilitate the animals that come to us.

Often we would be able to but we do not have access to a vet who can provide the immediate veterinary care for that animal. That lack of ready access to a vet is contributing to volunteer compassion fatigue. It is a well-known term. The case studies that I gave you were quite gruesome and quite explicit, but they are regular events. It is just the need for immediate vet care. Often it is immediate euthanasia for an injured animal, but if we take an animal to a local vet during business hours it may wait many, many hours before it is seen to.

I guess that brings me to the animal welfare and management strategy—that this is an animal welfare issue. Even the delay of euthanasia for injured wildlife is an animal welfare issue and we do not have any means of addressing it. For volunteers who take an animal to a vet, knowing full well that it may not get seen to or have its pain relieved quickly is very distressing, and that compounds. We do this 24 hours a day, seven days a week and so, for us, this need for a wildlife specialist vet is huge.



One of the things I have done is have a quick look at what training vets do. I found five universities that offer vet training, just on a quick online search. The one that had published its courses for vets was Charles Sturt University, I think, and there is no training in wildlife care. There is domestic animals and a whole lot of other things, but nothing in wildlife care. Wildlife are really specific in their anatomy, their physiology, the way they respond to medications, even to anaesthetics, to pain medication. So it is about having access to a vet who could address that need, not only for animal welfare but for the welfare of our volunteers who deal with this day after day after day. It is very distressing.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your submission and for your opening statement. We will get started on questions. I am wondering: how many volunteers do you have and how do you go about recruiting volunteers, or do they just sort of come out of the woodwork?

**Mrs Butcher:** We have been established as ACT Wildlife in its current format for about the last nine years, but I have been doing that for over 25 years in Canberra, so we are fairly well known. We also have a website. People can find us through volunteering expos, which we have just done, and we have a standard stall at the show. So we do some recruiting.

But often people come to us because they need us, and once they see what we have done, too. Members of the public get very distressed by the injuries that they see animals are subjected to and then they bring them to us. A lot of our volunteers come from that recruitment—you know, from people who have used us and been inspired to do the same thing.

We have about 70 carers. Our volunteers are either active carers or they are phone and transport volunteers. We have volunteers on the phone around the clock, weekends and night-times, and our volunteers then respond to calls to go and pick up animals, rescue animals. And then there is all the background, such as growing mealworms. Growing mealworms is an important job because in spring the little birds eat a lot of mealworms. So there is that ongoing, big range of volunteering that we do.

**THE CHAIR:** And do you have to train the volunteers quite extensively?

**Mrs Butcher:** We do, and that is done by the volunteers. We are all volunteers, so we, as the species specialists, provide species training for bird carers, possum carers, wombat carers and so on. But then we provide phone and transport training for people who are responding to members of the public who have questions. There are a lot of questions. It can be something like, “I found a dead possum in my yard. What do I do with its body?” to “I’ve hit something with my car. Now what do I do?” That can range from simple advice through to our volunteers needing to act on it. I forget what your question was now.

**THE CHAIR:** Training volunteers.

**Mrs Butcher:** Training, yes. So we do training across the spectrum, yes.

**MS CLAY:** Lindy, thank you for your submission. I did follow up. We had the Minister for the Environment here this morning. I take your point, in your submission, about the problems with not having access to a vet, or having access to a vet who does not understand wildlife and gives treatment that maybe leads to the animal dying when it might not have, and just the delays and the volunteer compassion fatigue. This is a volunteer issue as well as an animal welfare issue.

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** The officials said, in response to the lack of a wildlife vet, that they were focusing on providing vet services for their captive animals in Namadgi, they were focusing on biosecurity and they also provided a 24/7 ranger euthanasia service. What is your response to that response?

**Mrs Butcher:** Do you mean our two government vets that we have?

**MS CLAY:** Yes.

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes. They do all of those things, and we do not have access to them for the day-to-day emergency needs of animals. What they are doing is the very big, important, background population health issues, but we still need somebody who can prescribe pain relief, provide antibiotics and stitch wounds, which we are not able to do as volunteers. We can do a lot. I can do subcutaneous fluids on little dehydrated animals and I can dress wounds and I can do a lot of things, but I cannot prescribe antibiotics. It is a really basic thing. We need a vet for that, and to make an appointment with a local vet, they often do not know the animal, so they are not familiar with their physiology, or they are busy. Local vets are really so busy.

**MS CLAY:** If there were funding available, do you think Canberra would be able to find a wildlife vet? Do you think there are people around who would be able to do it?

**Mrs Butcher:** I know there are people around who would do this. We actually have just been unsuccessful in a funding submission for philanthropic funding that became available. We put in a submission for a part-time vet and veterinary equipment. We have a small first-aid clinic, a wildlife first-aid clinic, but we have not been able to use it, thanks to COVID. We put in the submission and we were not successful, but in consulting with vets about how we would set it up there was a real interest in somebody who would be available to do some work for us.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. The directorate officials mentioned the 24/7 ranger euthanasia service. Do you use that service?

**Mrs Butcher:** We do sometimes, but we cannot always get them. Sometimes what has happened is that the rangers have called us and said, “We don’t know if this animal requires euthanasia or whether it is salvageable.” Because none of us are vets, we are not able to make those decisions—especially for a big wombat, which is probably the trickiest of the animals. We really need a vet to look at it and say whether this is a serious injury that it will not recover from or something that can be treated.

**MS CLAY:** Have you spoken to the RSPCA about Canberra's need, possibly, for a wildlife vet?

**Mrs Butcher:** We talk to them regularly. My understanding is that they do not have their own full-time vet at the moment, but I could be wrong. That was the last thing that I heard from them. But they are not in a position to provide vet care for our wildlife.

**MS CLAY:** Thank you.

**MS CASTLEY:** Mine is a follow-on. I am not sure if I missed it, but do we have enough work to keep a full-time vet on? Is that what you are hoping for?

**Mrs Butcher:** Look, we would be happy with anything. Some of the vet care that we need is that ongoing monitoring of animals that are unwell and recovering. We deal with that ourselves or we try to get a vet appointment, or the animal just survives in spite of not getting the ongoing monitoring. Our volunteers would bring animals to a vet, if there were a vet there, and ask to have injuries reassessed or medications re-evaluated or pain management re-evaluated.

I was just telling somebody that, for the little animal I have in care, it can use human medication but the animal is too small for a human dose. We actually have a wonderful compounding pharmacy who made up a tiny, animal-sized dose of that medication for us. But if we had a vet available, they could have prescribed it for us. There are so many things we could use a vet for, and it would relieve that minute-by-minute stress for volunteers who have got a little animal and they need reassurance from a medical professional either that they are doing the right thing or that there is another step that they need to take for us.

**THE CHAIR:** Most of your animals would be either baby animals or injured; is that right?

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** On average, how long would an animal stay with a volunteer?

**Mrs Butcher:** It depends on the animal. Baby birds that come in in spring—and we have thousands of them—average about six weeks from being a baby to being released. Possums are in care for about six months, from being a baby to release. Wombats are 18 months, but some of them are short term. We have just started taking in adult wombats with moderate injuries that need just a few weeks of care, so we are now able to deal with that kind of thing. A lot of them are things like birds recovering from concussion after they have flown into a window, so they might just be overnight care.

**THE CHAIR:** Sure. We heard in another submission about things like parking—that perhaps the government could cover these types of practical things that volunteers have to pay for themselves. What about with caring for animals? In terms of setting up your house, what is the investment that a volunteer has to put into that?

**Mrs Butcher:** Look, it can be huge or it can be small. One of the nice things about the way we are set up is that we have been the recipients of some very generous donations recently—and we have had some great grants—so we are in a position to bulk purchase aviaries so that people can care for birds using an aviary that is on loan from us. But for people like the wombat carers, we have all built our own enclosures. Mine probably cost me about \$4,000 and it is on my property, so it is mine. I paid for it; it is not something that I can get reimbursed for.

We just got a grant from WIRES for the food. That was \$10,000 for a year's worth of commercial food for our animals. A lot of those costs are now being picked up by grants and donations, but there are a lot of out-of-pockets for the individual carers. We have a reimbursement policy. If a person volunteers with us and they are not in a position to cover those costs—and we do not expect anybody to—we have a reimbursement policy. So nobody should be out of pocket, but a lot of us are, just because we are; that is how it goes.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**MS CLAY:** Just quickly, with orphaned and injured animals, are there any government policies that are either helping to make fewer orphaned and injured animals or making it worse? You will know better than me, but I am thinking of slower streets, some of our roads things or education in the household setting. I know some of the injuries in the submission were from roller doors and things. Is there anything that we are doing well that we should do better to remove the problem?

**Mrs Butcher:** We do a lot of public education. A lot of it is incidental, when we talk to people over the phone, but a lot of it is really basic stuff like: if there are baby birds on the ground, check to see if the parents are there first, before you bring them to us, because that is just birdnapping. So some of that is public awareness.

I am sure there is the opportunity to make that broader than it is, but at the moment we keep doing that with our phone advice. We talked at a previous one of these meetings, a few years ago, about some particular hotspots on the roads where animals are more likely to be hit by cars. But I think the new fencing down on the big highway has reduced that a lot.

**MS CLAY:** Good.

**Mrs Butcher:** Not that we deal with kangaroos, but we do not see the number of orphaned joeys coming in, kangaroo joeys, that we have seen in the past. So I think those have been successful. Urban sprawl, though, is just happening. There are many more dead wombats in the new Denman Prospect area. We had never seen them dead along that stretch of road until the last two years, and they are constant now. That is really disheartening. The other thing, of course, is that we have just received a \$10,000 grant for treating mange. Our volunteers are doing the treatment, but the government paid for the treatment and they have the reporting portal, which means that members of the public can report them to us.

**MS CLAY:** That mange treatment is being tracked for effectiveness, isn't it? That is being run as a citizen science.

**Mrs Butcher:** Yes. It is difficult. The nature of wombats is that when they are well they go underground again, and they are nocturnal. So we do not always see them again, but we also do not see them sick constantly. To an extent, we trust that the treatment is successful. But, yes, that has been a great support for us.

**THE CHAIR:** You just said that you do not look after kangaroos.

**Mrs Butcher:** The ACT policy is that we do not take in kangaroos, no.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. So nothing happens with kangaroos?

**Mrs Butcher:** No, and I think it is to do with the legislation, the culling programs. It would be futile to have us caring for joeys to go back into the population to be culled again next year. It is not a good use of our time, I suppose. There are policies around eastern greys. We see wallabies, but not so many. There are fewer this year, fewer in the last few years.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. I think we will finish there. Thank you so much for your submission today. You will be provided with a transcript of today's hearing, and if there are any mistakes in that, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

**Mrs Butcher:** Thank you very much for your time today and for your interest. We value it.

**GALLANT, DR ESTHER**, President, National Parks Association of the ACT  
**GRIFFITHS, MR ROD**, Convenor, Environment Sub-committee, National Parks Association of the ACT

**THE CHAIR:** We begin our final session today, in which we will be hearing from Dr Gallant and Mr Griffiths from the National Parks Association of the ACT. On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for appearing today and for your submission.

Please be aware that today's proceedings are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you on the table. That is the pink document there. Could you confirm, for the record, that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes.

**Dr Gallant:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Great. To begin with, would you like to make a very brief opening statement, before we start our questions? We have read your submission, so we are across that.

**Dr Gallant:** Yes, please.

**THE CHAIR:** If you have any further remarks you would like to make, please do.

**Dr Gallant:** I would like to start by thanking all of you for your willingness in the past to meet with us. We have appreciated that—not only meeting with us but agreeing to go on outings with us, although it has not always worked out. That is something that is very pleasing to us.

We would also like to express our gratitude for the Environmental Grants Program. We have been fortunate enough to receive two of them this year, much to our astonishment—one for our citizen science program and one for the upgrade of our website, so we thank the government for that.

**THE CHAIR:** To follow on from that, regarding the grant for the upgrade of the website, I note that in your submission you talk about a lack of financial resources to contribute to other key roles within volunteer groups. Can you speak more to the importance of funding the support side of these organisations?

**Dr Gallant:** As I have mentioned, these two things were really important to us because of the cost of our citizen science project, even though we have thousands of volunteer hours. So it is a good investment. There are other things that we would like to do, on occasion. We have some generous donors who also support us. In particular, they will support our work party programs, so we have had some good donations to provide our equipment and so on that we use for our work party programs. It is maybe

a little harder to get donations for things like a website upgrade, so that was important. What am I missing, Rod, that we need money for?

**Mr Griffiths:** I suppose, from our broadest perspective, we are very lucky in that we are able to be self-sufficient. But if we wanted to expand our operations, like we did in the past, and actually employ someone, that would be quite a difficult task for us to take on. I think for other organisations who are not as well off as us and reasonably well sufficient like we are, that is probably one of the real sticking points, because you are relying on volunteers and those volunteers do need support in some way or form.

It is hard to find that time to get out there and do that hard work while you are a volunteer. I am thinking more in terms of submissions—getting the views of their members, and our members, across to you. It does take time and sometimes having someone who is a professional in the sphere, who can help us and other organisations to put forward a well-constructed view to you, to help guide your thinking on how to progress on the environment.

**MS CLAY:** Thank you. We had some really favourable comments from other witnesses about the partnership model we have got in Namadgi between our volunteer branch and our professional rangers. Everybody agrees that it is working quite well down there. I was interested that in your submission you mentioned better communication to make sure that we are realising the goals of our natural resource management strategy. Is there anything else structurally, or anything else about the park management that you see, because you are the experts on the ground down there? Is there anything else that you think government needs to really invest quite heavily in down in Namadgi? What is working, and where do you see the big gap with the way that we are servicing Namadgi?

**Dr Gallant:** More rangers would probably be good. We are happy to see an increase in the number of Indigenous rangers. Not having been involved with the work parties, I cannot really say too much about equipment or that kind of thing, but the thing that comes to mind immediately is the network of fire trails down there, which we have just been very concerned about. That is certainly an area where more funding is needed and more emphasis on getting it done right—not just kind of patched over but done right—with some input from people who understand what building rural roads involves.

We looked at one while we were out there—and you saw it—where they had put in this elaborate culvert structure and the whole thing had washed out in the flood and made the whole road impassable. They need to have advice from people who understand how those roads should be built. Maybe the problem there, in part, is not enough communication between the rangers, and even the upper level staff who might understand this, and the contractors on the ground. That is one thing that I would suggest that there needs to be some emphasis put on—not only the money for fixing it but the advice to do it right.

**MS CLAY:** So the on-the-ground PCS staff need to be involved in those key decisions about how to build it, as well as funding it.

**Dr Gallant:** Yes. As I understand it, after that trip, Pete Cotsell, the southern area

manager, went out and took a look at what was happening on one of the other roads and fired the contractors. So it is clear that there probably is the expertise there to provide the advice, but that has to be part of the contract—that the contractors are going to talk with people on the ground and allow the rangers to have some say, or the upper management at least, and be obliged to take that into consideration when they do their work.

**MS CLAY:** Yes. Great. Thank you.

**MS CASTLEY:** One of your recommendations talked about the creation of a land stewardship scheme. Can you talk a bit more about that and what you mean?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes. We can see that there are land stewardship schemes operating across Australia at the moment. Here in the ACT there has always been a resistance because we have a leasehold framework, and government has said in the past that it is not going to work. We think it can work. I think that our rural lessees are very committed to the environment, in many respects. What we are suggesting here is that there is an opportunity to come out and create a system that allows them to be recognised and supported in excess of what their obligations are under their land management agreements. The land management agreements are very focused on the leasehold component of it. The stewardship is actually something that would be a perpetuity proposal, so that we are getting that in perpetuity, as opposed to just focusing on the term of the lease and the strict conditions of it. It is more an incentive, as opposed to a requirement. That is what we are thinking our land stewardship process could be achieving.

**MS CASTLEY:** Great. Okay. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR** In your submission, you talk about how work health and safety regulations and risk management practices are limiting the flexibility of volunteers. Can you outline exactly what practices or where the limitations are?

**Mr Griffiths:** Do I take that?

**Dr Gallant:** Yes.

**Mr Griffiths:** I can think of myself as an example. I go out and remove pine wildlings from a conservation reserve. The ability to do that within the administrative requirements involves me having to tell the parks service that I am going to be there, to ring in and ring out. Half the time my phone does not work out in the area. I can understand the health and safety aspects of it, but to not have the flexibility to get out there when it needs to be done, because you have got to get in touch with the rangers et cetera and have it all signed off before you go, is very limiting.

The work health and safety in other areas means that we only have a very small number of volunteers who can do chemical work, let's say. I think there are opportunities to expand the number of courses for chem training that are available, and I think the volunteer hub are putting out as much as they can do in relation to that. But it can always be expanded, and we definitely need more people out there who can do the chemical side of weed control out in the field.



**THE CHAIR:** Can you outline what this volunteer hub is?

**Mr Griffiths:** Okay. The volunteer hub is associated with the ParkCare organisation within Parks and Cons. They have a website. You can become a volunteer and sign on as a registered volunteer. You then get told whether there are activities happening, and you can sign on to do those activities.

**THE CHAIR:** And you can access training through that?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes, you can access training through that. Also, you can access training by joining one of the ParkCare groups, because they are members of that volunteer hub.

**THE CHAIR:** Great.

**MS CLAY:** And that club emails people who are on the list?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes. I get regular emails saying, “Come out in the middle of the week and pull out weeds or do something.” Yes.

**MS CLAY:** Interesting. That is great. There is a marvellously social educative component to what a lot of your volunteers do. You have got people out there leading tour groups and walks and talking with great enthusiasm, with stories. Can you just run us through what the importance is of that social component and how many people are involved in delivering that? I am going to call it the social side, the educative social side, rather than the actual land management side.

**Dr Gallant:** I suspect you are talking about some of the walks that have been done. We are introducing again—it is something that has been done previously, but not in the recent past—a number of walks. Rather than just going out and walking, they have the emphasis on going out and looking at things like plants or animals. In some cases now we have some walks that have a cultural emphasis, either Indigenous culture or some of the European culture.

We have had what we call art walks. One member was very keen on doing walks around the War Memorial, and he would always have lots of information about what we were seeing, who did the artwork, and what the significance of the various sculptures and so on was. That was another of the more social ones. Usually, those kinds of walks would end with the opportunity for either morning tea or in some cases lunch, so there would be a social component to it.

We have a member who leads tree walks around the ANU. She is a guide at the arboretum and she really likes doing this, so she takes on those kinds of walks. One time I was really concerned because we had somebody with a pram, but everybody helped her to move it up and down the steps, and it all went fine.

**MS CLAY:** When you have volunteers in your group, do they suggest, “I would like to lead this”? Is that how it happens?

**Dr Gallant:** That is what our limitation is. We will solicit; we will say, “Is there something that you would like to lead?” In the case of the woman that I was talking about who worked at the arboretum, I said, “Why don’t you lead some walks for us?” “Okay.” We had a reptile expert who was going to take a walk out. I am not sure if that ever happened. It was postponed a couple of times. It depends on who in the group is willing and able to do some of these things or who knows somebody that they can get to do it. But we really like doing that. We have had a number of walks around Parliament House. That was one of our Heritage Festival walks, and people really enjoyed that.

**MS CLAY:** You mentioned—and we have heard a lot about this today—that navigating our grants system is a bit tricky. You are probably looking at PCS environment grants and heritage grants; you are probably not looking at TCCS adopt-a-park grants. Are there any simple suggestions that you would make about how that grants process could be less complex?

**Dr Gallant:** You have not been directly involved in writing these, have you?

**Mr Griffiths:** Not recently. Thinking about the grants processes, with people who are needing to do a grant, sometimes it is their first time coming across a grant process. It can be challenging. It is always about identifying the simplest way of getting the information that you require to assess the grants and making it as easy as possible for them to acquit the grant at the end of the day—if they can get out and do the work, and it is not onerous to (a) get into it and (b) get out of it.

**Dr Gallant:** With acquitting the grant, I was not involved in it, but I heard that the people who did the work went out and did the work, but acquitting the grant was just in the too-hard basket.

**Mr Griffiths:** I think it took longer than the work, actually.

**Dr Gallant:** I think it did, too.

**MS CASTLEY:** That is apparently the way it goes.

**THE CHAIR:** We have heard some different stories today about the grant acquittals.

**Dr Gallant:** We are fortunate now that we have a woman who is a former employee of the environment department and understands how the process is supposed to work, so it seemed to go really quickly with her handling it this year.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your time today and for your contribution to our environment in the ACT. When available, a proof transcript will be sent to you; please check it for errors and get in touch if there are any errors in it. We will now adjourn the hearing.

**Dr Gallant:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**The committee adjourned at 3.25 pm.**