

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 31 July 2007

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Ms H. Livingstone, president, Buchan/Gelanitpy branch, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR — I just have to go through a formal process and advise that all evidence taken at the hearings is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided for by the Constitution Act 1975 and the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You know that all the information today is being recorded and transcripts will be provided. Thank you very much for joining us, Ms Livingstone, to give us the local VFF view. We have heard from Simon Ramsay in Melbourne on the position statewide, but thank you very much for your presentation and submission, and hopefully you will take questions later as well.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — Thank you. I have a couple of pages of just general stuff. We are very pleased that an inquiry is taking place. We have been waiting for this for nearly five years. We have great hopes for the future outcomes of it. I really liked John Mulligan's report — it was very good — and Neil Barraclough's one too. It covers a lot of our stuff. My name is Heather Livingstone. My family has lived and farmed in the Gelantipy plateau for about 130 years, and we have watched what has happened over the years. I am pretty old, so I have a pretty good memory of when it was all just grassland, and that is true. I have spent most of my life in farming in the region. As president of the Buchan/Gelantipy branch of the Victorian Farmers Federation I can say we have held a lot of meetings to try to lower the risk of bushfire and its mismanagement for the safety of the environment and the wellbeing of the people of Gippsland. Many recommendations based on local knowledge and experience have been recorded, and they are included in our submission.

From the experiences and observations of the time of the 2003 Wulgulmerang fire, the most common remark was that the public land has to be better managed. Shortly after the fire I travelled with a Gelantipy bush nurse to visit everyone and see what the VFF could do. The most pressing thing needed was hay. We were able to get hay immediately. We had to put some pressure on the government at the time — that is a story! There was not a vestige of feed left on that whole plateau as nearly every hay shed in the district had been burnt to the ground and every hay storage that was about had been burnt out too. Thousands of head of stock were being shot and buried, and people were traumatised, and their experience after that will be lifelong.

It was generally recognised that the ferocity of the fire was generated by years of build-up of fuel on public land and neglected lightning strikes on adjoining parkland. One of the things everybody is saying is that the management authorities for parkland and public land should work together; they cannot work separately. The parks were inaccessible and were quite unmanaged. There were big steel gates locked on them and on any roads into them where the gates could be opened there were logs across. They were totally unserviceable roads. They were unsafe. I believe there were 87 lightning strikes recorded there. If they could have been attended to it might have stopped the ferocity of the fire that attacked Wulgulmerang. We must learn from history.

There is too much red tape. Red tape are the words that everybody is giving us. Government departments must try to understand the background to the bushfire problem. I think you are starting to get it now. Without practical forest and parks management in these warming conditions — I do not know whether it is climate change or evolution or whatever, but I do think it has all happened before — there is an enormous build-up of forest fuel. Our state and the environment are on the way to total destruction. That is how we are seeing it with two fires experienced in 4½ years.

In earlier times indigenous people used the fire stick as a management tool, burning the dry grass off, keeping the grassy areas fresh and ensuring a plentiful supply of wildlife — that was their food supply. These slow-burning fires just creeping along maintained the balance of the bush as they were done by custom at the right time of the year, which is autumn, winter and spring. I was pretty shocked to read that there was only 10 days when there was a window of opportunity to burn in the last few years. I do not believe that is true. There are a lot of days. If there were better little areas in each district with a land management officer and a crew, a lot more could be done. That is just my comment.

After Europeans arrived the settlers followed the Aboriginal ways and the country was all open, rolling grassland. My father said it was paradise on earth. Orbost right through Gelantipy, Wulgulmerang, Omeo and all that country was rolling grassland, and the settlers came there because it was great for their cattle. Now rabbits and various other issues have changed it into just scrub land. I can remember driving from Gelantipy to Bairnsdale and there were cattle grazing all through the open, grassy land. There were gum trees, yes, but lots of patches of open grassland — it was really great. That gradually got overtaken with scrub, and I think rabbits may have been a problem.

After European settlers did their bit, forestry officers took over the responsibility of maintaining a balanced public land service. These men had a good understanding of the bush and mostly did a good management job. They were able to burn when conditions were right, and these slow fires kept the bush clean. These forestry officers lived in places like Orbost; there was a group in Buchan — each place had its group of workmen. They were hands-on people; they went out and did what had to be done. Now it is much worse. Fires at the right time do not destroy but rather manage the bush. But they must be regular, and a good network of maintained tracks is an important part of the preparation, which should be ongoing. Ninety per cent of fire preparation is done over the years, before conditions get bad. Letting conditions get bad is not good, and that is what we have fallen into.

The government has discovered that the mountain country is very important for water. It is so neglected and ready for the disaster that has now occurred. After the 2003 fires we went out into the high country just above Wulgulmerang and you would sink to your knees in ash. That was once all mosses and grasses and lichens that filtered the water through — that was gone. Every creek, every gully, every river ran with mud. It is nearly five years on from there, and the Buchan River, every time there is a shower in the tops, comes down like mud, so Buchan's water system is not very good. For the last 30 years or so regulations in the country have been increasing, but still there is no policy of management. It is a very ad hoc thing. There are only regulations. You hear from the chaps on the fire thing that they are frightened to light a fire when it is a good day because they are afraid of litigation. Litigation is a bit of a worry for them. All consultation has been ignored. We have tried and tried. I have been working ever since the fire, trying to get something happening — we all have.

Public land and parks have been locked up, and little real management has been done. They will not do anything. Huge destruction to the environment has occurred via the interference of alleged environmentalists and shonky science. I believe a lot of the stuff that is in the DSE is shonky science. We have got quite a lot of environmentalists up our way, and they might have their say too. When we want to get a fire going to get the land cleaned up we cannot get it because they say 'No, you cannot light it. You will do this, you will burn that'. That is ridiculous. When the big fire comes the lot goes. It is a wall of red-hot coal. It just takes everything and you cannot save anything. If you have it controlled and managed you can save areas.

After the Wulgulmerang fire everyone got on with things. We had to. There was a lot to do. There were huge amounts of stock losses, lost money, lost income, lost everything. We had visits from members of the opposition and the other parties, but not from the government. That was a bit strange. We did not see anybody. We saw Craig and we saw Peter and everybody else, but we did not see anybody from a government body to make application to. I now realise it takes a bit of a while, and this inquiry has eventuated, which is good.

The 2007 fires showed that nothing has happened since the 2003 fires. They did not try and save the watersheds up on the Licola, and look what has happened to the Mitchell and also to the Dargo. What has happened to the Mitchell River and the Macalister River you could see was going to happen. With the loss of the catchments and watershed denudation, is anyone responsible or in charge of such important areas? This is what we want to know. I am not asking you people now, but it is what we need to know. What we need is good, practical leadership on this total issue of looking after our watersheds, our high country and our land management. It has to be somebody who has a heart and a soul, a feeling for it and an understanding of it. There are some pretty good people here today who will give you a lot of good information. I can see that. This leadership is a very important portfolio for the government to look at. It has to be somebody with heart and soul and belief and understanding of it who will listen and be a good manager.

I would like to mention some of the effects of the fires of 2003. Besides the large monetary losses to the people of Wulgulmerang and the huge effort to recover there are some areas of deep and lasting impact. The public bushland was ferociously burnt, deep into the ground. We know what happened to the rivers and streams, and I have told you that the Buchan River still runs like chocolate. These high country filtration grass systems have still not re-established, and that is what is so important. It is now nearly five years and there has been no regrowth of that filtration system. What is going to happen? What is going to be done about it? This is something we really need to work on. There is still plenty of public land to burn.

I was talking to Buff Rogers the other day, and he said he cannot get a burn where he wants it. He is on the edge of the alpine park and the Snowy River park. The chaps he applied to for a burn said they are not allowed to do it. We have got a very short time until next Christmas when it will be hot again. We have had a very worrying time around Buchan in the past few months — back in last summer. If you had a group of people in the area under a land management officer with a responsibility, like John Mulligan said, you can do something about it when the time

comes. The decision has to be with that person; he does not have to ring Melbourne. If Melbourne says, 'Oh, it is too hot down here, you can't burn up there today', that is garbage. We see the effects of the ferocious fires followed by heavy rain, and this is what happens. There are the ferocious fires, and then the rains, and everything is gone. With no preparation by the responsible body, the rains gouge out the country straight after the fires. It is really bad. There must be a change of policy on public land and parkland.

The government is the only body with the responsibility. We cannot do a thing about it. There will be plenty of opportunities to burn in the next few months. We must take the opportunities before next summer — and do it now. They say it will not burn, but it will; there are places that will burn. There are groups of people who know the country and know the area within a radius of, say, the Buchan area. They can go out and do their burns. They can have their group with them to burn and protect. There will be a need for substantial funding for our recommendations in our following submission. The government has the responsibility to manage its land. It has been a lousy neighbour, I can tell you that, over the years. I would like a bit of compensation from it, I can tell you. It is very quick to fine a farm neighbour whose fire may get away, but it takes no responsibility for its own fires. I have been dying to say this for ages. Allegedly there were many millions allocated to help with the fires over summer — when it is too late — but nothing is done to prevent them. I would rather see money going into the prevention of fires and that sort of management get going. We want real, proper management.

The House of Representatives committee in Canberra did an inquiry into bushfires. Its report came out on 23 October 2003. It was right on the ball; it got right onto it. Its inquiry was called *A Nation Charred*. The following are — do I have time to tell you? — the broad observations of the report. There are about a dozen.

The CHAIR — We are aware of and have looked at that report.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — You have got it? Good. I have included in the submission what came out of the latest VFF meeting and the recommendations. This is what they have come up with. Do I have time to tell you?

Mrs FYFFE — Is this in the submission that you made?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — This is the later submission; I have got a later submission.

The CHAIR — You can just present that to us, yes.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — Right.

The CHAIR — It might be worthwhile, Ms Livingstone, moving to some questions, if that is okay.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — Right.

The CHAIR — In the written submission we have received you touch on access to water to fight fires in your region.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — Yes.

The CHAIR — I wonder what the view is of your local VFF branch about the current regime for how we manage where water is taken to fight fires. Do we have enough water access points? What views and recommendations can you make to us as landowners in the area?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — On the water one, I have talked to some people in the Omeo area and in the Ensay area, and they said that because of the drought conditions there is a great shortage of water. There was a big hole in the Tambo River. The helicopters took the water from out of the Tambo and it shortened the supply of water for the Ensay area, which was not good. What we found — what I hear — is that in general they are not really big farm dams, and if at times of fire they are taking out of the dams, the stock are frightened with the helicopters coming in and they will not go near the water when they should. They need to. The other thing is that there is not much water left. A lot of farm dams are quite shallow and it leaves them with no access to water over the rest of the summer, which I think is really thieving their water. Where do they get water to replace it? I do not know.

The CHAIR — As you touched on it, I wondered whether there were additional issues. We are all aware of the lack of water everywhere at the moment.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — That is right.

The CHAIR — And there are some farmer compensation issues, and they have been raised with us in the past. Mr Viney.

Mr VINEY — I am interested in the following issue. You describe the local community in some areas as having different views, but also there being a general community desire for increased fuel reduction burning and prescribed burning. Does the VFF locally see itself as playing a role in trying to get that community commitment to what you desire in terms of improved practices of the community?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — I would say the community was fairly divided, because what the farmers want is rational protection, and what the alternative — they call themselves environmentalists, but they are not really, because when the fire comes it takes everything. If you can have a fire at the right time you can save areas, you can protect areas, and that sort of thing. We have a community that has a different attitude to the farmers. When the fires came, they were not about; they went to the coast.

Mr VINEY — Do you think that with the experience over the last two fires, of 2003 and 2006–07, there is a chance of the community coming closer together on the objectives the VFF are outlining?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — I do not know.

Mrs FYFFE — Good question.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — I really do not know. I listen to the radio and some of the environmental things are really strange. We find it very strange that they want to save the bush to save the animals, and what happened in the bush is that the animals were burnt to death. I saw thousands and thousands of dead birds and possums and kangaroos. We had to shoot some that were just dragging their hind quarters. It was terrible. The effect on people after fire — Craig was up there the next day, were you not?

Mr INGRAM nodded.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — You saw the dead animals everywhere and the digging of pits and shooting of cows that had been burnt underneath, and dead sheep and half-dead sheep. We used a lot of bullets, I tell you. It is not good. You know your cows; they are like friends when you live in the bush.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you for your submission. In your submission you spoke about containment lines and permanent strategically placed firebreaks.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — Yes.

Mrs PETROVICH — Would it assist in the protection of property if there was a partnership between DSE, Parks Victoria and private landowners, particularly in the interface between public and private land?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — If the roads were wide and they did not have logs to put across them and there was a break on either side which was kept maintained and the roads were maintained it would be safe. There is a 3-metre line around fences, by the shire's regulations, and trucks come and the tracks go down and go over a drop. A truck cannot turn. It is a ridiculous thing. Trees fall over the fences when it snows or the wind blows them and the stock get out, all that sort of thing. Three metres is a ridiculous distance. With health and safety regulations the way they are, I believe they have to look at safer and better roads and tracks for people fighting fires. If you have a good break and a good fire you can burn back from a break and stop that fire coming across. I know there are fireballs — I have watched fireballs hop like that along a mountain range, and they do spread quickly — but you should have good breaks and there are better ways of managing. There are people who would know more about it than me; I mean, I have only seen it for a lot of years — I will not tell you how many.

Mrs PETROVICH — Is there anything we could do with roadside vegetation that would assist that interface between public and private land?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — I think so. We were told to get out if the fires got too close. They were not very far away from us this summer, and right along the road from our place to Bairnsdale there are trees nearly meeting over the road, there are old ant-ridden trees and burnt-out trees — all sorts of things. They fell in the wind storms. If

a person is escaping a fire and a tree falls here and then another falls there, if you turn around and go back, then you are gone! It is suicide. In the fires in South Australia — last year, was it? — quite a lot of people were burnt to death on the roads. We need safer roads. With powerlines along roads, it could make a really good firebreak, with trees back from the roads and maintained. It would be a lot cheaper maintaining them than bringing in the forces when the fire is full-on, I would think.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you very much for your submission and sharing your knowledge with us. Talking about burning off, you mentioned that environmentalists say no so it does not happen. Is that a suggestion that perhaps DSE are responding more to those groups than to other, local people?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — The fear of litigation is the thing.

Mrs FYFFE — By the environmentalists or by DSE?

Ms LIVINGSTONE — By the environmentalists, I would say.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay.

Ms LIVINGSTONE — I think it is something that needs looking further into.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Ms Livingstone. Transcripts will be sent to you in the next couple of weeks with instructions. We thank you for presenting and taking questions.

Witness withdrew.