

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 31 July 2007

Members

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Witnesses

Mr N. Penrose, regional director, Gippsland,

Mr D. Tainsh, fire manager, Gippsland, and

Mr E. Waller, chief officer, fire and emergency management, Department of Sustainability and Environment;
and

Mr C. Rodda, general manager, water supply;

Mr A. McPherson, acting executive director, water industry, Department of Sustainability and Environment;
and

Mr C. Rose, regional manager, east, Parks Victoria; and

Mr B. Vaughan, regional manager, East Gippsland, VicForests;

The CHAIR — I call on our next witnesses from a range of agencies under the broader sustainability umbrella.

Mr PENROSE — Thank you, Chair. We have brought the whole family.

The CHAIR — Very good.

Overheads shown.

Mr PENROSE — We will do a quick presentation here and then hand over to questions. Perhaps you could direct the questions to me, and I will field them off to the relevant neo-representative here who can actually answer the question. I understand that you have had a presentation around the governance framework. I will just quickly recap on that to put some context around it. Obviously the legislative framework is the Forests Act and the National Parks Act, which provide for the two agencies to manage public land.

The Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land 2006 — I know you have copies of all this, and I am not going to go into any great detail — is the framework which we will present around, and it is based around the four platforms of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. We will talk a bit more about what the detail of each element of that framework is.

The regional fire protection plan, which our annual operation plans hang under, is a result of the sort of community consultation process whereby we actually interface with communities and set up a planning framework. Within that we have a readiness and response plan, which is about resourcing, dealing with models of fire cover and dealing with things like the audits to make sure that we have got the capacity to be able to respond.

Relationship management is another major platform of the way we do business. Given the events of 2003, the floods in 1997 and the floods again this year and the fire of 2006–07, one of the real highlights for this region has been the way that the organisations have actually come together and worked as a whole-of-government group. I have outlined the organisations that have been involved in that, and one of the real highlights of the way we dealt with this fire — and the CFA presentation outlined that — has been that we as a group have been nominated for an award for excellence in government leadership, which we are all quite chuffed about, just to get a plug in. That really comes under the umbrella of the regional managers forum, which is a group that brings all the regional managers of the organisations together. It was something that we used extensively through this last fire and flood event.

On fire prevention, obviously with 2.5 million hectares of public land in Gippsland, which is close to one-third of the state's public land resource and in excess of 60 per cent of Gippsland's land base, it is a major part of the landscape of the region. Some of the statistics include that 45 per cent of the fires that occur on that estate are from lightning strikes. Another 20 per cent are deliberate lights and up to 5 per cent are from camp fire escapes. Some of the other prevention mechanisms are around fire enforcement and investigation. Obviously that is dealing with the burning, allocation of permits to burn and that sort of thing.

With fire education programs, we obviously work, and you have heard this before, very closely with the CFA, and under the banner of the Fire Ready Victoria programs we have worked in partnership with the CFA in recovery programs. We utilise these opportunities, as Greg outlined in his presentation, to increase awareness about preparedness and prevention of fires.

I will give just a bit of an outline of the human resources and the capabilities et cetera that we have got to perform our requirements under the model of fire cover. We have nearly 600 staff within the network emergency organisation that have fire accreditation. That means they have a competency; they have been trained; they are able to go into a fire situation. Of those, 130 to 180, depending on the season, are summer firefighter crew which we employ for the fire period. This gives us a staffing capacity within the region — this is between our networked organisation without going outside of it — for 24-hour first attack in 10 of our fire districts of six level 2 incident day and night shift capacities and two level 3 incidents. Beyond that we would then start to go outside of the region, and beyond that we would go to other organisations and interstate and internationally to maintain our covenants. As you saw on the last presentation, we ended up with up to 17 000 people working on the last fire, so we have the capacity to gear up as the incident requires.

Some of the infrastructure that we have includes 11 major offices where we have the capacity for a level 3 incident coordination centre, a standard associated with the fire equipment centres. We have 10 air bases and 20 towers. We have people manning those towers throughout the summer period. We have 20 helipads across the estate, 200 dams and hundreds of watering points which are mainly in streams. We have 18 large tankers, 100 small slip-on units, which are usually the tray four-wheel-drives, 4 dozers, 11 first attack dozers and associated trucks and the capacity to engage up to 100 private contractors machines if we need to gear up, and I think we actually geared up to that in this last incident, and obviously access to the state DSE-CFA aircraft fleet.

On roads and tracks, we have talked a lot about access and safety et cetera. We have 17 200 kilometres of roads and tracks to keep maintained in a capacity to be fire ready. Of that we have 16 806 bridges, or we did have until some got washed away or burnt, and 1388, 1-metre culverts. I guess the future in this area is about the establishment of strategic breaks and standards around that, and there have been a lot of discussions on that and David will talk more about that in a minute. We have been working within this last fire around catchments of Melbourne's water supplies, but we are looking at the whole area, looking at establishing a strategic firebreak network which is a bit more than the upgrades that we did as a response to the fire in this last incident, and establishment of standards for future fire line construction, which is another part of the future that we are currently working on. I might hand over to Dave now just to take us through the next few slides.

Mr TAINSH — I just want to talk, firstly, about prescribed burning, fuel reduction burning, and then in starting this conversation I have to point out that, quite clearly, not even arguably, it is the most important fire management tool we have in our kit, but it is also the most difficult to manage in terms of community opinions, one way or another. The population is split in terms of pro-burning and anti-burning, and it is up to us, with the community and with the Country Fire Authority, to help work out the balance. Then the balancing act is about making sure we achieve an appropriate level of burning safely and with ecological considerations in mind, and that balance is where the complexity sneaks in. Our planning framework around all this commences with the fire protection plan which Neville has already alluded to. It is a 10-year vision. It was done in 1999 and it is up for review.

As a result of the latest code, there are a lot of issues we need to deal with in coming up with a new plan. Within the plan obviously we have broken up the entire landscape of public land in Victoria into fuel management zones, but it basically describes the objectives of each of the zones, whether it is ecological, whether it is asset protection or whatever. That is the plan that is basically done in a strategic sense.

As far as operationally, how do we make it work? As evidenced earlier in the day, we have fire operations plans — they are three-year plans — done annually and, as we speak, we are in our first week of public consultation where we have put what we believe is the right balance, together with the CFA. We have already worked our way through processes with the Country Fire Authority and we will go to the public to try to get this balance right that we were talking about before.

When it comes to implementation, this is where it gets extremely complex. The first thing is about timeliness. Obviously, when we are timing our prescribed burn, we have to consider the burn objective. We have to consider whether it is to burn greater than 50 per cent, or a cool mosaic, but it depends upon the objective of the burn, which is defined in the fire operations burning plan process. It also requires our weather to be analysed and fuel moistures to be analysed. This is where we get a very complex array of factors that determine when we can burn, and even if we throw caution to the wind, there is still a natural narrow window of opportunity when we can burn.

We spoke a lot in earlier forums about the Western Australian experience. We have looked into a lot of the work in Western Australia, as evidenced by previous speakers. There are fundamental climatic and geographical differences between Western Australia and Victoria, but essentially we can learn from some of the processes they go through. Quite clearly we are an autumn-driven fuel reduction burning program. Probably anything greater than 75 per cent is autumn and the rest is spring. That is because of climatic factors. It is problematic burning in spring, so we basically, without normal auxiliaries and favourable burning conditions, restrict our spring burning program to asset protection.

When it comes to supervision, basically we feel that to some extent in the past we have probably restricted our ability to do fuel reduction burns throughout rural Gippsland by having local people do local work, and hence they are restricted by the resources that are located in an area, so we have adopted very much a mobile workforce approach. If locals can do the burn within the local resources, then they do it, but if they need more, we push

resources into them. Wherever possible we have the local fire management officers and the associated staff managing the actual burn, but we will insist upon instant control teams and the best qualified person with local knowledge being considered to come and manage it. We get resources from not only across Gippsland, but across the state.

I refer to evaluation. We talked of evaluation and monitoring earlier on in the day. There is no doubt at all that we need to do more on that. We are embarking on a number of monitoring projects over the next 12 months, but quite clearly, if we are going to embark on such an important task, we need the monitoring to demonstrate our success or our failure, and I suppose to be accountable to the community as to what we are doing.

Guidelines, quite clearly, for something as complex as fuel reduction burning, are in the environment. We have a detailed set of burning guidelines that assist staff in making decisions by helping to describe the desirable weather and fuel moisture combinations that will allow a safe burn to be conducted but still achieve the objectives. We would like resources, as I have already mentioned, at the centre, but we are not restricted to that. We have insisted on mobility, and I suppose that one of the successes of this particular year just gone was that we mobilised people not only in far East Gippsland but across Gippsland and also across the state. Because fuel reduction burning is such a vital thing to be done in consultation with the community, we virtually have a two-pronged attack. First we go out with our colleagues, the Country Fire Authority. I take the point that was made earlier: is there a transfer of responsibility? No. What we have got to tap into is the vast amount of local knowledge and experience contained within the Country Fire Authority. They more and more are giving us some clues about the location of strategic burning, particularly on the interface.

We are piloting a process to make sure we can get into the community better. We started this process in 1999 when we put our fire protection plan together, and that started the process whereby people can contribute to a strategy. Each year when we do the fire operations plan, again with the Country Fire Authority and particularly the communities, they can help us put together a program that does this balancing act that I keep talking about. From the day of the burn and the months prior to the burn, as was indicated by Greg Flynn earlier, there are a lot of times during our planning process when people do not get interested, and yet you get to March and April and they are. With the support of the ABC and the print media we have put a lot of effort leading into the burning season about where we are going to be burning, and on the day of burning we use community engagement tools to help us get into the community.

Last, but certainly not least, with engagement is that we believe that a fundamental stakeholder in burning on the interface is the Country Fire Authority. Quite clearly I am not telling you anything new, but the Country Fire Authority is not only very experienced with regard to fire emergency, it is also usually locals who are respected as leaders of the community. If we do our planning and our burning for the CFA, they take interest and they support it. We often say in Gippsland, if I may say it, that teams that play together stay together. There is no doubt whatsoever that one of the strengths of our team and Peter's team is that we in fact are rubbing shoulders during the prevention part of the season, so that when we get into the 2003-type situation we are used to working with each other, so it is a great training tool.

As far as visions for the future, prescribed burning quite clearly is something that is a big part of where we are going to go. The fire protection plan, as I said, is up for review. This is an ideal opportunity to start integrating private and public fire strategies through the integrated fire management planning process that was alluded to earlier, but more to do a little bit more lining up between our road and track network, our strategic firebreak network and our burning zones, where they all feed off each other and there is some logic in where we burn, where our people are and where we can safely defend. Quite clearly we need flexible, simple planning with larger burns where practicable. The earlier presentation by the task force is saying that if we are going to cover the country in far East Gippsland we need to burn more here, and that is acknowledged and it is something that the department is working on. How do we do that and still fit within our constraints of ecological management and within our constraints of fire safety?

We want to integrate ecological and protection objectives. The Western Australian experience was that as soon as they flipped the formula around and away from fire protection objectives for burning into ecological objectives for burning with fire protection spin-offs, they caught all the communities. Suddenly it became, 'Burning is good; burning is not evil. Burning is not only that; it is for economic reasons and for the bush', and with that in place the community got on board with the burning program and, what is more, all our practitioners, our biodiversity experts

and our park planners are all on side and starting to meet our fire protection and burning programs and meeting the ecological objectives.

There is the 365-day approach. I have said that most of our burning is done in autumn, but it does not eliminate taking every possible opportunity as times go by. It would be nice to know that as we hit autumn, as we concentrate on our big burns, that every other part of our asset burns and our smaller burns are done at opportunistic times throughout the 12-month period.

Community involvement and community education is vital; education to make sure people are aware that prescribed burning is a necessity and not an evil thing, but community involvement helps us balance it. There is no doubt that there is fine line between what to burn and what not to burn, and we need the community on side and, I say it again, the joint DSE-CFA program in delivery.

I want to speak briefly on response, and I will go through this pretty quickly. The main thoughts behind these slides demonstrating the history of Gippsland is that Gippsland will experience large fires, and probably because of the long-term drought effect in the last 10 years, continual rainfall deficits in 2003 and 2007 have hit us. Both were predicted. Both agencies predicted it, but both were still overwhelmed to the extent of the fire that we experienced. That, together with the long-term drought, plus the climate-change predictions that we are all heeding, does mean that we have to plan for more regular severe seasons.

Just finishing off on recovery quickly, what I would like to say about the recovery aspect is that our recovery path is almost fourfold. The first one is that we are very much a major party to the whole-of-government approach to recovery in the community. Through that process we are embarking on a lot of fire education programs — again this idea about getting into the community about how the community should help us into the future. We have our own programs with regard to working with Parks Victoria to rehabilitate all of the control lines, and we have talked a lot today about rehabilitation of control lines. It is fundamentally important that as soon as the fire occurred that we went in very quickly to rehabilitate the roads, tracks and firebreaks we put in, because we were always afraid of the event that we have just had — that is, that if the firebreaks that we put in were not dealt with quickly as far as soil erosion goes, then we would have a problem.

Last, but not least, DSE and PV are embarking on a huge program of fire recovery associated with the road and track network, which has been compounded by the floods. I understand that tomorrow we have got the opportunity to talk to members of the committee probably about the Great Divide fire, so I probably will not go through this slide in much detail, other than to say that, together with the Country Fire Authority, our key priorities in the way we managed fire in Gippsland in this last 12 months were: firefighter safety first and foremost, protection of life and property, and in all of that putting a high priority on informing communities and the public and the media of immediate or imminent threat, and that was through a daily, minute-by-minute discussion paper of all our incident management teams and our coordination centre in Traralgon. The public needed to be kept informed.

As far as what we believe was an improvement on previous years, even 2003, the DSE and CFA previously considered themselves more and more as running joint operations. More and more we are moving towards an absolute integrated operation. This year, whilst there is always room for improvement, there was quite clearly a seamless, one-agency approach to the whole fire — a definite plus.

The other issue was that we are an open and honest community and we are open and honest to the media. There were some real breakthroughs. We were sometimes criticised for doing it, but we were open and honest, and we put a lot of effort into managing the information going to the media. What we knew, they knew.

This is probably the most important slide, I think, from my perspective. What are we going to do, given that the word is that we are going to be in for continually severe years? We need to do something different. Quite clearly we want to improve on what I believe is already a very high-quality use of the media. Our relationship with the ABC in Gippsland I believe is fantastic, and it is a relationship that we nurture. Public education, community engagement — there is no doubt that the bar keeps lifting year every year. We want more and more ways to hit every aspect of the community. There were a couple of comments made today by Peter about the fourth phase, and that is that we go local — I think we have got the 'local' right — we go regional Victoria, and I think we have got that right. The next step is to really hit this whole-of-Victoria approach to how we are letting people know — people who might be entering Gippsland — what the true story is.

Integrated fire prevention planning — that has been hit on before — so that private land and public land is seamlessly managed. There needs to be a continued and improved integrated fire response with the Country Fire Authority and allied emergency agencies.

The other thing which is very important, because whether we like it or not there will be times when we will want additional resources outside the state, is that we will continue to make sure our arrangements interstate and our international support are quick and easy and turned off quickly and easily without too much bureaucracy. Quite clearly fuel reduction burning is part of the template of the future. I have already gone into how I believe we need to improve our line there.

Where do we go in the future? This whole concept of a strategic firebreak network is fundamental to our burning program and fundamental to making sure we put some pre-planning into where our firebreaks are. Some of the previous speakers talked about mistakes we made — too many dozers, not enough people supervising. We were doing three operations at once. We were doing first attack, we were doing fallback lines and we were doing these massive contingency lines — and all of that in the chaos of war. What we believe we can do is we can put together, together with Parks Victoria and the community, a bit of a mosaic of firebreaks which we believe will do the job for fallback lines and contingency lines, and have them ready to go. That will still not mean that we will not be putting lines in at the time, but what it means is that if we do identify interface firebreaks that we think are part of the future, than let's maintain them.

There are a couple of things to do in that project. They are to identify the standards — that is the widths — and get some understanding of the prescriptions, and get that from the experts. The other one is to say, 'What is the network?', and already we have gone a long way to identifying what we believe might be the network, and we have now got to put that into the community, probably, to get ratification.

Last, but not least, we need to make sure that if we do put fire control lines in that in fact we have a standard or a prescription associated with them, so no matter what sort of operator is out there, if they are asked to put in a firebreak of a particular prescription, that is understood and we do not get 100-metre airstrips in some places and very inferior firebreaks in others. So that is a very important project for the future.

Mr PENROSE — We have gone through the flood very quickly. As Dave has said, this sort of combination of episodic events were the two things we actually feared. Peter Schmidt and I addressed a regional manager's forum in about October, where we actually said that because of 10 years of drought these were the combinations that we most feared. Why I say that is that this whole area has been under exceptional circumstances assistance from the federal government since about 1997, which demonstrates that the agricultural community here has been suffering under a long-term dry period. So it was no surprise that we had this sort of situation in the forest. In fact, all of our measurements of the fuel moisture contents were just demonstrating that we were in uncharted territory; we had a very dry catchment. In terms of the effect of drought on the fire, as I said, for the past 10 years the whole of south-eastern Australia had a rainfall deficit. We had situations right through the winter where the fire danger index did not drop much below 100, which is just unheard of. We knew we were in for a tough summer. It was just a matter of when we got ignition. We got ignition — and David outlined the problems we had. With 80-odd strikes and the way it got away quickly we were always going to be in trouble.

The other effect on the fire and run-off was that because of the dryness — and you have heard in some of the other submissions today about the intensity of the fire — it did burn exceptionally hot and it has denuded about 600 hectares of the catchment of the Gippsland Lakes. A lot of the tributary catchments have been denuded of a lot of cover. So the impact of that on run-off and on soil erosion has been reasonably significant. We cannot give you the actual figures yet until we do some more analysis.

In the Macalister — I will make sure that this is available for you later — we had a 1 in 100-year event; in Lake Glenmaggie we had over 300 millimetres of rainfall, major flooding in the Thomson, Avon, Mitchell, Snowy and Traralgon Creek, significant floods in Cann, Genoa, Tambo and Nicholson. That represented about a 1 in 20-year flood in the Gippsland Lakes. About 56 000 hectares actually got inundated and 30 communities were impacted. The high rainfall in 2007 and the run-off moved significant amounts of light debris from burnt areas of fires into gullies and waterways and we did actually see significant damage to infrastructure — a lot of debris washed against bridges, a lot of roads washed out — so the combination of the two has meant that we have got some major infrastructure issues. There are a couple of slides around that, and we have got some members here from the water industry in Clinton and Allan, who is behind me, who can answer some questions.

The CHAIR — Could you give the committee your name and details of where you are from, Allan?

Mr McPHERSON — Allan McPherson, acting executive director, water industry, from the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that. There is a lot of detail there. I will ask a couple of questions but the first question I ask I do not want you to answer straightaway. I appreciate that all of the representatives here, including the CFA I might say, have been here all day listening to the different submissions. At the end, once we have finished questions, I would not mind if anyone — although you have touched on some of the stuff — were to respond to some of the submissions that were made earlier in the day. We have touched on those issues a little bit and they are still in my mind, but I think it would be beneficial for the committee. Some of those things have been raised with us but are unresolved in our minds. Is there, I guess, a DSE response above and beyond what you have said to some of those issues? You can answer that at the end.

I would like you to answer the following question now. You touched a little bit on where you access your water and your water points, with over 100 water points in the region, most being through stream flows. Some of the submissions we have had relate to fire dams in the parks system and their adequacy now. Are there things we can do now to capture whatever water might be available for future firefighting purposes in relation to fire dams but on public land? If anyone wants to answer that, and also where are we with that and what do we need to do?

Mr PENROSE — I will pass that one on to Dave. Obviously at the end of 10 years of dry we did actually have some struggles with water.

The CHAIR — Yes, I understand that.

Mr TAINSH — There is no doubt that in a year with a winter like we have just had we will probably move into this fire season with replenished rivers and water supplies. I think Gippsland is blessed by a natural river system, blessed by lakes and reservoirs, and we do have a vast array of dam availability. Where it is more problematic is if we do move into this predicted climate change, where in fact we do have regular lead-ins, that we really need to not so much do a lot of infrastructure work but we need to identify pre-season each year where our stocks are up and down. I think we went into last fire season with both the Country Fire Authority and ourselves trying to identify, with the shortage that we had, where would we go if we needed water, and in particular with more and more of a protocol to make sure that our first attack, I think, is that we basically need to get the water that is closest, but then we immediately go into the public land around, or into the rivers and streams and not suck out of private dams beyond a certain point. So I think — I might just be being an optimist — this year might be a year when our water supply situation is okay, but we more and more need to have a good stocktake each summer and learn where our water supply deficiencies are and then we can make arrangements, making sure that all our people, particularly our aircraft observers who are identifying where dams are, are contacted and all that information is known.

Mrs FYFFE — If I could just follow up on that access to water, what protocols are in place to replace the water that has been taken from private farm dams for use in fighting fires?

Mr TAINSH — There are initiatives that basically run through police and emergency services. There was a protocol last year for the first time that basically any person who had water extracted from their water supply could make an application through the municipal emergency resource coordinator, then that information would be verified by our agency as to whether we did, and then the water supply would be replenished.

Mrs FYFFE — So individual farmers have to make an application to have their water replaced? You do not automatically, once everything is settled down, say, 'We used your water; we'll bring it back'?

Mr TAINSH — No. The onus is very much on the individual to, I suppose, verify it. But there is also a responsibility for us to avoid using it, if we can.

Mrs FYFFE — But obviously you had to this year?

Mr TAINSH — Absolutely.

Mr PENROSE — And sometimes we are protecting their asset, as well.

Mrs FYFFE — We have heard today about the database of endangered species and the lack of resources to actually put the information that is being passed on to DSE onto a database. Does anyone know anything about that? Perhaps you could come back to us on that.

Mr INGRAM — Thanks for your presentation. I have a number of questions. Kevin Tolhurst in his submission and also at the public inquiry in Melbourne was reasonably critical of the department's staffing and the expertise contained in it. I do not want to put words in his mouth, but his comments were effectively that DSE employs basically generalist-type scientists who are pretty good at writing briefs and reports, but it needs to broaden out that expertise to include specialist scientific expertise in some areas and also that traditional bush skill which, in my interpretation, was what traditionally has come through local DSE and its predecessor officers through forestry and so on. His comment was that because of that generalist skill a lot of the expertise needed to determine requirements for fuel reduction and ecological burns and also understanding the bush and fighting fires seems to be lost in the DSE. Has anyone got a comment on that?

Mr PENROSE — I am going to field that to Ewan or Dave, but I will just say that, through 2003 and this last event, almost every staff member in all agencies was involved for nearly 69 days and the level of expertise that is there at the moment, comparatively, has been enhanced considerably through those events in this region. There are not too many people in the region now who have not had some sort of experience.

Mr INGRAM — His comment was particularly about the way that staff were employed and that there was more focus on employment of generalist scientists.

Mr WALLER — We would acknowledge that there is a workforce issue there, and we are addressing it. Going to the question of the specialists, yes, it really was shown up this year that we did not have anything like enough fire behaviouralists, which is Kevin's specialist skill, but there are a number of specialist areas like that where we need to invest more to get more people in there. There is no doubt about that. We are doing the training course at the moment, and that will be swinging into action very soon. So there are some specialist areas where we do have to employ and deliberately train people. The idea would be to then push them into the field. They are not going to be head office boffins; they are going to places like the Bairnsdales, Traralgons and whatever. We are suffering also from a trough following a period when there was not a lot of employment, during the 1990s. There was a trough there, where there was not a lot of employment coming through, and now we have a gap in our workforce planning, which we have to fill by recruiting a lot of young people, which we are in the process of doing, but there are also the baby boomers retiring at the other end. It is not uncommon. As with a lot of other industries, we have a workforce issue.

We often discuss the Cann River problem, as in getting young people to go to and stay in Cann River and doing exactly what we heard the task force talking about. People either love their Cann River and live and stay on in places like Cann River or they do not. That is not easy with the generation we have. I know that VicForests and others are deliberately employing locals. I think we have to look also at training locals in specialist skills and employing them and having a train of locals in some of these remote areas. So there are some workforce issues we have to work our way through. We still need generalists to do across-the-board work, and we will still, presumably, employ generalists, but then they get the generalists in and say, 'Have you got a special attribute that you do want to pursue in firefighting?'. As Neville was saying, we have the opportunity to go that specialist way, if need be. So we have some workforce issues, but we are working our way through them.

Mr PENROSE — I think it would be worth getting some more comments from Dave and Chris on this one, because I think there is a capacity there. Everybody who is now employed in the organisation has fire as part of their duty statement, so it is part of our core business, in a regional context.

Mr TAINSH — I would just like to put some positive stuff on the table. Now a large proportion of our current staff have been through 2003 and 2007, so we have seen two of the biggest events in Victoria's history, where now we have a large cross-section of staff that have extensive experience, probably more than people who have spent their entire years in forestry. We have people who have done two stints. We have incident management teams, both with ourselves and the CFA, that now are regarded highly interstate and internationally with regard to their management skills in high-incident wildfires.

I will put it up onto a slide for you tomorrow, but more importantly one of the successes of this particular campaign — we can talk about the things we did wrong — was that we had something like 750 kilometres of fire

edge on the Gippsland side. If you want to draw a line up the Princes Highway, you can see how far that takes us. It is an enormous amount. Up to 75 per cent of that was contained using back-burning techniques. Some of the best back-burning we have ever spotted has come out of people who are in their 30s and early 40s, who are going to be with the department for a long time. They have done some of the best technical back-burning operations seen. So that is a positive spin. Sure, we have the behavioural specialist thing we need to fix and we perhaps need to have some specialist areas, but in terms of broad experience, we have had more people exposed to firefighting in Victoria than ever before.

Mr ROSE — I have just one comment to add. The fire ecology stuff that Neville was talking about — how do we shift the debate to one where fire is good for the bush — both organisations are now investing very heavily in skills, to help us take on that debate, saying, ‘Model fire is bad fire’ and ‘Fire is good for the bush and it’s good for asset protection’. How do we combine the two, to actually roll out a program? That is a real skill set that we are developing.

Mrs PETROVICH — To whoever would like to answer it: I was very interested in your demonstrated visions for the future, your 365-day approach and your ecological burns being accepted by the community, your fuel reduction burns and your strategic firebreak networks. Has this program been implemented to date, and if so, what type of improvement is this on your previous vision and action plan?

Mr PENROSE — I will ask a couple of others to follow up, but the whole journey through the drought really has been one of coping with a change in the challenge that the dry forest has presented us. We started to see fire behaviour in the middle of winter that we had not seen before. We knew that things were changing. Some of our normal techniques were not working and we had to start to change our approach. So it has been a very adaptive sort of process. But we have adapted to these changes, and I think that now it is a matter of upgrading the planning framework and the consultation with the community to actually embed that thinking more broadly out there. I know that, as an agency, the fire people who are working fire all the time are continually modifying the approach to meet the challenge that the conditions have imposed on us. We are not dealing with a standard set of conditions here, we are dealing with dry forest conditions that nobody has really seen before in their lifetime. The behaviours and so on were totally out of left field. Normal approaches did not work.

Mr TAINSH — First I have to say that with the majority of the visions it is not like we are starting from scratch. A lot of them are building on what we have currently done. There are two areas where I believe new work and significant work is required, and the first one is — it has been mentioned today — to apply appropriate risk management strategies for burning. Through the history of the last 10 years there have been occasions where you would probably judge that people in the department or in Gippsland to my knowledge might have been risk averse, or nervous, because of things that may happen to them or because of the risk of litigation or whatever. What we have to do when we are putting together a risk management strategy for a particular burn is consider its location. As Marg Stevens said earlier, in far East Gippsland the risk of a fire escaping causing damage is far less than for a burn lit next to Walhalla. The work to be done is to have an appropriate risk management strategy, but even if you take all of that into account and you do have an escape, there needs to be a fundamental change in the way the community and the departments and government consider escapes. That is new and fairly important work.

The next one is about the firebreak network. There is no doubt whatsoever that we have done the work and we are going to continue to market the work, but there is a huge investment needed from government to go the next step.

Mr WALLER — We will be coming back with a package of initiatives and policy changes which we are working on at the moment. Some are things we have touched on today, but there will be other ones as well. There are quite a number of initiatives that we are working on at the moment, so we will be coming back to the committee at some later date with those.

Mrs PETROVICH — How long has this work been in progress, Ewan?

Mr WALLER — It has been evolving. It has been going on for quite some time, a lot of it. Some of it was in our initial submission, but there will be more as we develop it. Some of it is actually coming from hearing people through this hearing and through this committee. But there is some really good work going on behind the scenes.

Mr VINEY — I have a complex sort of question in a way. I am interested in the discussions that you have been having or the proposition you have put to us about changing the way that you present the need for burning by

using different language, which, it appears to me, is one of the problems — in other words, you are using language about fuel reduction burning and prescribed burning which can be technical language that is not necessarily accessible to the community. Once you change that language you might have different community attitudes to what you are trying to do. What I am interested in is: do you anticipate that, if there is a changed community attitude, you are going to do an increased amount of burning? Do you think that you have not done enough over the years? Do you concede that point — which is a common submission coming to us — that you need to do more and that part of the restriction has been trying to get general community support for that process? Is that part of what you are saying?

Mr WALLER — The target we are working to is 130 000 hectares, and this year we met that target. Two years ago we nearly met it with 127 000 hectares, so we have been nearly there in the last couple of years. If you take that as the target and as a base, then over quite a number of years we have not gotten near there, so obviously there is a backlog. I would say straight from the start that there is a backlog and there is work to be done in catching up. I take that point. What that actual figure is and where we should be aiming for is — as Chris said — part of the ecological work we have to do as the ecological base for a lot of the work, but that is also tied in with asset protection. What the target will be is a work in progress, actually, but we are working to 130 000 hectares, and that will be governed a lot by the windows of opportunity that we do have. This year we had quite an extended period, and we met that target. That is the scene that is set at the moment.

Mr VINEY — On what basis has the target been set at 130 000 hectares?

Mr WALLER — Actually it was set before I came on as chief officer, but my understanding was it was worked out through the resourcing we had and what that could achieve. And looking back over the history of the windows of opportunity you get — the number of burning days in these burning periods — that was the basis.

Mr VINEY — So really it is a capacity basis rather than a needs basis?

Mr WALLER — Yes. We could discuss resourcing, but that is about what we can achieve at this point in time.

Mr PENROSE — I guess the other shift in that, though, is the 365-day shift, and that is to move a bit more from response to prevention and to look at how that can work over the whole year rather than putting all your effort into responding to the incident — that is, to actually look at fire, as Chris was talking about, as part of the whole year and right across the whole environment.

Mr VINEY — Part of the response now is to try to move to a needs-based plan of what the forest needs?

Mr PENROSE — Yes, if you like.

Mr VINEY — What the public land needs for its management, rather than the capacity of the department?

Mr PENROSE — Yes, that is right.

Mr TAINSH — Just to comment on that, 130 000 hectares is the current strategic target. Quite clearly we now have people working between us and Parks Victoria who are what we are calling fire environment officers, and they are in fact targeting certain areas to look at the requirements of fire-regime burning and to get a hectare figure of what needs to be burnt out there bit by bit from an ecological perspective. What we are getting is that if in fact we address the burning requirements as determined by the ecological objectives, we will come out with more than 130 000 hectares. It might be publicly more acceptable, and then it is just a matter of matching resources to it.

Mr ROSE — Just to add to that, there are parts of our forest estate that require more fire, and we have been underdoing them; there are parts of our forest estate that require less fire as a result of some of these intense wildfires that we experienced. Hypothetically speaking, if there were no communities, then you would burn according to those mixes. You add into those the asset protection mix, and therefore you end up with the burning requirement each year, and it will vary depending on the needs of the forests and parks.

The CHAIR — I will take two more questions before we wind up. We are already half an hour over our allocated time, but I appreciate the extensive contribution you are making.

Mr INGRAM — I would like to go back to the Gippsland fire protection plan. My understanding is that it is a 10-year plan, and I would assume that the original target set in the Gippsland 1999 plan was based on asset protection and also ecological targets. Do you intend to keep those targets within there? My understanding is that 119 000 hectares was the Gippsland target for fire burns every year, and the figures you put up before indicate that you have not met 50 per cent of those targets for probably two decades. Has the major restriction on that been human resources over two decades? If you have not met 50 per cent of the targets in two decades, clearly that means you have not had the resources to put them back in. That cannot be due to weather over two decades, can it? First of all, the fire protection plan and the ecological targets within there: how are we going to meet those targets in the future with that limit in resources?

Mr TAINSH — I have an intricate knowledge of the 1999 plan, and I might hand over to Ewan on the future planning, if you do not mind. The 1999 plan was basically almost entirely driven from a fire protection perspective based on zone 123, and there was a notional 5000 hectares that were put in per year that we thought might have the ecological tag, being small ecological burns associated with orchid management or whatever, but not large-tract ecological burning. So zone 123 basically determined how we got our 119 000 hectares. I would like to think that in future plans we still should define an annual target, but again that might be something that the department's executive will have to tidy up. Ewan?

Mr WALLER — I like targets. I think they should be in there. That is a personal view. I think one thing that really drives us is that 130 000-hectare target which is reported on in Parliament and whatever. I really like it, and that really reaches right down to the furthest corner of Victoria, which I think is good. As to whether it goes into new planning, I believe it should. It is one of the things, even though it is a bit of a black-and-white measure, that does give us something to really work against.

Also on targets, when you ask whether it is a resourcing issue, it is too easy to just dump on resourcing. I think one thing we are looking at is efficiencies. I reckon we can get a lot more efficient, using more aircraft than people on the ground maybe, and some of the freeing up of how we are ensuring we have the community outside more than we have right now, and buying in right across the board. If we do that we actually can burn bigger areas and use aircraft more. There is also a need for the community to accept the risk that is there, so that instead of saying it is all the department's fault if something goes wrong, the community can say 'Okay, this is what living with fire in these times means', and be more adaptive. That is some of the work that we are doing. I think we can make great gains in how we approach the job rather than actually how the job is done.

Mr INGRAM — Do you have a problem with resources because of the sort of summer fire season that you have and the fact that, when you really need to be doing fuel reduction burns, particularly if you get opportunities through those winter months, your staff has to be on leave in that period; and would you not be better off moving to a permanent fire crew rather than a summer crew?

Mr WALLER — If you are burning in those sorts of cooler periods the same risks are not there; it is just a matter of who is available to do it. Again, it might be aircraft, or it might be some other way of doing the process. It does not necessarily need the same care as it does when you are, say, burning in the shoulder period when the risks are far higher. There will always be staff around to do the burning if it is protected; we can do some burning in, say, Mallacoota in the middle of winter. I do not think that is an issue. I do not think the staffing would be an issue.

Mr TAINSH — Can I just add to that? There is no doubt that we need a peak force such that we do not need at other times, so definitely we have to identify a peak force, where we have a summer crew on. In the past we were saying that our fire season was three or four months. Now we are saying that with the burning season or the period where there is a likelihood of burning, we want to be highly operational from about October through to about the end of May. That is when we should have our people, and then we can take opportunities outside that with the resources we have. But with that comes a staffing plan that suggests the old theory of working all summer and taking the opportunity to give people a spell in wintertime. We have to go away from that. We have to make sure from a fatigue perspective that we are managing our staff's welfare and their leave for 12 months of the year. In some cases it may very well be that we allow a greater number of people to be away in January and February so that they are in fact fresh for the burning season, and not already exhausted.

Mrs FYFFE — Basically I guess this question is for Barry Vaughan. The timber industry is really important to this area. How successful have the salvage logging operations been since the fires?

Mr VAUGHAN — I think one of the key successes of this salvage period has been the speed with which we have commenced the operations. After the 2003 fires it took approximately 12 months before the first sawlogs were taken from the burnt area. This time around we were actually salvaging areas near Traralgon prior to the fire being extinguished in Swifts Creek. So the response was quicker than immediate. Currently in the Tambo Valley, which is part of the area that I look after — I do not look after the area to the west of that, so the detail on that is more vague — we have increased our contracting workforce from seven halves to about 11, and so in my opinion we have accelerated in an admirable sense. Notwithstanding that, there is still a lot of work left to be done over probably the next 12 months to ensure that we secure the maximum amount of sawlogs from that burnt area.

Mrs FYFFE — Did the heavy rains and the floods slow down the work? I understand that you have obviously been much faster, as you say, than in 2003.

Mr VAUGHAN — Yes. June and July have been very difficult months for the timber industry in salvage and non-salvage areas, so that has slowed our progress. But the infrastructure has not been limiting in East Gippsland. We have been able to manage the small amount of damage that the floods caused to the roads.

The CHAIR — Does anyone want to take up the opportunity of answering my first question or anything that was raised earlier?

Mr PENROSE — Just one quick one. We will extend that PowerPoint presentation to tomorrow, when we will take a bit more time to put some of the things to do with water that did not actually end up being shown today.

The CHAIR — Thank you, I look forward to that.

Mr TAINSH — I will just start the ball rolling with some responses. In a positive sense, we have spoken all afternoon about fuel reduction burning and prescribed burning. I think we are all in total agreement on that. I think we are all saying that fuel reduction burning is the way forward. So it is how, when and how much that we have to continue to work on.

Firebreaks have come up right through every presentation. Again, we concur; but again, it is about the levels and the standards and so on. Community engagement and keeping the community informed is the way forward. I think Bruce Esplin said in one of his presentations to the fire managers that we have almost taken the technical part of the way we do business to a high, and now the real improvements will be seen in regard to information exchange and how we convey all the information about what is happening to the communities, to government and to other people who need to know. That is the bit we need to work on. One thing that we will probably have to emphasise is that we cannot go away from careful planning. Whilst we might want to relax it and make it a little more flexible, planning and adherence to code is an important part, so we cannot throw out the planning process.

On the idea, I suppose, of re-establishing small satellite work centres throughout Gippsland, whilst we agree that that provides more resources and focused commitment of local resources to a particular area, we do have to rely on the efficiencies of a critical mass at particular locations and we have to rely upon mobility, but making sure that we have locals to guide the mobility. So we are going to be restricted to a certain number of centres from a resourcing and efficiency perspective, but we do have to tap into local knowledge; we need to delegate and trust the locals to do the job. But we are not about to reopen centres that are gone.

The CHAIR — We can touch on some of those tomorrow morning. I thank you all very much for the very detailed submissions. We look forward to going on some inspections tomorrow morning. All of you who have participated in the hearing will get a copy of the transcript of your evidence. Thank you for your contributions.

Witnesses withdrew.