

# Fox file release blocked by state

BY CHRIS CLARKE

A STATE government department blocked the release of secret Fox Eradication Program (FEP) documents earlier this month, claiming their publication could hurt Tasmania's relationship with the Commonwealth.

Three documents were withheld despite protest from the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, a leaked letter shows.

Fairfax Tasmania can reveal the program's Stage 2 Annual Progress Report, Stage 3 Mid-Year Progress Report and Stage 4 Annual Progress Report have been barred from release, due to a confidentiality clause signed by the two governments.

The letter shows an unnamed applicant requested the dossiers from the federal Environment Department in May, under Freedom of Information laws.

The request sparked a legal tussle between the federal Environment Department and Tasmania's Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (DPIPWE).

The letter shows the dossiers were considered for release to the applicant, but DPIPWE intervened, claiming the subject matter was "highly sensitive".

DPIPWE argued disclosure would only "contribute to confusion and misinfor-

mation".

"The subject of foxes and the eradication program is a highly sensitive matter within the state," the letter reads.

"Its release could cause damage to the relationship between the Commonwealth and Tasmania."

In a written response, the applicant argued the release of the documents was "unquestionably in the public interest and is a matter of public importance".

"Release of this information promotes effective oversight of public expenditure and transparency in funding acquittals and reporting would mitigate concerns of maladministration and/or fraud in the use of public monies."

Allegations of fraud by the FEP are being considered by police.

The federal Environment Department's landcare program delivery branch assistant secretary Steve Costello concluded the release of the documents was not in the public interest, stating it was "confidential information".

He declared their release "would not inform debate on matters of public importance" and agreed it would harm the working relationship between the departments.

On Monday, a DPIPWE spokesman said it was the Commonwealth's decision not to release the documents.