

**ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

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

Bairnsdale — 31 July 2007

Members

Ms J. Duncan  
Mrs C. Fyffe  
Mr C. Ingram  
Ms T. Lobato

Mr J. Pandazopoulos  
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Witness

Mr G. Dear, chief executive officer, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

**The CHAIR** — For the record I will just go through the formalities again. I welcome you, Graeme, and note that all evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege and all evidence given today of course is being recorded. There is a transcript version that you will get, with instructions. We thank you very much for joining us and hope you will take questions after your presentation.

**Mr DEAR** — Thanks, Chair and committee members. The authority's presentation and the authority's submission was based on the East Gippsland Regional Catchment Strategy. The regional catchment strategy is a strategic framework for natural resource management in East Gippsland. It is established every five years, under the CALP act 1994. It is based on extensive community consultation, with members of the public, agencies and also government bodies within the region and also within the Victorian and federal governments. The strategy is endorsed by the agriculture and environment ministers of the commonwealth and Victorian governments. So all of the items mentioned in the submission are based on that strategy. The strategy was completed in 2005. There are about four general topics covered in the submission. The first one is the need for larger scale controlled burns in the Crown land estate in East Gippsland — which takes up about 80 per cent of the region's actual land area — especially now in areas east of the Snowy River, which is a part of East Gippsland which has not been effectively managed for controlled burning for some time, for various reasons.

One of the issues when looking at large-scale controlled burns is that the word 'controlled' needs a new definition, so that we see that whilst there is a need for increased controlled burns, we need to accept the reality that if governments attempt to increase controlled burning, there is a greater risk that those burns will escape the boundaries. The more you attempt to burn in any given area, the more difficult it is to control that burn. So if the community needs greater or increased controlled burning, there is another side. They need to accept the risk that there is a chance for those controlled burns to escape.

The other item is strategic firebreaks. There is potential in some areas to establish strategic firebreaks maintained with native grass cover. Grasses are seen as more effective because they are fast in recovery, so if those areas are burnt you can establish grass faster than you can vegetation, and grass is still a very effective nutrient trap. Those breaks can be quickly brought back to being effective with the use of grass. Those breaks would not be effective in the control of wildfire, but strategic breaks could be effective in the use of controlled burning — in other words, to put a boundary around a controlled burn. To do an increased level of controlled burning and also to manage strategic breaks does take increased resourcing, so again there needs to be a decision made — if you want increased controlled burns, there is a resourcing issue for the departments which are asked to do and manage the burning. We say that is fine, but based on predetermined outcomes — so if there is an increased resource and it needs to be linked to a predetermined outcome or a target.

The other topic is water supply catchments. In this region there are specific areas zoned for water supply. One example is the Nicholson catchment, which has a special area assigned as a water supply catchment. The Mitchell in its entirety is a specially zoned water supply catchment. The Snowy has special zoning for water supply and so does the Bemm. So we believe we need higher intensity fire prevention works in those areas of water supply catchments. That is to protect the quality of the water and the quantity of the water, so we can plan and utilise that water for the future use of East Gippsland communities.

Just on the water supply catchments, after the 2003 fires there was a study completed that looked at the impacts of long-term water supply in those burnt catchments. The study is not yet fully completed, it is not yet released; but we would encourage the government to now utilise the methodology in that study to explore the impacts also of the latest fire — the 2006-07 fire. So for long-term planning we can determine the potential impacts on water supply and water quality into the next 15 or 20 years. That is the extent of the authority's submission, Mr Chair.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Mr Dear. You highlighted towards the end of your submission your study in relation to the water-quality impacts of the bushfires. I think in your submission you said that the Snowy catchments after the 2002-03 fires were reduced by up to 50 per cent. Noting that that report is not done — I do not know if it is in draft form at the moment — are we likely to see something similar in terms of the effects on water quality and quantity issues in your CMA region? Also, is the study looking at: if we are to increase burn-offs, what is that additional potential cost to water quality and quantity as well?

**Mr DEAR** — The initial study was about water quantity and not quality. The work that was done after the 2003 fires was about quantity, and particularly the study was trying to address that as native vegetation recovers there is a water yield requirement for the vegetation to recover, so the study is looking to address the impact of that growing or regrowing forest on the quantity of water for up to 100 years. There are initial findings in that study that say in areas such as the Snowy there could be a 50 per cent impact in the medium to longer term on water quantity. It does not address the quality issues I cannot address that question for you, but the needs now after 2006–07 are again to look at the impacts on quantity of water as a result of those fires. By assumption, if the methodology used in the initial study is correct, we will see significant impacts on long-term water quantity in the catchments of the Mitchell and Tambo rivers as a result of fires in this region.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — Thank you for your submission; that was very interesting. In some areas we have already heard that fire access tracks and breaks that were created during the last year's fires have been revegetated. Are the firebreaks currently significant enough and is there enough energy put into maintaining permanent firebreaks to protect catchments, water quality and quantity?

**Mr DEAR** — I think that what you probably would have heard, I might be wrong, but I believe that the tracks have been rehabilitated; in other words, the trees that had fallen over when those firebreaks were put in, during the emergency, and then replaced is designed to try to reduce the amount of sediment run-off as a result of those breaks, or caused by the those breaks. Revegetation is a different matter; it takes time to establish, so those breaks and the revegetation of those breaks will take several years and it will be quite slow. The works were there to try to reduce the impact of run-off and to encourage the revegetation, but that will take some time. What is not specified are specific strategic breaks that are maintained just for the purposes of a break throughout the regions, especially in areas where we had another specific need, like in a water supply catchment. The idea is that those breaks would be cleared of wooded vegetation and grassed up with native grasses specifically so you can manage controlled burning-off in those breaks. My answer to you is no, those types of breaks are not in existence and there is a need to establish those types of breaks.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — In an ideal world what sort of width are we talking about in these significant breaks?

**Mr DEAR** — I think that is a matter for DSE to answer. I think DSE officers, who are experienced in bushfire and in fire management and fire behaviour, are the ones to answer those sorts of questions. All I can say is that the need has been identified in the regional catchment strategy, but DSE has the true expertise, not our authority.

**Mr VINEY** — Good to see you again; thank you for your submission. Various parts of your submission refers to things like patchwork burning, and later to the need for ecological burning. Please take the committee through the environmental issues associated with prescribed burning and how you see that in this catchment.

**Mr DEAR** — The regional catchment strategy talks about patchwork burns and it also talks about the need for burning based on the actual vegetation's need. I will start with the patchwork burning. The idea of patchwork burning is that in remoter areas in our region, of which there are a lot, we establish large areas of burn and effectively the controlled burn organises itself, where it actually burns and where it does not. That is the idea of patchwork. You have some areas of native vegetation that have been burnt this year, and another area that has not been burnt for 10 or 20 years, so that you do not have a consistent heavy fuel load throughout the forest. That is the idea of patchwork; like a patchwork quilt if you like. The idea of burning according to the needs of the vegetation is a much more complex one. The term we use in this submission is an EVC, an ecological vegetation class. One example of an ecological vegetation class might be rainforest. There are rainforest stands east of the Snowy area that really do not like being burnt because that type of vegetation establishes in areas that do not burn. Another example of an ecological vegetation class would be grey box forests, and those sorts of areas, stand up to burning quite regularly. The regional catchment strategy talks about, where you control the burns, to do it based on the needs of the vegetation, to burn with a regularity that we know the vegetation thrives on and likes to exist in, and that is the idea.

**Mr INGRAM** — I have a two-pronged question. The CMA is involved in strategic policy direction, like the regional catchment strategy. It probably has a limited involvement in public land management with that. I suppose the question is whilst you are developing regional catchment strategies how much involvement in that strategic policy direction should CMA have on public land management in general? The other issue, which I do not

think you answered in this submission, is how much impact on your catchments and river health have the fires in 2003 and 2007 had in your view?

**Mr DEAR** — I will start with the first one. The concept of the regional catchment strategy is that it is a plan written for all the community of East Gippsland — government, agencies and community. The way it is written is that whilst our authority has got the responsibility to write the document and prepare it, it is prepared in consultation with our partners. There is community input to the strategy; there is government agency and department input to the strategy. In the areas where it talks about the fire and fire regime, effectively those sections of the strategy are written with our departmental partners — with the people who have the skills. The strategy, whilst written by us, is prepared with our partners, in consultation with our partners. DSE, for instance, is one of those vital partners. You will find a lot of those words are written by them.

The CMA's involvement in public land management again comes down to the fact that implementation of the strategy is not just the CMA's role; it is the role of departments and agencies and community. There are aspects of actions in the strategy which are not completed by the authority; they are completed by the agencies and departments responsible for management of public land. The actual responsibility for the Crown estate rests with DSE and they are responsible for implementing those actions of fire management over the Crown. Day to day our authority does not have much active involvement in that.

The second question you asked was about the impacts on catchments. There is no doubt the fires would have impacted on the health of those catchments quite seriously in the short term, as has been evidenced by the impacts on the Snowy, sediment inflows into the Snowy, since the 2003 fires; and also the sediment inflows into the Mitchell River as a result of the 2006-07 fires are quite significant to the impact on the community in terms of water quality and quantity, but I cannot quantify those impacts yet. Obviously there is research that needs to be done into the long-term impacts of those fires and it could well be that the long-term impacts are not that severe but we do not know. It is really the subject of further research.

**Mr INGRAM** — Research was done in 2003, and that is reasonably detailed research, on the number of the water flows out of the 2002 catchments?

**Mr DEAR** — Yes, on water quantity.

**Mr INGRAM** — Is that reasonably good data?

**Mr DEAR** — Yes, it is. The study was completed with a consortium of people with expertise in hydrology and we believe the study is quite firm in its foundation, and the results of the study, we believe, are quite solid. It is just a matter of getting that study signed off and then repeated for the 2006-07 event. We believe in quantity terms — in river flows and quantity — that those studies are as accurate as we can produce.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for the submission. You will get a transcript with instructions. We thank you very much for joining us today and informing us.

**Witness withdrew.**