

Office weighs in on fox 'fraud'

BY CHRIS CLARKE

ALLEGATIONS of fraud in the Fox Eradication Program (FEP) have reached the Tasmanian Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman - who is responsible for investigating administrative misconduct - would not go into depth about the allegations on Friday, but said his office had not made a determination of guilt.

It comes as Tasmania Police continues its assessment of the same allegations.

However, the Ombudsman's comments contradict information provided to Fairfax Tasmania on Thursday by the federal Environment Department.

The department's statement said allegations of fraud by the FEP were "baseless" - and even claimed the Ombudsman had said so himself.

"There have been ongoing allegations that the Tasmanian Government has misused funding provided by the Australian Government for fox management," the Environment Department statement read.

"The Tasmanian Ombudsman investigated the claims and found them baseless. The department reviewed the allegation and did not find any indication of fraud."

But Ombudsman Richard Connock said he had not made any decision about the

allegations.

"This office has made no general determination either way in relation to any alleged fraud in the Fox Eradication Program," he said.

It is not clear if the Ombudsman's investigation is complete or ongoing, and Mr Connock is prevented by law from detailing the case.

The Integrity Commission - of which Mr Connock is a board member - is also reviewing the allegations.

Documents released last month show the FEP failed to investigate several fox sightings and failed to conduct a number of community engagement activities, despite pledging in a 2013 report to the Environment Department that it would do so in exchange for \$1.9 million in funding.

Despite the issues, a DPIPWE spokesman said the Environment Department has never questioned the FEP's competence.

"At no stage has the state been informed that priorities were not being met as part of this work."

The inconsistencies were previously withheld from the public because DPIPWE claimed their release would hurt Tasmania's relationship with the Commonwealth.

Earlier this year, it was revealed the state's fox evidence collection contained significant scientific errors.