

Tasmania's Fox Taskforce may be investigated

By CHRIS CLARKE, police reporter

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A fox carcass was discovered by a farmer near Cleveland in 2006.

UPDATE 3pm: THE state government says it will cooperate if police decide to investigate allegations of criminality in the Fox Taskforce.

In a statement on Monday afternoon, Primary Industries Minister Jeremy Rockliff said:

“If it is determined that an investigation is required, of course the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and the Environment would cooperate, just as it has with numerous reviews and questions regarding foxes in the past.

“As we promised before the election, we disbanded the fox taskforce, and that money has been reinvested into areas of priority.

“While Labor and the Greens spent millions chasing just one species, we now treat foxes like any other potential invasive species through a much more integrated approach.”

Mr Rockliff said the Liberal party decided to package the fox hunt into its biosecurity sector when it came to government.

“With regards to the Federal Government's funding, this goes to Biosecurity Tasmania's Invasive Species Branch and is spent in-line with the Project Agreement. This includes investigating reports from the public, reviewing risk analysis and increasing preventative efforts at the state border.

“This is not about eradicating foxes, but ensuring the capabilities are there to prevent, detect and respond to the threat of all invasive species.”

Former police and primary industries minister David Llewellyn, who oversaw the establishment of the state's Fox Taskforce in the early 2000s, has been contacted for comment.

UPDATE 12pm: POLICE are reviewing a 150-page report that alleges criminality in the Fox Taskforce, Commissioner Darren Hine says.

The report was handed over to Tasmania Police and the Integrity Commission on Monday.

The report was collated by a team of investigators - led by Windermere MLC Ivan Dean - over a 13-year period.

"The information will be reviewed to determine whether any further action, ie an investigation, should be undertaken," Commissioner Hine said.

Meanwhile, in a statement, opposition leader Bryan Green said "no suggestion of wrongdoing" by the government and Fox Taskforce members was ever put to him.

"As minister, the scientific advice I received supported the existence of foxes in Tasmania and justified the robust eradication program put in place," he said.

EARLIER: POLICE are expected to commence an investigation of the controversial Fox Taskforce in the coming days.

The taskforce was commissioned in 2006 after rumours a fox population had become established in Tasmania in the 1990s.

On Monday, a team of investigators – led by Windermere MLC and former Tasmania Police Commander Ivan Dean – will hand over a 150-page report to the state's top cop Commissioner Darren Hine.

The report raises concerns about the legitimacy of the taskforce and the near \$50 million of funding it received.

It also raises concerns about the legitimacy of the fox material found in Tasmania in the 2000s, and the subsequent media attention it received.

The report includes a leaked never-before-seen government document that supports the group's claims.

It is understood the material in the report has been reviewed by ex-police officers, legal experts and scientists.

The state's corruption watchdog the Integrity Commission has also received a copy of the report.

Mr Dean will meet with Police Commissioner Darren Hine in Hobart at 11.30am to handover the team's findings.

Tasmania Police would not comment on the meeting or the report and said the matter was private.

The Fox Taskforce failed to find any irrefutable evidence of a fox population in Tasmania during its eight-year existence, despite the use of hunters, sniffer dogs, cameras and baiting.

Fox carcasses, body parts, faeces and DNA were discovered in Tasmania between 2001 and 2011 and were labelled evidence of foxes in Tasmania by the then-state government.

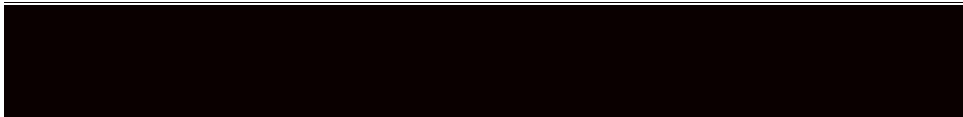
No one has proved without doubt that any of the material originated on the island.

Scientists have previously stated that the capture of a live wild fox or the discovery of a fox den in Tasmania would constitute undeniable proof of a fox population in the state. Neither has been discovered. The taskforce was disbanded in 2014.

As of November last year, the government was still employing five fox detection staff and continues to receive close to \$500,000 each year to continue its search. That funding is expected to continue for at least another 12 months.

Fox sightings in Tasmania continue to be reported to the state government each year.

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