

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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Mr G. Flynn, operations manager region 10,
Mr P. Schmidt, general manager, Gippsland, and
Mr B. Russell, operations manager region 11, Country Fire Authority.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for joining us. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and 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 today is being recorded, so you will get transcripts over the next few weeks. We thank you for joining us to give us a perspective on the region. We ask you to present, and later we will have a few questions.

Overheads shown.

Mr FLYNN — Thank you very much, and thanks for the opportunity to present. We will use a PowerPoint presentation and the secretary has got a copy of the presentation for reference. The representatives at the table this afternoon are Peter Schmidt, general manager, Gippsland CFA, with 35 years experience in the CFA: 29 years as a volunteer and 14, obviously concurrent, in CFA management. Bryan Russell, on my left, is the operations manager for the CFA based in Bairnsdale, with 18 years experience in the CFA, the last 6 or so of that at operations manager level, which is the level he is at now; and myself — Greg Flynn — 23 years in the CFA, the last 13 years of which have been at operations manager level. The CFA has been party to the whole-of-government submission, but we want to focus on some Gippsland-specific issues in relation to the terms of reference. We note that this is the sole presentation to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee from the CFA in Gippsland, and it provides that local information.

In relation to prescribed burning, we would contend that the CFA strongly supports prescribed burning, and the continuation of that, to manage fuels in forests in both public and private land forests. We do not differentiate there. We note that the planning for fuel reduction burns is a complex and long process, and we have heard discussions about that this afternoon and will continue, I am sure, to have representations on that. We would suggest that we need to retain a capacity to complete programs throughout the year and not have financial constraints placed on agencies involved in this that mean they do not have the resources to continue with it throughout the year. That window of opportunity for fuel reduction burns is often very small, and some parts of Gippsland require a different approach or different opportunities present.

I use the example of foothills forest versus coastal forest. In recent years in country around Heyfield and the Holey Plains country different opportunities have presented and been taken by the department in doing burn programs in those different bits of country, and different weather patterns would enable the coastal country to be burnt when the foothills country cannot be and vice versa. If you take the activities of burning and using the CFA brigades and brigade members to be involved in that process, I know there are a couple of brigades not far from where we are sitting today. Mount Taylor and Sarsfield brigades are the two brigades in Gippsland that have been involved in recent years in fairly successful joint agency burn programs and have produced some good protective boundaries around the interface country. But there is a challenge in getting the CFA members to participate in that burn program, and part of that challenge presents in a manner of planning. For example, tomorrow is looking like it is going to be a good day to burn, the plans are all established and the advice goes out to the local brigades that are likely to be involved, 'We are planning to do a burn tomorrow. Can you supply some people?'. We will go through the process and arrange for brigade members to be available. The day dawns tomorrow, the weather pattern is a bit iffy and the conditions are not quite right, so the burn is cancelled or postponed until the weather conditions are right.

All those arrangements that people may have put in place in terms of taking days off or changing their arrangements go out the window, and we start again the next time the day is available or the plan is available, and that presents a challenge. It is not an insurmountable one, but it is a challenge. Our brigades in this interface country are often very happy to be involved — and willing — but it is a challenge to get that balance right on their availability, so we need to be conscious of that.

We make the point down the bottom that we want to recognise that volunteers are not an infinite labour source. I have got to say I am very proud to be a part of the CFA, and every time I have asked for people to assist and fight the fires — in 2003 and 2007 — I have been amazed at their ability to give and give continuously, and that makes me very proud to be part of that organisation, but we have got to recognise that they are not an infinite labour source, not an unending labour source. We have got to be very conscious of that. The challenge for CFA members being involved in fuel reduction burns is also one that we need to balance with their availability for emergency response. Brigades keep that in mind when making people available to do fuel reduction burns. It is one that is a balance, and they work through that. Invariably brigades are able to respond to emergency calls where they might not be able to field a team for a fuel reduction burn, so they keep that as their primary responsibility.

Moving on into prescribed burning and community engagement, we see that community engagement in planning burns is essential. We see it as important, but it is not always easy to make it happen. If you take, for example, the experiences that we have had in recent years: lots and lots of people get very interested when there is smoke coming over the hill — they can see the smoke, they can smell the smoke and they hear about it on the radio — but when you want them to talk about planning for that eventuality, not too many people are that interested. That is the experience we have been through over recent years. DSE has invited participation in engagement in fuel reduction burn planning for some years now. In fact they are doing it again at present, which is a normal process. Our brigades across Gippsland will be involved in that — have been involved in that in the past and will be involved in that on a continuing basis. We will facilitate that in the usual manner. You do not always get every brigade agreeing with the exact plan and where the burn should be, but that is the nature of the business. Some will prefer one location to another, and we go through that consultation process with the appropriate people.

Mrs FYFFE — Can I just interrupt for one second, please? Where is the area you are talking about with these prescribed burns? Are you talking about private land or in state forests?

Mr FLYNN — For the DSE planning process it is public land, but we get involved in the consultation on where those burns are going to be located.

Mrs FYFFE — I just wanted to be clear.

Mr FLYNN — That is fine. The input is provided from a CFA perspective on where the impact is likely to come onto the CFA, I suppose. That is where it is presented. We recognise that burning is not without its risks, and we have heard that this afternoon a number of times. Fire is a difficult tool to master, and I would contend that engaging the community in the process of where it is likely to be applied is an important tool to improve the understanding that the community has, so that when another fire — a wildfire — comes over the hill there is an understanding of what has been done in the past and what impact that it is likely to have in the future. We suggest that we need to recognise that, if the government is empowering the department to manage the land, then the managers need to be able to make those decisions, to do it properly and to be supported in having made those decisions. There is the risk of fires getting away.

The bigger the fire, in terms of a fuel reduction burn, potentially the greater the risk there is sometimes of it escaping the boundaries that have been established for it. We cannot afford to hang people out to dry because a fire has got away. We need to support all people involved in those processes. The community notification process in terms of prescribed burning we suggest needs to be effective and complete. In recent time notification processes have built on the very good relationship that both DSE and CFA have with ABC Gippsland and the other media outlets, but particularly the ABC. Notices about fuel reduction burns are broadcast locally prior to a burn, and even updates are given during the burn. This enables the community to be kept aware of any developments that may occur, particularly where you have got a change in weather pattern and smoke moving quite some distance along through Gippsland, so people at least have an understanding of what is going on.

The opportunity for the integrated fire management planning process, which is, I suppose, an outcome of the 2003 Victorian bushfire inquiry process, is a step forward in getting the whole picture together, and we would support that too. It will improve, we hope, integration between all agencies so that you will not have a firebreak that might be established on public land coming to there and a firebreak on private land being some considerable distance apart and ne'er the twain shall meet, so we would hope that that integrated fire management planning process will present that opportunity.

In terms of strategic firebreaks, there have been some comments about those this afternoon. The CFA would support the establishment and maintenance of strategic firebreaks. It is a concept that we see as having the potential for improvement in protection opportunities for some of the interface communities.

We would suggest that, yes, you are looking at sectoring large tracts of land using natural and/or man-made breaks. We would also note that we are not suggesting these strategic firebreaks are to be a break that you would stop a wildfire on. They would be the sort of break that would provide an opportunity to start fuel-reduction burns from or bring fuel-reduction burns to or a line to work from in moderate fire weather conditions only. As I say, they will not constitute a line that will hold a running fire in anything but the most moderate fire conditions. To think anything else, I believe, would be somewhat foolhardy.

Again the integrated fire management program would hopefully assist in determining the best location for these to bring them to a common point for private land and public land protection. As we say, we would suggest they need to be strategically located to support that private land or asset protection.

Access tracks are another item in the term of reference. The CFA supports the establishment and maintenance of good access tracks. As we suggest, this allows greater flexibility for planning — again, it is a point you start your fuel reduction burn from — but we note that if you do not maintain them, you cannot consider using them. They are going to provide improved firefighter safety. They are going to provide the opportunity for rapid first attack by neighbouring crews. We have said ‘CFA crews’ there, but neighbouring crews, whether they are DSE or CFA — a well-maintained track scheme will enable that.

The obvious impact is the need for dollars to support this activity. If you do not have the dollars, you will see that the tracks do not get maintained. Part of one of the other terms of reference is about the signage of tracks. We would suggest that we need to support the maintenance of accurate and up-to-date signage at all times. It is very much a safety issue. If you are sending crews into an area that does not have accurate signage and those crews are unfamiliar with the local territory, they rely on signs very much, so it becomes a safety issue.

With respect to community involvement in fire management, we would strongly support community engagement in all fire management planning processes, but as I said earlier, we recognise the difficulty in sometimes achieving this. Unless there is smoke coming over the hill, a lot of people are not terribly interested in fire. It is not that sexy, so they just do not get interested. The networks that are established during peacetime are, we suggest, some of the best networks you can utilise during a wildfire event. The contacts that you know and you build up and the way you go about doing things in peacetime are the ways that are going to help you during an event.

I note the concern expressed in the earlier presentation from the combined councils regarding the information flow to communities during wildfire events and the impact that had on some of the business activities in Gippsland. We recognise the concern that was presented there. We recognise that there is clearly a balance in this issue. It is a very delicate balance between providing information to the community during wildfires and its having an impact on business activities, but we suggest that the balance lies more in favour of having a few more alarmed people than one dead person. We would contend that on an ongoing basis.

In terms of that community involvement in fire management, to give you an example, on the worst day during the fires, in Central Gippsland at least, on 14 December 2006 there were 15 houses destroyed in the Seaton-Cowwarr-Toongabbie area. They constituted approximately 3 per cent of the houses that were impacted on that day. The majority of those house — all those houses — that were lost were either unoccupied or undefended or both. In terms of that particular fire and the losses that occurred, this was one of four fires deliberately lit on that day in the vicinity of the western edge of the campaign fire. It was known as the Coopers Creek fire. The one death that did occur on that day, whilst it was not a direct result of the fire — it was as a result of a motor vehicle accident involving a member of the public who was fighting a fire on a friend’s property — was a tragic event. It was a pretty amazing outcome to have not lost a heck of a lot more, given the ferocity of those fires.

Another thing to support community involvement in fire management is that through the 253 meetings that were conducted throughout the fire event and leading up to it, we were able to make contact with 17 000 people. If you do the figures, that is about 67 people per meeting. I addressed a couple of meetings, and there were a heck of a lot more than 67. A lot of those meetings were scheduled and produced with very short time frames and at very short notice to the public. We got an enormous response and enormous community involvement. They were attended by both the DSE and the CFA as the fire agencies involved. It illustrates that, if the fire is coming over the hill, you will get a lot of attention. If we go back to the case where we are trying to drum up attention and interest and there is rain coming out of the sky, you will be lucky to get two or three on some occasions. That is the extent of our presentation, Chair. I am happy to take questions, and Peter or Bryan will answer them as best they can.

The CHAIR — There are always a lot of questions, so we will probably do a couple of rounds. I will start off first with the communication issue that was raised by the coalition of councils that you just touched on and concur with that. A part of our job is to consider minimising the impacts not only directly where the fire is but on the broader community, because economic recovery is an important part of local communities in the response, particularly the psychological response and the community confidence around things. Probably because we have more recently gone to a formal communication arrangement with the ABC, which generally does work well, in the

communication to the non-local public — which I think is what is normally touched on by those who have made comments — we have had a number of submissions around this, predominantly around tourism-affected areas.

As a former tourism minister I am conscious of this, because over the last seven years I have had a whole lot of presentations made to me. I have been in fire-affected areas where maybe the announcer is just not aware of where Moondarra happens to be or Coopers Creek, so they take a much broader view and say ‘the fires around the Latrobe Valley’. That is meant for the general public. I am making a bit of a statement. The general public knows the Latrobe Valley, and they keep away from the whole area, and that means even East Gippsland, even though the fire might be in Central Gippsland. Or they might simplify it by saying ‘a number of fires in Gippsland’, but it might not be in South Gippsland, so people could still go to Wilsons Promontory, which is miles away. I think there is a need for a better sense of locality. I do not know whether there is a better mechanism — perhaps by naming towns or particular roads — but we need to build a risk management regime around that, because you obviously do not want people to go in there if circumstances change. Is there some comment on that?

Mr SCHMIDT — We looked at this in a lot of detail during the fire and particularly during its development, and we took a four-phase approach. We picked particular areas of Gippsland that would be the first affected, and we staged it out from there. We would run meetings in phase 1, phase 2, phase 3 and phase 4. We were very aware of the issues we were going to face, particularly with some 200 000-odd visitors who come to Gippsland right on Christmas. The effects of the fire on 14 December go to show that the local community were pretty well engaged and had been engaged through our Fire Ready Victoria seminars and the meetings we conducted in the early phases of the fire and before.

The issue for us is when we get new people to the area it offers a whole new challenge in relation to an education process. They do not understand the locality. They do not understand where Briagolong is when it is said over the radio. They do not understand. They are not used to driving through heavy smoke and do not know the roads et cetera, so we have to take a very careful approach to that, and we work closely with the DSE in the way that we communicate messages. One of the things we did, and we make no excuses for it, is that when we had days of extreme, predicted fire weather we went to air and gave the worst case scenario. If you refer back to the Canberra incident in 2003, you can see the consequences of a lack of communication, so we make no excuses about the fact that on those days we gave a fairly stern warning that this could be the situation. It was for the safety of everyone involved. There were situations where some people did pack up and go home, but as we have found when talking with tourism representatives, that result was a lot better than what could have been the worst case scenario of finding a lot of people caught out.

Mr VINEY — In your presentation you made some comments about the weather conditions for prescribed burning. You said that if the weather was not quite right the burn would be cancelled and that would cause difficulties from the CFA’s point of view. Are you suggesting that there is a risk aversion to prescribed burning that we need to deal with? Is there, if you like, a tendency, if the weather is not quite right, to cancel it, whereas you might have been able to do it anyway? Is that what you are saying?

Mr FLYNN — No, that is not the issue, and it is probably a question that I am not able to answer because I am not dealing directly with lighting the fires. There is a prescription — that is the term; it is prescribed burning — and if the conditions are outside that prescription, you are not going to burn. That is the way I understand it. But from a CFA perspective it is the difficulty that presents when we get crews lined up to attend. They are going to attend from, say, midday until 7 o’clock or 8 o’clock at night or whatever the time might be, and then the day dawns. To actually plan their attendance they change their life around. They might take a rostered day off or change things around at home or whatever they are doing. When the day dawns and it is cancelled because the weather conditions are outside the prescribed lot, they have to change, and you have to plan again the next day or the next day or whenever it is. I am not able to answer on the risk aversion approach or not.

Mrs PETROVICH — To whoever the question is the most appropriate: what is the current status of roads and tracks in the region following the recent fire events and floods, and do you have any suggestions to improve the road and track networks?

Mr RUSSELL — That is mine. I cannot answer on the track situation; that is more in the DSE sphere of influence. But certainly on the road situation, VicRoads and the shire have done their works and most roads have been restored to a condition similar to what they were before the fires, to the best of my knowledge. In terms of minimising the risk to roads, there probably are some works that need to be done to minimise the impact of fires on

roads — things like trees on verges. Leave it at that. That is probably the most significant factor. If a fire goes through and you have multiple trees falling across the road, they become a risk to the travelling public. If one comes down in the front and one comes down in the back, then they cannot go either way. They also become a risk for our firefighters — the safety of our firefighters either when they are travelling to a fire or fighting a fire from the road. If you have trees falling down on them, that becomes a very risky occupation to be undertaking.

Mrs PETROVICH — What were the access issues that would have most affected CFA members during last summer's fires?

Mr RUSSELL — During the last campaign fire the main issue was probably the closure of the Great Alpine Road. That issue drew out over a number of days, and I think eventually weeks. The issue there was that the fire went through; trees and rocks were on the road, and then there was a long process to have VicRoads go through and make sure that road was safe, clear the trees, make sure the fires were out and then clear the rocks and everything else that had fallen on the road and make it safe enough for the general public to travel through. So during that period of time that whole road was closed, which caused north and south access issues. It hindered our operations to a degree, because we got tied up with escort duties, of escorting essential supplies, for example, and escorting even maintenance workers — Telstra and the likes — into various areas. So we got tied up in those sorts of roles instead of what we were supposed to be there for — and the general access for people who were north of Bruthen.

Mr SCHMIDT — Can I just add to that that the major consequence of our fire fight was the effect on logistics — it affected supply logistics, particularly up in the Tambo Valley et cetera. With the road blocks done the way they are and the recognition of not letting that sort of stuff through, that can hinder our firefighting.

Mr FLYNN — We have that same issue that presents, and it also presented during the fire in Licola. As the fire came down and ran over the main road into and out of Licola, Licola was isolated for some days. We had crews up in Licola. They were quite safe there, but the same issue presented, and the same sort of issue would present in Dargo on another occasion, if that was the case. With any of the isolated communities that have one road in, one road out, that is the issue that confronts us every time.

Mr SCHMIDT — That requires us to do additional planning at the forefront. What we actually planned for was that we recognised those roads would be closed during the onslaught of the fire, and we actually basically embedded our crews up there. Some of them were up there for several days, and they were very well communicated with: 'You could be there for the long haul, because the road could be shut for some time and you need to stay there'.

Mr INGRAM — Just following on from that question, an issue in relation to the fire has come up fairly regularly in some of the submissions but also in other public meetings. At a meeting in Heyfield, there was a comment that the roadside vegetation actually stopped the CFA assisting at a house which was under serious threat from the fire. This is not about just public land but the heavy vegetation on the verges. So the evidence is quite clear that this is a problem. We are after solutions. How do we resolve that? There is a range of legislative obligations that require leaving that vegetation on roadside verges, but this is clearly creating a safety problem in our community — or is it? I suppose that is the question.

Mr FLYNN — The issue of roadside vegetation is a very challenging one. Years ago many CFA brigades used to do a regular burn alongside many of the roadsides in their particular patch, if you like. For various reasons, over a number of years that has declined. There are all the legal liability issues associated with smoke on the road, there is the management of traffic, there is the management of vegetation and all those things — and there is the availability of our volunteers to be involved in that sort of a project, which is reducing, and their willingness to accept the liability issues that confront them. So I do not have a magic wand to wave and say, 'Look, there is an immediate answer there'.

Mr SCHMIDT — I would consider that under IFMP. Given the interwoven nature of that particular project with municipalities and other agencies with regard to risk management and fire reduction et cetera, I would consider that some of those particular risks would be identified through that process and treated at a local level.

Mr INGRAM — So trees which are at risk of falling over roads and at risk of fire should be removed?

Mr SCHMIDT — It would have to be on a case-by-case basis, I would think.

Mr FLYNN — Trees at risk of falling over on their own is not a CFA-related matter. Trees at risk of fire, perhaps we can provide some advice on. That is where that issue comes up: if it is a municipal road, we would see it is a municipal responsibility.

Mr INGRAM — I suppose that traditionally those roadsides were the firebreak, and that is where most of the fires would have been fought. I will throw in another one: one of the issues that has been raised about the interface firebreaks between public and private land is the adequacy of the size of the breaks. Do you believe that our current rules about those firebreaks and interfaces, or the provision of those, are adequate? Should we be providing more? What is the appropriate width of firebreaks? If we did have better firebreaks in those areas, would your CFA volunteers be more inclined to actually participate in some of those fuel reduction burns on the interfaces?

Mr FLYNN — Can I go back to the comment I made about strategic firebreaks? We do not necessarily believe that a firebreak of 20 or 40 metres is going to stop a wildfire in anything but moderate conditions. For that reason, we have got to be conscious that we are not talking about something that is going to stop a wildfire. It is something that you would use as a line from which to burn or to contain a fuel reduction burn under prescribed conditions. If you have got the opportunity to put more of those breaks in in a strategic manner that protects or enables the protection of interface communities, we would very clearly support that. They need to be maintained, they need to be properly planned and they need to be prepared and continually funded to support them. In that planning process you are conscious of all the environmental concerns that you need to consider, so that you are not just putting in a 100-metre wide, bare-earth break. That is not what we are talking about. It is something that is environmentally balanced, but provides some degree of protection.

Mr RUSSELL — We have to put our firefighters into a safe working environment, so if they are working on a strategic break we want that environment to be as safe as possible. Some of the factors that the brigades are talking to me about are the ability to work from that fire edge and the ability for vehicles to pass each other and even turn around. The figure that I am being quoted by brigades who are on the interface and who are working in that environment is that a break of a minimum of 20 metres would possibly be sufficient. Again that is just a figure that they have worked out. There is no science behind that, and I am sure that a more detailed review of what is actually required would come up with a more appropriate figure.

Mr INGRAM — If you were burning back off that firebreak, and if a tree were there which was likely to catch fire and fall over your break and over the fence, it would not necessarily be something that you would want in that area, would it?

Mr RUSSELL — No, that is exactly right.

Mr FLYNN — You would have to deal with it at the time.

Mrs FYFFE — I have a question about the floods, but if I could first just ask for a bit more clarification on your presentation. When the CFA was established in 1945 it was to provide protection from fires on private property and public land outside the Metropolitan Fire Brigade area, yet listening to your presentation — it may be unique to this region — I got the feeling that you have a lot of responsibility in the provision of resources for prescribed burning on public land. Has there been a shift from DSE over to you in responsibility for the manning and staffing of those prescribed burns, because you really emphasise them in your presentation.

Mr FLYNN — No. There has been no shift in responsibility from DSE to CFA in terms of who is responsible for fuel reduction burning in state forests, on public land and that sort of stuff. CFA has the responsibility for the country area of Victoria under section 3 of the act, and that is very clearly defined. There is no contention that DSE is handing responsibility to us. Our brigades get involved in some fuel reduction burning on public land, and it is often a good skills enhancement exercise for them.

Mrs FYFFE — Which you touched on in your presentation.

Mr FLYNN — The responsibility for that still rests clearly with DSE.

Mrs FYFFE — It is just that you seem to have a lot more involvement.

Mr RUSSELL — It is probably not unique to this area, but certainly those brigades that sit south of the interface area of all that bush have a bit of a pecuniary interest in getting in and helping DSE to conduct its burning operations, particularly along that interface. They are very keen to get in and actually help secure that interface area, because if the fire comes out of that bush, it is going to be burning into their own properties. That is the reason for their keenness and their interest to get out and help DSE.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you. My question was going to be about the recent floods. How heavily was the CFA involved in the recent floods out here? Can you tell me just briefly what impact you think the bushfires have had on the severity of the floods?

Mr SCHMIDT — In relation to CFA's response to the floods, in many instances we were basically the first responders, as we are representing a lot more communities than SES is, and that is naturally the case. We had something like 500 volunteers who were involved for basically up to a week, so it was a reasonably heavy commitment out of the CFA volunteers in Gippsland. Once again they worked very much within their own communities. As to the impacts of the floods — —

Mrs FYFFE — Their having had the previous bushfires and then the floods.

Mr FLYNN — As the general manager of Gippsland CFA, I was very concerned with regard to the welfare and wellbeing of our people, who have been through a very, very long campaign. Our campaign actually started last September, not December. We have been heavily involved in firefighting from right back in last September, which started with a fire at Wilsons Promontory. There was a very large commitment by the volunteers in Gippsland right through that time, plus the 69 days of the campaign fires and many other fires prior to and since those. I would have to say that as far as the floods were concerned, it was really the last thing that we wanted with regard to the welfare and wellbeing of our volunteers in Gippsland. But once again, being the community-conscious people they are, and particularly those who were impacted on within their own communities, they responded very well.

The CHAIR — We might wind up there. We thank our CFA Gippsland regions 10 and 11 for their submissions. I remind you that a transcript will be made available to you in the next couple of weeks. I am sure I speak on behalf of the committee in saying thanks to the CFA in the region for the many, many different fires it has fought in recent times, particularly the very large wildfires. We thank you guys as professionals and also the volunteer firefighters. We certainly hear of great things being done in very, very challenging times, so thank you very much for that.

Witnesses withdrew.