

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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Mr B Esplin, emergency services commissioner, Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner.

The CHAIR — I would like to declare open the first of the Parliament of Victoria Environment and Natural Resources Committee's hearing on the inquiry into the impact of public land management practices on bushfires in Victoria. I ask you to turn off your mobile phones if you can for the session. I welcome Bruce Esplin, the emergency services commissioner. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments made 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 Esplin, would you care to make a presentation to the committee before we go to questions? I thank you for joining us today, and I thank also the audience in the gallery.

Mr ESPLIN — Thank you, Chair. Can I just say at the outset that the views expressed in the written submission, which I have already provided, and in this presentation are my views. The Victorian whole-of-government position will be provided by the Department of Sustainability and Environment at a later stage. My views are focused on the emergency management and the public safety implications of public land management, not on any other policy area as such. To place my views in context, they are based on the reviews and the ongoing community interaction and consultation that has been undertaken since 2003.

The Victorian Bushfire Inquiry resulted in an ongoing community engagement program with regional communities affected by fire, and unfortunately we have had a number of fires since that time. The purpose of my visits with communities was to assess what changes have occurred and to identify where further changes are necessary. Many of the recommendations made in 2003 have been implemented, and the remainder, generally longer term issues, are nearing finalisation. I would say that in my judgement improvement is apparent, but the recommendations work not in isolation but in combination and the substantial improvements that the community expects in our fire management in this state will come and the benefits will be achieved over time. For many of the recommendations there is no completion date. If I look back in history, one of the problems and one of the mistakes we have made is to see improvements in fire management as a project, not a period of ongoing change.

When dealing with the issue of fire in Victoria I believe we must accept that fire, and bushfire in particular, is one of the most recognised and recurring emergency hazards in Victoria and in Australia. Despite that, many people, particularly in our urban cities, do not understand the place of fire in the environment, either fuel-reduction burning or bushfire more generally. Bushfires are a natural occurrence. They are part of the Australian environment, and certainly they are part of the history of Victoria. They will never be completely prevented but more can be done to mitigate their impact. One of the challenges that I think I face in my role, and I think this committee will face over the course of its inquiry, is to create the environment where people respect the risk of bushfire but are not afraid of it, nor do they treat it with complacency.

There are many recurring themes in fire management that are very evident in our history, but regrettably, despite this rich history, important and recurring lessons seem to periodically be forgotten or lose prominence. Periods of intense investment, activities, change in fire management are invariably followed by apathy and complacency after a few quiet fire seasons. I think that is the challenge that we face as a state now — how do we deal with maintaining people's willingness, interest and engagement in fire management?

One of the critical constants that I am confronted with is that bushfire does not respect public and private land boundaries; neither should good fire management practice. I am sure other presentations to you throughout the course of your inquiry will make that point very clear.

My submission is based around five key factors. The first is that people that I speak to have convinced me that the build-up of fuel in our forests has been occurring for decades — it is not a recent phenomena. I think the second point is that the climate change risk is very real and has become a major challenge for how we plan, prepare and respond to fire. The third point is that I think while it is obvious that response capacity is vital, the focus of our effort must shift to further improvement in the prevention and mitigation of bushfires. While prescribed burning is the obvious vital tool, it must be acknowledged that it will not in isolation prevent all bushfire. The fourth point is that responsibility for fire management is very much a shared responsibility, and is only achievable if everybody works and plans together. Finally, the fifth point I would make is that communication between agencies, across government and most importantly with the community will be a critical determinant to any success that we are able to achieve.

If I could turn, firstly, to prescribed burning, the place of fire in the landscape is not well understood, especially in Australia's capital cities, as I indicated earlier. Prescribed burning is not without its own inherent risk, yet it is a critical tool in the firefighter's toolkit. Much research indicates that it can significantly assist bushfire suppression activity by reducing fire's rate of spread. Similarly, other research shows that if it is not done regularly and repeatedly then the build-up of fuel can actually increase following patchy periods of fuel reduction burning. Communities I visited, and I guess it comes from the people I know and have come to respect, tell me the problem of fuel loads in our forest has been building for perhaps 50 years or more.

If that point is accepted, then the process of change to address that build-up of fuel will take time — it cannot be achieved in one, two or three years. It will require very much a sustained commitment from the fire services, from the public land managers, from all levels of government and, importantly, from communities too. Change and improvement will be incremental. The benefits of change will accrue over many years and they will be cumulative. As I said, there is no quick fix to this issue.

In 1982 McArthur et al stated:

Changes cannot be introduced overnight and the process must be a gradual one in the future as it has been in the past.

I would argue that prescribed burning has all the characteristics, challenges and requirements of unplanned fire or wildfire, and must therefore be managed in the same way. That was one of the major thrusts of the report we did into fuel reduction burning following the Wilsons Promontory escape. Similarly, in the Victorian bushfire inquiry we recommended a 365-day year-round approach to fire management to provide consistency in the approach to fire resourcing regardless of its origins — planned or unplanned.

Fuel reduction burning must be carried out in a way that is not only effective but, most importantly, in a way that increases the safety of Victoria's community and their assets. The window, as many people will say, for safe and effective prescribed burning is very short. It means we must take every opportunity available to burn. The policies, the processes, the communications, the command and control structures, the incident management systems, the community engagement that surrounds effective prescribed burning programs and the risk management practices must be aligned and effective, and they must be resourced accordingly.

It is not a question in my mind of whether fuel reduction burning should be undertaken, it is a question of how much, how often and in what pattern to improve community safety and to meet, obviously, ecological intentions also. I think many people would agree that there is no agreed science as to prescribed burning at this point. While that science is being developed, the focus of prescribed burning should be on asset protection. Having said that, there is a need, and room, for large mosaic burns which should be used to increase the variation in intensity and provide ecological benefits, thereby creating a mosaic of fuel conditions across a landscape can shift the spatial arrangement over a long period of time.

Fuel reduction burning, in my mind, should be measured by the strategic value of each burn and the cumulative effect of that burning program over time, and not simply on the basis of the number of hectares burnt in any one year. I think that is important — to put in place a reporting arrangement that allows for its cumulative benefits over time to be part of the way we measure its effectiveness.

If I could turn to climate change, environmental problems arise because of the interaction of people and environments. There is a growing acceptance around the world that climate change is real. A CSIRO report released last month — Victorian Climate Change Adaptation program — identifies an increased impact of drought and incidence of bushfires. Australia is not alone in experiencing the predicted climatic change, although Victoria is expected to warm at a slightly faster rate than the global average, particularly in the north and east of the state. That will have an increased fire risk impact. Victoria is expected to experience warmer, drier and longer summers, which are very likely to increase the frequency and intensity of bushfires.

Taking some Bureau of Meteorology data from the last fire season — 2006–07 — there were 44 fire weather warnings. The previous highest, no surprise, was in 2002–03 when there were 35. Looking back to 1984, the 22-year average for fire weather warnings was 16 fire weather warning days. In the past seven years that average has increased to 26 fire weather warning days — a 62 per cent increase. Last week the lead author of the intergovernmental panel on climate change, Professor Andy Pitman, told a conference in Sydney that days of extreme fire risk will increase between 25 per cent and 50 per cent by the year 2050, and that this prediction, in his mind, was a definite prediction regardless of any cuts that may be able to be made to carbon emissions in the future.

I would argue it is no longer relevant for us to talk about above-average fire seasons. Drought and bushfires are becoming the norm, wet years the exception. Already we are seeing enough evidence that fire seasons are starting earlier, they are lasting longer and, as indicated earlier, they are including more extreme fire weather days. There is very much a need for ongoing research in Victoria on developing and cleaning up our understanding of the impact of climate change, not just on fire but for other emergency situations also.

With the increased risk of fire associated with climate change and on the basis that the days available to burn are already few in number, legislative and regulatory arrangements should be streamlined to maximise our ability to strategically, safely and effectively carry out fuel reduction burning. The seasonal approach to fire prevention that perhaps was characterised before 2003 is definitely no longer viable. It is also, I think, very important to understand that fuel reduction burning is not a panacea. As fire danger increases, the benefits of fuel reduction burning decrease and at higher levels of fire danger, weather is more influential than fuel reduction burning in terms of successful suppression operations. That was a study by McCarthy and Tolhurst in 2001.

The increased severity of bushfire behaviour seen over the last five years is not unique to Victoria, nor indeed Australia. United States, the South of France, Italy, Spain and Greece, other countries prone to bushfire, are also experiencing significantly enhanced fire risk. A noted fire expert, Professor Stephen Pyne, a frequent author on fire management, argues that while the US has lost its firestick capacity, or its ability to use fuel reduction burning as a prevention tool, Australia has retained fuel reduction burning expertise and capability. That gives us a solid platform to build for the future change in fire risk environment that will accompany climate change. He says that Australia is almost unique among industrialised nations in retaining prescribed burning, but if the tool is relinquished it will be very, very difficult to get it back as a critical management tool.

In terms of prevention and mitigation, the scale of the increasing fire management problem, compounded by the impact of climate change, means we must adjust our focus and invest more in mitigation and prevention, but it also has to accompany our recognition that some fires, simply put, will not be suppressed. Our only option is to do more in the way of prevention, mitigation and community engagement to get as much groundwork done before the fire season starts.

As early as 1968 Athol Hodgson indicated:

Many authors have pointed out that fires can thus be started 30 or more kilometres ahead of the main fire. As we have seen in the spring fires in Victoria, the intensity of these fires, plus the spotting so far ahead of the flaming front, is so great that there is no way they can be stopped by the fire brigades. In fact, no firefighting capabilities of any nation could stop many of these fires.

There are repeated findings in the research in the 80s, and again more recently from the United States, that point out that there will be some fires that once they start they will not be able to be suppressed by the existing fire suppression systems.

Going back to the 80s, the forest commission data shows that before Ash Wednesday the extent of fuel reduction burning over the 10 years, from 73 to 74, preceding the Ash Wednesday fires, ranged from a low of 36 790 hectares to a high of 477 160 hectares in 1980-81, with the average area being treated being 191 000 hectares. The wide fluctuations in the area treated is related to seasonal conditions and the capacity to do the necessary work in the often limited periods of suitable weather. Despite that substantial burning pattern before, Ash Wednesday still happened; 47 people lost their lives including 14 volunteer firefighters; nearly 2100 structures were lost; 8000 people homeless; 210 000 hectares burnt.

The question that I think we need to resolve is how much should be burnt each year, how often and in what pattern? The states, the territories and the Australian government have made very substantial investment in the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre and the CRC is looking at the whole question of the science supporting and enabling fuel reduction burning. CRC has the heavy responsibility to develop the science to support that practice.

It is interesting that our thinking, our findings and our risk with fires at the moment mirrors that which is being found in the United States where there is increasing recognition that unless our approach to fire management alters, increasing fire risk will result in seasons that include one or more fires of the scale and intensity that no response capacities can suppress.

In support of that need for more fuel reduction burning, I think it is important to stress another point. From my position I am very concerned about the DSE and Parks Victoria fatigue. The same staff responsible for suppression are crucial to effective mitigation and prevention programs. As the bushfire seasons grow longer and the demands

for fuel reduction burning extend the prescribed burning season, there is a substantial pressure on key staff for long periods each year, and I wonder how long that will be sustainable without additional resources for those organisations. The interconnectedness between prevention response and recovery is becoming more and more critical.

There are signs of changes occurring since 2003 when the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry recommended a very inclusive approach to the way we manage fire response, recovery, prevention and planning. Building on the view that fire does not respect boundaries and neither should our planning, we recommended in 2003 a more integrated approach to fire management planning that took out the boundary between public and private land tenures. I think that process should be unfurling this year.

That is an area where I think there is great potential to make a difference in an inclusive way of planning for fire, ensuring that people's views are included, ensuring that local knowledge is included. I actually think that the process of integrated fire management planning, if it can be made to work — and I am confident it will — will be just as important as the outcome in giving the community the view that their voices can and should be heard in the way we plan and manage fire in this state. The planning process will obviously include prevention activities such as prescribed burning, identification of water supplies for firefighting, use of planning in by-laws powers by local government and many other critical tools in managing the fire risk in this state.

I said at the outset that fire management is a shared responsibility, one that must include local knowledge. Victoria's emergency management arrangements build on a policy position that communities should not be passive recipients of services. They should be very active participants in their own safety planning and in the decision-making processes that surround their safety. This participative approach requires government, land managers and fire services to move beyond being experts to actually becoming facilitators who work with communities to support that community participation. It also requires that communities be responsible for taking up the opportunities to have their voices heard. The time for sitting back and believing that no change will occur, despite whatever input, is gone. There is a process, there is a willingness on the part of the CFA, DSE and Parks Victoria to seek and utilise the input of communities. It is a responsibility of communities to take those opportunities when they are provided.

One of the mistakes we have often made after previous fires — and by 'previous fires' I am talking as far back as Black Friday 1939 — has been to consider fire management capacity building as a project: get the job done and then move on. The ongoing community consultation is essential. It is particularly important in resolving concerns relating to the interface between public and private land, and that planning process is just critical to get right. Individuals outside the fire agencies are often a rich source of knowledge and experience of previous fires and are able to provide substantial, accurate details of fires that have occurred in the past and to predict the likely path or impact of a fire once started. Land-holders want to be consulted; they want to have input on proposed actions, and they want to discuss the impact of actions that have been taken. Local knowledge in its different forms can make a very significant contribution to community safety, and applied wisely it can very strongly complement fire agency activity.

The Integrated Fire Management Plan will provide the scope for communities to be involved in a meaningful way from the earliest stage of the planning process right through to recovery. To get those planning and engagement processes and participative processes correct, communication needs to be right. The feedback, the information we were able to attract during our visits to the community, is very much that communication between agencies, government and the community is paramount in the success of fire management, and on the other hand poor communication between fire agencies and individuals can see small issues become a major source of dispute and even civil litigation. It is important that community members have an understanding of why decisions are made and why firefighting appliances are deployed in the way they are. Effective communication, in my assessment, can make the difference between a perceived success or failure of firefighting efforts. It is also important to identify clearly what the assets are in a community and what will be the priority for their protection.

To do this I think we need to modify the way we talk about fires and the way we report on fires. Frequently the reporting around fires communicates just what has been lost rather than strengthening an understanding of what has been saved, and there are many sets of data available now that indicate that the losses are very small compared to the saves that have been achieved in recent fire seasons. Where individuals have been critical of fire service performance it is often based on their expectations not being met and, more importantly, on reasons not having been communicated or their not being given the chance to have input into the way fires have been dealt with.

Despite that, community engagement I think is one of the strong successes in Victoria. In 2003 I think something like 8500 people attended community meetings. In the most recent fires of the summer 31 000 people attended community information meetings to learn what the fire was doing and what they could do to help themselves. This is creating an increasingly substantial demand for emergency information and is in its own right becoming a small source of resourcing implications for the fire services. Over 400 safety messages were issued by the fire agencies in the recent fire season, an average of six per day. Again that highlights the need to resource the community engagement and communications that the community has come to demand from our fire services.

The final point in communication is that communicating early after fires to resolve issues can make a substantial difference. Providing the community with a debrief meeting after the fire risk has passed can give the opportunity to the communities to have their voices heard, to raise any concerns and hopefully to create some closure and hopefully to clear up any frustrations that might exist.

In conclusion I would argue my reviews and community visits suggest that coordination and management of major fires is now occurring at a significantly higher level than was the case during 2002–2003. Much has changed since the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry. There has been more than \$200 million of additional funding invested in fire management. There is increased coordination between the fire services at the state and local level and stronger partnerships across the emergency services, resulting in a better response capacity across the state. There has been a huge uptake in community engagement and participation in fire management. The role of the ABC as the emergency broadcaster is widely and constantly complimented. There is a heightened community acceptance of the need for and benefits of fuel reduction burning. There is a much better take-up of local knowledge. In my assessment it is better integrated and better considered as part of not just the fire response but the planning for fire. And a strong improvement has been in the use of recovery support starting at the outset of the fire, not being seen as a sequential arrangement with the fire response.

Having said that, more can and needs to be done. The challenge now is to maintain those improvements and build on them while incorporating the new and emerging risks of climate change. I believe our focus must be an ongoing strategy for the build-up of fuel in our forests; an understanding and planning for the impact of climate change; a new approach to prevention and mitigation which includes the use of mosaic burns, more work on fire access tracks and permanent fire breaks as part of the protection of critical assets; more resources for prevention and mitigation; increasing opportunities to ensure all involved take responsibility and remain involved and engaged; and improved communication at all phases of planning for response and recovery.

Before I conclude I would like to stress that my presentation is focused on improvement and opportunities for further improvement, but I think it is really important that we do not overlook what has already occurred. In 1939, 1.6 million hectares was burnt, there were 71 deaths, 700 homes were lost, and countless stock and countless assets in forests et cetera were lost. In 1943 there were 42 deaths, and 700 homes, 1 million hectares of grassland and 160 000 hectares of forest were lost. In 1983 there were 47 deaths, including 14 volunteer firefighters, nearly 2100 structures were lost, 8000 people were made homeless and 210 000 hectares was burnt. In 2002–2003, 1.3 million hectares was burnt, 41 houses were lost and there was 1 death, which was not directly related to the fire. In 2005–2006, 180 000 thousand hectares was burnt, and there were 4 deaths. This summer 1.2 million hectares was burnt, there was 1 death and 41 homes were lost.

Bushfire preparedness is not something we do now for the bad years; it is something we must do all year every year. We have invested a lot in planning for terrorism and planning for events such as avian influenza, and we hope that those events will never happen. But bushfires will happen every summer, and improvements in planning capacity and resources will not be wasted. Victoria will be a safer place if they are applied. I thank the committee for the opportunity to provide this presentation.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Esplin, we appreciate that very much. Also I publicly commend you on your attendance at a number of community gatherings and forums. Obviously your input as the first organisation submitting formally to the inquiry is very much appreciated.

I will ask the first question before I pass it on to my colleagues. One of the functions of your office is to establish and monitor performance standards for the prescribed emergency services agencies. What have been the findings of this monitoring process? Are the outcomes reported annually, and are they reported also to the public?

Mr ESPLIN — My act requires that I provide those performance standards and monitor those standards. The Department of Sustainability and Environment is not a prescribed agency under the act. Now, having said that, I have had nothing but cooperation from that department and from Parks Victoria in working with them. We have been working with the parks and DSE following fuel reduction burns — for example, in the Wilsons Promontory fires — and working to see how those recommendations have been implemented since that time. They are not reported to Parliament at this stage. Our findings are reported in open reports usually or through the Department of Justice annual report.

Mrs FYFFE — Regarding the decision making for the resource applications in the Thomson, Macalister and Mitchell valleys, have you reviewed it? If you have, what recommendations have you made or will you be making?

Mr ESPLIN — I have not reviewed that particular piece of work yet. I am waiting to get access to the debriefs from the two fire services following their normal review of fire season performance. In terms of the Thomson catchment, I think the initial work that was looked at indicated that the fuel reduction burning work — the firebreak that was created — had a major impact on protecting that catchment. I think in part that has led to a government policy decision to look at the use of strategic, permanent firebreaks where they have an appropriately beneficial effect.

Mrs FYFFE — It was not what was done previously. It was the resource application during the actual fire period.

Mr ESPLIN — I had the opportunity to look at that before the fire season. The three fire services — and I include the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in that — developed a policy to protect the whole of the state over the course of what was expected to be a particularly long fire season and to maintain the capacity to respond to new-start fires that might have occurred in any part of the state during that long, difficult fire season. I think, regarding the resources applied to protecting the Thomson catchment, that I have not seen any negatives about that yet, but I have not looked at it in detail at this point.

Mrs PETROVICH — You talked about the firebreaks that were used for the Thomson area. If those methods were used in that area, can you answer me why were they not applied in the adjacent valleys? I think if they had been applied around Licola, it might have been a lot easier for those people.

Mr ESPLIN — In looking at the amount of firebreak that was constructed as protecting the Thomson, I think it needs to be looked at in total. I think there is something like 100 to 200 kilometres of firebreak created for the Thomson catchment, but the total firebreaks created exceeded 1000 kilometres of work. There was a lot of publicity given to the Thomson catchment protection, but there was a lot of other firebreak work done that had a material effect on minimising private property damage and losses.

I think it is part of the integrated fire management planning process that communities collectively need to establish where such firebreaks can and should be effective. They are not always effective. They are not a panacea, but they can have a major beneficial effect for the firefight that might be necessary.

Mrs PETROVICH — We know there was a slight difference in the sort of firebreaks that were used around those areas. If we had been able to use some of the broad stretches of firebreaks which were used around the Thomson and the amount of resources that were put into other areas, do you think it would have assisted some of those other communities?

Mr ESPLIN — I think it could assist, and I think that is why there is a policy to put in place the permanent firebreaks where they have a strategic beneficial effect. It will not be in every situation. In some fire situations I think many people would argue that they would have no impact or not the beneficial impact that people might say. It will be a situational strategy, and I think it needs to be dealt with as part of the integrated fire management planning process and that local communities and public and private land management sit together and work out strategically how to protect their area.

Mr INGRAM — Bruce, in your submission you made the comment that a number of reports have indicated that land managers are under pressure to increase the scale or efficiency of prescribed burning but suggested that this was impeded by the lack of support and resources. Can you expand on what resources are

required, considering that even the current targets for prescribed burning are only just about equal to what is recommended just in the Gippsland area for prescribed burning on an annual basis?

Mr ESPLIN — The point I was making is that over time there has been a fluctuation in the resources available for the programs of prescribed burning. I think it needs to be seen in context with my suggestion that there is no agreed science for how much, what pattern and how often. It also needs to be taken in context with my fear that there is fatigue in some of our public land management resources. I think that that is a problem that we need to address significantly. That will impact on the amount of burning that can be done, and it needs to be built onto the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre science of how we go about that mosaic burning. What is the most effective way to provide that pattern of burning that improves our fire safety but at the same time does not have too negative an impact on our ecological and environmental values?

Mr INGRAM — You made the comment that the firefighting has to be seen as a 365-day-a-year event and that funding for wildfire management comes out of Treasury and funding for prescribed burning comes out of DSE, so there is always a limit on how much can be done in the off season compared to an emergency event.

Mr ESPLIN — My recommendations in 2003 and again after the prescribed burning review at Wilsons Prom provided hopefully the arguments for more resources for DSE. I think there have been more resources. Out of that \$200 million of additional money that I indicated, more has gone to provide an ability to burn for longer, to do the burning program with so-called project firefighters et cetera. My argument is that with the fuel load build-up that has been occurring for so long and with the enhanced risk of climate change I think we need to look at that again. I believe that, if we are going to accept that prevention and mitigation should become a dominant focus, then it is quite likely that more resources will be required.

Mr VINEY — I am interested in two elements of your submission: the need for increased prescribed burning and also your comments on the potential impact of climate change. I am just interested in your comments on an observation that it would appear that, if you are going to increase the amount of prescribed burning, with the impact of climate change, firstly, the climate change is going to reduce the number of windows for prescribed burning and probably increase the danger — I would expect — of prescribed burning in large parts of the forest that at that time of year would normally be wet. I am interested in your observations on bringing together the two separate elements of the submission.

Mr ESPLIN — Sure. I will put my comments about the danger of fuel reduction burning in context. The number of escapes is comparatively small, but the escapes when they do occur can have a major impact on the public's confidence in that program. And our research into the program indicated that the number was very small by comparison, but the impact it had on the public's confidence seemed to far outweigh that issue.

Now the view that I am given by the communities that I speak to is that, if a back fence goes here and there, the safety benefits far outweigh it. There is a very strong and powerful argument by the communities I visit that more burning needs to be undertaken, particularly the burning that will protect their assets. So there is, I believe, an acceptance on the part of those communities that live close to the fire and live in areas of high fire risk that the burning program needs to occur.

I guess the point I make in this is my statement about the whole notion of fire in a landscape not being well understood, particularly by people in Melbourne. There can frequently be an outcry against fuel reduction burning — either its impact on tourism or its impact on the environment — yet large, very hot fires are having a much more destructive impact on our landscape than any low-intensity fuel reduction burn would ever have. So I argue that there is very much a need to increase the awareness in Melbourne and in Sydney or wherever else that fuel reduction burning is a critical tool in the toolkit. It does carry risk, and there needs to be some acceptance of that risk and some willingness to accept that occasionally, despite the most appropriate risk management planning, a burn might escape. Now the people living close to those fires are the ones who tell me that they can accept that risk. They want that activity to occur.

Mr VINEY — Do you agree that the potential for that to occur, the time frames when that can occur, will get less with climate change?

Mr ESPLIN — I think it will. I think DSE and Parks Victoria need to look again at the process of fuel reduction burning to see again whether there are any obstacles to being able to take every opportunity to get that burning undertaken. Prior to the Wilsons Prom review I think it could have been said that the protocols and the

approval arrangements around lighting up a burn were fairly intense and fairly bureaucratic. I think we need to make sure that with those conditions that you have articulated the opportunities to burn can be taken — every opportunity can be taken to effectively safely burn. That means we need a risk management approach, but it has to be as flexible and as effective an approach as we can put in place to make sure that opportunities to burn are not lost because of the bureaucratic regulations and red tape.

Mr VINEY — I guess what follows from that in terms of resource requirements, which I guess is one of the issues we are going to have to consider, is that if you have got less time in which to do more burning, then the days when there are prescribed burns are going to be pretty intense.

Mr ESPLIN — They are, but I think the corollary to that is that as we warm it may be possible for days in winter to be suitable for prescribed burning, so it may be that the number of days increases because the climate generally is warming, and it may be that there is value in looking at some of the burning that can be undertaken in what previously might have been considered to be unsuitable weather conditions. Maybe it will, on its own, create almost a natural mosaic. There will be areas that burn well, there will be gullies and other areas that do not burn so well, and perhaps that will create its own form of mosaic in addition to the planned mosaic burning that the public land managers will undertake. Again I think it is in the planning, and the planning means we have to be available and freethinking and flexible in the way that burns are planned for and undertaken.

Ms DUNCAN — I understand you are currently assessing this year's fire response compared to the 2003 bushfires. Can you provide for us an overview of that process and what the key findings have been to date?

Mr ESPLIN — It is an ongoing process, and obviously it has been slightly delayed by preparing for our appearance in front of this inquiry, but it builds first on going and visiting communities affected by fires and it builds on the debriefs undertaken by the fire agencies themselves and the findings that they have established. It looks back to 2003 and the issues that we found there. We try to establish what has changed and what needs to change further. There will always be changes, in my experience, and it is now something in the order of 20 years — I hate to admit — but there are always lessons from any emergency that we review. I think there is almost a moral imperative on finding learnings and improvements out of every disaster, every fire, every other emergency that we undertake.

So it will be a long process, and I would hope that we would, well before the fire season, be in a position to come back with further findings about what was the performance over the last summer and how does it compare to 2003. I would say by August-September we would be in position to have further information about what the community is saying, what we have found, what has changed and what needs to change further.

Ms LOBATO — I guess my question follows on from Joanne's, and that is that your previous report re the 2002–2003 fires found that the current legislative and regulatory arrangements relating to planning and mitigation for unplanned fires did not effectively cover all the agencies and utilities in terms of broader regional planning. Is this still the case?

Mr ESPLIN — Yes, it is, and the integrated fire management planning process is meant to redress that issue. One of the issues is it is not just a case of DSE, Parks Victoria and local councils sitting at a table planning. It needs to include other critical infrastructure providers — for example, power companies with easements running through railway lines and other organisations that have some involvement in fire. VicRoads needs to be at that planning table. One of the issues that has been brought to my attention already is some of the complaints about road closures that occurred during and immediately after fires and the impact on getting fodder and other supplies through to farmers in areas. So I think there is an opportunity for local emergency plans to be far more developed in terms of some of those issues such as road closures, but it needs everybody to be sitting round that planning table.

One of the key findings in relation to the integrated planning process is that there are some issues that need to be looked at regionally. Looking at them at a local government area is too small, and some of the organisations involved have very much a regional or even a state level interest. So the process is in three parts: a local planning, a regional planning and a state level policy planning. It is meant to pick up all of those issues and ensure that everybody who has an interest in fire management is sitting round that planning table at the right level.

The CHAIR — Bruce, if I can ask another question, you said in your presentation that fire management should not be seen as a task-driven approach where you have a number of seasons of fire and then a perception of maybe less fire and people take their foot off the accelerator, and that you need a full-time approach. Do you think

that a strategic plan for fire prevention and management is required really for a 10 to 20-year period rather than the approach we have been pursuing to date?

Mr ESPLIN — Yes, I do. That goes hand in hand with my view that the reporting of the effectiveness of fuel reduction burning should not be purely on a hectares burnt each year basis. It needs to reflect the strategic value of the burns undertaken, but more importantly the cumulative effect of those burns over time. I think that will give a more meaningful measure of the effectiveness of that program. I think that means we do need to plan into the longer term, into the 10-year cycles et cetera. That is certainly a view that is reinforced with me by most communities that I go and talk to. They are looking for a longer term planning horizon because they see that that will be accompanied by a commitment to that planning environment. I think that is one of the issues that people are concerned about — that there is always an upsurge of interest after a disaster but then it can fall away and some of the benefits can get lost. That is a challenge I think we face. It has happened since 1939, and probably before. We cannot afford to let it be lost again.

Mrs FYFFE — Bruce, I will try to be very quick with my question. It is regarding recovery. On property owners not insured and damage done by emergency services — i.e. fences et cetera to control a fire — it is permitted under the fire brigades act to allow the damage so they can go and protect other property. Private insurance companies accept and pay, but the issue is when they are not insured — we have many issues with a long drought period, and many people have let their insurance go because they have not been about to pay it — for example, damage to sewerage pipes, septic systems and now it does not work. Have you made any recommendations of how this is to be handled?

Mr ESPLIN — Firstly, I think the recommendation is that the recovery support provided is not a replacement for prudent risk management by the individual — in other words, insurance. I accept your point that the drought has had a major impact on the viability of many farmers across regional Victoria. There is a recognition that we need to look and talk to communities about some of the damage done when the firefighting effort is being undertaken and how that is dealt with following the fire event. There are certainly some differences between fire on public land and fire on private land, and there is a need to review that. I know the Country Fire Authority is very keen to have a look at those issues of when fences are damaged or when other damage is done. There have been some stories of the rotor wash from helicopters having an impact on dam walls in rare water supplies that are not too full at the moment. There is a range of issues like that that are going to require some ongoing consideration. There has been some pick-up. I think some of the recommendations we have been able to make such as the replacement of essential water are steps in the right direction. They recognise the impact of drought on a community and the need to ensure that there is that essential water available. It is an ongoing process again. We keep coming up with these sorts of issues, and we need to work through them with the fire agencies and understand what might be a more equitable way.

Mrs FYFFE — Could I just have a quick follow-up, because Bruce has just raised — —

The CHAIR — A very quick one.

Mrs FYFFE — Replacement water. Water is taken out of dams to be used to fight fires, and no-one objects to that, but it is in reference to the quantity of the water taken and when disputes arise from the quantity that is perceived to be taken and whether the replacement is sufficient.

Mr ESPLIN — The actual policy basically defines it as essential water for domestic purposes and for stock health and feed and condition sorts of purposes. I am only aware of one, maybe two, disputes about how much water was taken. One is of such a magnitude that I am struggling to understand how there could be such a difference of opinion, because the quantities are widely divergent. But I think the policy has been well accepted. It has been reasonably well applied, albeit that it was put in place very early towards the start of the fire season.

Mrs PETROVICH — I have so many questions, but the one I would like to ask now is, can you answer me, were the fuel reduction burn targets which you have spoken about today — these cool burns — met in any way over the previous eight years?

Mr ESPLIN — Yes, I think they were. The previous seven or eight years had been particularly dry, and I think if you look back in history you will find examples where there has been that same thing. I think in the 10 years preceding Ash Wednesday the low point there was 36 000 hectares, which is similar to probably the target last year being not met. But there have been years when the target has been met. I guess the challenge now is to see

whether that target is the right target and to look at the use of larger scale mosaic burns that are done over one or two or three, maybe more, years. I think there is a different approach called for. I know the chief officer of the Department of Sustainability and Environment is looking at a different approach and finding a way that can better utilise a focus on asset protection with broad-scale burning done to augment that asset protection. If that can be done as an ongoing and sustained and cumulative effect, then I think it will make a big difference.

Mr INGRAM — At that conference we were talking about in Sydney, Kevin Tolhurst put forward a proposal that suggested that a trust fund be used because of the seasonal nature of prescribed burning, and money that was not spent in one year could be carried over and spent in the following year. He also suggested that sometimes maybe the money that is allocated for wildfire that is not spent — that is budgeted for but not spent — is put into that so there are always funds available. Do you see that as some way to address the lack of resources, considering that we have not met 50 per cent of our targets for two decades?

Mr ESPLIN — If my argument about measuring the cumulative effect as part of the reporting process is put in place, then I think the opportunity is there for a move over financial years to ensure that where a target is not met everything is done the following year, to try to catch up if you like. I think most fair-minded people would say there will be years when the dangers are too high to achieve the fuel reduction burning targets, but I think in those years there needs to be the opportunity provided for a catch-up if the funds are not expended. It may be that in those years where you cannot do much fuel reduction burning the fire response costs are equally high, so it could be that there is a trade-off there. But I think there is a need to better look at how we source and fund both the response and the prevention/mitigation effects.

The CHAIR — I will close off this particular session at the moment. Thank you, Mr Esplin, for your 32-page submission and your attendance and giving of evidence today. Thank you very much for that.

Witness withdrew.