

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 4 June 2007

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Witnesses

Mr N. Bibby, chief executive officer, and
Mr R. Rees, chief officer, Country Fire Authority.

The CHAIR — I welcome Neil Bibby, chief executive officer, and Russell Rees, chief officer, of the Country Fire Authority. All evidence taken at the 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 given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. Mr Bibby, would you care to make a presentation to the committee before we go to questions; Mr Rees as well?

Mr BIBBY — Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to present to the inquiry. There is a whole-of-government presentation that is being put together which is with DSE and the CFA, which you have. There are five themes that we would like to touch on, which are in the submission but which we think should be accentuated at this stage of the hearing. The first theme relates to community involvement. The second theme involves the maintenance of capacity to undertake what has to be undertaken in the changing environment that we have. The third one is the integrated fire management, which Mr Esplin has spoken about at length. Fourth, research, and the fifth one is the integration or the working relationship CFA now has with DSE and how that has been improving over the last number of years.

In relation to the first topic we wish to talk about, it really talks about community preparedness and resilience and the work we have to do to make sure the people we protect in the CFA benefit from what has happened over the last few years. We have had great success in the community being involved in protecting their own premises in these fires. Mr Esplin went through the fire losses in comparison, and you will see that there has been a significant reduction in those losses. However, this has been a 15-year overnight success. CFA and other agencies have been working over many, many years — since Ash Wednesday — to come up with a solution which will change community behaviour. If you look at other examples of major community change like road accidents and smoking, you will see that they are with us every single day. These fires are not with us every day, so we have an added burden of changing a community that in some cases becomes complacent.

However, the benefits of the programs were highlighted in this fire season. This is the fire season where we have seen the greatest change and the greatest community expectation change on the fire services and government. There is now a thirst for knowledge during fires. Examples: when we first started street meetings we were looking at about 8000 people, in this fire season we had close on 60 000 people. During the fires 32 000 people attended street meetings. The 32 000 were because of the extra funds that were available to us leading into the season to help us put more facilitators on the ground. Victoria Bushfire Information Line, which started with a couple of hundred to 1000 calls when we first started it, had 53 000 calls this season. Our website, which started off at about 80 000 hits when we started it, had 2.3 million hits this season. With our Community Fireguard, which was really the start of the linchpin for our information into the community, our meetings have increased by 24 per cent. The work done by the ABC and other media outlets and the timeliness of that information and the information flow to the community has seen a thirst for knowledge and has seen significant results, but has an unlimited supply of dollars that can be put into it.

What we are now doing is building on this in the future. CFA and DSE are looking at a number of issues. The first one is to concentrate on how the message is spanning technology to ensure that we have more than one or two means of getting information out to the community during a fire. We are also looking at engaging and targeting specific communities, such as ethnic communities. Teenagers are another — apathetic would be a nice way of putting it — group within the community and those in the low socioeconomic groups which need a concentrated look at what goes into educating them, and I suppose the non-engaged. With all the advertisements, all of the street meetings, you still have a large non-engaged community which we have to work on.

The last one we will be working on is, I think, the next step in the evolution of community involvement in fires — that is, we have done all the planning work for being physically prepared for fires; however, we have done little to be mentally prepared for fires. Psychological knowledge is something that is not understood very well. There are examples in the world, particularly in the cyclone, tornado and earthquake areas, where this is being done very well, and we need to learn from other emergencies how we can prepare the community of Victoria to be psychologically prepared for fires.

In the community involvement, making sure the resilience of the community is there, making sure they know what decision to make is an important step for us. What I have is our review, which only came off the press last week, on last year's Fire Ready Victoria strategy, which shows the statistics for this year, and I will supply it to the committee to have a look at should they wish to have that.

The CHAIR — We would like to see that, thank you.

Mr BIBBY — The next area I would like to touch on is maintaining our capacity to undertake those things which we have to do within CFA. This year there was a concentration on two fires — the fires in the north and the fires in the south of the Great Divide. However, I have a map here which I will pass around so you can have a look at it. It shows where the other 22 major fires occurred around the state. Our volunteers and our people were fighting those fires. At the top corner you will see that we had 22 000 incidents on top of the two major fires that occurred this fire season. We also sent over 150 people into New South Wales to assist in that area. Maintaining capacity to fight large fires and then continuing that capacity across the state is something that our integrated volunteer and career system is maintaining quite well. I suppose the acknowledgement of that is that each of those other small fires did not break out into the large-scale fires that we had in the north and south of the Great Divide.

That capacity of our volunteers and our staff to undertake protecting the rest of Victoria is important to us. With the volunteers, within Victoria we had an overall gain of 0.4 per cent last year. We lost 6 per cent, and we gained 6.4 per cent. Our problem with volunteerism is not the number of volunteers, it is where they are. Currently we have in our rural environment hard times with the drought, changing farming practices, additional requirements on volunteers in the social environment and training we have to have for our volunteers. An example of one of the imposts — ‘imposts’ is the wrong word — one of the requirements that is now placed on volunteers is the working-with-children requirement. This is there to protect our children, however, for volunteers who have a normal juniors brigade it is an additional impost on them. They can see the reason for the protection, but it is just an example of those added requirements. There are employment requirements on staff, particularly in times of full employment where employers cannot get casuals in or cannot get people to assist in letting them go off to fight fires, making it very hard. We are looking at fast rotation on the front so the people are away for shorter times, and we are looking at moving them around faster so we can benefit from them.

Our organisational structure has been looked at. We currently have 20 shopfronts in CFA — our regional offices. We are looking at moving out and increasing that by about 50 per cent. We want to get our shopfronts closer to our volunteers so they can gain access to CFA staff for things like training and community safety. We are looking at where we can place those around the state to assist in that area.

New technology is making it easier for our volunteers. However, with new technology comes new training. Our emergency alerting system, which is now almost complete, has meant that a large number of individuals in brigades have the freedom to leave their household and be paged as opposed to waiting for the telephone number to come through. The original concept of call-out was based on — do not take this the wrong way — the little lady staying at home listening to the phone at the farm. Those days have gone forever so we have now a requirement for technology to push that forward. Our country call taking means that across the state call taking and dispatch has an integrated approach where once it was done in cells across the state. This is helping our people. It is also a changing practice, which means a large amount of education for our volunteers.

The next generation of volunteers is going to be important to us. The younger generation coming in and the way their needs are — the X and Y generations — are the ones we need to confront. Unfortunately, as I said before, they are the generation that is leaving the farm and leaving the rural environment, meaning that we are getting volunteers in provincial and urban areas, however, in the areas where we need them it is becoming more and more difficult. Technology changes and changes in a number of areas will help in that.

On demographic change across CFA I will talk mainly in the area of the wildfire environment — I will stay right away from the urban environment, which we protect across Victoria as well. The sea change and the tree change in movement of the population to places like the Surf Coast, Macedon and the Dandenong Ranges really puts something in the middle of the fire line that we have not had to deal with before — a large number of people and houses. We have spoken about the two fires that have occurred — the 02–03 fires and the 05–06 fires, even the Grampians fires. We may have been lulled into a false sense of security. None of those large fires had the intensity or the speed that the Canberra fires had or Ash Wednesday had. Now you add the demographic changes with tree change and sea change and you see that we have the potential to have a disaster which is significantly like Canberra. The issue for us is that we have a system in place with the ABC radio and a system in place with our community meetings, where they may not be applicable for a fast-moving initial fire. That is the message we have to get out there. What happened in 2002–03 and in 2005–06 in the middle of the Grampians were slow-moving fires — comparatively slow. The Dandenongs, Macedon Ranges, Surf Coast and other interface areas are very, very dangerous.

I refer to climate change. We are very much aware of the changes that have taken place in the climate. CFA's model is that we are having an increased number of fires and they are coming over a larger portion of time, and therefore the window of opportunity for us to work in a fire environment is increasing significantly and putting another burden on our volunteer systems.

With the environment comes a number of other issues, including water problems. We have spoken about those. Some of the infrastructure that was put in this year to help us with the water problems, with the government injection of funds, has meant that we have had the ability to increase our ability this year and in future years. However, large tanks and large demountable dams still need water to be placed in them. They are the sorts of things we are working through currently with the water authorities and with the fire service in how we operate in a changing environment.

In the environmental area we still have three other areas to look at. Fuel is one of the things the CFA and all emergency services have to look at. We are building trucks now. We will have about 2000 trucks with a 20-year life span running on diesel. In 20 years we may not have diesel to run on those trucks, so we have to now look at the long-term viability of our firefighting trucks and what we will use in the future with that change that is taking place — a small issue, but something that has to be confronted now because in 10 or 15 years time we will ask, 'What will we use for fuel?', and it is something that has to be built into the next generation of trucks.

The CFA buildings in the rural communities are becoming more than tin sheds; they are becoming community gathering points. Assisting those communities to make those tin sheds into community gathering points will help us improve the sustainability of the communities and therefore improve the ability for us to have volunteers.

With technology, going through the integration of IT with DSE and with all the other agencies that we have, there needs to be a large-scale approach to that with emergency management in Victoria. With radio communications, trucks and aircraft, with all the changing technologies that are taking place, we have to be in front of the game and they have to be in line with the changing environments I just talked about.

Integrated fire management planning is something that Mr Esplin talked about and was one of the recommendations out of the VBI, the Victorian bushfire inquiry, and one of the ones we strongly support.

I will give a very small background. Municipal fire prevention planning, which is under the CFA act, was done on the basis of and written in such a time when you had small local government, you had utilities that were owned by government, and you had water authorities and public land all in small areas. We have moved on with the same structure but with the larger local government areas, the inability for us to deal with privatised utilities, the difference in structure between VicRoads and where we are with roadside clearing, the water authorities having different requirements, and the CFA brigades, the meetings became an inappropriate way to plan on a larger scale.

Integrated fire management will look at the amalgamation and bringing together of these groups under a larger local government area. It will look at bringing together the authorities which we have to deal with — and it is really the DSE and Parks Victoria, local government, the utilities, the water authorities — and the community in which this is taking place to make sure we have the planning appropriate for the communities in which we work.

It has been looked upon as the golden bullet. This is looked upon as the best thing that we could possibly have. I will reiterate what Mr Esplin said. This is a planning process. This is something where people have to engage the community, be part of the community, and be resourced appropriately. Following the bushfire inquiry the government provided funding for the integrated fire management process. It has now been signed off by the Premier, which has given significant status to the process, far more than any other project, and we have advertised for and are about to hire an implementation team, after going through 18 months of discussion with local government, with communities and with a whole lot of other stakeholders to make sure they are in line with us to take this forward.

As to ongoing research, Mr Esplin touched on it and I just want to touch on a few things. Ongoing research for the fire seasons — we are looking at it for the future; for the methodology by which we make decisions; for the process in which we look after our volunteers, and we encourage the volunteerism, and for the process by which we integrate decision-making between a number of different cultures — career culture, volunteer culture, forestry culture and local government culture — all of those are things that impact on the decision-making process, and the work has to be done to understand how they have come together.

I guess I have touched on some of the things we have said we need additional work on in relation to research. There is fuel reduction burning — the DSE is doing a lot of work on that; the effective use of aircraft; construction in bushfire-prone areas, with the appropriate construction taking place; planning in bushfire-prone areas, community engagement on a broad scale; community engagement on a targeted scale; vehicle types of the future, rapid data gathering and deployment; models; prediction tools for fire; prediction tools for mosaic burning; prediction tools during fires and for planning for fires; lightning detection and remote fire detection. I have only touched on a few on the large list of things that have to be done, just to emphasise the need for an integrated approach to research in Victoria.

The last item is about touching base on where we are with partnerships and cooperation. I will ask the chief officer, Russell Rees, to talk on that.

Mr REES — Thank you, Neil. For many years the CFA has been working with DSE for improved and more effective relationships, and the other party to that that often gets forgotten is the MFB. So we have three fire services in the state of Victoria. What is interesting about those three fire services is that two of them are statutory authorities with a statutory duty, and the other is a land management agency which has a fire protection responsibility, but also where fire is a tool for managing the land.

The issues are that in many respects we are different, but the diversity that we bring to the table is in fact our strength. If we are to work together to get better outcomes for the people of Victoria, then we must use those strengths, the things we have together to get ourselves to perform better, as the community and as government would well expect. The partnership that we have with DSE is best exemplified by the latest document, the last of many documents of agreement, which I think I ensured you had copies of — that is our Heads of Agreement plus our partnership guidelines.

Inside the Heads of Agreement is the whole document of principles to assess the way we think, the way we work together and the way we behave, but in the partnership guidelines are some fundamentals for the way we go about doing our business. Included in that are the priorities for incident management and also a range of other procedural matters so that we, for whatever term, get the best value out of our firefighting effort.

There are a couple of matters, however, that are critical to our ongoing future. Many of those are actually about spending in infrastructure. The CFA and DSE, which have a range of facilities across the state, are working together to resolve the issue of nominations of locations for incident control centres and coordination centres. You will recall in my previous briefing to you we described the difference between incident control centres and coordination. The critical factor is that we are saying that across the state we are nominating locations, and it is irrelevant whether they are housed in a DSE building, a CFA building, a Parks Victoria building, a Melbourne Water building or any other building. We are saying it will be the facility where we will run either coordination or incident control, and we need to invest in those buildings so that any agency, but particularly CFA, DSE or even SES, can operate as the control agency in that building. We need to invest, make it suitable, and whatever. Some examples could be that in Ballarat it would be in a CFA facility. In Orbost it would be in a Parks Victoria facility. But whoever is the control agency they can go freely into that building and operate.

For us that is very important because it means we can preplan, and we know that if our people are trained and play together then they work together. A critical issue here is that the way to a relationship is through partnership. We know that it is no good bringing people together on the day. You need to do the work together to begin with, and that includes the local people and people you bring in from outside during major events.

Following the coroner's inquest into the fires in the Dandenongs in 1997, CFA and DSE went to great lengths to ensure that their radios were compatible. In brief, we operate exactly the same terminal — the box, the thing that sits in the truck or in a headquarters. But as well as that, the radio not only works the same but the nomenclature — that is the picture that appears on the screen — is also the exactly the same. This means that anybody from either agency can use anybody else's radio. This may sound like a small thing, but if you are operating at a fire it is a critical piece of equipment. We are in a situation where both our agencies will need to replace their radios between 2010 and 2012. They are at the end of their useful life, and that is a very expensive and extensive change program. It is vital that we maintain the same radio and the same system so that we can continue to work together and take full advantage of the sort of technology that is going to be available to us into the future in terms of communications.

As Mr Bibby indicated, we have got a huge benefit from new call-taking, dispatch and alerting arrangements, and we believe that we have to work together to make sure that that is more effective and works across all agencies. A critical element of this is to realise that if climate change means that we are in a drier continent, particularly south-eastern Australia, and if as a result of that we have a greater number of fires with fire numbers increasing as well as the frequency across there, we know — and it is presented in the whole-of-government report — that approximately 5 per cent of ignitions proceed to a significant fire. If you increase the total number you are going to increase the number of fires. If you make that critical assumption then what we call our first-strike capability has to increase. We have to look very strongly at the types and ways in which we respond to initial fires to keep fires small. Every large fire was once a small one, and if we can keep all fires small — and if you look at the volume of events that CFA runs on throughout the summer period like the one we have just had, you get some sort of idea about the ability to keep fires small — obviously that keeps us a lot safer. So a very effective, alert dispatch prioritisation of fires is critical to us.

Along with that is the type of equipment that is used for that capacity, particularly in those remote parts of Victoria where numbers are not as great as they used to be due to demographic changes, as Mr Bibby explained. There we have to think about new equipment and sharing equipment between DSE and CFA in such a way that it does not matter what badge is on the side of the fire truck. Community members, whether they be volunteers or paid people from DSE, parks or whatever related agencies, can use the vehicles to get first strike. So if there is a vehicle that sits in a shed or in a DSE workshop, people know it is a vehicle used for firefighting and they take it and use it. I think we can be justly proud of the partnership we have, but I also think there is a lot more we can do together. We need to recognise that the diversity we have is our strength, and we need to recognise that that partnership is something which has to go forward if we are to be effective in achieving the sort of outcomes we all want.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Bibby and Mr Rees. We will ask some questions now. In your presentation, Mr Bibby, you highlighted some of the challenges in relation to an adequate number of volunteers and where you need them, particularly where there is demographic change — in reducing populations around, I guess, small towns and farming communities. But I also think you hinted at demographic change where there is an increased population — the tree change and sea change phenomena.

I am wondering what your plans are to deal with those challenges. Do you have more full-time personnel to meet some of those challenges, being a volunteer organisation? Do you have other mechanisms to have different types of volunteers who can go to those remote areas or to those tree change/sea change areas? Does a rapid response unit or the like — similar, say, to that in British Columbia in Canada — apply in dealing with the fire threats when they occur in those communities?

Mr BIBBY — I think you have very adequately discussed all the issues that I was about to discuss with you. There is no one answer. There are a number of things that we are currently doing. We are currently running a regional TV program called ‘Does the hat fit?’ which is a program to try to get people into the volunteer service who are not firefighters; people who can support the finances and the secretariat including ex-teachers who want to do community education. So it takes the pressure off the brigade as a whole. A number of brigades are amalgamating. An office-bearing role within a brigade is quite a burden, so if you have two brigades where you once had six office bearers you bring them together and you have three office-bearers and it makes it easier on that particular brigade.

We have tried quite successfully to bring the younger generation online. Surprisingly when we started by saying to the younger generation, ‘Come to the regional headquarters and fill out an application form’ we got next to none, but when we said, ‘Fill it out online’ we got a large number of young people coming. So we actually moved into their environment.

We have a number of people around the state who are getting more elderly, and I suppose some communities that are made up of retired people. There are a number of rapid response smaller appliances which are available for them to use in conjunction with the larger appliances, so we are looking at replacing them across the state.

In answer to your question, there are a large number of solutions. One of them is more career staff for firefighting. Currently we are not at the stage where additional career staff in rural Victoria will make any difference at all. What we need out there is more support officers who support the brigades in the training, in the administration and in those things so they can concentrate on what their core function is, which is fighting fires. So that is the sort of area we are looking at in rural Victoria.

Ms LOBATO — Thank you for your presentation. I am very interested in asking many questions about the volunteerism as well, but I need to pick just one question. I was up at the Upper Yarra Dam just the other day and I noticed a large firebreak, so I guess I wanted to ask a question about the maintenance of the permanent strategically-placed firebreaks and containment lines throughout public land areas. Are they an effective fire management strategy?

Mr BIBBY — They are an effective fire management strategy. I think it would be more appropriate to ask the DSE in the next session about the maintenance of those particular breaks because it is its responsibility, but I will say that it is imperative that they are maintained properly because they will just end up being another part of the forest if they are not.

Ms DUNCAN — I am living in a high fire-prone area, near a state forest, and I am interested in what impact, if any, the ceasing of things like timber harvesting, grazing, four-wheel driving, hunting, camping, mining and prospecting activities have on the frequency, scale and intensity of bushfires.

Mr BIBBY — I have no figures to hand, but what we do know is where there is human intervention within a forest environment, that automatically increases the possibility of fires occurring. In relation to grazing and logging of the forests, I am not skilled enough to answer those questions. There are experts within DSE who can answer those questions.

The CHAIR — You said you do not have them to hand, but is there any detail like that in your submission or can we get access to some of that data if it is available?

Mr BIBBY — I would have to defer to DSE. I am sorry.

The CHAIR — We might get that information from DSE.

Mr VINEY — I am interested in the issues that you raised, Mr Rees, about the relationship with DSE and the interface between CFA and DSE, in particular in the prescribed burning area. I wonder if you could take us through some of how that works and what the CFA's role might be in that process.

Mr REES — There are some locations across the state where CFA people have been intimately and regularly involved in both the decision-making process of what part of, I will call it, the bush gets burnt and what part does not, and there are some places where there has been very little engagement up until very recent times. We have been working with DSE, and in one sense it is the precursor to this IFMP process that in one case we sound like a broken record on. But it is to say that really the people who live in the area should be working with the people who are custodians of the land — that is, DSE — to describe, prescribe and undertake the sort of work that is needed to protect everybody, treating the land for the benefit of both public and private estate.

Important also is to realise that surrounding much of the public estate — that is, the forested areas — are in fact areas of private forest, of which there are both the plantation industry but also landowners who own private, natural forest, so part of the issue is how do we work together to do that? We have been working on a project that involves the local volunteer brigades and the local community describing and working with the local public agency, whether it be DSE or Parks Victoria, and then working to carry out the burns, doing it together.

We were not all that successful this year because the weather beat us. We tried to do this as a project in the Grampians. In fact they did a small burn, but it was too intense and then it rained, so they did not get there. But the idea is that the local people will have a much greater say in how to protect their community and involvement in the sort of decisions that are made, particularly closely adjacent to their land.

The benefits of that are numerous, but one of the great benefits for us is that not only are our people involved but it is also a training and exercise activity, and both volunteers and career staff from CFA interact with the people from DSE and Parks Victoria. As I said, we can talk a lot about it in documents, but it is the partnership and the relationship management that becomes critical here — an understanding of what we are doing — and we are able to achieve far greater outcomes.

I would not see CFA people getting extensively involved in fuel reduction programs deep in the forest, but I would see them being very active participants and indeed taking almost total ownership in some instances of public land fuel reduction activities, depending on where they are.

Mr INGRAM — Thank you very much for your presentation. Have you received any criticism from volunteer CFA members on the workload and the threat to CFA members because of these large campaign-style fires that we have undergone in 2003 and 2007? Considering we have a large number of relatively unskilled project firefighters who are the dominant workforce in the state forests and national park areas, there has been limited direct attack on fires in some areas in those large fires and there is also arguably a financial incentive for some DSE paid employees not to put the fires out, are you getting some feedback within your membership reacting negatively towards these large campaign fires and the cost on them and their employers?

Mr BIBBY — Most definitely we are. The burden that we are placing upon our volunteers in these large fires to repeatedly go back to the fire front is becoming quite high, and we are also finding that in some cases strike teams later on in the fire are hard to get. However, when we had a number of blow-up days, as opposed to going in and doing the slow-burn process — which is, I suppose, for some firefighters boring — when they knew they were really required we had no problems with getting people on board. The issue of paid versus volunteers — CFA, DSE, MFB — internally in CFA we have been working shoulder to shoulder since CFA was formed in that area at something that is, I think, culturally accepted within CFA. It is more the burden on the employer that we are looking at very carefully to ensure that we can place less of the burden on the employers so that they will release our people to fight the fires. The stamp duty approach that was taken this year was a start to that, but I think we need to look more at how we can assist an employer then to let our people go.

Mr INGRAM — Just to follow up on that, one of the submissions we got was that there has been a reduction in paid, dedicated fire staff within DSE in the last seven years. Is that —

Mr BIBBY — I can speak for CFA. There has been an increase in paid, dedicated fire service people within CFA as a proportion over the last seven years.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thanks for your time today, gentlemen. You mentioned earlier that it is great to get onto fires when they are small, and to me it seems there is a critical delay in dealing with fires when they are small. Have we developed systems to deal with these small fires at their source at this stage?

Mr REES — Absolutely. It is a huge myth that fires are not attacked with sufficient weight. Naturally when you get 55 lightning strikes, many of them deep in the forest as occurred early December 2006, you have to make some priorities. The other issue is getting safe access to those fires, and when you look at our priorities you will read that firefighter safety is the no. 1 priority. You are not going to put firefighters in an environment where they are unsafe. I think the critical thing to this is having safe access to suppress a fire, and that is where the issues of tracks and firebreaks and those other benefits come in, and that you have an aerial firefighting force that is capable of rapid response and able to be spread across the state so all your eggs are not in the one basket, so that you are able to make an aerial attack that can perhaps hold the inaccessible fire for a period of time, remembering that a lot of these issues assume that the fire is benign, that in fact you do not have strong winds, high temperatures and low humidity. Fifty-five lightning strikes with extreme fire weather at the same time are going to put enormous pressure on any fire service.

When you look at the number of events we have that are outside that, you realise the sort of battle you have. I think, as I indicated earlier, that the more you realise that we are going to have more ignitions, it leads you down the pathway of not just saying you want to be better at attacking fires at first strike, but you have got to prevent ignitions to start with. You cannot control lightning all that much. You can control what happens to the fire after the lightning strike by fuel management, but your real trick is to stop having ignitions in the first place.

Mrs PETROVICH — You actually mentioned access, and that is an area of interest of mine. Do you believe that increasing the size of public land — because we have seen great areas of public land being made into parks — and taking cattle out of the high country has created a problem with some of the access tracks that were kept open by country people in those areas?

Mr REES — I am definitely not an expert in cattle in the high country and the impact of that, so I would defer to the land management agency for that. In terms of access tracks, there is quite a detailed discussion on access tracks and the benefits and otherwise in the whole-of-government submission. An issue to us, of course, is that the more you have the tracks open, the more you invite other people who are not necessarily the type of people you want in the forest — and I call deliberate fire lighters an example, or careless people — so there is a very

delicate balancing act between having tracks that are open for general public access versus tracks that are available for firefighters to use to get there, and that is a critical question for us.

The message we get from our people, very loud and clear, is that they know that if there is a fire close and adjacent to them, as in on the public land near a CFA brigade, they are fully prepared to go and put that fire out. What they would desire, and what we are working together with DSE to do, is that they not only have access but they have the right type of vehicle to be able to do that. Generally speaking, some of the big CFA trucks are not quite as suitable as a smaller vehicle to go into the bush to deal with that, and that is that partnering that we are working on DSE to do.

Mrs FYFFE — Regarding resources, you have talked at some length about the marketing, the PR side of the CFA, the publications communication, and I should imagine it has swallowed quite a large proportion of your budget. Do you believe you have got sufficient resources to ensure that you have enough firefighting equipment, and do you think the balance is right between the investment in community assets, that is bricks and mortar versus actual firefighting resources?

Mr BIBBY — You never have enough, but if you look at the balance that has been struck and the increased resources in prevention, you will see that there has been an increased percentage of the work that we are now doing in prevention. In our annual report now we graph the operational side and the prevention sides so that you can see the slow increase that is taking place there.

But the sorts of programs that we need for community resilience are expensive programs. They are face-to-face meetings. They are the sorts of things where we can utilise the effective whole-of-government approach to looking at disaster management. Integrated fire management is one of those areas where, if you take out the word 'fire', you see that integrated emergency management is something that can go across a large number of services within Victoria. That is what we are trying to do: move towards an integrated emergency management process, not just fire management, therefore we will be able to utilise those resources far better.

If it comes to physical resources — trucks and those sorts of things — we have sufficient funding currently to replace our tankers. A large program was put in place there. We have a large program of building now taking place, with an additional 18 fire stations recently. Physically I do not think we could add more resources to our organisation with the people we have to actually do it.

Mrs FYFFE — Then why are so many CFA units having to go out to fundraise for what they see as essential equipment if you say you have sufficient resources?

Mr BIBBY — We have basic levels of equipment, which is the truck that they have from the fire service, then we have supplementary equipment. There are two levels there: there is equipment which the brigade buys and we maintain, or we buy part of it, or they actually go within the CSESP program to provide their trucks. Then there is another level of trucks which they use for their own purposes within the brigade.

The additional vehicles that are across CFA, that they fundraise for, is diminishing. The CSESP program, which has a large amount of government funding in there, is diminishing the need for that to occur because the number of old trucks that we have across the state is diminishing. But there is still fundraising for specialist needs or brigade needs.

Mrs FYFFE — You are saying that they do not have to raise this equipment to be able to effectively fight the fires in their areas?

Mr BIBBY — That is correct. If we go back in history, the fundraising process for brigades was: you get a truck, everything else you buy yourself. Post-Linton full uniforms supplied; boots, all of those things, were supplied.

Mrs FYFFE — I am very much aware of that.

Mr BIBBY — Yes. That was not there in the past. Pagers which were once supplied as additional to brigades; new EAS programs will have pagers supplied to all of those people. It becomes an essential for them to use things within their own community that they see are supplementary to the services that CFA provide, but will add to the community. We do not stop them from doing that.

Mr INGRAM — A question on the arterial road network within the private land areas: one of the issues that has come up in some of the recent large fires is that the increased vegetation on roadsides has meant that there is an increased risk of firefighters going in and out of fire areas. In 03 we had the example that fire breaks had to be built on private land when there was a road reserve next to it because of the increased vegetation and the lack of maintenance in those areas. Have you got a way forward on that, considering we have got environmental laws to stop removal of native vegetation on these roadside reserves?

Mr BIBBY — In a number of examples that we have had, down Geelong way, down Warrnambool way, the introduction of native vegetation has actually improved the fire rating across the roads. When you have large heaps of phalaris and grasses like that, that are unbelievably bad in fire situations, by ripping that out and putting in native vegetation, you actually improve the fire rating.

When we look at land and roadside protection — this is where we go back to an integrated approach, because there are roads that have been protected for many, many years by the brigade or by the local communities, where once there was a forest next to the land, there is now not a forest any more, so it has been traditionally done. There is land that is protected because the particular farming community need their places protected, and then there is the integrated fire management where we use roads for access and where we use roads for fire breaks. Identifying those, separating them from the traditional needs, from the pecuniary interest needs, is what we are going through now. But in relation to what you are saying, there is a lot to be done in fire roadside management. There is a lot to be done.

Ms DUNCAN — I would just like to compliment you on your community education programs. I have been to a number of the Fireguard meetings myself. Have you got any data or anything that shows the effectiveness of those sorts of programs for those tree changers?

Mr BIBBY — We currently have a PhD student working with the bushfire CRC doing that work for us, and when Alan Rhodes is finished we will make that available, but the report I talked about before, which was showing some of the work that was done and which I will give to your executive officer, will give you an indication of where we are.

There is work done on individual cases, like the work Mr Esplin talked about when he talked about the history of fires and the reduction of fire losses and the reduction of life losses, which is clearly showing, particularly since Ash Wednesday, the reduction — because, I think, of a combination of things, but one of them is our prevention programs.

The CHAIR — I was interested in the comments in relation to coordination. I think Mr Rees raised some of those in relation to the integrated coordination projects of SES, CFA, DSE and MFB working on the project. Mr Esplin had recommended in his last inquiry about the State Emergency Operations Centre just where are we with that project, but I am also interested in other areas of coordination where there are efficiency and economies of scale. Do we need to be doing something else about the way we provide for aerial firefighting appliances at the moment and other technology? If we are going to have more bushfires, more intensity, we are going to need — you are saying we have got enough resources — one would think we might need some more resources or different types of resources that might need coordination, not only at the state level like a state emergency operations centre but maybe even at a national level where there was cooperation around accessing aerial appliances, for example.

Mr BIBBY — The work done with Mr Esplin has a report that looks at a state coordination office. The outworkings of the work that was done is the work that Mr Rees was talking about, where we no longer have the CFA office and the DSE office. We are already now looking at rationalising those across the state, so that is there. The one issue that still has not been looked at is the IT connection. We both run a mains ICS process, we both run different data networks and we both need to integrate those appropriately. They were integrated during these fires because of good work done by some IT technicians in doing the patches. However, a long-term strategy in that area will be one of the areas that I think is important.

Logistics management is the other area that I think we need to take a step forward in. If you look at what CFA and DSE do during a major fire — moving 10 000 people around on a daily basis, feeding them, housing them, looking after their needs, looking after their families, communications, transporting them backwards and forwards, moving logistically into trucks, changing over the crews and then feeding them again — it is one of those things that currently we are doing on a whiteboard, a very people-intensive approach. It needs a shot in the arm, the logistics

management of both organisations. We have acknowledged that, and we are working towards looking at how we take that forward.

Mrs PETROVICH — Just one final question. Could you detail plans to educate and engage with those communities that you mentioned earlier — those communities in peril, such as Macedon Ranges, the Dandenongs and Surf Coast?

Mr BIBBY — Those areas are where we are concentrating mainly on our Community Fireguard groups. One of the problems there is the Surf Coast, where a large number of the people own holiday houses, so they are absent landlords. We run programs before the fire and after the fire in those areas — and during any fire season. We also have the communications process put in place for them as well, which is ABC radio. We also allocate our funding on the basis of risk. Therefore those areas with the higher risk, like the ones you have been talking about, are the ones that have an allocation of funding appropriate to them. Then we get down to a micro level, concentrating on the higher risks, like caravan parks. We have a caravan park process to talk to people on an ongoing basis as they rotate through them. So there are five or six programs assisting in there. However, we are still not getting to everybody in those areas.

Mrs PETROVICH — One of the areas of concern was the issue you raised with me. I actually live in the Macedon Ranges, so I understand. We have sat on a tinderbox all this summer. When we have these fast-moving fires that you talked about, I am just concerned as to how we are going to engage with the community and let them know how to deal with those sort of circumstances.

Mr BIBBY — We talk to the community about the difference between the slow-moving fires and the fast-moving fires. When we have a fire like that, it will be very, very fast, and we will not get into the community information which we have been becoming used to over the last three years. We have to find ways to let communities know faster. We are looking at things like SMS messaging — Mr Esplin is looking at things like that and trialled that this year. So there are new technologies that will allow us to do it. But it is less of an issue about having a community informed at that stage; it is more of an issue of having the community planned and physically planning and psychologically planning for that sort of event so that when it does occur they can take the appropriate steps — unlike, I would suggest, Canberra did.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much. We will conclude this session. Mr Bibby and Mr Rees, thank you very much for the work of the CFA, the work you have done in the whole-of-government Victorian submission as well as the evidence today.

Witnesses withdrew.