

Hansard 4 June 2002 – Budget Estimates Hearing (Tasmanian Parliament)

CHAIR - One of the first questions I suppose I could ask - with the Consolidated Fund appropriation there has been \$1.4 million I think in relation to fox eradication, which seems to be newsworthy at the moment. Has there been any evidence or 100 per cent evidence to show that a fox or foxes are here in Tasmania? You speak with some farmers, they say, 'Look, I would have seen one if they were here, because I'm out in the paddocks and hills. Time and time again, I've never seen one'. Then you get a report in the paper where somebody saw one. I just wondered what evidence there is to say there are foxes, or there is a fox.

Mr LLEWELLYN - You will need to bear with me a little and I will give you a bit of the historical aspect of it as well.

You would recall that about 18 months ago we first had the allegation that there had been several litters of foxes brought into the State. We got the Police and the department[DPIPWE] on to that particular job and they analysed that and worked for some time in trying to assess whether or not they could get to the bottom of the issue. In the end there were a lot of people interviewed but no conclusive allegations materialised to the stage of charging people.

As time went on there was a series of reports of people sighting foxes and in the original allegations it was alleged that litters were distributed in and around Longford, in and around the south of Oatlands and on the east coast near St Helens. When over time this constant spread of information about sighting the foxes came in and when it was all coordinated and so on it corroborated those original allegations because all the sightings were occurring in these areas where it was alleged that the fox litters had been distributed. Longford, south of Oatlands, Campania and in that region and near St Helens.

Ultimately there were two foxes shot [Eric Bosworth's Symmons Plains fox & the Longford fox photo] - one which you cannot draw any conclusion about because the people who shot the fox although they had a photograph in the newspaper -

Mr FLETCHER - That was the one near St Helens, wasn't it?

Mr LLEWELLYN - No, this was the one near Longford. They eventually sent the pelt of the fox to the Parks and Wildlife Service and that was a recently-skinned fox skin. There were DNA tests done on it and so on and it matched in respect to this source of origin again the alleged stories that were there.

Subsequently a further fox was shot near Symmons Plains and that was recovered, analysed and the stomach contents and so on analysed and found to be containing small animal species and so on that were only here in Tasmania. So fairly conclusively it was

shot where it was shot and so I think one can conclude that that was perhaps the most significant event that proves that foxes are in the State.

On top of that the DNA assessments that were made put the second fox as being a sibling or a close relative of the first fox and having originated in southern Victoria from the area where these foxes were alleged to have come. So all of the circumstantial evidence and this latest hard evidence adds up to the fact that this is the case.

On top of that we get maybe six or eight reports a week of fox sightings on the fox hotline, 80 per cent of which we believe to be legitimate sightings particularly when we know they come from people who have been fishing and foxes have come down within a few metres of these people and investigated what was going on and then disappeared and so on. I have noticed in the newspapers some people are very dubious about this but certainly I am not and I do not believe that we can afford to take risks so there could be a number of foxes - between maybe 11 and 20 that are in the State at the moment. So that is why we have to have this coordinated program.

We work with the CRC for pest management in Canberra. There has been a lot of preliminary work in getting the appropriate people together to deal with the issue of how we actually manage this very low number of foxes. They are very cagey, shy animals and it is no wonder people do not see them readily because they have learnt to avoid people.

CHAIR - Are you aware if 1080 is going to be laid in the near future?

Mr LLEWELLYN - Yes, that is one of the programs that the Commonwealth are very anxious that we get on with and they have finally made a contribution to this program of \$400 000. We hope that that will be an ongoing contribution as well, but at the moment it is \$400 000 and that was made on the basis that they thought we should employ a 1080 baiting program, which has been successful in Western Australia and in other parts of Australia. The particular bait they are using on this occasion again has been researched very thoroughly. There is a FoxOff bait which is a big pellet into the middle of which the 1080 poison is put in a hole and then there is a bait made of dried kangaroo meat that also has 1080 poison impregnated in it and we have done a fair bit of research with both of those baits by hanging them up at about a metre above the surface of the ground and/or burying them in the ground and seeing what reaction there is particularly with regard to our own species of quolls and Tasmanian devils and so on that may eat these baits.

The best situation that we can find that would both minimise the problem with our native species and at the same time capture a likely fox is to bury the kangaroo meat in the ground about 20 centimetres deep and this has been utilised in Western Australia and other areas as a means of actually getting these foxes. Foxes can apparently smell this bait from about 500 metres, so you deploy these baits at 500-metre intervals and

we hope they will be a success. They will come along and dig them up and eat them and they only have to eat one of them and they will keel over, whereas with our own indigenous species they are not so susceptible to 1080. In regard to Tasmanian devils I think they will have to find 25 of them before they get a lethal dose and with regard to quolls I think they have to eat about four or five before they have a lethal dose. So we think it will both minimise the effect on wildlife, but also maximise our chances of getting foxes.

CHAIR - Just a note, get foxes onto the output.

Laughter.

Mr RATTRAY - Minister, you stated earlier on that you had evidence that foxes are being imported into Tasmania.

Mr LLEWELLYN - Unsubstantiated.

Mr RATTRAY - I was wondering whether you made any charges because of the nature or what is likely to be. There is nothing that far out we could have supported something like that.

Mr LLEWELLYN - No, we are highly suspicious of how it happens and believe we probably know but, there is one thing to have an indication and high suspicion and there is the other of having the evidence to actually prove it and there is also the matter of the statutes of limitation with our current legislation. It may be that we might have to change that in the future because I think there is only a six-month statute of limitation on charging people in this area and we have issued a reward, as you know, of \$50 000 and so it is a substantial one for knowledge leading to the conviction of persons. We have had quite a big response from Crime Stoppers through that and all these reports have been investigated by the police. When we did have the police on the original issue that matter was given very serious consideration; there was an inspector and a number of police officers who worked hard at trying to find an outcome but were not able to.

Mr RATTRAY - Thank you.

[2.30 p.m.]