

**ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

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

Bairnsdale — 31 July 2007

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Witnesses

Mr Rohan Bilney, and  
Mr Roger Bilney, Gippsland Environment Group.

**The CHAIR** — Our next witnesses are Rohan Bilney and Roger Bilney of the Gippsland Environment Group. I ask you to note that the terms of reference have recently been amended to include the impact of the June-July Gippsland floods, so you might want to make reference to those. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. We thank you, Roger and Rohan, for joining us and ask you to present, and if you are happy to take questions later on, we would appreciate that.

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — First of all, Jill Redwood from Environment East Gippsland would have liked to have come along today but because it is too far for her to travel, she is endorsing our group due to our sort of similar environmental concerns. I will talk relatively briefly and quickly. This inquiry is supposed to be looking at public land management and practices on bushfires. If we really looked at what the forest practices are, some of the major things are things like forestry, prescribed burning and grazing. These things are the economic reasons. The economy, I suppose, drives land management practices and the environment comes in behind that. We also need to recognise that these practices have caused significant changes to vegetation structure and composition, and that is one of the reasons why we have had such great megafires recently.

We realise that the prescribed burning that everyone is talking about needs to be done more frequently. We are saying all of a sudden we need to understand the effectiveness of prescribed burning. In order to reduce fuel loads it has to be done frequently. As there is a conflict between protecting biodiversity and managing fuel loads, and unfortunately a majority of species do not like frequent fire because they occur in forests and it is the forests that everyone is, I suppose, more concerned about because of the fire risk, there needs to be significantly greater science in regard to the effectiveness of prescribed burning, because it is inadequate in many regards, and it compromises conservation and biodiversity. One of the reasons we cannot actually implement ecological fire regimes is because we do not really know what the ecological attributes are or the required burning regimes that can maximise or enhance biodiversity which is stated throughout all the codes of practice, forest management practice plans — all these things. Therefore, due to our lack of knowledge, a lot of our codes of practice cannot be implemented to their full extent, and therefore biodiversity is the thing that is suffering due to our virtual mismanagement of the forests. It is probably the summary of our main concerns. Do you want to talk about firebreaks?

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — Some other concerns we have are that some of the criticism that has been levelled at the department I think has been very unfair in the sense that most other fires in the past have been through very wet periods with a very short dry period, and we have had extensive fires like 65, and then we get back into wet seasons again where, in the last 25 years, the area is in 85 millimetres of deficit of rainfall in the last 25 years, with the last 10 years being exceptional, and Rohan and I have spent an enormous amount of time in the last five years in a lot of the gullies and the foothill forests from the Mitchell through to Lake Tyers, and the rain forests are just as dry as a chip. I have never known the moist areas of the forest to be so dry.

What has happened now is we have finally had a fire that has come through, and all the south sides of the ridges and all the gullies have just gone. They have just disappeared. In the past this never used to happen to such an extent. On top of that — and I am not being critical — the department has then gone in and fire bombed within the fire perimeter to get rid of the areas that have been mosaiced from the natural fire because the fire only had to come up one ridge within that area of unburnt and you had a fire escape, and it was away again, so they were fighting a fire that I assume they have never had the experience of fighting before, and it was an exceptional circumstance, and I think in many aspects they did far beyond what they were expected to do, and I take my hat off to them for what they did achieve.

In some areas there were mistakes obviously made, but my concern about that is that we now have this massive block of country that has not got mosaics and, from a biodiversity point of view, most of our larger animals cannot come back because there is nowhere to come back from; there are no gullies, there are no slopes; it has all gone. We have a commitment from the government on biodiversity, and I think we have to follow that through with significant monitoring and possibly relocation to get our glider species back. A lot of our ringtail possums, which are a great indicator, will not come back because there is nowhere to come back from.

In relation to bulldozer use, from my experience, and I had 13 days involved with this episode, I think from what I saw there was overuse of bulldozers clearing enormous tracts of country where, when the pressure was really on, when they could not get bulldozers in, they still burnt off road systems and did adequate jobs. The unique thing

about this part of the world is we get a lot of easterly winds for which we are very fortunate during this fire period which gave them periods where they could actually burn off to some degree of safety. I think sometimes the bulldozer use has left a very large scar.

Also on the use of the firebreaks on a permanent basis, which sort of developed through this fire, I would like to see more of a code looking at what species and what vegetative classes are in those areas that they are going to be managed for, because you can isolate genetic diversity by doing these breaks, but you can also enhance some of our species if you do it in the right way. I would also like to see bulldozer drivers and operators having a lot more ecological understanding. From some of the operations I saw, they have no understanding of the forest and the forest type that they are operating in. To see old red box being pushed over and old stringy barks left in place, you can burn under box year after year and nothing will happen to them, but stringy barks come and go. They are the weed of the forest, and yet they were left standing and these magnificent old trees were just bulldozed out. It is not a very wise way to manage. That is basically what I wanted to raise with you at this stage.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much. I was interested in your submission that said, and I quote:

Under extremely dry conditions, as experienced during the 2003 and 2006/7 fires, back-burning as well as recent fuel reduction burning, did little to reduce wildfire intensity.

I am just wondering if you can elaborate a bit more on that saying that all that effort did nothing about — —

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that from the fire in 2003 — and we even heard in the room today — the amount of regrowth that has come back is significant. That is only four years ago and already we are having complaints about the fuel loads in there. If you burn that again you will cause huge, or significant, disruption to the lifecycles of a lot of the species in there. Therefore there is a lot of science to say that fuel reduction burning is only effective for up to about 18 months. Fuel loads can come back to within 90 per cent of their levels within a very short time. In many cases under extreme wildfire conditions fires will burn anything; they will still cover a helluva lot of ground. We are still pro-burning but burning in the correct ecological manner, which is outlined by the ecological guidelines that the government has produced documents on. We just want to see it implemented to the full degree, I suppose.

**Mrs FYFFE** — In your submission you say that spring burning should be conducted in south-eastern Australia. You are saying this as against autumn burning? Can you tell me why?

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — We are not saying only spring burning. We are saying that if you think about natural wildfires, they occur when lightning strikes, which is more frequent in spring and summer. It is when the gullies are wetter and it is when you create more of a mosaic with the burning. That is what fuel reduction burning is; it is fuel reduction. It eliminates a lot of the gully vegetation because gullies are driest in autumn. We are losing a lot of things like logs and, as I said before, gully vegetation. We would like to see more of a change in seasons to try to do a little bit of both to see the responses of the species that are being impacted upon by the fire, not necessarily seeing it all being burnt in autumn, or the majority of burns being conducted in autumn.

**Mrs FYFFE** — Can DSE monitor, and is it not studying the effect of the various burns now?

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — Not really. There are very few sites that are being studied. A lot of the work that has been done has been conducted in areas other than Gippsland. Gippsland has been a bit of a black hole in regard to ecological monitoring, not only of fire but of all environmental studies. A lot of the science in regard to fuel dynamics as well as ecological studies has been conducted around Melbourne — like in the Wombat State Forest — or taken from Western Australia or the Northern Territory where there has been a lot of fire research. Does that answer the question?

**Mrs FYFFE** — Yes, thank you.

**Mr INGRAM** — Thank you very much for your detailed submission; I acknowledge that a fair amount of work has gone into it. Gippsland is a pretty big and broad area with quite a diversity of EVCs, different vegetation classes and so on. If you were given the reins how would you manage each of those vegetation types? If we are talking about ecological burning instead of fuel reduction burning, which is what you are talking about, what is the right regime for the heathland grasslands, or grassy forests or some of the dry sclerophyll forests? If you were given that management, because we are talking about natural fire regimes, what is a natural fire regime to those areas and how do we do it? Is there enough information to do it; I suppose that is the other question?

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — Yes, it is one of the inadequacies. The life history requirements of the species that occur in the communities are at least a guide to the burning regimes that we should be looking at. Some species might take 15 or 20 years before they can even set fruit or flower. Each community is defined, I suppose, by the fire regime in the first place. Although, as I mentioned, a plant species might take 15 years to fruit, it might then be that a New Holland Honeyeater or an eastern pigmy possum could come into those areas. So you must be looking at the ecology of the species as well as how they respond, in order to determine the maximum and minimum fire interval periods that should be occurring.

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — They are indicator species. If you go into a forest and the banksias are all dead, it is an indicator that that life cycle is finished, so you might be looking at firing again. If you are getting coastal tea tree taking over, which is an invasive species, then you know that the fire regime has probably been lacking and you probably need to drag that back, but you may also create a further problem because you have lost the seed beds of what other type you may be looking to have.

**Mr INGRAM** — Would you agree that the current management of the large, extremely dense fires are not ecologically— and I suppose I am putting words in your mouth but you criticised some of the prescribed burning, and you mentioned that we probably should have some more spring burning, but how do we get it right? How do we get that timing right, and how do we distinguish between the protection of human life and property and the broader ecological burning that is done for the management of state forests and national parks?

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — We have already done that, haven't we? Basically our areas close to habitation have a special zone and they will be burnt at whatever frequency is determined. But 85 per cent of the area is still supposed to be ecologically burnt, and that is basically what we are talking about.

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — How can we burn ecologically when our knowledge to this stage is inadequate? You talked before about asset protection. There seems to be this demand from a lot of people with vested interests, or people who are going to lose out financially, who demand that the forest is burnt frequently to protect their assets. But we need to prioritise which assets are most important to us as a community, not as a neighbour to forested environments. We need to realise that it is indigenous flora and fauna that is our most important asset. It cannot be replaced by money. Things like fences can easily be replaced and houses can be replaced, but the integrity of our environment and biodiversity cannot be. Fire jeopardises the biodiversity if it is not conducted correctly.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — Thank you very much for your submission today. What about the protection of biodiversity by doing mosaic and cool burns and back burns and creating firebreaks as opposed to the alternative damage caused to biodiversity through wildfire?

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — There needs to be a bit of both. With some communities you need some form of protection either through recently burnt areas or some form of natural protection, like rainforest and things like that. We need to have a mosaic of different age structures throughout the forest environment to provide some form of heterogeneity rather than homogeneity in our forests. That is one of the reasons why our forests have been neglected in the past. What else can I say?

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — For example, you can have a fire in a logging coupe that is 40 hectares. You say fire is a natural process, but a wild or a slash burn in 40 hectares is not a natural process because even though you have an intense fire, you do not have intense fires naturally on 40 hectares. What happens is that you have this massive input of all the native animals and introduced animals, like deer, that hit the area and a lot of species cannot re-establish because they are getting grazed out by the wombats, wallabies, deer, whatever, whereas when a major fire goes through a lot of the species regerminate from the fire and there is nothing for the animals to graze on because they have all been wiped out by the fire. Some plants need large, broadscale fire to regenerate away from interference which is in most of the areas now. If they have not been eroded some plant species will come back. I think the Snowy Gorge is a very good example. After the 2003 fires species there were almost going to be classed as endangered, but they came back in enormous profusion after that fire as it went down into the low, rocky gullies.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — From that answer can I determine that you are actually advocating for wildfire? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — What I am trying to say is that wildfire is not necessarily a bad thing from an ecological point of view. Some species take that window of opportunity to survive. Sometimes the small burns are

not hot enough. You look at some of the burns that have been done, and there has been no wattle regeneration come through, which means they have only just gone across the top. You need to go a bit deeper to get wattles coming through, and if you cannot get wattles coming through, there is something wrong in the bush. Fire is not fire, is not fire, is not fire — that is the point we are making. Sometimes a very hot fire is an important part of a process.

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — And also species are not just adapted to fire, they are adapted to a certain fire regime, and that is where, unless we understand or get that fire regime correct, species will suffer or be promoted.

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — And you end up with more kangaroos, more dogs, more wombats, more deer. That is what you end up with, with the type of forest you have: more animals that threaten the areas of the people who want the area more regularly burnt. They end up having far greater pest animal problems due to their own fire practices. That is a part of life now, but we need to understand that we are causing a lot of our own problems. There is quite a lot of literature on that, if you want to read it.

**Mr VINEY** — Thank you very much for your submission. You made the comment just a moment ago that you did not think there was enough research in this area and that areas that were burnt in 2003 were re-burnt in 2007. I think you were deducing from that — and you said — that regular burns were not necessarily going to be a protection. But that is in conflict with some of the research that I saw when I was recently in Western Australia, which showed that some areas that were burnt many years before, when a wildfire went through, ended up with a cool burn rather than a very hot burn in those areas. Are you saying that the Western Australian research is not relevant to the Gippsland research? I am just trying to get some clarity on that.

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — I am not saying it is completely irrelevant. I am saying you are looking at a completely different ecosystem in Western Australia. You are looking at more of an open forest, compared to here, where we have got closed forest, with completely different species responses and species adaption to fire.

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — Very much flatter terrain, and they are going to go to a longer period of burning. I was over there last year talking to the nature conservation people — because I was over there at a training course they were running — and they are going to change some of their burning regimes, push them out over longer periods. But it is interesting that the best history we have in Australia is in Western Australia, the best fire regimes and management are in Western Australia, yet this summer just gone they had phenomenal bushfires. The point we are making is that no matter how much fuel reduction burning you do, you are still going to have natural events that are going to come through and wipe you out.

**Mr VINEY** — I was just there a few weeks ago, and their experience of those recent bushfires is that the mosaic burning that they were putting in place had substantial benefits both in terms of the environment and in terms of protections.

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — It most certainly does, yes.

**Mr VINEY** — So you agree?

**Mr ROGER BILNEY** — Yes, but the point out of that also is that it is not a total protection, and that is the problem in the community now. We have this belief that if we were doing all this burning we would be safe, and that is the point we are trying to make: that you are not going to be safe. In fact you may be worse off, because you change the structure of the forest, more fire-prone species come in.

**Mr ROHAN BILNEY** — It is well recognised that fuel reduction burning is inadequate in preventing fires; it is only a small aspect. We need to look at how communities can survive fire, rather than actually trying to stop and prevent fire. We need to see a change in community ideas, I suppose.

**The CHAIR** — We might wind up there. Thank you very much for the Gippsland Environment Group's submission. It is quite a few pages of submission. We thank you for that, and for taking questions. We remind you that transcripts will be sent to you with instructions on what to do with them in the next few weeks.

**Witnesses withdrew.**