

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH MR BOB CHRISTIANSEN OF MAGILL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON THE 18TH OF MARCH 2005 IN REGARDS TO THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION.

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

Tape 1, Side A

[0:25] Bob, thanks very much for agreeing to be involved with our little project to record the history of the Commission, and obviously today to record your contribution to that area, and perhaps if we can start with a little bit of your own background, just to give us some context?

Thanks, Bernie. I was born at Waikerie, on the Murray, on the River Murray, on the 6th of June 1931. It was a year of a big flood – they've had a few big floods but that was one of the big floods, '31. My mum and dad were fruit blockers on the land up there. I went to school, to the Waikerie School, primary school and then to the high school. I achieved my Leaving Certificate, which was a great achievement in those days, and then I went to work on the fruit block with my dad. I stayed there for a number of years until he earnt enough money to buy his own block – he was share blocking and then he bought his own block, and it wasn't quite big enough to support him and myself, so I looked for something else and I saw an advertisement in the *Sunday Mail*: 'Come to Papua New Guinea – a career with a challenge'. I was 28 then. I had an interview. A chap came down from Papua New Guinea and interviewed me in September, and a couple of weeks later I had a call to go up there before Christmas in 1959, but I decided not to go then. I wanted to stay home for Christmas, so I went the next year.

That's a bit of a transition though, from being on a block at the Riverland.

Yes, it sure was. I had no idea what I was going to.

What made you just grab that opportunity?

It looked exciting and I was thinking 'How much future is there in being a small fruit grower on the river?'. There were signs that you might have to be bigger to be successful, as a lot of things were in the rural area. So I took that and went up there and never regretted it: I stayed up there until they got independence in 1975, then came back here.

You were doing government work up there?

Yes. I was with the government. I was in the Department of Treasury – it was the Finance Department when it started off – and I was with Treasury. I didn't have any formal accounting qualifications, but I could add up two and two and comes out to four, and with the background of ... I did some accountancy at school and that helped me. It turned out that I had a little bit of administrative ability so that helped me on the way through, too. I ended up an area finance officer for the Highlands area. That covered the Eastern Highlands, Western Highlands, Southern Highlands. We had a staff of 50-odd in the Treasury there so it was quite a job. Interesting, very interesting.

Pretty exciting times too, I'd imagine.
Yes, it certainly was.

Primitive PNG stuff.

Yes, there were still ... Not far from where we lived there were still some areas that hadn't been settled, they were still head-hunting in there; but they stuck to themselves, they didn't come looking for us! (laughs) That was good: we had a good life up there. When they gained independence we came out and came back to Adelaide. We chose to come to Adelaide for the kids' schooling – the youngest [Ian] came down a year before we left Papua New Guinea and went up to Waikerie and went to school there for a year. Then when we came down they were both [in Adelaide. Julie had already been in Adelaide boarding at Girton College, and Ian went to King's College.] That's why we chose to come here to Magill, which was close to there: they [completed] their schooling there [at what became Pembroke].

Had you teed up a job to come to?

No. No, we came down ... We got a payout – compensation and that sort of thing – that enabled us to buy this house and settle down. I retired around the place for six months and then I thought, 'It's time to go back to work', so I went into the State government and got a job with Department of Lands, in their revenue section, and worked there for 12 months. Then I saw in the *Government Gazette* they were calling for applications for the Secretary for the Pest Plants Commission: the new legislation for pest plants had just come in and they were forming this new commission. So I applied for that job and was lucky enough to win it. If you can call it lucky! (laughs)

[6:40] Well that brings us in a sense to the start of the story, but this is starting with the Department of Lands. Firstly, you didn't transfer within the Commonwealth system.

No. No, we didn't. We were permanent officers in the PNG administration, but we weren't Commonwealth employees so the majority of permanent officers took their 'golden handshake' and came out and then started their own way again. There were contract officers up there and they were more Commonwealth-employed people so they'd come back to a Commonwealth job.

So in your case you were coming down here and having to find a job and ...
Yes.

... the job with the Department of Lands was something just advertised in the paper or ...?

Yes, that was in ... No, I saw that in the *Government Gazette*. I used to get the *Government Gazette* and had a look at that. I just saw this one, it was a CO-2 in those days, whatever it was. I thought, 'I'll start at the bottom and work my way up'. That was one way of getting into it, to start at the bottom and work your way up.

[8:00] Then the job for the Pest Plants Commission came up: any particular attraction to apply?

Yes, too right. It was a job that involved people on the land. I could never work four days or five days a week just in an office surrounded by walls, so this was a good opportunity to do something that I thought I'd like, getting out with the local people. It was good.

I was thinking that the transition from PNG to working in a Department of Lands office in Adelaide is a fairly big culture shock after 15 years up there!

Yes. And with my background up the river, too, I would never have been able to work at that.

So that was ideal. Then the same again when I went with the Soil Conservation Council: that was involved with the outside groups, which was good.

Securing the job as Secretary, it's a new Commission starting up: what was involved there, in the early days? Did you come in with much support or ...?

Yes. The legislation had been passed, that was through Parliament, so that was all ready to go.

One of the main tasks was to convince local government that they should get together and form Pest Plant Control Boards. That involved a lot of meetings with individual Councils and groups of Councils to convince them that forming a board over a larger area is the best way to control pest plants, rather than individually as they had been. We had some real good meetings, some fiery meetings, and ...

Kept you on your toes?

Yes, too right. The fact that I had a country background, born and bred at Waikerie, helped me a bit because I could talk a little bit and relate to them a bit, so that did help when we went out.

We didn't win them all eventually, but most of them we won.

Before you could go out, of course, I presume you had to learn what's involved in this new legislation, this new scenario.

That's right.

I mean how familiar were you with the notion of pest plants and ...?

Yes, that's right. I had to learn what the legislation meant, how to interpret it and what it meant to them because that's what they wanted to know: how it was going to affect them?; what it was going to cost them?; what say they still had in their programs and that sort of thing. That was their fears – that we were going to come out and take over everything. That wasn't the case, and that's what we had to convince them.

How did you go about that learning? Was someone taking you to one side and teaching you, showing you things ...

Yes.

... reading the Act, of course?

Yes. The chairman of the Commission, Peter Trumble who was in charge then, he was a great help to me. He was fantastic. He guided me a lot of how you handle these people and what the Act is all about and what it tries to achieve. He helped me there a lot with the Act.

Did you get involved in any of the ... I was going to say 'scientific' side, but obviously you've got to become accustomed, familiar with what you're handling, the plants themselves and the ...

No, not really. I didn't get much involved in the technical side; I was more in the administration side – how they run their Board, how they do their meetings, how they handle their finance and that sort of thing. I wasn't involved in the control programs very much.

No. But when you were going out talking, I'm thinking of the initial period when you were going out talking to the local councils and so on, did someone else come along with you to talk about the ...?

Yes, yes, yes. Ray would come sometimes.

That's Ray Alcock?

Ray Alcock, he would come sometimes. Max O'Neil would come along. They would handle the technical side of it.

Of course they had a background coming through Ag. Department and so on.

That's right, yes. Then later on, as it got going, we had some other technical, younger blokes in the office, they used to come out when I'd go out to the meetings and they'd handle the technical side.

Right, OK. On the administrative side then, Bob, was there any sort of model or were you developing a model for setting up these Boards? How did you go about that?

The Act had a bit of that in it: dictated the number of people that each Council could have on the Board, what they could spend their money on and that sort of thing. But it was more or less just getting a committee – it's a board – but getting them together and organising their number of meetings that they would have on their needs, what they thought they would need; who they would get in to their meetings as specialists and that sort of thing, if they needed them. Once the Board was set up I was more or less there to guide them, to help them along their way. I didn't give them much technical input because I didn't have that.

No, I was just making that distinction.

Yes.

But also you had to develop a working knowledge, I guess, of that sort of thing.

Yes, yes. I knew what the programs were supposed to do and I knew where they could get resources from the Department, because we used to get a lot of technical resource from the Department of Agriculture and I could help them along those lines.

[14:45] Leads me to ask, Bob, just to clarify: were you working for the Department of Agriculture, or for Pest Plant Commission? Who employed you?

I worked with the Department of Agriculture. They paid my salary, state salary. Now that you mention that, I could probably say that the Pest Plants Commission was unique in that we had our own budget. It wasn't a funding line from the Department of Agriculture. I would negotiate with Treasury and we had our own fund. That was really great, because the Department of Agriculture, as they do with their funding, they can move money from one area to another but they couldn't touch our Commission fund because that was ours. That was a great thing in that Act that we had our own money.

Were you housed in the Department?

Yes, yes. We were housed in the Department. We used all the facilities – all their offices, their staff – and our account was with the Department's in their accounting section. We used the Department's car pool and that sort of thing, yes.

You were the person devising the budget, setting budgets and ...?

Yes. That was my work. I would arrange the budgets for all the Boards and provide them with their funds for their operations.

Must have been a challenge to – again, thinking of the early years – going out to set up the Boards and negotiating with the Councils and, indeed, negotiating with landholders and ...

Yes, it was. But I wasn't the only one; I would have ... some of the members of the Commission used to come out to these meetings: Roger Brockhoff, he was very good; Malcolm Groth used to come out to some of the meetings; Des Ross; those landholder members, they achieved marvellous things, getting these guys together to forget Council boundaries and Council differences that they'd had over the years. (laughs)

The local Boards were being set up; they obviously took into account the Council boundaries, but you were operating across boundaries ...

Yes.

... and so you're trying to merge interests, I suppose.

That's right. We were trying to impress upon them that weeds don't know boundaries, so you can't have a program that stops at a Council boundary and then not continue on – it's just a waste of time. So that was the idea, to get them to realise that a bigger program over a bigger area would be a better way to attack weeds than just little pockets being attacked.

[18:25] Did you find a level of resistance or a level of acceptance? Obviously it varies.

Yes, it varied. Before this new legislation came in there was the old *Weeds Act* and there were some Councils that were working together as Weeds Boards under that, so there was no problem there with ours. But it is the other areas where they thought they were doing a good job and they didn't have to combine, they thought they were doing well enough, but ... We did

have some resistance, but finally we got them all into Boards, but not as we would have liked to. On quite a number of occasions we just had to let perhaps two Councils go together or we had to let single Councils be a Board and that sort of thing, which we didn't really want, but to get the whole thing rolling we let it go that way.

So a pragmatic approach at times.

Mm.

How much power did the Commission have to impose itself on these local Councils? Could you have come down heavily?

No. I don't think we could have. We wouldn't have achieved anything if we did that. It was better to let them have the way they wanted it and get on with the job and a bit later on changes could be made, and that did happen.

Because ultimately you're trying to control the weeds.

That's right, yes. We're not trying to interfere with local government at all; we're attacking weeds, as you say.

Perhaps easier to tackle the weeds than the people! (both laugh)

I'll say. Yes.

As Secretary of the Commission, where did you stand in the hierarchy? You've got a chairman and a Board ...

There was the Chairman of the Commission, and then there was the Executive Officer, and then I suppose the Secretary came.

And the Executive Officer at the start was Max O'Neil?

Max, yes, Max O'Neil.

You were fairly senior, because then you've got support staff and the technical people.

That's right, yes. But I didn't really have any support staff except Marie Caskey. She was a typist and help in the office – and a great help, too. But my main role with the Commission itself was to service the Commission, their meetings, organise their meetings, organise their travel if they were doing trips away, do the minutes of the meetings and just service the Commission. I remember the first lot of minutes I did I took them up to Peter Trumble, the Chairman. He checked them out. I wasn't as fluent as he is in the English language and that sort of thing, It was marvellous the way he just helped me clean them up. It was really good. I appreciated that. Eventually I didn't do a bad set of minutes.

So he gave you some guidance on how minutes should be done and so on?

Yes, too right. Yes, he was good.

[22:35] That leads to a more general question, Bob. Did you find you needed to get training in any particular areas? I mentioned before the *ad hoc* learning of the science of the job, so to speak, but did you ...?

No, no, not really. I just picked it up and I got a lot of help from our chaps in our finance section of the Department of Agriculture, and I got a lot of help from the guys in Treasury that I used to deal with. I'd go over there every 12 months to try and get the amount of money that I needed and they were really helpful, the guys over there in Treasury. I appreciated it. I don't think I ever came away disappointed, the amount of money I could get for the whole show. It was really good.

It's interesting – did you have any formal accounting qualification or skill after ...?

No. No, I did a little bit of bookkeeping at school, in high school, that's about all.

Because you hadn't mentioned it in the brief biographical outline and I just wondered whether you'd picked up any skills along the way.

No.

Apart from being able to badger!

Yes. (laughs)

Or barter, more politely.

I picked up a bit of skill being in Treasury up in Papua-New Guinea because we had quite big budgets up there and we had to balance them to the penny and then the cent every year. That was good. I worked on the Papua-New Guinea general accounts one year when I was in [Port] Moresby, that was interesting.

So very much learning on the job.

Yes.

[24:30] Did you find that that background limited you in any way in negotiations with the Treasury people or deciding what sort of budget to set? Were there times when you felt 'I just need to have a bit more experience'?

I suppose there were times when I was a bit worried how it would all end up. But the fact that I probably wasn't as well educated as those blokes in Treasury were, they tended to help me more than hinder me, if you know what I mean.

Perhaps you could rely on native cunning more than formal skills.

I don't know what it was, (laughs) but it was quite interesting ... No, I won't say that. (laughs)

Click.

That's right. Things like budgets and so on; you were devising a budget, working out amounts, negotiating with local Councils, local Boards and so on, but presumably something has to go through the Commission itself in the end, and people there ... You were presenting a budget to the Commission meeting and people passing comments and so on on that and advising you.

Yes, they all had to go to a Commission meeting.

So it wasn't just a matter of you fronting up to Treasury saying 'We need X hundred thousand this year', but the Commission had to verify your figures and so on?

That's right. That has to ... It doesn't come from me. It had to go from the Commission to Treasury, and then I would go and talk to the boys and substantiate all that was asked for. That was the role that I did. I would develop the budget for the Commission to accept and then discuss it with Treasury. As far as the Boards' budgets were concerned – this is just for administrative purposes, not for weed control – the Boards would contribute a certain amount to their budget as well. They would contribute 50 cents for every ... must get this right, I've just got to remember. (pause) They would contribute 3% of their general rate revenue and 1% of their urban rate revenue to the Board fund, and the Commission would contribute 50 cents for every dollar that they've put in that way. If that wasn't enough to fund a Board we would put in an additional support subsidy. So if the Board needed 35 000 for their administrative expenses and the 50 cents in the dollar subsidy plus the Council's contributions only came to 25 000, we would put in an extra 5000 [sic] to give them their money. They were reasonably happy with that, that that was set and that they couldn't be stung for any more.

Do you recall if it was a regular occurrence for there to be a shortfall? Was the Commission topping up the ...? As a rule of thumb. Any shortfalls?

The shortfall was mainly in the lower rate areas like in the Mallee, up in the north, over parts of Eyre Peninsula, where their rate revenue wasn't as high as the higher-settled parts of the State, but that's where most of the support subsidy went. In the Adelaide Hills, where they've got a high rate revenue, they didn't get as much support subsidy.

Did that cause any problems for the Commission? People complaining that you're helping some more than others, or ...

No, no, it didn't seem to be an issue. I can't recall it being an issue, no. No, that wasn't a big problem, really. No, that was all right.

[29:40] That leads me to ask, Bob, working with people like the Board Chairman and Max as Executive Officer, how close a unit was it? I'm talking here about administratively ...

Very close.

How did you work together?

Yes, real close. It was a fantastic working relationship. As far as the Commission staff itself, there were eight of us. There was Max as the Executive Officer, myself, Marie, Ray and Arthur Lewis, William Judd, Richard Carter [and Jim Garrick]. There were eight in that group, and we were very close. Supported each other. There's no doubt that we would have very interesting discussions, mainly on the technical side of it, the boys putting their views in, and there were some good arguments, but it was all worthwhile, it all achieved something good. It was a very tight-knit group. As far as the members of the Commission are concerned, they were all out

there really trying to do the job as well, and they'd help us. Any time we wanted them to come to a meeting, we thought there might be a sticky meeting, they would willingly come. They used to love coming out.

You wouldn't get the whole Commission and the whole Board coming, you'd get ...

No, just get ...

... a couple of members or ...?

Yes, or the member that was closest to that area where the problem was, he would come out and sort them out. That was terrific because the member would come out and somebody on that Board would know him or he'd be a cousin or something like that, and you get that personal involvement and it makes it so much easier.

I'd imagine. Doubtless you were getting out and about a fair bit, then.

Yes, too right. As I said before, that's one of the reasons I took the job. (laughs)

But you didn't become a desk-bound administrator, either.

That's right.

You were able to maintain that.

Yes.

In some cases, people end up losing that 'getting out of the office' aspect and they just end up in the office.

Yes, and lose track of who they're dealing with.

We'll just pause for a moment.

**[32:05] End of Side A, Tape 1
Tape 1, Side B**

[0:05] ... going out in the field and spending a bit of time out and about. Obviously it's a great interest for you. How often would you be out, do you reckon? I know there's no 'normal' week in a job like this, but in a year would you spend 50-50, 60-40?

In the first couple of years I would have been out about 30% of the time. Quite a few of them would involve overnight trips. The West Coast would be three or four days, that would be fairly intense. We would try and arrange a number of meetings over there for that week and that would be fairly intense.

So you might go for a week at a time and ...?

Yes, that's right. Especially to the West Coast and up the north. But closer here we'd try and just do a day trip and a couple of meetings a day. There were a number of night meetings involved. But it was all very interesting to see the differences of opinion amongst local government: how they would accept it or how they wouldn't accept it. As I said before, there were some very fiery meetings. But we thought we were trying to sell something that was going

to work and we just had to stick by that. There would always be one or two members of local government or councillors out there who could see that what we were trying to do was worthwhile and so you'd work on those guys and try and get them to convince the others that it was something that was going to benefit their areas.

What arguments came up? You say they were fiery meetings. What sticking points were there?

A lot of it was that we wouldn't be able to give them programs that would be any more successful than what they're doing. For instance, they've had horehound and onion weed for years up in the Mallee areas. All the programs that have been introduced before haven't really got rid of them, so how can another body come along and say, 'OK, this is going to be so much more successful'. Our argument to that was to do it over a larger area with proper control programs and better management and that sort of thing.

So there's a bit of education that has to go on?

Yes, that's right, yes. We would not promise them, but suggest that they would have more technical support in the fact that they would have a fully paid, authorised officer out doing the job rather than a guy that's employed by the Council and doing this work and that work and all sorts of jobs, he would be a specialist weed control officer funded by the Board. That was one of the reasons that did help, the fact that they were going to have this full-time officer.

Did you find, or do you recall if there were any cases of people saying, 'We know what's best and we don't need you to tell us'? Like they'd tried their own 'remedial programs'.

Yes, that was there. Yes, for sure, especially amongst the Councils that had been doing something. They were doing reasonable jobs, individual Councils that were interested in weed control. But there were so many that regarded weed control as a lesser job for them to do: there were other things that they had to do before weed control. We tried to convince them that going into a Board with a specialist weed control officer would be better for them and their country.

There's a few things coming through there. You've always got the situation of 'We're from the government, we're here to help', so there's a bit of reluctance to that. There's also in the early days, you're the new kids on the block even though there's been weed boards before and so on. Lots of little tensions coming through there, I would think.

Yes. They didn't want to lose ... the Council, individual Council, doesn't like to lose control of anything. They could see that this board would be out there doing what they should be doing, but we had to convince them that they had members on that board. It was the Council's board, not the Commission's board. It was their board, it was still their own people, but they were just doing things over a larger area.

[6:10] How did you go about that education role? Obviously at the meetings you're talking face-to-face with people, but did the Commission get involved in a broader education program to get the farmers into TAFE courses or conferences, those sorts of things?

Yes, they used to do ... This is where the Department of Agriculture used to help them, because the Department of Agriculture had their agronomists and that sort of thing out in the field and they were the people that helped in that respect.

So they spread the word for you.

Yes, and they would hold their field days on weed control and all that sort of thing, put down their trial plots and that, and that was where the Department helped us.

So there was a bit of synergy between the two.

For sure, yes. We more or less were there to put up the framework for the thing to be operational, that's what the Commission's job was to do.

[7:20] So within the Department, how much liaison went on? Did you personally ... you were saying before you had to deal with finance officers, but the Commission ... meeting with district advisers and the agronomists and so on?

Yes. Like Ray Alcock and our technical blokes were with the Department guys quite a lot. They had to be to keep up with technology. The Department boys used to do the research and our fellows had to keep up with that to be able to get it out to the local Pest Plant officers. Yes, a lot of liaison there.

In your own case you mentioned the financial aspect, dealing with the finance people; what about things like on the regulation side or ...?

That's where I would deal with the Secretary for the Board on the interpretation of the Act and how to apply the regulations and that sort of thing. That was with the Secretary of the Board. The member Boards' District Clerks, the Council District Clerks, I used to liaise with them (if there were any problems in their particular area). When it got to that stage, we'd have the assistance of the Commission members, they'd come out too. It was all in together, you know what I mean?

Yes. That's something I was going to ask you in relation to your work with Max as the Executive Officer. Again, it's all in together: how did you, or did you develop boundaries – 'This is my role, that's your role' – and did you cross over boundaries? Or was it an informal rather than a formal understanding of who did what?

As far as Max and I were concerned, he advised me, he helped me a lot. He was involved in the development of the legislation and he knew what it all meant and he helped me immensely there, the interpretation of the Act. But as far as going out to the Boards and dealing with the Boards, I was given a free rein. If I had problems then I'd talk to Max or the Chairman of the Board, I'd soon run to seek help!

I suppose I was asking, Bob, was there a clear demarcation between 'That's Max's job and that's my job'? It's obvious some things like finance and so on were essentially yours and so on ...

Yes. The Boards' finances was my province; administration of the Boards, that was mine; dealing with Treasury for the Commission's budget, that was mine. But in developing the

budgets for the Commission and the Boards I'd liaise with Max, I'd talk quite a lot with Max about it.

You worked together for quite a while.

Yes. Max was there when I started in 1976, and then he was there ... he retired while I was still there.

[11:15] you went on until ... you stayed with the Commission all the way through till retirement?

I stayed with the Pest Plants Commission until it combined with the Animal and Plant Control ... like with the Vertebrate Pest Authority and the Pest Plants Commission, they became the Animal and Plant Control Commission, and I stayed with them. Then the Soil Conservation Council became a body and then I transferred over to the Soil Conservation Council and became the Executive Officer for that.

And you left the Animal and Plant Control ... OK.

I left the Animal and Plant to go to Soil Conservation.

Thanks for explaining that because I thought you'd stayed with the Animal and Plant all the way through ...

No.

... and the Soil was just a side line.

No.

[12:05] Just to pick up on those couple of big things then. The merger into Animal and Plant Control ...

Pest Plants and Animal and Plants?

Yes, that merger into ... Could you explain a little bit about that, that period of your ... It's a fairly substantial ...

It was a big move, but both bodies were doing a similar sort of thing, treating pests on the land. But one of the main things that worried us was getting the two groups together. We were a bit like Councils: we were doing a pretty good job treating pest plants; now if we have to start treating vertebrate pests as well, is that going to weaken our endeavours?, if you like. You're going to have guys doing both – field officers doing both vertebrate pests and pest plants. Now, if he's originally a vertebrate pest bloke he's going to lean towards doing the vertebrate pest work and the pest plants work will drop off. It didn't really happen that way. That was just a fear we had.

I just wondered whether you would embrace that, when you say there was a fear there, whether you'd actually see it as an opportunity to expand the work of both groups in fact?

Yes.

But there's a bit of a worry there ...

We were worried that it wouldn't be as effective having two single identities doing two jobs as having one identity doing two jobs, but it worked out all right (laughs). Bit of jealousy.

You're dealing with people and personalities in these sorts of situations.

That's right. They were big changes. When you went to Board meetings there was quite often an emphasis put on one more than the other: the Boards were more interested in pest plants or vertebrate pests, depending what area they were in, where the problems were. But it evened out after a while and the problems were tackled as they should have been.

What did it mean for you personally, the merger of the two? As you indicated, you stayed with the Animal and Plant Control – at the same sort of level and doing the same sort of work?

Yes, it was the same work. The Boards became Animal and Plant Control Boards instead of Vertebrate Pest Boards and Pest Plant Boards, so it was just a matter of combining those two. There was a bit of work in there but that wasn't much at all. As far as I was concerned the administration of the Board was just the same.

Did you automatically come over and be the Secretary for the new Board or did you have to go through application and ...?

No. It just evolved. Yes, there wasn't any change of status or anything like that. I didn't have to apply for the job. That was reasonably easy.

I haven't seen much on the mechanics of how ...

No.

... you actually bring two similar groups together.

Together, yes. Yes, there was new legislation. The Animal and Plant Control legislation came up, and that overrode the other two pieces. Max retired just before that happened so there was a brief period, a few months, when I was the Acting Executive Officer of the Pest Plants Commission, and then when we combined John Bromell, who was the Executive Officer for the Vertebrate Pests, he took over the kingpin role there.

Of course they were coming from another department?

They were still a little bit associated, but they were quite a bit with the Department of Lands.

So there was a bit of a merging of two different cultures, perhaps, or did you operate in a similar way?

Yes, we operated in a fairly similar way. They had more scientific officers than we did. We relied a lot more on the Department of Agriculture. They had a lot more top research officers. It was a bit difficult. They had a different approach to animal control than you do to pest plant control. It's probably because pest animals were more mobile than the weeds, so there was a difference there that I could pick up. Not being a scientific officer, it was a bit different chasing

foxes and dingoes compared with chasing horehound, which is static. So they had a different approach to it – well, they'd have to, too.

[19:05] From your perspective, Bob – and I know you mentioned the legislation overriding the two separate Acts – where was the push coming from? You're sitting there in the Pest Plants position: who's driving this notion that the two should come together as one? Is it something the landholders wanted or the Boards wanted or...?

No, it was a general ... to do with the land management, that's what it was all about. It's the same as vegetation control and soil conservation. They were all land management matters. The idea is to – which now looks like it's going to happen – is all items of land management should be under one umbrella rather than be individual. That's happening now. That's the start of that whole push.

So a bit of an environmental land management consciousness type of thing.

Yes, I think so, yes. I can see the benefits of that, as long as it's managed properly and each individual one gets its fair handling because some of the others – native vegetation, they can be pretty emotive, and which way it goes depends on who's pushing it rather than what is the real need on the ground.

That's what I was wondering, whether this is something that's coming through the political system being imposed on the Boards or coming from the other end where people are saying, 'This would be a better way to work'.

Yes. I don't know...

And you're sitting in the middle of it all!

Yes, that's right. I know some of the guys out in the rural areas are a bit worried about the new, big department that's going to take over land management. But as I say to them, it's up to you to make sure that it works how you want it to. You've still got the involvement out there.

[21:45] But sitting in your position there, Bob, leading up to the merger and of course with the Act and the merger, how involved were you in the mechanics of that process? Were you getting called off to meetings to discuss how this is going to work and ...

With the Boards?

Yes, with the Boards.

Yes, it was discussed at their meetings generally. I didn't have a big involvement when the legislation was going through Parliament. I went to one or two meetings.

[22:20] Blevins.

I remember I had to go down to Parliament one day when Frank Blevins was going to meet a deputation from one of the Mallee Boards.

He would have been the Minister of Agriculture?

He was the Minister for Agriculture, Frank Blevins, yes – from Whyalla he was, up that way somewhere. The meeting was going to be at 4 o'clock. The guys from the country are down there and I went down with them. We waited and waited. About half past four Frank came out and he said, 'Look, I'm sorry. Got held up. I can only give you five minutes'. These blokes had travelled all the way there. Typical. But in we go for the meeting. We come out and Frank said, 'How'd I go?'. I said, 'Handled it pretty well, Mr Blevins'. He said, 'You ought to see me in action when I know what I'm talking about'. (laughs) He was really terrific the way he handled it. He had a bit of a briefing about it, but he handled it really well.

It's said that he was a pretty good operator like that.

Yes.

Did you have many dealings with him, or ...?

No, not a lot, no.

Or other ministers or other politicians perhaps?

Yes. I had a few discussions with Ted Chapman when he was Minister for Agriculture, but not too many – I left that to Max or John Bromell. (laughs)

I'm just interested to know if you saw the Minister about or a politician coming to knock on your door for information.

No, they didn't knock on my door too often. (laughs)

[24:15] Of course it can be a very emotive area.

Yes.

And particularly if things go wrong ...

Too right.

... if a control program goes astray. I'm not certain if that ever happened, but you'd find yourself very quickly on the back foot, wouldn't you?

Yes, I guess you would because you never know which way they're going to swing things. (laughs)

[24:45] So it's round about 1986 the legislation went through – just going on memory there.

The Animal and Plant Control, was it?

Mm, about '86.

Yes, that was just after Max retired.

So you stayed with the Commission for a few years?

The Pest Plants Commission?

Yes, the Animal Plant Control. You said you went off ... you stayed with them and then you went to the Soil Conservation.

To the Soil Conservation, yes.

When was that transition – roughly?

I was with the Soil Con. about four years, and I finished in '91.

So you must have moved not long after the Act.

About '87. Yes, not long after, yes, wasn't long after.

Wondering what prompted you to make that move? You'd only done 10 years or so with Pest Plants.

I guess this was a new challenge to set up the Soil Conservation Boards, similar to what we'd done with the Pest Plant Boards. This was wider, too, the Soil Conservation, because it covered the whole of the State, whereas the Pest Plant and Vertebrate Pests only covered areas mainly of local government, but the Soil Boards were over the whole of the State. But the setting up of those Boards was not very difficult because the framework of the board system was so well-known in the country areas that it wasn't much problem at all.

How did you become Secretary for the Soil Conservation?

I applied for that job.

You applied, OK. It was Secretary, was it?

Executive Officer.

Executive Officer, sorry, I've got it. You said that before, sorry. So it's actually taking a step up in a sense?

Yes. There again we had a new commission – it was a Council, new Council, to set up – I had a similar role there as I had with Pest Plants and Vertebrate Pests.

A bit of a role model to follow.

Yes.

Did you find, again, much acceptance or much opposition to the notion of 'Here's another Board, another group coming in', the Soil Conservation mob?

No, not really. It was much easier. Very easily accepted, compared with the initial one, especially out in the areas where there were no Boards: they were really looking forward to it, they wanted it.

So you were still able to go out and about to the rural ...?

Yes. Yes, I used to still travel out the same, but perhaps not as much. I didn't travel anywhere near as much, no.

Less necessity or less appeal or ...?

No, less necessity. Some of the newer Boards I'd go out when they held their initial meetings and help them out there. I'd go out occasionally. There was more dependence on regional staff,

the Department of Agriculture regional staff, especially the northern Boards, the regional staff at Port Augusta would help out up there and on Eyre Peninsula. There wasn't anywhere near as much as with the other two.

How much of the existing model – the Vertebrate Pests and the Pest Plants come into one: you've got a model up and running, you've got a bit of experience in setting these things up – how much of the model was copied over? It's not an automatic transfer, I realise.

No. We used a lot of what we had, the framework for the other Boards.

Modified it for the circumstances?

That's right, yes, it was quite similar. They had their Secretary, their funding, the same sort of thing. It was just a different job that they were doing.

It was interesting in the areas outside local government: the members would be chosen from local landholders and they'd put their name up and say 'Yes, I'd like to be on the Board', and there was a bit of lobbying to get on the local Board, so that was a difference compared with inside local government.

Setting their programs and finding out really what their problems were was a little bit more difficult because of the vastness of the areas. I found the Pest Plants and Animal Control probably more interesting, I found that more interesting than Soil Conservation. But my job, I enjoyed the job, what I was doing, it was good.

[31:10] One of the things ... Just the fact we've been talking within the State, within Adelaide and going out to regions and so on. Did you have much dealings with interstate departments or similar boards?

Similar bodies? Yes. Yes, we'd hold an interstate liaison conference every couple of years – it might be held in Adelaide, it might be in Victoria or Moree or whatever, we would have that conference. When it was here we would host it, they'd bring their representatives over. We had a fair bit of liaison with New South [Wales] and Queensland. There was a project on the Gwydir River for water hyacinth control. It might seem funny that we had an interest in that, but it was the headwaters of the Darling [River]. We didn't want water hyacinth coming down the Darling, so we were a member of that body and our technical guys would go up to meetings up there and have a look how the control work was going and that sort of thing. We had a fair bit of contact with them in that respect. Victoria, as I said before, we had contact with them in the interstate liaison conferences, but we would have other meetings with them on border problems. There was liaison with the other States.

That's probably a good point just to put the pause on, because we're almost out on this side.

[33:20] End of interview.