

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 3 July 2007

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Witnesses

Ms P. Pike, president; and
Ms M. Sietsma, member, Friends of the Grampians/Gariwerd.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome Ms Prue Pike and Ms Margo Sietsma, Friends of the Grampians/Gariwerd. I remind you that all the evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided under the Constitution Act 1975, and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. I invite Ms Pike to make a representation to the committee, keeping in mind that we are a little behind time. If you could make your presentation and allow time for us to ask questions that would be appreciated.

Ms PIKE — Margot and I will be giving the submission jointly, and we brought some things from FOGG that show our background. This is a book called *Beyond the Smoke* for which we had government support to produce. I might also be referring to some letters and a recent newsletter, which might cover some of the issues we are talking about.

To start, we want to say that we believe the response to the fire, in this area anyway, was terrific this year. We were really impressed with the coordination that now occurs between the DSE, the CFA and Parks Victoria in managing the fire. The community consultations, those community meetings, the use of the ABC, the incident control — all of that is just fantastic. I have been living here for 35 years, and I would have to say if we had had a fire like we had this year 35 years ago, or even 20 years ago, it would have been disastrous in terms of human lives and assets in comparison to what happened, so I think there has just been a huge improvement, and the fact that you come back and then consult with community again about how to improve what you do. I remember being in the Gippsland fires and that terrible noise would come on the radio. You removed that this time, and I believe that was from community advice. That sort of feedback change in what you are doing and improving all the time I think has been remarkable. That would be my first comment.

Getting on to the national park — the National Parks Act says that the primary purpose of national parks is to protect the natural environment — the biodiversity and things in the natural environment — and that is what we are really concerned about I guess: that we have parks set aside to protect the different ecosystems within Victoria. Many of them are very small and vulnerable and though the Grampians is quite a large national park, it is very narrow, running north-south, and so it is also vulnerable in terms of how it is managed. Though we agree that fire is an important tool in managing parks the purpose of using fire as a management tool should be to protect and look after the natural environment in that park, the ecosystems within that park — and that needs to be fully understood, so I will maybe pass over to Marg. This would be our major concern really — that the use of fire in the park should be to preserve and protect the natural environment.

Ms SIETSMA — And that is where we are rather concerned about the amount of pressure to change that, to change the emphasis from protecting the environment to protecting assets. Assets need to be protected but there are assets other than farms — there are businesses which have the asset of the park as part of their business, and they lose a lot when they lose that opportunity to use the park. Then there is the park itself — the environment and the animals and plants. Here we think it is pretty well managed but we are concerned — we were looking at some of the other parks where there have been huge firebreaks put around the side of the park, eating into the park.

We are also concerned about the number of access tracks that can be put in. Access tracks bring weeds, they bring foxes, and then when you have a fire they are not necessarily in the place that you wanted them anyway, because you cannot predict where a wildfire is going to be. You might have put in fire trails that are not used and need to put in new ones for this fire. We would be concerned if the park had too many new trails put through it. Following on from that, we are concerned that we do not want too much change to the zones that are here. At the moment the park has got four zones — there is asset protection, there is strategic fuel breaks, there is environment, and there is complete exclusion. Each of those has a different recommended burning pattern, and we do not want to see the burning pattern of asset protection sneak into the ones which need less burning. There has been a lot of research into burning, and we want to see that research used and listened to and enhanced. I think I will leave it there on that one.

Ms PIKE — Yes, and I guess that is one of our concerns. An experience we had this year was of a prescribed burn at Wannan Crossing, which was an area 2 burn which was to be up to an 80 per cent burn, so it is an asset protection burn — it was in that class, which is okay. At the beginning of this year it was very hot and very dry — and we know there is a lot of pressure on Parks and DSE to get their prescribed burning done. It was very hot and dry, and that burn was in fact about a 95 per cent burn, and many old, mature age red gums were lost in that burn, which is inevitable — I know we will lose some. But you probably only have six or seven big old mature red

gums to a hectare, and if every time we do a prescribed burn when it is hotter than it is meant to be and we lose these red gums, if we start overdoing this prescribed burning, even in those areas, there will be no mature aged red gums. So that was a concern, and when I actually rang up about the fact that I had heard that this was such a hot burn I was told by DSE staff that that was a very good outcome, that in fact they wanted that, and that 80 per cent was really more a minimum target than a maximum target — it was not 80 per cent-plus or minus, it was to be as much as they could get. While I was in contact with them — and this is all on page 7 of the letter I wrote to Ian Voigt, the DSE person, so if you can refer to that, it has more detail in it — but then Lynch's Crossing burn was —

Mrs FYFFE — Excuse me, may I interrupt you a moment. We do not have a copy of that letter, do we?

Ms PIKE — Yes, I just gave her the newsletter, which has a copy of the letter in it on page 7.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay, thank you.

Ms PIKE — This is only an example of what our concerns are. We are not against the burning happening; we know it has to happen, but it is the way it is done and within what guidelines and on what scientific basis it is done that concerns us. A proposal to burn Lynch's Crossing, which was really in next year's plan, was brought forward because it was too dry to burn other areas this year — and this was the problem; the drought created enormous problems for fire managers, I am certain of that, so I know it is not easy. But Lynch's Crossing was partly zone 4 and partly zone 3 in the old thing, 70 per cent zone 4 probably. It contained a lot of long unburnt forest as well, which there is not a lot left of in the park. The proposal was to burn that when it was still very dry, when in fact they should have been aiming for a 50 per cent-only burn — it is meant to be a very patchy burn in these environmental areas.

I was contacting them the Thursday before this fire was due to happen, and in fact the fire did get called off, because it was finally considered too hot, but I think there is such pressure on DSE to burn that in fact they were almost going to the point of burning really inappropriately, and I think that is something you really have to watch. That would have been a very hot burn there — it would have resulted in 80 or 90 per cent probably of the area burnt, which would have been really inappropriate given there are bandicoots in that area and there are the heath mice in that area which have been trapped. I think we came very close to making some silly mistakes. Fortunately it did not go ahead but it was very much a last-minute decision. The burn was called off late on Friday and it was to have occurred on the weekend.

That is our concern. The processes seem good but I think there are political pressures coming in to undermine some of the processes and this idea that somehow you can change the percentages that you are targeting to burn. When I got the letter back from DSE they were saying, 'Well, those are really only targets,' and I am hearing they may be going to drop these targets — the 50 per cent area and the 80 per cent burn in other zones. If they drop those targets and they do not come into the fire operations plan, than what is the meaning of a zone 1, a zone 2, or a zone 3 burn?

It becomes totally meaningless if in fact you are not planning or targeting to burn them at different rates. I know they are not going to want to be held to an 80 per cent burn because things go wrong. You cannot have them being taken to court because of that, but I think they have to be clear about their intentions and their prescriptions for when they are setting up a burn — that in fact if it is to be an environmental patchy burn, it is an environmental patchy burn — that they do not do it when the conditions clearly indicate that it will be a very hot burn. I guess that is really Friends' concern — that there is so much public pressure. This idea that somehow if we burnt the hell out of the park, we would all be safe is just ridiculous. All we would do is lose our biodiversity, and I think there needs to be some better argument and case put about that.

The other issue we have is the targets that have been set for the park — 50 per cent of the park was burnt, as you know, two years ago. There is now a target of 5000 hectares a year to be burnt — forever, as far as I know. In 10 years time another 50 000 hectares of the park will be burnt. That will mean there is only 25 000 hectares of the park that has not been burnt in the last 10 years — and that is not allowing for any of the fires that we are going to get anyway. The north end of the park is due to go. There is so much dead stuff there; so we are going to have fires from lightning and things, and if those targets are not adjusted each year with what in fact occurs in burning anyway — which they appear not to have been — before the last fire 3000 was the target; since half the park has been burnt suddenly 5000 hectares is now the target to burn.

I think we have got to really look at what is burnt each year, what needs to burn, and we need to do that on a scientific basis, not on just the result of people wanting to protect their property outside the park. It should be about how we protect the environment within the park, and that is what we really need to be looking at, or we will lose more of our biodiversity over the state.

Obviously with climate change, the biodiversity within the park is at enormous risk anyway, so we need to be more careful than ever about managing the way we use fire within the park. That was really going to be one of our final points, but we need a lot more research and monitoring done. It is too difficult to find out what is the appropriate fire regime to maintain biodiversity in particular ecosystems. The research is just not being done. The monitoring is not being done. We keep asking them, 'Can't we have areas of the park that have been burnt to be really properly monitored?'. The water and a few other things are being monitored, but the biodiversity is not being monitored. Nobody is in there looking at what is happening to the birds, the insects, the micro-organisms and the small plants. We have a dreadful focus just on trees, as if that is the entire environment. We really need a lot more money being spent on monitoring and evaluating what is going on with fire. That is going to be critical with climate change. Margo, you were going to say something?

Ms SIETSMA — Yes, you pinched my voice. We feel there is a real opportunity after this big fire to do some good research. The community input is good, but also you need to use the knowledge of experts. It cannot be just locked up and put on library shelves. It has to get out to the people who are fighting the fires. It has to go out to people who are managing the park. We have had this big fire, and there is some money going on monitoring, but it would be terrific if there were more so that next time there is a fire you have lessons that you have learnt from this one. I think that gets about to the end of our thing.

Ms PIKE — No, there are a couple more here. Just one other concern we have is that there should be a surround strategy for the national park in terms of planning schemes. There is more subdivision occurring obviously in the park because of beautiful areas to live in, but the problem with more subdivision is then you get houses and dams and whatever put on them, and all of those are allowed under the vegetation legislation. In fact we can be losing a lot of the vegetation around the park simply by people building their houses which are then vulnerable to fire, which then require greater firebreaks, and so it goes.

Planning schemes, I think, really need to look at developing housing envelopes, so houses are built in areas where they are not going to be damaging the natural bush that is there so you maintain some sort of a buffer around the park. That is not so difficult to do. Most land around the park has areas with cleared land in it and areas with bush. Houses should have to be built where the cleared land is, and well away.

I just went to a mediation in Horsham where there is a proposal to put a camping ground in the buffer zone that had been left from a development for flowers in the area. There was a lot of cleared land on the area, but the camping ground was going to be put under the trees, right on the edge of the national park. So it was going to require a whole lot of clearing, which would be legitimate under the vegetation legislation. It was going to cause more headaches for the park trying to keep the fire out of this camping ground right beside the park. I do not think it should have even got to the point of a mediation. That camping ground should have asked to be located in the cleared area in the middle of that block of land. I just think there needs to be some more gardens given so that in fact we are not undermining the vegetation act just by this creeping process that is happening.

There is one other point that is probably not particularly to do with FOGG but it is just my experience of the succession we are in. It has to do with the CFA. My husband is 63. He got called out to go the same night as the fire here when there were 30 or 40 lightning strikes. He went out with a team. There was a tree on fire up a hill. They could not get to it with a truck. They had to put on backpacks and go up, and they got the fire out. He came back and told me he was the fittest one in the group there at 63. They all really struggled to get up and back.

He has been asked— as everyone in the CFA has — to go up to the New South Wales fires. It is not going to work. With more fires all over the state, we are not going to be able to move people around. You cannot rely on just old people to be fighting fires out in the country. There has to be some scheme for training younger people. I think people could enjoy that experience, but they need to be properly trained with the CFA and invited out to help when there are these fires. You have to have a big force of younger people that you can bring into the community to work in these times. I think that is increasingly going to be the case with older people, so good luck.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you very much for your submission and the time that both of you have put into making it to us. I understand your passion. One of the difficulties that we face as a community is that a beautiful area like this attracts visitors. Visitors demand amenities. They demand services, and that brings other people — a lot of investment in equipment, a lot of human investment. The managers of these parks and these areas around them have to try to protect all of them. You have talked at some length about burning off, but how effective are any permanently maintained firebreaks and containment lines in managing the impacts of the fires in the Grampians?

Ms PIKE — In managing fire I think they are remarkably ineffective, when you see the fire that jumped Wartook onto the island. This fire — the CFA and people can tell you — was spotting kilometres ahead of the fire front.

Mrs FYFFE — But was that an exceptional fire?

Ms PIKE — It is not going to be exceptional into the future, with climate change. Probably the dryness of the air is the critical change. Apart from the increased temperatures and the winds we are seeing, this is something we can expect more of, not less of.

With regard to firebreaks, obviously you need fire access because you have to get equipment and people in, but I think it is wrong to suggest you are going to stop a fire with a firebreak. How many times have the fires crossed the Western Highway? The fires we have had in the last few years have all jumped across the Western Highway — it was a four-lane highway at that point. If you are suggesting you put four-lane highways through the park, you may as well give the park up too. It is not effective.

Mrs FYFFE — I think you have expressed very clearly that you are not happy with the burning off, and the firebreaks are also a problem?

Ms PIKE — No, I am not happy with firebreaks. I think it is a nonsense. I think it is a false sense of security — they do not work. That is the reality, and that is what people are seeing. You just have to look at the Western Highway. It should have been able to stop them, but it did not. The emphasis now is on people knowing how to look after their own property. From what I have been told, we did not lose one house that people stayed and defended. That is a huge statistic, I think. That just shows that educating people about looking after their own property and this whole emphasis on protecting assets first, once the fire is on, is a really excellent way to go.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thanks to both of you for your submission today. It is a very interesting and informative approach from your group. I just want to ask both of you: did you go out into the park after the fires?

Ms PIKE — Yes, lots of times.

Mrs PETROVICH — So you went out lots of times?

Ms PIKE — Yes, I would go every week.

Mrs PETROVICH — Can you describe to me the loss of wildlife and plant life experienced after the Grampians fire?

Ms PIKE — I live in the north end of the Grampians, and I have walked in after previous fires. There are probably about four or five bird species and the odd black wallaby that we would see in the bush. That has changed very little. In fact I have probably seen fewer bird species now. Maybe straight after the fire there were a few burnt animals and things that they were eating or investigating. It takes about two years before you really start to hear birds back in the bush. This year, because it was so dry, things started to come up in about April. You would be expecting to have a wonderful flower season and orchids and things. In the north end of the Grampians, all of that came up and died because we had no rain.

The recovery in the north end of the Grampians after the fire has really been delayed by a year. We are starting to see things coming up again now — and with a bit of luck with the rain we are having, that will go ahead. But it takes at least two years to start to hear anything like a full range of birdlife back into the park, particularly where big areas have been burnt. In the fire we had in 2000 at the north end there were lots of green patches left — under the cliffs and things — that did not burn. This fire took out everything, so the recovery will be much slower, I believe, just because of that. You did not have the patches of bush left that you would normally have, because it was so dry, and the fire just burnt everything.

Mrs PETROVICH — If I may, I just have one quick question.

The ACTING CHAIR — We are a bit behind time.

Mrs PETROVICH — I know, but I am a little interested in this aspect of it, to be honest, because I think it is intrinsic to the whole thing. You are actually saying that you are advocating that you do not think the cool burns would have helped?

Ms PIKE — No, I am not saying that.

Mrs PETROVICH — Okay; so do you agree that an increase in cool burns and fire management would have been better than the hot burn that we experienced in the protection of biodiversity? You talked about the loss of those red gum species because of the heat of the fire.

Ms PIKE — That was a prescribed burn.

Mrs PETROVICH — Yes, but it was a hot burn, not a cool burn. I am talking about increased cool burns.

Ms PIKE — Yes, as long as they are done on the proper scientific basis. I am concerned the Northern Grampians are so dry that I think we will need some patches through that to stop a fire just taking hold. I suspect the Victoria Range is really at risk. This year we could have lost that. Obviously there is a dilemma for me. You do not want a catastrophic wildfire either. That is very damaging. So to manage biodiversity you have also got to do some of that. But it has to be done on the basis of managing biodiversity, not on the idea that the park has to somehow protect everybody who lives around it. That is my concern. If it is done by really looking at the science, looking at how often different ecosystems need to be burned — some it is 7 years, some it is 14 years, and some it might be every 3 years. We need to know that stuff, and we need to plan to do it that way and not just plan with set targets regardless of anything, like, 'We have got to burn this bit because we are going to get into political trouble here' — that is something governments have to live with, but I think science should be the basis of what you do. Sure, we have to do something to protect the biodiversity from catastrophic wildfire.

Mrs PETROVICH — That is a very important point you make.

Ms LOBATO — Just briefly — thank you for being here today and presenting to us. Congratulations on the level of volunteerism and obviously the passion of your group for the park. I was just wanting to know — you have spoken a lot about your concern about the zones in regards to the prescribed burning. Do you have ongoing communication with Parks Victoria and DSE? Do you have an input there?

Ms PIKE — Yes, the discussion with FOGG is coming up shortly. I think it is just being produced, so we will be able to have a discussion with it then. But we do not have a discussion about the fire protection plan, which is the one that sets the targets. What we are really saying is that if the prescriptions and the percentage burn that you are planning to burn is taken out, then discussing the FOGG with them is a complete waste of time, because it has no meaning. There will be no real meaning between a zone 1, zone 2 or a zone 3 burn. If all of them can be a 80 per cent or 90 per cent burn, we are not talking about having patch burns and the environmental aspect. I think we need to try to develop a patch network of burning across the park, looking at what our different ecosystems are. We are not against that, but it has to be done in that way; on the basis of really knowing what is going on within the different groups within the park.

If they take out the prescriptions in the thing, it will be just open slather. This idea that it is fine to burn a prescribed burn that is meant to be 80 per cent but that we are happy when in fact it ends up being a 95 per cent burn, I think is wrong. We should be unhappy that it went past 80 per cent and we did lose red gum trees that we did not mean to lose. If we are going to go for a 50 per cent burn, we should not be happy if it ends up being an 80 per cent burn because it is supposedly better. That means we are not really thinking about what the ecological needs of the park are. Does that make sense?

Ms LOBATO — Yes.

Ms PIKE — So I would be really unhappy to see those prescriptions and things taken out of that fire prevention plan.

Ms LOBATO — Thanks.

Mr WALSH — Prue, you mentioned that the burns should be based on scientific fact. Which scientific fact, because in my experience we never get two groups of scientists to ever agree? Who is and who is not the authority?

Ms PIKE — I do not think that is true. I think scientists do by and large — and the whole thing about science is that they do question each other and they do move on, and of course science is not absolute fact. We are only working on the best evidence we have, but unless you put money into actually doing proper research, then of course we do not have a proper scientific basis. It is possible to go in and monitor what has happened, look at our different ecosystems, look at what is going on there and go on within the different groups and develop an idea of what is the best fire regime for areas. I totally reject the idea that scientists are like economists — put two in a row and they will come up with a different thing! On most things, scientists agree. They may vary around the areas, but where there is good evidence they will move with that, and that is what we need. What we do not need is people misquoting scientists often or people who do not — anyway I will not get into the climate change debate. Look at smoking — everybody disagreed about whether smoking harmed your health or not. It was nonsense. The people who knew, knew. The scientists knew what was going on in that case; the research was telling them.

Ms SIETSMA — One of our activities in the last few years has been to get scientists to come and speak to us. We have had people from the bushfire CRC down to do public lectures. We have had Melbourne University researchers come and tell us stuff that they have been finding out. We have been trying to lift our education and the local education on the science of fire. It has been a bit of a hobbyhorse.

Ms PIKE — Kevin Tolhurst was excellent when talking about the need for patching and a whole range of things that you do in terms of prescribed burning. I think it is quite wrong to suggest that there is not a consensus out there about better ways of doing it in the research community, but it needs more funding; it needs to be more work. Particularly with climate change coming — it is critical.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you so much for your submission. It was most enjoyable.

Witnesses withdrew.