

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Dunkeld — 4 July 2007

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Mr L. Heard, chair, biodiversity advisory committee, and
Mr D. Arnold, land and biodiversity program manager, Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome representatives from the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority: Don Arnold, land and biodiversity program manager; and Mr Leigh Heard, the chair of the biodiversity advisory committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to 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. Will Leigh or Don make the presentation before we go to questions?

Mr ARNOLD — I will make the presentation. Our region contains many unique land and water-based ecosystems, plants and animals, and some significant areas of remnant vegetation remain within bioregions and there are many rare or endangered species across the catchment. Coastal heath lands and heathy woodlands are known for their diverse ground flora, particularly orchids, and are communities in which the importance of maintaining natural ecological processes through appropriate fire regimes is critical.

Inappropriate fire regime is one of several threats to the catchment, and for the most part it is of medium-to-low significance. The Glenelg Hopkins CMA has focused much of its activities on major threatening processes, and as such we have not participated actively in fire management. In terms of extent, timing, resources and effectiveness of prescribed burning on the Glenelg Hopkins catchment, I guess in terms of the extent there is frequently a difference between what is planned and what is actually delivered. From a habitat-enhancement perspective, we would contend that insufficient prescribed burning is conducted.

Timing: the shifting climate extends the potential burning season, and burning opportunities are available potentially throughout autumn, winter and spring. We certainly saw that last year, but it was not capitalised on.

Resources: prescribed burning operations have become a major logistical exercise, primarily due, it seems, to litigation and OH&S. It is a major exercise that lacks a flexibility to respond to weather and fuel opportunities. Late autumn, winter and early spring burning possibly could require a lower level of resources and might provide that level of flexibility.

In terms of effectiveness, matching fire intensity to habitat is very challenging, a lot of our different ecological communities require different types of fire intensity. Greater use of mosaic burning and creation of multiple age classes is recommended, particularly for the fragmented habitat areas. Much of our region is effectively now islands, different from what it was many years ago.

Impact of prescribed burning and recent wildfire on Glenelg Hopkins catchment: there has not been a lot of detailed survey on this. I guess some of it is more anecdotal. The impact on water quality, particularly sediment movement, has been relatively low in recent years.

Flora: it is unclear, but suggests low to moderate, and pest plant and animals low to moderate, and probably fauna is medium to high. I guess there is an example of that in the last 12 months with the Framlingham fire, which had a fairly devastating impact on local wildlife, particularly koalas.

Impact of prescribed burning and recent wildfires in the Grampians water quality and quantity. It has been relatively low, and that was due to the low-intensity rain that we had following the Grampians fire. We were very fortunate compared to what happened in the alpine areas in East Gippsland. I think there was something like 50 millimetres of rain that fell within that two-month period after the Grampians fire, but it led to very minimal sediment movement, and it because of the low intensity of the rain that we had at the time.

Reporting processes applicable to prescribed burning programs in the Glenelg Hopkins area. Annual fire plans are developed by DSE and are circulated to the CMA for comment, but by and large we have not been active participants in fire management, so we have not sought a greater level of involvement in that, and it only provided limited feedback. On the legislative and regulatory arrangements for the prescribed burning, it is not area that we work a great deal in, so we did not feel like we could make comment in that particular area.

I might move on to the last dot point, which was the effectiveness of maintaining permanent strategically placed firebreaks and containment lines in the Glenelg Hopkins catchment. Prescribed burning along roadsides has been essential to maintaining native grassland communities. Native grasslands are one of our most threatened ecological communities within the region. By and large the bulk of that is found on roadsides, and burning on those roadsides has been pretty critical to maintaining those communities.

In guess in a general sense the CMA would prescribed burning programs that reduce fire intensity — more burning that encourages mosaic-burning patterns. We also suggest that more resources need to be directed towards first attack. These days we can pretty accurately identify where lightning strikes, and most of the first that have started in our region have been as a result of lightning strikes, and they can be mapped pretty quickly and pretty accurately. If resources were built up in that area — to respond and respond — as *Cr Robertson made comment about earlier, is the area that we need to build greater capacity, or at least that is what we believe, because it is those fires, particularly the Grampians fire, that can have a devastating impact on natural resource systems in our region. I might leave it at that.

Ms LOBATO — Thank you for your presentation and your submission, which we have all read and now heard. I do not have a question.

Mrs PETROVICH — Your submission noted the effectiveness of fuel-reduction burns has reduced over the last 20 years. Can you elaborate on why this is the case?

Mr ARNOLD — I guess one is the perception is that there is less fuel-reduction burning happening in more recent times. The other thing that I would suggest is that fuel-reduction burning is by and large contained to a fairly discrete block of bush, and it is not creating a broad-scale mosaic that we would advocate. The burning that is conducted tends to be on a scale of around about five to seven years. It is burnt, and then they go off and burn another block somewhere else, and it will not come back until five to seven years later. We would advocate that you need to work on a broader scale and do smaller burns within that, and then go back the following year and do further burns and further burns the year after that, so you have a whole range of different age classes.

The other comment probably I would make is that a lot of our remnant vegetation is effectively fragmented, and as a result it is effectively an island. Some of those islands are not being actively managed in terms of fire, and as a consequence when there is a lightning strike or there is a fire in them, the whole island is effectively being burnt out, and the impact of that is quite devastating.

Mrs PETROVICH — These islands you are talking about are outside the national park?

Mr ARNOLD — Yes, outside the major national parks. The major public land areas of the Grampians are the state forests towards Casterton and the state forests down south towards the Cobobonee-Kenbruck area and national parks in those areas as well. Outside of that there are small remnants of public land that are not actively managed in terms of fire.

Mrs PETROVICH — Have we identified these as part of a program at all at this stage?

Mr ARNOLD — By and large most of the program, I think, focuses on the major areas of public land, and there is less on the smaller fragments. It is a bit of a risk.

Mrs PETROVICH — That is certainly something we need to look at. Thank you.

Mr HEARD — There is a perception that when the national park was created in the Grampians it was a sort of a lock-up-and-forget-it attitude, and there was much less burning than had been previously under the forests commission. It was being less well managed in regard to fire. But some of the older people — —

Mrs PETROVICH — You are saying that is a perception or a reality that it is being less managed now?

Mr HEARD — There are figures to back it up, I believe.

Mrs FYFFE — Another Victorian water authority has expressed concerns about the run-off from poorly maintained access tracks having a negative impact on the quality of local streams and water. Is this an issue for your authority?

Mr ARNOLD — No, I am not aware that we have got any concern about the maintenance of tracks. Certainly after the fire in fact the resources were put in to rehabilitate a lot of the fire tracks at that time to prevent run-off. We would have to commend the action that was done by DSE and Parks Victoria. I guess we were fortunate in this region though that the intensity of the rain at that time was very light, so we did not suffer like other areas of the state which have had heavy rain. We potentially could have, so I guess I have to temper my comments with those.

Mrs FYFFE — That's okay. Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR — You are the chair of the Biodiversity Advisory Committee, and one of the things that we have heard is that there is little pre and post-flora and fauna counts, for example, so there is lot that we do not know about what the fuel reduction burns are doing to biodiversity and also what wildfire is doing to biodiversity. What do you know of that and how much work do you do in that area?

Mr ARNOLD — A couple of things: we are doing some work on the impact of fire, particularly on heathy woodlands, which is one of our ecological communities in the Casterton area. It could be applicable to other woodland-type communities as well. I guess we are just seeing what is the best way of managing that for a whole range of biodiversity values. We are also looking at some roadside veg management in terms of fire — what is the optimum way of managing our roadsides. So that is the work we are doing. Not a lot of that is looking at before and after, apart from perhaps that heathy woodland one. But I am aware that Parks Victoria has done some work in the Grampians. I do not have a copy of that report, but I have seen a presentation which demonstrated what happened post-wildfire.

The ACTING CHAIR — So the CMA itself does do not any work within the national park on biodiversity?

Mr ARNOLD — No.

The ACTING CHAIR — Why is that? Why is the national park outside your catchment?

Mr ARNOLD — It is not outside necessarily. I guess we focused our efforts on where we can have the best result looking at the asset and what the threats are to that asset. By and large we would say that the park is being managed reasonably effectively, and we are focused predominately on private land. We are trying to work with land-holders of private land to improve land management in that area. So that is where we have focused a lot of our effort. It is potentially part of our area of responsibility, but we have not spent a lot of time in that area.

The ACTING CHAIR — Don and Leigh, thank you so much for presenting today and for giving your submission.

Witnesses withdrew.