

**ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

**Inquiry into the impact of public land management practices on bushfires in Victoria**

Halls Gap — 3 July 2007

Members

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Witnesses

Mr M. Boatman, manager, community safety, Midlands-Wimmera area, and

Mr J. Athorn, operations manager, region 16, Country Fire Authority.

**The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan)** — I welcome Mr Michael Boatman, manager, community safety, Midlands-Wimmera area, and Mr John Athorn, operations manager, region 16, Country Fire Authority. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975. It is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks.

**Mr ATHORN** — I will start and hand over to Michael as we go along. We would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to make a presentation today. To give you a little background on Michael and me, Michael has been working in the Wimmera area for 11 years: firstly, as risk manager and operations manager in Horsham as part of region 17 and from 2001 as manager community safety for Midlands-Wimmera across regions 15, 16 and 17. I have been operations manager at Kerang in region 20 for a period of three and a half years. Then I spent four years in the outer metropolitan area at region 13, working out of Lilydale. I did have a small amount of time in headquarters over the last summer period, so it has been a little bit of a nomadic life.

I will detail some of the background administrative arrangements. We all work across, as I have just stated, two areas as far as the CFA is concerned — Midlands-Wimmera and South-West. That involves the interface of three CFA regions — regions 16 and 17 in Midlands-Wimmera and region 5 out of Hamilton. The Grampians, as you have most likely become aware today, is covered by four municipalities: the Rural City of Ararat, the Rural City of Horsham and the shires of Northern Grampians and Southern Grampians. Some of the administrative arrangements when we have to deal with issues in that area cover a number of areas that we have to consider.

Joint planning across agencies is done through the municipal fire prevention plans that are developed in accordance with the CFA act. These are documented works to be undertaken by individuals and agencies put in place to reduce the risk of fire. The planning and prevention also allows for municipal fire prevention officers to issue direction notices under the CFA act to help with that fire prevention, and enables individuals to be identified to remove fire hazards on their property through that process. In particular this applies around the Halls Gap area.

CFA and DSE engage extensively at the local level to establish joint plans for fire management on both public and private land. We do that through a number of processes, I guess, and forums. The annual Grampians fire conference is where CFA, DSE and Parks Victoria get together with representatives from the agencies across those three CFA regions to discuss what we need to do both for prevention and also in an operational sense. Response arrangements are also included as part of a state-level mutual aid plan but we bring that down to a local level and review that across both agencies prior to each fire danger period.

On community engagement plans, there is discussion between CFA and DSE particularly about the Fire Ready Victoria sessions that we put out to the community. Communications plans become part of that mutual aid plan, so how we conduct our communications, particularly in radio communications, phone communications and so forth, are included in that plan so that we have set arrangements there. Incident management plans also include the arrangement for joint incident management teams. That includes information units in those teams to be able to provide information about fires to the public, particularly when fires are running.

On incident management arrangements, we use the AIIMS ICS system in both agencies, and have been doing that for a number of years. Incident management teams are established by both agencies and joined together when we have joint fires going and particularly where both agencies are involved.

Designated incident control centres for fires in the Grampians are located at the DSE office in Horsham and also at Ballarat. We have a number of division command points that can be established at Ararat, Hamilton, Horsham and Stawell. Currently a state-level review of ICCs is being undertaken and plans at this stage are looking at a level 2 ICC at Stawell and a level 3 to be established at Ararat to give us a little bit more capacity, I guess, across the area. The arrangements we have got are consistent with CFA-DSE partnership arrangements at both state and local levels, as I have already said. The cooperation between both agencies is very good as far as we are concerned. Local groups and brigades are part of those incident management arrangements. We try and convey what we are doing through to the groups and involve them as much as possible, down to brigade level where we can.

The focus of initial attack is toward a rapid and aggressive first attack. Some examples of where we would, I guess, ramp up our preparedness for that is where fire danger increases, particularly with the increasing temperatures and lowering humidity and so forth where there is potential for lightning strikes. The liaison then between CFA, DSE

and the other agencies through the councils and so forth is also heightened. Can I hand over to Michael now to look at other things like community partnerships and so forth?

**Mr BOATMAN** — Sure, thanks to the panel. I will just refer in a bit more detail to the community partnerships particularly that Martin Duke was talking about earlier. Following the Mount Difficult fire of 1999 there was quite a bit of concern, particularly in Halls Gap, among the tourism operators about the media attention that that gained in Melbourne. It was a fire 25 or 30 kilometres north-west of here but in Melbourne the fire was outside Halls Gap. Tourists cancelled their visits to Halls Gap because of the fire risk. The tourism operators in Halls Gap were quite concerned what that would mean to them. Not only bushfires but having prescribed burns — they did not want to have any at that stage around the outskirts of Halls Gap because they thought tourists would not come here if there was a black environment to come to. We started from that basis.

Rod Cooper, who was then MERO at Northern Grampians shire, proposed a subcommittee of the emergency management planning committee to oversee a fire risk management study for Halls Gap — what were the risks and issues particularly at Halls Gap given the resident population of 300 or 400 and the potential for about 10 000 tourists to be here in the peak of the summer? In 2000 funding was obtained from commonwealth and state agencies — about \$20 000 — to undertake the fire risk management study. That was a community effort involving Shire of Northern Grampians, CFA, DSE, Parks Victoria and Victoria Police overseeing that study.

The fire risk mitigation plan that was developed involved a number of community meetings in this very building to try and get the community input and tourism input, and a study of the vegetation and like arrangement around the town of Halls Gap. There was quite a significant chance for tourism operators and the community to be involved in looking at that plan. That plan determined that one of the major sources of risk was the tourists that were here and the lack of knowledge of the tourism operators on what they should tell their guests about what was happening and what they should do. That led on to a further study which you may have heard of, which was the Halls Gap fire risk management study undertaken by OESC with the RMIT centre for risk, which was done in 2003. It was really a survey and recommendations after talking to the tourism operators.

Some of the things that came up from there were the need to better engage the tourism operators and to provide information to the tourists about what they should do. There were a couple of tools developed that Martin alluded to; one of them you might see in your accommodation venue. This is the new version. It is basically a tear-off information sheet — you can all have one later. This is to try to give the tourism operators the confidence in some training for them that they can also pass that information that was non-threatening — the colours are carefully chosen to be able to give information without the threat of what was going on. Also in your accommodation room you might end up with a key tag like that that says in the event of a fire tune into the local ABC as the particular place to listen to and what its frequency is and some website information. That is hopefully in all of the rooms around here.

Some of the other things we did were the fire safety expos we had in October for the last three years and the clean-up weekend over that same period of time that Martin alluded to. Last year, 2006, during that weekend there was 110 tonnes of green waste collected around the township of Halls Gap that was removed. That has significantly reduced the fuel available to fires within the township. It was a bit better last year than the year before, pre the fire — the fire certainly stirred people up to do a little bit more. As Martin alluded to, the work of the subcommittee has been in a number of parts. One is these tools and the expos, and that has been recognised by winning some fire awareness community service awards in 2005, commendation from the Australian Safer Communities Awards. This year we have got the RACV fire safety grant of \$10 000 to further develop those tools that you see there.

Some of the other things that come out of those subcommittees are recognition with the private/public land interface, particularly above High Road in Halls Gap where it is private land right up to the top of the escarpment, that we need to be able to do joint prescribed burning across land tenure. That has always been a bit of an issue of how you do that without the private land and public land having to put 6 metres of bare earth along the top of the escarpment between the tenure.

Prior to the Mount Lubra fire, Geoff Evans, the DSE fire management officer in Horsham, and Graham Parkes, the ranger here, were working with the local landowners to try and look at cooperative burns. That was nearly coming to fruition when we had the fire. At the moment there is not the need to do that burning because it is a little bit black but we are certainly working towards across land tenure burning being an option around Halls Gap. You might be aware, and certainly the study showed, that Halls Gap is vulnerable to fire from about six different directions given

various weather conditions and where the fire might start. It could come from anywhere and we need to look at burning that is responsive to that risk.

During and after the 2006 Mount Lubra fire there were many community meetings held around the Grampians. In 2005–06, including during the fire, there were 26 meetings in communities around the Grampians. This year there have been 16. There is a little bit less to burn perhaps and less risk in some areas, but certainly we do look at fire-ready Victoria being a significant way that we can tell communities what they should do in the event of fire around this area.

The future under the integrated fire management planning framework will see integrated planning undertaken at municipal and regional levels across the spectrum of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Through that process we need to address issues in the interface area, like at Halls Gap, regardless of land tenure: how do we do that local planning that recognises across four municipalities, three CFA regions and everything else that occurs there that it is a single risk and should be treated as such and have a plan that looks across the whole gamut of operations? It needs to be risk based and recognise the key public and private assets in a cooperative manner. I think, combined with the OESC wildfire consequence project, it will allow proper risk-based decision-making on what we should protect and how we should protect it. We need to incorporate treatments that work for local communities and the risks they are facing in each of those areas. We need to maintain strong links with fire brigades and community groups to ensure their valuable contribution is recognised and continues to have a high priority. They live here; they know what the risks are.

CFA brigades are involved in prescribed burning for native forest areas on private land and council reserve that is often contiguous with public land, and that happens around the Grampians. In fact Halls Gap has been involved in burning some forest through there as a cooperative with DSE a few years ago here and in land to the north of here just between Delleys Bridge where you came in and the hotel. There have been a number of burns planned for this year, one of which was conducted towards the end of April, about 430 hectares down at the southern end of the Grampians, and a number more were planned but weather conditions meant that they did not go ahead.

Participation in those joint burns is seen as a benefit for training and experience in forest fires. We do not want to replace the efforts of DSE firefighters in prescribed burning but supplement them and give our people experience. As has been mentioned already by a number of people, volunteers do not want to be overused. They do not want to be going all over the state to do prescribed burning, but where it is their local area and their local input they certainly want to have a chance to be involved if time, manpower and weather are right for them.

There are some limits to CFA involvement in prescribed burning, including that timing, availability and proximity. They have other jobs that they would probably prefer to be at sometimes, but they certainly do not want to give up the experience they gain from being involved and the protection that affords their communities. So brigades and groups need to be involved in the planning process of the overall program and individual burns. They have the opportunity now at the Grampians fire conference and in municipal fire prevention planning to look at the DSE fire protection plans and fire ops plans and have involvement, but they need to be involved in the burning as well.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you, Michael and John.

**Mrs FYFFE** — Michael, you may not be able to answer this, and if you cannot, you are permitted to supply information afterwards to the committee: the committee understands that every three years the CFA audits the fire prevention plans developed by the local municipalities. What were the key findings of the most recent audit that relates to the Grampians area?

**Mr BOATMAN** — I am not sure I can specifically answer that, but each of the municipal fire prevention plans that I have some involvement with, which are for Horsham, Northern Grampians and Ararat — I do not look after the Southern Grampians — all passed their most recent audits over the last three-year cyclic period. The difficulty with that audit, as you might be aware, under the CFA act is that it audits that they have a plan and that it recognises the risk, but it does not audit the implementation of the plan. So while I try to oversee and make sure it is implemented, the audit does not pick that up.

**Mrs FYFFE** — Thank you for that. I was not aware of that. Could I just ask John a quick question: how effective is the provision and maintenance of large water points on Crown land in assisting with bushfire operations, in your opinion? Are they sufficient in size and quantity?

**Mr ATHORN** — This is only my 11th week in the area, so I am on a fast learning curve here.

**Mrs FYFFE** — Okay. You can reserve the right to give us the information afterwards.

**Mr ATHORN** — But generally, from experience, those water points are valuable for us. The closer we can get water to the actual fire, the better that is for us so that our turnaround times are reduced. Obviously that allows us to do aggressive firefighting, where we can, whether that be through on-ground resources or from the air.

**Mrs FYFFE** — You mentioned rapid and aggressive first attack and you were describing your firefighting experience, and that is why I asked you — because of your knowledge of where you have worked and the fires you have been involved in — whether we should be looking at more water points on Crown land.

**Mr ATHORN** — We are always reviewing that as part of our operations. Over the last couple of years we have increased the availability of water through putting in additional resources and through additional support from government to be able to get water onto fire ground. It is our biggest weapon, and obviously part of what we need to do is to make sure we can get access to those resources.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — A question to either of you, I do not mind who answers: do the local CFA members support the principle of firebreaks and prescribed burns as being the most effective methods of protection of assets, access and biodiversity?

**Mr BOATMAN** — Certainly from my knowledge of it — and I am heavily involved at the Northern Grampians municipal fire prevention committee — there is support for a network of breaks through the Grampians on public land. I would suggest that in that initial attack the breaks are more important for access to what are predominantly fires caused by lightning strikes in the Grampians, but the provision for trucks to get there quickly is very important. Where we have not got that access and the fires are more remote — like the Mount Lubra fire — the likelihood is that they will get larger and get worse. The brigade members are certainly supportive of a network of tracks, but I also think that because they live here they are supportive of the idea of mosaic burns to address biodiversity issues.

**Ms LOBATO** — Thank you for your presentation. I have two very quick questions. I am not sure whether you have discussed this issue, but I wanted some more information about community fire guard groups — their existence and their effectiveness. I also wanted to know whether local brigades have junior programs to encourage our young kids to become involved in volunteer firefighting.

**Mr BOATMAN** — I will take the first bit. We have in the past had community fire guard groups within Halls Gap, and it is probably a similar issue to the one mentioned about the transient population — they are very cyclic, and at the moment they are in probably in abeyance. We have got to regenerate them and look to renew them, but certainly across the Midlands area the community fire guard program is a very important program in high-risk areas. In the past I think there have been about four groups in Halls Gap, one in Pomonal and one in Moyston, so around the Grampians there have been a number. But just at the moment they are probably at the downhill part of their cycle, and we are looking to ramp them up again.

**Mr ATHORN** — We have a number of brigades that have junior involvement, and as a result of the changes in legislation we have been doing a significant amount in recent times to look after juniors within our brigades. We have also got programs running through some of the secondary schools, Lake Bolac being one of them, where they train juniors in firefighting as part of the curriculum.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Is that at Lake Bolac high school?

**Mr ATHORN** — Yes. It is an excellent program. Our juniors are aged between 11 and 16 years. They go into the seniors at 16, and brigades are well aware of that. They try to pick those juniors up, particularly through the school program, so that they come in. The others are part of the CFA, and we take them through their minimum skills while they are juniors and try to get them up to that level. There is a lot of work in that, and it is really trying to retain that interest in CFA no matter where they go within that environment. A lot of them have an interest in the CFA because they come off the land and their parents are involved, and it is very much a family-oriented organisation as well.

**Mr WALSH** — Just to follow on with the school program you were talking about, are you tracking those participants over a number of years to see their success rate and their retention in the CFA?

**Mr ATHORN** — There is a lot of work done at the human resources level at headquarters to track all of our people, including juniors. It is one of the areas that we are working fairly strongly on at the moment to try to develop juniors across the organisation. I am not fully aware of exactly what information is available at this stage, but I know there is a lot of detail on gender as well as numbers and so forth in that junior program. If you are interested, I can get you that information.

**Mr WALSH** — It is more so that over a period of years we can see what works and that can then be spread across the state — for example, that X, Y and Z works and that you have had a retention rate of so many per cent.

**Mr ATHORN** — There are challenges when a lot of our young people move away from home and their social life starts and that sort of thing. Trying to retain people in that environment is difficult, but if we have the input and the influence at an early stage, then hopefully we can get people back in when their circumstances change. We find that that occurs quite often.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — I think you mentioned before, Michael, about where the interface was between national parks and private land, and you said that you had just got to the point where that was going to go ahead and then the fires took over. What process did you have to go through and how tortuous was that process to get to that point?

**Mr BOATMAN** — It was quite a long process. I would not like to speak for DSE's internal processes, but certainly to get the approval to talk to DSE about cross-tenure burns was one issue, and another was to say to the owners, 'We want to start these burns, probably on the private land, and burn them up the hill into the public land', recognising that that would have an impact on the visual amenity of the area. It was quite a long process, and I think we had got agreement that, yes, it was the way to go. Given that this is zone 1 at the top of the hill in an asset protection area, we do want to continue that sort of liaison. From speaking to Geoff Evans, I expect that liaison will start again in a few months time to make sure it is still agreed that that is the best way to go, probably in a few years time.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Hopefully the process will not be quite as long and tortuous as it was.

**Mr BOATMAN** — No. I think the initial work has been done to recognise that that will be of benefit to the Halls Gap community and that having a little bit of black there will not kill off all tourism for the next 20 years.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**