

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 3 July 2007

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Mr B. Clugston, sheep farmer and horticulturist.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome you all here this evening. We are the Environment and Natural Resources Committee of the Parliament of Victoria. I acknowledge our parliamentary colleague, Hugh Delahunty, who is the member for Lowan. This is our first community forum as part of this inquiry. We have been here today and we will be in the Grampians region for another two days. We are here tonight to hear from you as members of this community. I need to read a few things just to let you know what is happening this evening. As you know, this committee is focusing on land management issues and how they impact on bushfires in terms of their severity, their frequency and their scale. Tonight we are trying to focus on land management issues. I ask anybody who wants to speak this evening, and I know we have a couple of names already, but anybody who decides later in the evening that they want to speak, to contact Derek at the back or Caroline or Francis to let them know that they might want to speak. We are going to try to keep it to about 5 minutes for each person. It will depend on whether lots more people come, when it might become more important. It is really about trying to manage the time here tonight. People might want to speak for longer than that, or we may be able to get back to people and give them a second or even a third opportunity to speak. But it is really important that we hear from everybody who wants to contribute tonight.

I need to read a little something about the transcript and things like that. I need to advise you that all of the evidence taken at this forum is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under the Constitution Act 1975 and the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside this forum may not be protected by that privilege. All evidence given here this evening is being recorded, which is why we need you to identify yourself. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript, which you should get in the next couple of weeks. To get things started a couple of people have suggested that they might like to present some information to us tonight. So I might start with Barry Clugston, who is a sheep farmer and a horticulturist. Thank you, Barry.

Mr CLUGSTON — Thank you, Acting Chair. Thank you for the opportunity. I live out the road here towards Stawell. I have been a farmer there for quite some years. I am a tree farmer: I do not run so many sheep these days. We were caught up in the Deep Lead fire which was the first fire that started on new year's eve 2005. We lost the farm although we saved the house and the sheds. I was involved in that recovery but then I also got involved in the Mount Lubra fire three weeks later — a bit by accident, but I was caught up there for another six days in the suppression effort. I have been a CFA member since 1959. I will say that quietly — my dad must have registered me!

The ACTING CHAIR — As a child!

Mrs PETROVICH — Very much a junior member.

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes, a junior member. I do not remember going to any meetings, but we used to go to a lot of fires, so over the years I have had a lot of experience with fires. I am particularly interested in this discussion and this inquiry because I think there has been a lot of misinformation. I sat in on today's activities and a lot of information has been put forward. I could argue with some of the points that have been put up but I am not prepared to do that in this forum.

There are a few points that I would not mind making. I think the protection of biodiversity in the national park is vital; it is very important. That has been one of my interests for many years. I do not want that to be overlooked in the pure asset protection around the edge of the park or for people only. To my way of thinking national parks are for biodiversity protection, not just for tourism values or landscape values; there are other values.

I have another couple of quick points. In the Mount Lubra fire I actually watched the lightning storm that started the fire on the Thursday night. I watched its development and was then caught up in the suppression efforts from the Sunday afternoon and for the next six days. One problem I found was that as an individual in there with my own vehicle I went from house to house checking houses, and I met a lot of stunned and shocked people. It seemed to me to be a shortfall in the ability of the organising and suppression agencies that they could not get in, or were not able to get in. They were too busy fighting the fire to worry about people as individuals — or properties.

When I think back to my own fire it was 17 hours before a fire truck arrived at my place, and I was right on the edge of the fire. We found a shortfall in the guidelines. It is not written in the CFA or the department guidelines that they need to go and check any houses or assets. The police came around the next day to check whether we were still alive, and that was good, and the fire brigade came after that. I thought that was a shortfall. In my background you go to a fire, and you might drive past the house and all is okay, so you keep on going and put the fire out. But

in these bigger fires it is a real problem as to how you check to make sure the individuals and people in the houses are secure and safe. You cannot check the livestock. There is a shortfall in the guidelines there somewhere.

The day after the Mount Lubra fire, on the Monday, I gave my firefighting unit away and I went down to a mate's place and I shot sheep all day. Again we have got a problem there because I took my bolt-action rifle — that is the only thing you can get these days — and I nearly wore my hand out shooting sheep and reloading that rifle. No-one likes shooting sheep. I do not like shooting my own but most people do not like shooting their own. I took on that job for a mate of mine, and we shot over 1000 sheep that day, and it seems to me we could do it a lot better, in a humane situation.

If we had access to better firepower, we could have done that job in a lot shorter time frame. So bolt-action rifles are very effective but also very slow. I was under-equipped because I went down to that property thinking I would only be shooting sheep and I ended up having to deal with a dozen or so cattle, so I did not have enough calibre in my rifle, and it was a very traumatic experience for me and my driver who was with me trying to deal with those cattle. From a humane perspective we have got badly injured sheep and livestock wandering around or trying to wander around or just simply laying there waiting to be shot. Somehow we need access to better rifles, better equipment to be able to deal with that. I do not mean that all farmers need better rifles, but we somehow need access to them. We could get them first light next morning and start dealing with them right from the word go. There is another problem.

Wildlife is also a particular consideration of mine. In the course of walking around those paddocks all day shooting sheep I came across a huge number of corellas and cockatoos that had been overcome by smoke and killed, and then I was able to observe over the next few days there was a significant impact on the wildlife. In some of the waterways up here above Bellfield there were wallabies and kangaroos dead literally by the score — there was a huge number of them. It probably has to happen; it is part of the natural process — you get a fire you do get impact because not everyone was able to escape from that fire — but when people, departments and agencies, shires and what have you, are planning their selective strategic burns it is very important that they think about that mosaic type burning. That has got a better potential to secure wildlife in little green areas. This district capitalised on those green spots later on, from a tourist perspective, and had black shirts with green spots all over them which indicated the recovery. But that mosaic pattern really needs to be picked up because it is so important to protect biodiversity in any particular large-scale bushland area. Edges are very important for wildlife and very important for small macroinvertebrates — the insects — a lot of those actually get to the edges of bushland and cannot go any further, so if people start burns on the edge of the bushland, which you are often forced to do, in a whole variety of ways, you can be impacting on a lot of threatened species on the edge of that bushland.

Threatened species are a very important component of the protection too. We have got a range of threatened species in this area, not only in the national park but in the bushland reserves around it, and those little islands of bush are vital for the ongoing existence of many of those species, and if they were impacted, then we could lose species that we should not be losing.

After the Deep Lead fire we were able to get a program going. People were saying, 'What can we do to help?' So we were suggesting, 'Well, build a few nest boxes', and this was happening all over Victoria. The RACV even put in money to help provide material for the nest boxes. So boxes for bats and gliders and quite a lot of the small birds were put up all over the place, and that provided immediate protection for a lot of the surviving species. That was a very successful program because it was able to pick up on people who were outside the fire area but really wanted to help in a variety of ways. They could contribute money but they could also contribute in time, putting boxes together.

There has been a lot of criticism about a lack of waterholes around the district. We have got a lot of waterholes through the national park; we have got a lot of waterholes across the shire area where I live and the rural brigade area, but because it had been so dry we did not have much water in them. So we could not get around that for the year we had. I think it is all very well to argue for more water points but in a lot of cases in a year like we had, there simply was not the water available.

A figure used today was about 12 megalitres of water used for the whole fire effort. I agree with that. I think there was very little water used in the suppression effort when you consider the amount of water that fire trucks and helicopters and other units used, even though there were a lot of trucks on the ground and a lot of helicopters in the air, the overall impact on Lake Bellfield and other points was not that great.

The other quick point I can make is on the access tracks. I worked in the Grampians many years ago, in the old days, chasing bushfires for various departments. I actually ran a summer fire crew for the department for quite a few years, and we were the crew that were trained — we trained a crew up every season to walk in to put a bushfire out. So when you would get a lightning strike on top of a mountain we would either grab a taxi ride with a helicopter and drop off on a rock, or walk in.

Quite often we were walking in, and you could often start off on a vehicle track, then on a walking track, but generally the fires rarely intersected with a track and you had to walk in. You cannot have a mosaic of tracks across a place like the Grampians to cater for something like a bushfire. The point was made today that you only allow foxes in or motorbikes or four-wheel drives that should not be there anyway, and it costs an enormous amount. The cost of installing a greater network of tracks in a place like this would be greater than its benefit. You are better off to wait for the fire and then have your machinery and crews ready. We can readily walk in or grab a helicopter and drop in. They are the few points I wanted to make, Acting Chair. I am happy to answer questions if you have got any.

The ACTING CHAIR — Good on you, Barry. Thank you for that, and I do appreciate you coming forward as first cab off the rank this evening.

Mrs PETROVICH — I was engrossed in what you were saying. Can you give me a couple of moments because they were very interesting points?

The ACTING CHAIR — That is all right. I should just have said to the forum before we started that if people want to present, we may or may not ask you questions depending on whether you are happy for us to ask questions.

Mrs FYFFE — I just wanted to explore your thoughts on the actual gun power that might be available. Are you suggesting that in a fire period we should have an area where there is a pool of firearms that are sufficiently able to deal with this?

Mr CLUGSTON — I think that is the only way to cater for it. All our automatic rifles and guns have been taken through a program which you can argue about outside this forum. There are quite a lot of bolt-action rifles left in the district — there is no question of that — but it is very difficult now to get access to larger centre-fire rifles. To deal with a cow or a bull is beyond the capacity of a .22 rifle. You need a bigger gun than that, and I had such a gun but I had it at home in my gun cupboard, not in the ute where it should have been, so I was only using a .22 and using hollow-point bullets, and it was very effective on sheep because you could get quite close and deal with the sheep in the immediate spot where you needed to put it down, but the cattle were a totally different story. If we had had an automatic rifle, say a .22 rifle, we could have been far quicker with our operation and we could have got many more sheep dealt with in the course of that day rather than coming back the following day and dealing with them.

Now the suggestion has been that maybe a department or maybe the police might have a gun cupboard with a few strategic rifles put in it, and there might even be some people trained up before such an event so that you could get the phone call quickly. Now the CFA and suppression agents do not want guns all over the fire ground — we understand that — but the livestock have to be dealt with too, almost before the fire suppression efforts, in a humane perspective. So we have got to be very careful about that, but you can have both if you are careful. If you train the right people up, I think you can do it.

Mrs FYFFE — I think you have raised quite an important point.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for your submission. Obviously you have a lifetime of experience in this area but also with fire management and land management. With this depth of experience have you seen a change in land management practices historically to present times?

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes. I recall the Grampians. I am not a native of the Grampians, I am a native of the Mallee, but we used to come to the Grampians for holidays, breaks, school camps and what have you. The old days where you would just drop a match and walk away from it have gone. Now we have got assets around, we have got biodiversity to think about, we have got threatened species, so we have to be much more careful how we handle that.

We understand a lot more now the impact of those species and just even managing the vegetation. I have seen a lot more care taken. I have seen times when political thinking has meant that people have gone away from prescribed burns and suddenly you have an emergency, so they are back on deck again.. We really need fairly constant thinking. We need a fairly constant focus on good strategic burns to be made. We cannot avoid having them. It is very important that we have them in a place like this and even in some of our other wonderful national parks.

I think the Deep Lead, Mount Lubra and more recent alpine fires demonstrated very clearly to me that because of the radio chatter, the media discussions — there was a lot more talk about suppression techniques, strategies, policies, understanding, efforts, dollars — I think it put it more in everyone's minds that there is no easy answer here. But we cannot let that slide away now and wait for the next emergency. I hope it is not next year, but it could be some years away. People start to forget it, and I think you need the resources still there to be able to make sure that the agencies are geared up, ready, trained and organised. It is like an army. You train an army to kill things, but you hope you never have to use it. It is a bit the same with fire suppression techniques. You train them up hoping you never get a fire, but, sorry, they come around.

Mrs PETROVICH — Just an additional question: obviously the biodiversity aspect is something that I think we are all cognisant of. From what you have said today you believe that the mosaic and cool burns and those green areas are the most important asset to protect that biodiversity?

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes, I agree with that. I agree with that because we went through campaigns in the 70s to get a lot of terrific national parks across Victoria. That campaign was very successful. We were able to get various representative land types around Victoria. I was certainly involved in that campaign, but the next challenge for me was the amount of biodiversity on farms. We have raised the level of that as well, but what I am saying here is that not every species is represented in a national park. A lot of it is on farmland, so it is a community consideration. It is not just a farmer problem alone or a national park problem alone, but it is how we look after those species, and it has become quite obvious that careful management will make a big difference.

Ms LOBATO — I do not have a question, but I would just like to thank you for your interest in this inquiry. Thank you for presenting and thank you for your dedication to the CFA for such a long time.

Mr WALSH — Barry, if you had been given the opportunity to help write the report with us, what are one or two key recommendations that you would like to see go into that report as far as change, either in fire suppression or fire management when it is actually happening?

Mr CLUGSTON — There are probably two points. There are the fire suppression techniques, and we always need to be careful about them. But I think regarding the point about houses and protecting assets, a lot of property owners think they take a lot of care and attention to detail in terms of how they look after their own properties. Fires like we have just had sometimes test those theories to the extreme and some have failed, so I think we have got a lot of work to do to get people to understand the potential fire that has. How do you protect your property? How do you also protect the biodiversity that might be surrounding it? Why do you live here in the first place? Because we like the area.

Mr WALSH — But what would the recommendation be to achieve that?

Mr CLUGSTON — I think we need a bit more discussion through the various agencies, even the shires and the CFA, because I am not sure the planning schemes totally support the fire suppression techniques. I think there is sometimes a disparity between the two. We have allowed a lot of small subdivisions to pop up in a variety of places, and that causes the suppression techniques to change. That to me is a problem with the planning schemes. Access to firepower for livestock dealing would be one point I would make, and looking after houses — getting that discussion rolling — I would be happy to keep doing that.

The ACTING CHAIR — Barry, is your point on subdivisions about just having housing that close? You are saying that potentially there then is a conflict between making all efforts to protect that house versus perhaps reducing biodiversity as a consequence of protecting that asset?

Mr CLUGSTON — Partly, yes. I think you are on the right track there. We went through a conservation strategy with the old Shire of Stawell in the mid-80s, I think it must have been. The point was well made there and still sticks in my mind that we have allowed a range of subdivisions of various hectare sizes, and people go into a beautiful area of bushland and scratch a hole for their house. Then they need a garage, so they cut a few more trees

down. Then they need a swimming pool, and then they need a horse yard, so gradually the attrition of the bush is impacting on the biodiversity and the very reasons they went there in the first place. If they bought a bare-acre paddock 20 hectares down the road, a farmer's old, run-down paddock, and strategically planted trees — any trees they planted would be an improvement — by the time they got the house built the trees would be grown. It is a very simple concept in my simple brain. I am not sure I answered your question.

The ACTING CHAIR — No, that is okay. You also said in the beginning that in some 17 hours you did not get a visit from the CFA. Did you expect a visit from the CFA? Did you know what was going on? What was the communication like for you as an individual land-holder? Did you have a fire plan and had you attended something like what we call fire guards. I do not know if you call them fire-guard meetings. I am just curious to know were you panicked by that? Did you understand what was going on, and did you know what you needed to do?

Mr CLUGSTON — I think I knew what I wanted to do, but my property — the house property — is slashed and mowed from fence to fence with the exception of the plantations across it. I grow wattle trees for a living. I produce the seed, and that all goes into the food industry. It is a different industry, but it relies on those trees. The trees were not so volatile in the fire, as we found out, but if I had had a 50-metre firebreak around my fence, it would not have made any difference. It would have spotted over the top of that property.

A fire plan? Yes, I had a fire plan. We got the family out. A mate and I moved into the house. I had already been to the start of the fire and came back very quickly when I realised the smoke was heading home, so I went back with a few minutes to spare to save the house. We were able to do that with sheer hard work. You always expect the fire truck will come in. The CFA have been putting the message out for some years 'Don't expect a fire truck to arrive', so in the back of my mind I was thinking, 'No, maybe it won't arrive'. But I said to the fire brigade captain a few years ago, 'I'm in the fire brigade for insurance. I go to other people's fires, and you think maybe they will come to yours'. And it did not happen. I had one mate show up. I do not see that as a problem for the CFA, because I was not right on the edge of the fire and I was regarded to be up a bit of a bush track in that sense. But in the back of your mind when you are facing a fire you think the fire truck will come. But it just was not able to be there. It was so confusing on that night.

Communication? I did not have access to a radio. I had my phone, but I did not have time to answer the phone. The other question was about fire guards? No, I was aware of the fire-guard stuff. I think the place is pretty — it is not fireproof by any means. We lost an enormous amount of assets and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of resources that night, but I do not think I could have done it any other way.

Mrs FYFFE — I am not quite sure if my question is applicable. I have been wanting to find out about plantations, but I think you may not have had a plantation like a blue gum plantation or a pine plantation.

Mr CLUGSTON — No, it was a carefully spaced plantation with mature trees of varying ages. You tell me which way the fire is going to come, and I will tell you how I can deal with it. It happened to come onto my property in one sense in the best way. If I had had one fire truck, or a better and larger fire truck there, I could probably have saved a lot more. I just did not have the capacity with a fire like that.

Mrs FYFFE — I will wait for a witness who had plantations.

The ACTING CHAIR — Poor Barry has been in the hot seat for half an hour.

Mr WALSH — He is used to it, with his water hat on. Barry, when you were talking about the fire brigade coming, we know ABC radio did an excellent job with bulletins every 15 minutes and they advertised all the public meetings and all that. Are you effectively saying that during a fire there should be someone going around one-on-one to each house?

Mr CLUGSTON — After the fire.

Mr WALSH — After the fire?

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes, not during the fire; that is not possible. That is too dangerous. I did that on the first night at Mount Lubra in the fire on the fire ground, house to house in the middle of the night.

Mr WALSH — So someone going around just making sure everyone is right or whatever?

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes. I think there is a shortfall in the guidelines somewhere, because as a fire truck and as a brigade you are going to put the fire out, and that is what you do.

The ACTING CHAIR — I will just jump in — a quick yes or no answer will be fine. Who should that be? The CFA, the police, DHS or everybody?

Mr CLUGSTON — I would like it to be a combination. Mostly it is CFA ground. Parks Victoria do not have to deal with it because it does not have the assets so much. DHS should not have to be mobilised that quickly. Just a drive past with a truck; that is all you need.

The ACTING CHAIR — By anyone; it does not matter?

Mr CLUGSTON — Yes.

Mr WALSH — I understand that better now, thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks, Barry. I know you have had a big day listening to all the input. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.