

**AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH JOHN WILLS OF THE MOUNT LOFTY RANGES ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL BOARD AT LOBETHAL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON THE 29TH OF SEPTEMBER 2005 FOR THE PROJECT ON THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION.**

[Square brackets include comments and corrections provided by Mr Wills in February 2007]

**Tape 1, Side A**

[0:30] Just by way of introduction, John was at the Commission Conference dinner earlier this year (telephone rings, break in recording) and at that dinner John was going to be one of the speakers giving some of his reminiscences, which is the point of today's session. We didn't get a chance to record the reminiscences then so we're going to record some of the stories now. By way of introduction, John, perhaps you could just outline a little bit of your personal background to put things in context for us.

Can do that. I was born on the 23rd of December 1951 at Tumby Bay. Then the family moved to Brinkworth and I did my schooling at the Brinkworth Area School, started work with Elders GM – worked there for 7 years – left that and sought employment with the Birdwood High School – as a groundsperson there for 7 years – and then started work in 1981 as a Weeds Officer with the Gumeracha Council. That's where my story starts in the area of animal and plant control.

Just by way of rounding things out, you're a bit of an outdoors person?

Yes, I certainly have [been]. I love the outdoors. I've always lived in the country. Played a lot of sport – football, basketball, tennis. Coached several football sides in the country – A-grade sides and junior sides – and lucky enough to play in 10 Grand Finals winning seven premierships in all that time, because I moved around a little bit with Elders. I was with Elders for 7 years and had 10 permanent appointments in 7 years and about six relieving jobs, so I moved around a little bit, mainly in the Mid North there. But it gave me a bit of experience in dealing with rural landholders and talking to them. But I'm a very, very keen gardener, extremely passionate gardener, love my gardening, so it's a bit of a conundrum or what you call it, where on the one hand I'm out killing weeds and on the other hand when I'm at home I'm into growing gardens. Enjoy reading. Enjoy the family: I've got one grandson and two more on the way in February and March, which is quite exciting.

An extra little interest.

Yes. That's exactly right, plus they're pretty close : one's right next door and the other one's at Lyndoch, which is only about 10 minutes away from where we live.

The rural existence, the country lifestyle, is well and truly in your blood.

Well and truly, yes. I've got to be dragged screaming and goodness knows what down to the city. It's only half-an-hour away but I hate going down there. Always tell the NRM [Natural Resource Management] people down there that if they want me, they've got to come up here: I don't want to go down there.

But we ran a Murray Grey stud for 15 years, just in recent times. We had a property at Birdwood, 80 acres [32 ha] there, and ran a Murray Grey stud and we were very successful: had many Grand Champion, Senior Champion, bulls, had a National Reserve Junior Champion at one stage, so that was good too, gave me a bit of insight. A lot of local people knew about that and they probably respected my position as an Authorised Officer a little bit better because I had land and we were relatively successful with the stud, and it did make them listen to you a little bit more because they understood that I knew where they were coming from and all that, so that was really quite good. But we sold, dispersed that about 5 years ago, and sold our property about 2 years ago.

That was a bit of a side interest to your work?

Yes, yes, it was just a hobby. It was a pretty full-on hobby, I might add, because we showed all over the place a bit. My wife's a teacher so we all had to do this out of hours. Our kids were pretty well involved – the two children – in it as well. Yes, I've very much been an outside person, always been ... brought up in the country and had an intrinsic link with the land and rural people and always much happier talking to the farmer than I am to anybody else, I enjoy communicating with them.

[6:15] You've hinted and stated that your background was good experience for working as an Authorised Officer. I didn't mean to cut you off before, but perhaps we can turn back now to how did you become involved in this line of work, going back to your working career.

Yes. When I was working as a groundsperson at the high school I did some training there at the TAFE [Technical And Further Education College] course and after 7 years working at the high school I was looking for something else to do, something a little bit more challenging. The Gumeracha Council at the time advertised for a Weeds Officer. So I applied for that. Back then the Weeds Officer probably wasn't a real glamorous job in the Council – you were right on the bottom of the heap, there wasn't really anybody else below you really. I applied for that job and was lucky to win the position. That was in March 1981. That was as a Weeds Officer working under the old *Weeds Act*, which is going back a long time. The *Pest Plants Act* was in by then, but Gumeracha Council was relatively recalcitrant in coming across [to] the new Act. They were always very independent. They were happy with their situation and didn't want to be involved in the new set-up at the time. When I was employed there were only two or three Weeds Officers that were still working under the old *Weeds Act*.

[8:25] ... Because the Commission didn't subsidise the Council under that old system, I was doing incinerator inspections as well and inflammable undergrowth in towns inspections, plus all the weed control. I never did any pest animal control at all, none at all. And reported to Council at the end of each Council meeting. At the end of each Council meeting the

councillors, half of them, were half-asleep anyway and weren't the least bit interested in the Weeds Officer's report unless I was reporting on a neighbour or somebody that they didn't like (laughs) then they would get pretty cranked up about it.

Vested interests, yes.

Yes, very much vested interest with Council, there's no doubt about that. In fact, at the time – just shows you how things have changed – there was a councillor then that often said, 'The only good tree is one in a fire', and he meant it. He was talking about eucalypts: 'The only gum tree, the only good one, was one that you'd chuck in the fire'. Very, very anti-native veg[etation] going back then, especially Gumeracha. A lot of the rural councils were very, very anti-veg.

At an individual level the councillors were ... you mean individually ...

Both. This is going back 24–5 years ago. As individuals, generally the councillors were big farmers and I don't think any of them on there at that time were really ... had an environmental twist to them. And Council tended to be not interested at all in environmental matters back then.

My inspection records that I kept were on a ruled A4 sheet, a sheet of paper that was the extent of my record-keeping. I just used to write it on an A4 sheet and just a bit of information about who I'd seen and what they'd said. I probably dealt with about 120 landholders in terms of weed control issues.

Were you the only Weeds Officer for the Gumeracha Council?

Yes, yes; I was the only Weeds Officer for the Gumeracha Council. I had other duties: I used to do the incinerator inspections, go around to all the incinerators (they were all registered) and checked the flues to make sure they were up to scratch and all that sort of stuff. Also the 'Inflammable Undergrowth In Township' notices: I used to have to send them out and get the owners to slash the grass. If they didn't we'd just get a contractor in to do it. That aspect of it was very similarly aligned to our weed control work.

[11:55] Did they have someone else handling the pest animals, the vertebrate pests?

No; they just weren't an issue. No rabbits. As far as I knew there were no feral goats. In fact, there weren't feral goats. I knew there was feral deer out in the Mount Crawford Forest that does move into that Council area, but none of the big landholders wanted to do anything about that because they used them for ... used to go out shooting anyway. No, it was just no requirement to do any animal control.

[12:45] The main weeds I dealt with then were blackberry, gorse, Salvation Jane and thistles. Gumeracha was very hot on Salvation Jane, extremely hot on it, and always expected a fair bit to be done with that. The first story that comes to mind: when I started I didn't have a vehicle, I

didn't have a Council vehicle at the time, so I had to use my own vehicle. The second vehicle we had, as a family, was a beat-up old Volkswagen that I used to drive as a second vehicle. When I say beat-up, it was beat-up. The Council paid me an allowance for mileage and all that. But I remember calling into this place at the back of Gumeracha one day and pulling up in the Volkswagen. Getting out of the car I had a sense that somebody was in the house, as you often do, but knocked on the door and nobody came, so left a card saying that I was the Weeds Officer from the Gumeracha Council and could they contact me about a weed matter. Hopped back in the Volkswagen and black smoke and a few dents and all sorts of things coming out the back, and headed off. When I got back in the office that afternoon the boss dragged me into the office and said that the lady had rung up that owned the place and was quite agitated and really quite concerned and said that this person, this man, had rocked up at her place in this beat-up old Volkswagen and said he was from the Gumeracha Council. 'Is he for real?', she wanted to know. He assured her that I was. Plenty people now wonder whether I'm for real, but that's another story!

[15:10] You mention there that you had a boss.

Yes, yes, that's right, yes, exactly right. The boss was the CEO of the Council. We were directly responsible to Council and nobody else because under the old *Weeds Act*, that Act was directed, vested towards Councils and the Commission had no input into that operation at all. The Councils funded it fully. That's why they fought right to the bitter end to retain that independence. In the end it was probably a bit stupid because under the arrangements that came in – I can't remember when the *Pest Plants Act* came in, but it was probably '78, 1978 it might have come in – the Commission provided a subsidy; and also the very first vehicle was bought by the government. But why Council fought it was that the Commission liked two councils – at least two councils, preferably more – to join together to form a Board and Gumeracha Council didn't like that because they thought they'd be losing ownership over the issue. They fought long and hard over that one. But in 1983, after I'd been working there a couple of years, they eventually got pushed into coming under the new arrangements, which was the *Pest Plants Act* then, which, as I said, came in in about 1978, thereabouts.

We can fill in later.

Yes. It was 1983 when Gumeracha Council finally bowed to the pressure from the Animal and Plant Control ... well, from the Pest Plant Commission, and what they did, they formed the Talunga Pest Plant Board. That was a board made up of the Gumeracha Council and Mount Pleasant Council. Mount Pleasant Council were part of the Barossa Ranges Pest Plant Board, but Mount Pleasant pulled out of that arrangement and joined up with Gumeracha for the Talunga Board. I did three days a week for Gumeracha and two days a week for Mount Pleasant.

So that extended the area you had to cover?

Yes. It basically doubled the area. Didn't double the contacts because the Mount Pleasant landholders were extremely large, very large landholdings, and didn't have the weeds that Gumeracha had. Salvation Jane wasn't proclaimed for the Mount Pleasant area either so I didn't have to worry about Salvation Jane in Mount Pleasant. Two days was a bit of a breeze. (laughs) I was absolutely flat-out in Gumeracha ??? like a cut snake; and in Mount Pleasant I could wander round and take a bit of a breath, so it was quite good.

Could I ask you there, John, you've mentioned Salvation Jane not being proclaimed by Mount Pleasant: any particular reason that you're aware of?

Yes. When I say it wasn't proclaimed, it actually was proclaimed for the Board area, which included Mount Pleasant, but the Board had a policy of not enforcing it in the Mount Pleasant area. The reason for that is that Salvation Jane has never been enforced in the Mount Pleasant Council area. They've never had any enforcement provisions there, and the councillors there didn't want to. I certainly had plenty of people who used to ring up and be a little agitated because it wasn't, but the problem is that, if it was going to be some enforcement there, it would need certainly an extra officer, probably, which at the time was going to cost [\$]40–50 000, with a vehicle, and that's before we do any work. It was probably going to cost that community a quarter of a million [dollars] a year or something like that to do the weed control. When I mentioned that to the landholders they seemed to not get quite so agitated (laughs) about it all. It really is very much a historical reason, and it's to do with the fact that a fair bit of Mount Pleasant is cropping and grazing with sheep, so a fair bit of that Council area Salvation Jane was never deemed to be a problem; it's only a small percentage of it is high-rainfall area with high-rainfall pastures, and the people that are worried about it tended to do something with it, anyway. It was pretty prevalent in the roadsides, so if it was enforced there it was going to cost that community a lot of money, just to carry out the control on the roadsides alone, without doing anything on the property. That still stands: even though now Mount Pleasant has moved into a completely different area, that still stands with them, they don't do any enforcement work there at all.

[21:25] Thank you. That's interesting.

About that time, as well, we really moved into the modern era and we developed a card file index system for keeping all our records, which was a real jump at the time. We had a pretty sophisticated system, where we had a separate colouring system for each weed and another colouring system for the stage that I was at with each landholder – whether I was just doing preliminary talks with them or whether we were taking more formal action. It was pretty sophisticated, which was all great until you came to springtime when you had 150, 200

different actions all coming at the one time, and I tended just to throw it up in the air and forget about it then.

We had hard-copy maps that we used to take out in the field with us and locate a landholder on the map, and usually had some reference on the map. Then we'd go back into the Council office and go through their hundreds of rate card notices to reference that property back to the landholder. That often took hours just to find one landholder. That was good fun at the time. Horrible system, but anyway it was the only thing we had.

So it was a bit of a jigsaw to piece this information together?

Yes, it very much was. Because you had hard-copy maps it was a bit of a guess as to ... You had to guess as to where you were, anyway, out in the field because sometimes the boundary lines don't coincide with the fence lines; and sometimes it's a bit hard to tell exactly where you are, especially in a new area. Even out in the field it was a bit tricky trying to work out where you were on the map. Then when you came into the office you had absolutely hundreds of all these rate cards in filing cabinets. The rate cards were the things that the Council girls used to generate the rates off of. Basically it was a statement of that particular landholder's rates and when they paid them and all that sort of stuff, but it had all the property reference gear on it so that's what we used to find the details about each individual landholder. Then I would transfer that onto my card file index system that I used – this new, whiz-bang, sophisticated system that we used at the time.

I suppose there was an issue there of you might have lots of small landowners and that's one thing; you might have people renting a property, running a farm or whatever but not being the landowner themselves, paying the rates.

Yes, that's right.

You'd track people down.

Yes. Back then that wasn't quite so prevalent. This is still over 20 years ago. The mad development and subdivision of land had just started then, but hadn't built momentum. The start of that 1983 period, there wasn't a lot of that; you were tending to deal with full-time farmers that were generally earning their living off the land or at least eking an existence out of the land. There were very few true hobby farmers. That was only 20 years ago, so things have changed ... .. then. I was still dealing with around about 150 landholders on a regular basis, which didn't change a lot from the previous years.

[25:50] The main weeds then were still the same: blackberry, gorse, Salvation Jane, thistles and a bit of Cape Tulip thrown in there. Still absolutely no animal control work at all. In fact, because that was the *Pest Plants Act* I'm not even sure whether I had any authority at the time

to do any animal control. It was the *Vertebrate Pest Act* at that particular time, so I'm not even sure ... I knew nothing about that aspect of the work at all, not a thing.

When you had the Talunga Board being created, did the pest animals then come under that Board? Like was there an officer then to look after the Mount Pleasant region at all?

No, not at that time, not when it was formed in 1983. There was just myself, and I was the Pest Plants Officer. The *Animal and Plant Control Act* hadn't come in at that particular time. I suppose – I can't remember now – that that Board was vested with the animal control activities under the *Vertebrate Pest Act* at the time, but it never mattered because I never had to deal with animal control issues. It just wasn't an issue for us.

[27:30] A story that comes to mind in that era is when I first started work in the Mount Pleasant area, I had a Gumeracha Council Ford Falcon 500 at the time, and it had a Gumeracha Council sticker but it was only on the passenger side of the vehicle, not on the driver's side. I remember pulling up to this particular landholder's property at Craneford, which is around Eden Valley, and this gentleman has quite a lot of Cape Tulip in the area and it's a bit of a concern with the community. I drive up this landholder's driveway – almost mentioned his name then – which is probably 400 m up to his house. Hop out the car and the gentleman comes out of the house. A bit of small talk, talking about the weather and about the cattle markets and all that sort of stuff. Then I introduced myself as 'John Wills, the Pest Plant Officer from the Mount Pleasant Council' and looked at him. There was this pause, then he stiffened and stood up straight and he said, 'If I'd known you were the bloody Weeds Officer, I'd have shot you coming in the gate'. I stood back a bit, I was a bit shocked by this, and I said, 'Why's that?'. He said, 'Ah, I've had dealings with you guys before and you're bloody hopeless. You've caused me that much trouble. I've done what you've told me and it hasn't worked. No, I would have shot you'. I said, 'That wouldn't have done any good, Jack. You would have been up for murder then, or manslaughter at least'. He said, 'I would have made out I was aiming at a target on a tree and missed the target and got you'. He was going on like this, pretty aggressive and pretty anti-Pest Plants Officer. I thought, 'This is no good. I haven't even been able to get to talk to him about the weeds yet'. So I thought, 'Well, I'd better spend a bit of time with him'. It was the first visit in the morning, so it was probably about half past eight by the time I got out there. Spent a bit of time there and ended up having lunch, and I had to pull myself away at about half past three to head back in the office. Turned him around and we managed to get two or three years' weed control out of him till he turned bad again. (laughs) He used to tell all these stories about he'd been using Ester 2,4-D for so long that when he went out for a pee somewhere, when he peed on a plant it died, and he said it's the Ester 2,4-D that he's got in his system that kills the weeds! (laughs) I suggested he should save up and walk around his place and wee on all the Cape Tulip plants around the place, but I'm not sure whether he quite appreciated that. But he

was a different guy, a very unusual guy: we managed to whiz him around at least for a couple of years until he turned bad again. (laughs)

It must have been a bit of a worry, though, if you're spending quite a few hours with him and he's threatening to shoot you initially!

Yes. I knew a little bit about him beforehand, I'd had a little bit to do with him back in my Elders days – I was based in Mount Pleasant back in the Elders days – so I knew what he was like, but I couldn't see the point of just walking away at that point in time because I'd achieved nothing, he'd achieved nothing. I thought somehow or other we've got to get to the starting point. Even though he said it, he didn't appear to me to be a guy that would carry it out. He was making a point, I thought, at the time, so I thought, 'I'll base it on that'. A little bit different to another gentleman I've had dealings with since. I felt that he was just saying it and wouldn't carry it out, so I took the punt. As I said, I spent (laughs) all day there, which is not what I intended to do. It all worked out relatively well for a couple of years anyway. (laughs)

A couple of things come out of that, just to round it out, John: one is you knew him through your Elders work, but it's interesting he didn't know that you were the Pest Plants Officer.

No, he didn't.

So it's a question of how well-known – in that case personally with him, and more generally in the area – how well-known were you for your work?

Yes. At the time I'd just been appointed to it. The other Weeds Officer from the Barossa Council, he covered that area, so they knew him. But they didn't know that I was ... Nobody there at the time knew that I was the Pest Plants Officer because I was relatively newly appointed and they never advertised to the community that there was a new officer; you just went out and introduced yourself. I don't think he recalled me back from the Elders days because he was an Elders agent out there. I could recall him because he was a different person back then, so I could recall him because of that.

**[33:45] End of Side A, Tape 1**  
**Tape 1, Side B**

[0:10] John, you basically turned up and introduced yourself with a calling card and that was your form of advertising, publicity for you and the work?

Yes. All you did was you just rocked up at a landholder, knocked on the door, introduced yourself, and off you went. They all knew that there was a Weeds Officer. They all understood that there was a Weeds Officer: as I said, we were just Pest Plants Officers from that point on. When you introduced yourself they knew what you were about. The fact that I was new, that didn't really matter. They just knew I replaced the old guy, he was Brian Pike. That was all pretty cool. They accepted you, who you were, no need to give authorisation or anything else, they took you at face value.



The other thing I wanted to ask you about that incident, and again it's more general as well, is you spent some time to win him over: so how did you win him over? You've got to demonstrate your knowledge of pest plants. But did you get any training ...

No, no, absolutely ...

... of what we now call 'customer relations' or any of that type of 'managing skills'?

Customer relations back then didn't exist. No, look, you were thrown in the deep end, very much so. No training at all, except that we had to do the Certificate in Weed Control, but there was no aspect of that in terms of human relations or customer relations; it was purely the Act and stuff on how you kill weeds, basically. It was very much up to the skill of the individual – if you had good human relations skills you got on OK; if you didn't, you got on really bad. That was it. That was the end of the story.

I just felt at the time that, as I said earlier, it was pointless leaving at that point because at some stage we were going to have to face up to the problem that he's got the Cape Tulip, which is a very major weed, a very high-priority weed. There was no point walking away because I was going to have to face up to it eventually and so was he. It was just a matter of I felt I had to build some relationship with him, start to build some relationship and some trust, because I really felt that he'd lost trust in the previous situation. That's not to reflect on the officer; it's just that some of the advice and stuff that he'd been given he'd lost faith in it. I suspect a lot of it was due to the application too, not necessarily the advice, because of the way this person is. I thought I had to build a relationship, start to build a bit of trust, so we tended to move away from the weeds initially and talk about a whole lot of other things, and then slowly get him back to the weeds and try to make him understand that, no matter what we say here, he's got a legal responsibility to do it. There's a way to say that without saying it, in some cases. Then coming in for morning tea with his wife – she was there, old Millie – and started communicating with her and eventually you just ... As I said, it's building a relationship with him. In the end he was quite good and willing to try a few things. We got a contractor with him for a couple of years to do it. Because Cape Tulip is a difficult plant to control it does get a bit frustrating in the [short] term, so I guess in a case like that you're looking for a couple of good wins early in the piece in the control program to keep his confidence and trust in your going, but it doesn't always happen with a plant like Cape Tulip. So it's all about ... That's the way you deal always with these landholders, if you can, is to build up some relationship and some trust with them. Once they have confidence in what you're saying at least you've got a chance that they'll take on board what you're saying. In some cases it works and sometimes landholders just resent who you are and where you're from. So be it.

[5:15] I want to make that quantum leap to spanning the whole 25 years: have there been cases where you've just come up against a brick wall?

Yes. Not many, not many. I've usually always been able to negotiate my way around the situation, which other people outside of our organisation – another organisation looking in – would probably find interesting, because we would issue probably more legal notices than any other Board in the State. But I see that as an important tool to propping up this ability to be able to negotiate with landholders and get landholders onside. If you've got 10, 20 other people who are not doing the right thing, it undermines your position to be able to negotiate something with them as well.

Yes, I have come up against one in particular. A particular landholder, who is well-known around the traps, just will not, no matter what I do, change his ways. Every year I have to issue a legal notice; every year we have to take the contractor on there; every year I take him to court. I remember when we first started doing his place he was very aggressive. I took a contractor on to his place and we started doing the work, and the next thing we saw this little Suzuki come screaming up gullies – because we snuck in the back door, basically, tried to sneak in and do it – and he tracked us down and came charging up, and very aggressive, which I knew he had an aggressive history for another reason, and ordered us off the property, which the contractor and myself decided that it was probably the best thing to do under the circumstances. The next year, we had to go through the same process: issue a legal notice and go and do the work, so I contacted the local police and the police came out and spoke to this particular gentleman and told him that we had a right to be there and to do what we had to do. So we did the work and he didn't bother us that year. The following year I was carrying out an inspection on the property – it's quite a large property, probably 2 or 300 acres [81–121 ha] – and I remember walking down a gully from coming in the back of his place, and I saw him. He has a road around two sides of his property and I saw him coming around on one of his roads right up the hill. I saw it slow down just a bit and I thought, 'He's seen me'. He drove around and came down the other leg of the road that comes down the other side of his property, which was a bit closer to where I was at the time. I saw the car stop and he hopped out. He has a Filipino wife. He hopped out, she hopped out, and next thing she's hopping the fence and coming running towards me. I was probably about 150 m away from her at the time. She was mostly speaking in Filipino but there was an occasional word of English that came out, so I had a fair idea what she was saying in Filipino and it wasn't very (laughs) complimentary. There were several words of English that I got that I wouldn't have wanted to use at the time. I really wanted to turn and run back up the hill, but I didn't want to be too undignified so I thought, 'I'll just turn and slowly walk back up the hill from where I came'. Anyway, she was getting closer and closer and, as she got closer to me, she's picking up these big stones and throwing these stones at me. So I thought (laughs) I'd better turn around and face her at this particular point in time. She's getting closer and closer, and then she picked up this stone about as big as the palm of your hand and threw it at me.

Through my sport I've got pretty good judgment and I figured it was heading for the crutch so I covered that bit but it went through my legs. She's close enough then to leap towards me, and she grabbed hold of my arms or my jumper and shaking my arms and calling me 'Gestapo' and other names, plus there was a few other words that started with 'f' and 'c', and a fair bit of Filipino thrown in. I tried to tell her ... She was telling me to get off, and I was telling her that 'I do want to get off if you'll allow me to', but she was right off the planet, she was going off. I looked up the hill at one stage, where the owner was, and he was there watching very intently everything that I was doing so I didn't want to push her away. I didn't want to do anything that was going to cause us some problems in a legal sense down the track. I kept on telling her that if she let go of me and stood back and settled down and allowed me to walk off I would walk off. Anyway, eventually she did. (laughs) I wandered up the hill with my tail between my legs and she headed back to the car ... That was probably, that would have been a good 12 years ago. To this point of time nothing's changed, except she doesn't belt me up anymore. (laughs) I can go to the house; I can talk to the owner relatively well; but he still doesn't do the work. We still have to carry out the legal notice and we still have to take him to court to get the money ... Mostly you can win people, but just sometimes you cannot. He's fairly aged, so we didn't take him to court for a few years because we were sure he was going to die shortly, didn't think he'd live much longer. We left the money that we ... the work that we carried out, we left it as a charge on his land rather than take him to court for probably six years. Given the new arrangements we're working under now or about to come under – the new NRM arrangements – we decided we'd better take him to court and recover the money, because he just hasn't dropped over yet. But hopefully he'll die soon. (laughs) He's getting pretty old.

In that case, if you win in court, you get the whole six, seven years there?

Yes. We've always been very successful taking him to court because we do have experience in the legal aspects of it and we usually ... got a pretty good protocol, pretty good system. But he hasn't changed and I don't think he ever will, so that's the way it goes.

[12:55] I'll let you carry on with some of your points now, because ...

Yes, we're running out of time. In 1986 the *Animal and Plant Control Act* came in, which was an amalgamation of the Pest Plants aspects and the *Vertebrate Pest Act*. They amalgamated to become the *Animal and Plant Control Act*, which I found interesting because up till then I'd never had anything to do with any animal control stuff and I did the vertebrate pest course down the Coorong shortly after that, which was quite interesting.

That's a course put on by the new Commission?

Yes. It was a course put on by the Animal and Plant Control Commission to train officers and others in all aspects of pest animal control. It was a whole week at Gemini Downs and it was really extremely good, a very good training program. About the mid 1990s I started using

computers, which was interesting. I did enjoy computers right from the start, I wasn't frightened by them, not like some people, so I took to them pretty well. We started using a database called PESTWIN that was developed, or initiated, by Alan Arbon – who is still an officer with us – then. That was a database where they kept all the records of property inspections and did away with the old card file index system, and that was fantastic.

Is that something that's used across the various Boards?

At the time it was used by just a couple of Boards. It was developed through the Mid Hills Board, which used to be Mt Barker and Onkaparinga Council and a few others. He developed it with a computer programmer that was employed by the Council at the time. Then, because we were an adjoining Board, I got interested in it and they allowed me to use it. It did develop further out from there. A lot of other Boards, especially in the intensively populated areas ... the Fleurieu started to use it and it went out from there. It certainly did change the way ... That was probably the most significant change up till then, without any doubt at all, in being able to keep track of all our property inspections. As I said, this time of the year with the old card file index system, we just had to throw it out because it was too complicated. But with a computerised system you'd get a report out each week that showed you which notices were due, when your follow-up inspections were due, and so you just did all that. So it really was ... Having a computer that we could use, and then this PESTWIN program, up to that point in time was probably the most significant change in the way we operated – in our record-keeping, especially.

[16:35] And I fielded my first rabbit query. I can even remember the landholder's name – and he won't mind me mentioning it – a man called Leon Holmes out at east of Springton rang me up one day. I did know Leon through other matters. He rang up one day and he said, 'I've got some rabbits, John, and I want to do something about it'. I said, 'No problems, Leon. I'll get back to you on that'. Even though I'd done the vertebrate pest course some years earlier I had to go and consult my notes to find out how this landholder, Leon, had to treat his rabbits. That would have been about 1993. We organised some 1080 from Murray Bridge somewhere and Leon did his rabbit-baiting program. From then on I was an expert on rabbit baiting there, the first one.

That was your first one, but presumably other rabbits had been spotted in the area and been treated?

Not in my time. Absolutely not, no. Previous to myxomatosis they had some big problems out there – this is going back in the '50s and '60s, they had big problems – very bad problems with rabbits out through the Palmer hills, out through there there were shocking problems; but myxomatosis basically reduced it to almost nothing out through there. I never ever had one single enquiry. That's probably for 11 years, the first 11 years that I worked. Not a one. That

was my first one, and I had a couple of others that year, and needless to say I was able to field those queries without consulting my notes.

[18:45] About that time we started talking to other Boards and officers about how we operate and how we go about doing things and about their programs and swapping a few ideas, and that was a big step, talking to other officers about what we're doing.

Then in 1999 ...

By then you were a bigger group.

By then I was still the Talunga ... working for the Talunga Animal and Plant Control Board, which was just the Gumeracha Council and Mount Pleasant Council, but the Commission by then had started their biennial conferences, they were then – the first one was at Roseworthy – and they were well attended, officers from all over the State came to the conference where they had some training, some education. We were still really fairly ... I was on my own, and that was it; you were very much left to your own resources. About that time, probably the early 1990s, I started talking to a few of the neighbouring guys about their programs and what they were doing.

It's interesting you're still working as an individual, you were the one person.

Very much so.

Doing it all.

Very much so. You were left to your own resources. Even though the Commission had started their conferences, their annual, biennial conferences, we still didn't get any help in terms of handling landholders. It was very much the technical support information you were given, so you really had to fall back on your own individual skills on how you handled landholders. I know a lot of guys had a lot of problems with that, some people just couldn't deal with it.

[21:10] In 1999, or before 1999, there was a major readjustment of Council boundaries and Councils amalgamated and realigned, and because Animal and Plant Control Boards had to cover one or more entire Councils it had a major impact on Animal and Plant Control Boards at the time. Once the Councils got themselves pretty well established, or the new Councils got themselves established, the Commission then had to come in and realign all the Animal and Plant Control boundaries to suit. Probably, from that point on – without any doubt at all – has brought on the most significant and biggest changes that I've ever seen in my 25 years. The last six years has seen the biggest changes. That was when we became the Mount Lofty Ranges Animal and Plant Control Board, and that took in the Stirling Animal and Plant Control Board, the East Torrens Animal and Plant Control Board, part of Mid Hills or the Mount Barker Council part of Mid Hills; and also took in part of Talunga, my old Board, because Mount

Pleasant Council, in the Council amalgamations, got split up in two ways – some of it went to the Barossa Council and some of it went to the Mid Murray Council – so again Mt Pleasant went off somewhere else. I was lucky enough to be appointed as Senior Officer. It was a big challenge, but a very exciting challenge.

As I said, in those six years the changes have been just absolutely phenomenal. We're using bigger laptops. We have digital maps now that have all the property ownerships on it. We have GPS [global positioning system] up to those maps so we can see exactly where we are in the landscape. We get instant ownership details. We can generate notices in the vehicle, so if we see a landholder, if we've seen a problem on a property, we can go to our new PEST2000, which is a Microsoft Access database, we can generate the notices then and there – we print them back in the office but everything's done there; that's made our operation probably five or ten times more efficient than it used to be. We also have very much integrated programs. I know that this Board, as a Board membership – that's the Board members – have been very much into developing integrated programs with other natural resource management people. So we've formed partnerships with all the water catchment boards around, very early in the piece; some community groups like Sixth Creek Catchment Group, South Para Biodiversity Project, the Green Web group, and especially the Adelaide Hills Council – we've always had a very good relationship with Adelaide Hills Council, not so much with Mount Barker. Adelaide Hills Council gave us early IT [information technology] support and we also manage a lot of their weed control contracts. But they have given us a lot of support.

We also have programs that span across our region. We have programs that span into other Board areas. One of those is the Purple Peril and Woody Weeds Committee which spans the Barossa Animal and Plant Control Board, the Fleurieu Animal and Plant Control Board, the Mid Murray Animal and Plant Control Board and Mount Lofty Board. That develops our communication programs, biological controlled-release programs. We also have a Weed Warriors program that we support the Project Officer here, but that covers the same region. We've gone from being very insular and very isolated to be just covering the whole range of animal and plant control issues across regions and across other natural resource management sectors. I personally would be dealing with over 600 landholders at any one time, so that's been a big change from the 150 or so that I dealt with initially, and that's due to the major change in ownership, in development and sub-division, over the last 16 years. It's certainly put a lot of pressure on our resources. It's probably the most significant factor – not probably; it is the most significant factor – or challenge to our resources has been this incredible, over four times, increase in our landholder contacts. But our resources over that time, if you look at our

antecedent boards, is exactly the same over that time. So it's been a big challenge in how we deal with this, how we become more efficient, to be able to get through all that.

[27:05] One of the big things, John, is you're now not working as an individual. You mentioned you're the Senior Officer so you've got a staff ...

Yes.

... about the place now. How many people would be ...?

Yes. We have five, including myself, five operational officers and we have 1.5 FTE [full-time equivalent] girls, admin[istration] girls. Because of these partnerships that we've formed we also employ what we call a Natural Resource Management Compliance Officer, that's funded by the Torrens and Patawalonga Water Catchment Board. That person is employed by us. He sits in our office here, and he works with us in developing integrated programs across soil, water, and animal and plant control issues. That position was put up about 2½ years ago, which was well ahead of these new NRM arrangements, so I really chuckle to myself – and I've more than chuckled sometimes, I tell it to quite a few people – that this integrated stuff is ho-hum for us: we've been very, very integrated on the ground for many years. As the sixth person we have another person who is our Weed Warrior person: she works 2 days a week. So that's basically eight people that we have employed under the Animal and Plant Control banner, but we also house the Torrens and Patawalonga Onground Management person here, which was a pretty good move because, because he's based here, we've very much integrated our programs. So we integrate our compliance stuff with their Onground Works programs. That happened about four months ago. Really it emphasises where we've come over the last ... my 25 years is very much into integrated programs. As I said earlier, I really chuckle when they talk about this new NRM arrangement to make us more integrated. We're so well integrated now that it's not going to change the way we do things. It might change the way things are done elsewhere, but not the way we do things on the ground here.

[29:45] So you've been doing that for a while. One of the significant changes I should ask you about, in this new arrangement and the staff you got is, John Wills personally: gone from being an individual reporting to a chief at a council to being the Senior Officer controlling staff. How have you adapted to that? You go on a management learning curve!

Yes, yes, it's been a big learning curve, but not as much as one would think because of my history. I did talk about it a bit earlier on. I coached A-grade football sides for about 5 years and I've coached junior football sides. Coaching is about communicating, it is nothing more: if you can communicate to your players and manage your players and give them responsibility and give them respect, then you'll get the best out of them. I don't want to brag about it, but I was fairly successful as a coach – mind you, I had some pretty good players as well, had some pretty good people on the team – but that gave me pretty good background. I've mentioned this to other people before, about that ability ... When people come here to be employed, if I know

they've played sport, especially team sports, I'm much more excited about employing them if they've played some team sport, because they understand about playing in a team, about getting on with other people and how it all fits. For me it wasn't really difficult because I felt I had those skills, but it still was a challenge because we had to bring people together that had worked in different areas and we had a completely new ethos. Some of the guys had worked in a very restricted environment, in a management environment where they weren't allowed to do anything; they had to report everything they did, report back. Whereas my management style is totally different. I only want to hear from them if they've got a problem. I believe in putting responsibility back on them. If you put responsibility back on them they'll achieve a lot better than if you do the opposite. My management style is pretty different. I expect things to happen and they know very well if it doesn't, but very much the responsibility is back on them to achieve what we need to achieve as a group. It's been very exciting and I have enjoyed it. I had a vision of where we wanted to be, with the help of the Board, the Board members, and we work towards that vision. We have a bit of fun – I'm a guy that I like to have fun, I like to enjoy life, and I like the other guys to do the same, so we have a lot of fun here – but we like to achieve as well.

Serious work, but ...

Very serious work, but you've got to enjoy, you've got to have some fun. If you don't have any fun, then you stop achieving. Yes, it's been terrific for me. I've enjoyed very much taking this Board from where it was ...

**[33:30] End of Side B, Tape 1  
Tape 2, Side A**

[0:10] John, just to tease out a little bit more about the new structure and so on, and you mentioned there bringing four Boards together into one. Both the present and the past arrangement, what's the Board structure like? How do you fit ... how did it all operate?

That's a good question. Going right back to 1981, being a Weeds Officer and just reporting to the Council was very difficult. It certainly was a very poor structure, because the councillors came there with very much a vested interest and they never really looked at things [globally]; they really looked at their own interests in terms of animal and plant control. Animal and plant control came right on the end of the agenda, always the very last thing, and that's the way they saw it. Moving from a structure like that, even back in 1983 when the Talunga Animal and Plant Control Board formed, albeit still people from Council still on the Board, but you had some people from the Gumeracha Council, some councillors from the Mount Pleasant Council, but they tended to have an interest, at least some interest, in pest plant work. And you had a separate Board meeting. They came there to discuss about pest plant issues and they tended to have a bit more interest in it, but they still came with very much vested interests and they still had a bit of a vested interest in the Council and their patch.



The one thing I've noticed with the formation of the Mount Lofty Board, which covered a much bigger area: we still had representatives from the Mount Barker Council and representatives from the Adelaide Hills Council. The representatives from Mount Barker Council were, are all Council appointees, they are councillors. The Adelaide Hills Council took a different perspective. One of their four representatives was a councillor representative, the other three were drawn from the community. It so happened that one of those was a councillor, but two of them had nothing to do with Council, they were purely community representatives. It's very interesting to see how the dynamics of that worked on the Board as a group. The Mount Barker representatives are very much focused on what's good for the Mount Barker Council and not necessarily even for the Mt Barker area. They're coming there as representatives of Mount Barker Council, not as representatives for the Board. Even though they'll be very good and very supportive, they still come there as representing the Council. The Adelaide Hills Council reps have generally been fairly good, but the two community members have by far given us the most support and will also put more in to the Board because the Council representatives, or the councillors, tend to be there because 'Somebody has to sit on this bloody board' and they might have a bit of an interest in weeds, whereas the community representatives come there because the Council advertised and they've got interest in it so they've come onto the Board, and they've got a little bit more energy and a little bit more interest in the issue. That was a big change.

Certainly this new Board, the Mount Lofty Board, have been a lot more strategic in the issues that they raise, especially the current one. In the early days there were a couple of members, and they were councillors, that tended to be very much reactive and 'What about that patch of weeds and what about that patch of weeds?'. This Board are very strategic and have been fantastic really. They're very supportive. Because they come from a wide area, 'my patch' stuff tends to get a bit off the radar because they are really representing the whole Board. There's a big, enormous change in that in terms of the Board membership and going from the old council system to the current Pest Plant Board members, there's a big change in that.

[5:45] Where do you and your staff fit in terms of the Board? You have to go along to report to the meetings?

Yes.

How does that operate?

That's right. Our Board only meet quarterly. The way it works is that ... All the staff are employees of the Board, so ultimately we are responsible to the Board. But on a day-to-day issue all the staff are responsible to me. When it comes to reporting, I do a Senior Officer report about administration type stuff to the Board, and all the operational staff – which includes me

as well – we provide a separate operational report to the Board that just generally shows what we’re doing in terms of operational stuff. Our approach has always been that if a Board member has an issue about a property somewhere they should take that directly to the officer concerned, as any other landholder would. If they’re not happy with the response they get, like any other landholder can, they can come to me and talk to me about it. Right from the start we put that up and said that, ‘When you’re coming on to this Board, you’re to deal with big-picture stuff and policy development. In terms of individual property stuff, you’ve got to deal with the officer concerned, outside of the Board meeting, and only come to me if you’re not happy’. Outside of the Board they’re really no different to an ordinary person. Generally, apart from the odd exception, that’s worked pretty well.

Every meeting I do get at least one officer to come in to the Board meeting, one other officer to come in, because it’s important that the Board members have some relationship with the staff. Some Boards I know some Senior Officers don’t even like the officers to come into the Board meetings, but that’s a mistake. You’ve got to have them come in and let them see the officer and build some relationship with them. That’s basically the way it works. We are employed by the Board. In a legal sense we’re responsible to our Board. But in terms of very much day-to-day stuff, the Board have divested that responsibility to me so in terms of operational stuff I make sure the guys are heading in the right direction. It does work extremely well, we don’t seem to have too many problems in the way we work.

[8:45] I was going to put you on the spot in a sense, John, about the status and the stature of the Board, and I’m thinking here in terms of ... since you mentioned the connections were developed with other Boards and that broader perspective started happening: the Mount Lofty Board, how is that seen from within and from outside? How do other people react to you?

That’s a very good point. I’m pleased you brought it up because one thing I noticed when the Board first formed [was] that we had a very poor reputation. We got a lot of negative comments from other people in natural resource management that were very much stand-offish and wouldn’t be involved. But where we are now – and it’s only been six years – there’s no doubt at all that we have a very, very, very, very high reputation in natural resource management in terms of on-ground activities in this region. I must admit I’m really excited about that and I feel really satisfied that now we are held in very high esteem, extremely so, there’s no question about that. Look at how the catchment boards engage with us, the soil boards; they have a land management program which is an educational program; they engage with us very strongly. I recognised that very early in the piece, that this wasn’t good; it was very bad. But now it’s fantastic, it’s really terrific.

[10:35] The other one, in relation to this: you mentioned a short while ago that you had a vision, so there’s a John Wills’ vision. Maybe the Board vision is the same, but perhaps if you’d outline the John Wills’ vision.

Yes. I did have it ... There is a John Wills' vision and there was a Board vision, and we had a joint staff vision as well and we had a workshop that worked through that.

And between all three visions you're going in the one direction! (both laugh)

Yes, that's right, that's right. If you get it all right they do go in the one direction, there's no question about that. One of the things in my vision was this fact that I wanted to see the Board as a credible organisation within the natural resource management community, because I thought we had a lot to offer in terms of our on-ground management, project management. It's really one of the things that we're very good at. So I did want to see that. I also wanted us to be accepted by the community as an organisation that would act on trying to deal with animal control issues rather than fobbing it off: that was the hard stuff, making sure that the officers had the confidence that they would be supported when they went out to do some of the hard, pointy stuff. Because unless you do that, the nice stuff doesn't get done quite so well either, so you've got to support all the stuff you have with a good compliance aspect, otherwise the whole thing sort of falters. I wanted to build ... All about building trust and confidence and esteem with staff, I wanted to make sure that they felt that they were important in the organisation and that that was translated back into the community. We've done some training programs – a lot of training programs – outside to build up the confidence. I'm pleased really. I don't think there's too much in terms of my vision and what we wanted to achieve that we haven't achieved. Probably, if we weren't going into NRM, there's no doubt at all that we would have to sit down and go again and re-sort our vision, because we really are just floating along at the moment. We've really achieved a lot and we've gone where we wanted to go. We've become more financially independent by managing a whole lot of different contracts outside of our animal and plant control stuff – something I haven't mentioned – but we, at our peak, were probably bringing in [\$]120 000 into this Board from contracts that we were managing outside to prop us up. That's diminished a bit over the last few years.

In terms of my vision – and this is a thing I'm a bit, quietly, very satisfied about at this point in time –going into this new NRM organisation, looking at it from a purely selfish point of view, that this Board has come a long way and we've achieved what I set out to achieve. There's no doubt at all that we're known in the community now and we're highly-regarded in the community, and the guys, the people here, are pleased to be working for the organisation, too.

It's good that you record that because part of the nature of the exercise is, in a sense, to get a view from within.

Yes, OK.

So don't feel (laughs) bashful about saying this!

No, no. It's the first time I've ever said that, mind you, to anybody. I thought it was important. I could see the point, and it's the time to say it.

So I was going to ask you have you got other things on your list?  
Just a few to sort of ...

I've got two ones which we can round out after ...  
OK.

[15:10] ... give you your steam again.

Just a few things to really continue on this picture of where we started and where we are now. Certainly it is, up until the beginning of these NRM changes it was a very exciting time and very satisfying, the last six years. I think if you talk to the other guys, other people here, they – well, not 'think', I know – that they would say the same thing because the feedback I get they're really excited to be involved in this organisation.

[15:50] I've talked about the changes over the last six years. How we're very much integrated now. Our programs that span across Boards, across regions. We're dealing with a lot more landholders. Our IT stuff is just spot-on; we've got terrific IT systems going here. But the one thing that hasn't changed – and it's really humorous, it's really funny, and we joke about it here as officers but there's a very serious message behind it, I've talked to our Board a bit about it – that the only thing that hasn't changed significantly, and I mean significantly, is the weeds that we're dealing with. Over 25 years our high-priority weeds – and I could look at the notes for '99 on but I won't, I'll go back to the weeds that I've got written down here in 1981, because the weeds are exactly the same – and that is Salvation Jane, gorse and blackberry are still the weeds we spend most of our resources on. Interestingly, when I look back over 25 years, I start to think if we're still dealing with exactly the same weeds over those 25 years, then there's something not quite right. I'm proud of the structure, I'm proud of the way animal and plant control has developed over the years and it's a credit to the Commission, a credit to the government, a credit to Councils, to everybody how that has all come on. But when I see that the weeds that we spend our most time on are exactly the same weeds that we spent our time on 25 years ago I start to think that that is wrong, and that needs to change. I've certainly talked to our new Board and very much to the new NRM Board about how we need to change that, make sure that our resources are perhaps put into more areas where we can be more proactive rather than reactive, but it's just a point. We chuckle about it here as a staff, but there is a very serious message behind it, that we need to have a major look at that.

[18:30] The other thing that's changed significantly is back in 1981 [we] didn't have any animal control programs, and even up till the early '90s no animal control programs. Now we

have enormous animal control programs. We have major fox-baiting programs – we source something like 14 000 fox baits a year in this area. We would field, on average, three rabbit enquiries a week. We have some major goat and deer control programs through the area. Going from a point where we did none to a point where it's a big part of our program is a bit daunting in terms of [personal] resource management – again, because we haven't got any more resources than we had back in 1981, if you look at where we came from – but we're doing all these extra things. But it's all exciting.

[19:40] The other thing that's come on incredibly much over that period of time is bio-control programs and our knowledge of integrated weed control. The bio-control programs, we must have 12 or 13 various bio-control agents out there now and they've really come on very quickly over the last six years and seems to be gathering pace. The knowledge we have in terms of integrated weed control is pretty good. I'm pleased to say that. Especially those major weeds, we really know what to do with them and how to integrate other techniques into controlling them, compared to what we did a few years ago.

So that's about all I've got to say, in terms of ... It's probably enough. Probably plenty.

[20:40] I could probably put another tape in! (both laugh) There are a couple of things just to round it out. I come back to your comment ... I prefaced your comment about I had a couple of issues to ask you on, and your comment to do with you're looking at the same weeds now. Are you looking at them to the same extent? In a sense, the last 25 years, has that just been a holding pattern, that we're not making any advances, all we can do is just monitor and control?

Basically yes. With Salvation Jane we've stopped its spread, which is good. We do get that feedback from other people, landholders, that know that we tend to have a hard ... run a pretty hard control technique on Salvation Jane. In fact, once you get it, it takes 7 to 10 years to get rid of the seed reserve you're never going to get rid of it in a hurry. There's no doubt that we've held it. With the gorse and blackberry, there's less now than there was around 25 years ago, no doubt about that, but we've still got a long way to go. The story behind it is that the Board and the community, they have an expectation that these things are not going to be there. You'd think after 25 years, you would think that maybe we're getting close to that, but the figures that I get out of our database tells me that that's not the case. The problem is that, while we're putting 90% of our resources into six or seven plants, we're not dealing with some of these other plants that are coming in behind that aren't properly on our radar, and that's what I'm really worried about in terms of our message is that we're putting so much resources into these big plants, these widespread plants, we're basically putting nothing into some of these other little ones that might be sneaking in behind us. They're the ones that we should be putting our resources into, not the other ones. It's more to do with that story, being a bit smarter about where we're putting our resources: should we still be putting our resources into the big four or

five, or should we be putting a bit more resources into identifying and trying to eradicate some of these new ones that are coming in underneath?

[23:25] But it comes back, of course, to the expectations, real or unreal, as to what can be achieved. I mean rabbits: it might be nice, in one sense, to wipe them all out, but it may not be achievable without some other environmental impact coming along. You've got a fine balancing act all the way through I guess.

That is spot-on. I couldn't put it better. That's the problem that the expectation is that we should be getting rid of all this stuff – after all, that's our job. It's a matter of giving them information. We're lucky with this database I talked about earlier on, this PEST2000: there is a report that tells us the amount of infestations that we've got recorded and their density and all that, and with that you can multiply out the cost of controlling them across the Board area. I only worked that out a couple of years ago. We are using that as a tool now to raise awareness that let's have a look at what we're doing really, because we've still got \$15 000 000 worth of gorse to do and we can only physically manage to achieve about half a million a year of that. You put it back on them: you say, 'Does it make sense to you?'. We've just a little bit more information now, that only is recently, that we're trying to get out to the community and decision-makers to get them to re-think what's achievable and what's not achievable. It's about just providing information.

[25:15] Perhaps a positive one to finish with, because I've asked ... I said there were three, and the second one you've already touched on is the environmental theme and your comment earlier about when you started in '81 and you can see through your comments all the way through today it's come up to NRM. Obviously, at least for the government if not this community generally – and I'm being a bit flippant in my comment – but the environmental theme, the environmental consciousness is so much greater in our ...

Absolutely. Like even with Councils now. I don't go to Council meetings but you can tell what's coming out, that the Councils are very strongly environmental and our Board is and we are. We've moved, as people, as animal and plant control people, have moved a quantum in terms of our thinking about how we control things. In terms of going into NRM, we've got mixed feelings. We're all excited about the change. There's no doubt in my mind that the environment either ... I don't think the environment will be better off under those changes; and I don't think the community will be better off under those changes. We as a staff will be better off. But these changes bring with it an enormous cost. It was in a submission that this Board made going back when this was first mooted, and everything I see to this point in time only adds weight to that. That aside, this Board has been – I say we've been integrated for 5 years, so we're not fazed by this integration and amalgamation: 'Bring it on', we say, 'Bring it on. It's fantastic'. If I just put that aside and look at what's happening and the way the structures are being developed, there's no question in my mind, no question at all, that there's going to be a big cost in these new structures that will either have to come from the community's pocket or it will come from the environment. In other words there'll be less works done on-ground. There's

no question about that. I'll be happy if in 4 or 5 years' time somebody comes back and says, 'You were wrong John Wills', but I'll be surprised if somebody does that.

[28:15] We'll see how that unfolds. To wrap up your contribution to recording the history of what has happened and where we've got to now with the present regime, I just want to ask you about good stories. Any that come to mind? You talked about the property owner wanting to ... threatening to shoot you and the Filipino abuse (both laugh) and so on.

The racial abuse.

I don't want us to look at the negative only, but on the positive side what are some of the success stories or the good experiences?

There are so many. There's one that comes to mind. There was a chap at Mt Torrens that bought a property maybe 16 years ago, an 80-acre (32 ha) property, and on it there would have been 20 acres (8 ha) of gorse. He came to me – or I might have gone in, I can't remember at the time – but he said, 'How am I going to deal with this? That gorse: to control it is worth more than what the land is'. It's very expensive to control that stuff. I sat down with him and we worked out a bit of a plan. It was basically staged, so we just picked a little patch of it each year and that's what he did. He said, 'This is going to take me forever'. I said, 'Maybe, but you just chip away at it, chip away at it'. I reckon – that was probably about 12 years ago, something like that, can't remember now – but I reckon it was probably about 5 years ago he treated his last gorse plants, and now that property is just magnificent and he gets so much satisfaction out of that.

If the person's prepared to make the effort and put their money in ...

That's right. It's a matter of – it's something we do a lot now – matching the landholder's resources with their ability to be able to do the work, so we do a lot of planning now. But things like that are pretty rewarding. There are some properties that have controlled Salvation Jane, where over the years they've eradicated it: that's pretty rewarding. Most of the landholders you deal with are really good and you get a lot of satisfaction in going there now and they say, 'Yes. No. Done it. Controlled it'. There are lots of good stories, not many really bad ones: I guess they're the ones that stick out or we joke about, we chuckle about.

Yes. I thought we'd just try and get a little bit of a balance there. But you're going to landholders now and it's ... Is it a case of less resistance that 'You're from the government here to help me – get lost' whereas now people are more accepting that 'You may actually be helping us'?

Yes, absolutely. There's no doubt that people accept us a lot more and welcome us, generally.

You get the people ring up and say, 'Joe Bloggs told me to ring you because you're the guy with all the knowledge' and all that sort of stuff. It gets back to my vision too. When I came in that's what I wanted to happen. People do accept us really well as incredibly good source of information, and you get a kick out of that personally when you see the landholder going off doing that stuff and having success with their program. Really, there are so many success

stories in terms of landholders managing their weeds that you could spend half-an-hour just talking about them. There's a lot of them.

The fact you have had success and the work's continued. And saying before, some of this stuff you just can't eradicate, it's going to keep coming back, so you've got to keep treating it and so on. But the fact you're being welcomed now, not threatened with a shotgun ...

Yes, that's right. I haven't been threatened for quite a while, even by this particular landholder whose wife threw stones at me. At least I can go there to his property. We are credible. He doesn't like what I'm telling him to do, but he sees me as being credible, as somebody that he could let on to his property. Even that's a positive out of a bad story: at least I can go there. I don't think any of the officers have been ordered off a property for quite a while.

[33:30] **End of interview**