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The Secretary  
Public Accounts Committee  
Parliament House  
Hobart 7000

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### **Inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Fox Eradication Programs in Tasmania**

Thank you for providing the Tasmanian Conservation Trust (TCT) with an opportunity to make a submission to the above inquiry.

The TCT is represented on the Fox Eradication Program's Stakeholder Reference Committee along with other 'non-government' organisations such as farming, hunting and volunteer organisations. Fox eradication is one of the highest priorities for the TCT and we take very seriously our role within this committee. One key role of our participation in this committee is to question Fox Eradication Program (FEP) staff about the approaches being taken to detect and eradicate foxes. The TCT also sees its brief in this committee is to dispute approaches being taken if required and the FEP staff have been open to such an approach. Our experience has been that the FEP staff are totally open to requests for information (except for certain personal information and the exact location of fox reports) and listen to and respond to any criticism that we offer.

It is vital that the public scrutinise and challenge the FEP and any other government program that is funded by its taxes and this may be done via the Stakeholder Reference Committee, the media and the Parliament, including through Public Accounts Committee inquiry.

**In summary, the TCT has a very good knowledge of the operations and funding of the FEP and as an independent conservation organisation we are in a good position to assess its effectiveness and efficiency. We conclude that the FEP is being both effective – within the physical, technological and financial limitations that they operate – and efficient with the funding it is provided by both the Tasmanian and Australian Governments.**

**(a) Operations of the Fox Eradication Program**

Through our assessment of the detailed documents and briefings provided by the FEP staff, we believe the strategies currently being utilised to eradicate foxes are appropriate, well coordinated and are being implemented to a high standard. The FEP also has processes in place to review the strategic direction of the program and research programs to acquire new knowledge to test effectiveness of existing methods and assess alternatives.

Some people in the community and perhaps in the Tasmanian Parliament assume the FEP is not being effective because they don't trap or photograph foxes or locate carcasses of poisoned foxes, but all the evidence suggests that foxes have only been present in low numbers and the statistical probability of recording either a live or dead fox is very low and it would be miraculous if they were being found in significant numbers.

**(b) The costs for fox eradication programs in each year of operation**

**(c) The cost effectiveness of the fox eradication programs**

We understand that the funding provided for the FEP and its status is:

State Commitment

\$2.53 million per year for ten years (commenced 2007/08)

\$0.60 million per year ongoing

Commonwealth Commitment

\$2.53 million per year provided for 2007/08 and 2008/09 (currently involved in negotiations for future funding)

While the total existing State and Commonwealth commitments for the FEP totals \$56 million over ten years (pending on-going Commonwealth commitments), this seems a very small amount of money compared with the possible environmental and economic impacts if foxes established.

The TCT is disturbed that the Commonwealth commitment is not secure beyond the current 2008-2009 financial year and we urge the committee to recommend in its inquiry report that this commitment must match the Tasmanian government's commitment for a period of ten years. We further recommend that the committee write at the earliest opportunity to the Australian Government making this recommendation very strongly.

We understand that this funding situation means that some staff are not guaranteed employment beyond 30 June 2009 and some have left in order to seek more employment security. Their actions are entirely understandable but must considerably reduce the program's capacity while new staff are selected and trained. We urge the committee to take up this matter with the Commonwealth Government.

We understand that in the current financial year (2008/09), the approximate proportion of funding allocated to each section within the FEP is:

- Management (including biosecurity) - 10%
- Community Engagement - 7%
- Research and Development - 9%
- Monitoring and Investigations - 32%
- Operations (e.g. baiting, trapping) - 42%

This means that 74% of the FEP budget is currently going directly into on-ground works, for 'Monitoring and Investigations' and 'Operations' (eg. baiting, trapping) which is a very high proportion and we commend the program for this. Management is a very lean 10%.

These figures show the committee that the FEP is focusing the vast majority of its resources toward on-ground works and this will give it the highest probability of detecting and eradicating foxes.

We do urge the committee to investigate whether more funding is required for research because this appears very low given the urgent need to assess and trial every possible method for finding and eradicating foxes. We recommend that alternative sources of funding for research be explored and that funding should not be taken away from the on-ground efforts.

**(d) The methodology used to determine allocation of financial resources**

While we are not aware in detail of the methodology that has been used to determine the allocation of financial resources, we are more than satisfied with the funding allocated to each section of the FEP as listed above.

**(e) Measures used to determine the success of fox eradication**

It is very difficult to determine the success or otherwise of the FEP for the reasons outlined above. It is frustrating for some people that no foxes are caught as result of the FEP baiting program but it is crucial to emphasis that we are dealing with very low numbers of foxes. In the Tasmanian landscape it is very likely we will never find a poisoned fox as it is known that a poisoned fox will seek a secure hiding place to die and in the Tasmanian landscape there is virtually no chance of finding the carcass. This also explains why foxes have been found that were killed by cars but none that have been killed by the baiting program.

**(f) Any other relevant issues**

We wish to put on record that based on the information provided by the FEP and publicly available via the Department of Primary Industries and Water web site and other sources, the TCT believes there are still a number of foxes present in Tasmania. If foxes are not successfully eradicated and establish in Tasmania, they will threaten a high number of

native fauna species with extinction as well as being a major impact on agriculture. If foxes establish permanently in Tasmania it is estimated the state could support a population of up to 250 000 foxes. Based on the Victorian experience this could mean 5-10% of all lambs are killed by foxes and bettongs, bandicoots, native hens and other native wildlife either disappear altogether or are reduced to being threatened species.

There is a large amount of physical evidence that foxes have been and are still present in Tasmania. The DPIW web site (last viewed a few weeks ago) clearly states that there has been four dead foxes found (three killed by vehicles and one shot), blood found at another site, 38 scats verified as being from foxes and 54 excellent sighting reports. Much of this evidence is recent and therefore we still have an indeterminate number of foxes present in Tasmania.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make a submission and the TCT would welcome to opportunity to make a representation to the committee if public hearings are held.

Yours sincerely,

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