

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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Witnesses

Mr A. Heard,

Mr S. Armytage, and

Mr B. Crawford, Grampians Asset Protection.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I would like to welcome Simon Armytage, Anthony Heard and Bill Crawford from Grampians Asset Protection. I remind you that 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.

I ask you, Mr Armytage, Mr Heard and Mr Crawford, to make your presentation to us in light of the submission that we have before us. If you can keep that as brief as you can, given that we have the submission, we can maximise the opportunity for questions.

Mr ARMYTAGE — I would like Mr Heard to give a brief presentation and then Mr Crawford and I will try to answer your questions.

Mr HEARD — First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to have us speak today on behalf of the Grampians Asset Protection group. I am the captain of the Willaura fire brigade. During the Mount Lubra fire some 20 000 hectares of the Willaura fire brigade area was burnt in a period of about 4 hours on Sunday, 22 January 2006. It is a subject that is fairly dear to my heart.

I will try to answer the questions along the sheet here. We will go through it point by point. The first thing is extent, timing, resources and effectiveness on prescribed burning. Over the past 20 years there has been an average of about 3000 hectares of burning off done, as an average, in the park. This current year the DSE is trying to up that figure to 5000 hectares. The park is some 168 000 hectares, so we feel that in the overall scheme of things, this is not enough. We would like to see it perhaps up to 10 000 hectares a year as an average in the future, so that at least we are getting some continuity and there are not vast areas of the park that have not been burned for a long, long time.

Prior to the Mount Lubra fire there were areas that had not been burned for 30 to 40 years and the fuel build-up in these areas was just massive. The timing of these burn-offs: we feel that in this particular area of the park where we are today, the south-eastern side of it, we get too little burning done and it is done too late in the season. Decisions are made in Horsham and they are not actually in the interests of our side of the Grampians. We have got a different climate down here, it is south of the Divide, and I do not think enough is put into it from the powers that be who make the decisions in Horsham.

We feel that they should be trying perhaps to do some spring burns, which may be more effective on a drying cycle, and perhaps they should look to Western Australia, where a bit of this is done, for provision that they have good experience in these things.

The effectiveness of their burn offs, we feel are not particularly effective, particularly on the south and east facing aspects because as you get later into the season, there is not enough sunlight, it is damper and they are not cleaning out the under story very well. On the west facing side they are getting some quite reasonable burns due to the extra sunlight.

The timing of these burns too — we feel they are probably starting too late in the year, we were thinking towards March/April. As the season gets on as soon as daylight savings seems to end — this is as a general rule — the days get shorter and there is not enough heat in the day to carry a fire to do the job. You get into late April and we are not getting very effective burns at all.

The hotter the burns, it seems to actually bring back a lot of flora that we have not seen before, and we think that could actually make the park look better than it has been, with a lot of this woody under story, that this seems to be dominating.

Point 2 is the manner of the burning and how it is conducted. Currently the DSE have a 3-year plan. We quite keen for them to look to a 10-year plan. There is a whole plethora of zoning issues and things and we would like to see that simplified overall.

An example of what we perhaps would like to see is from Dunkeld to Pomonal along this east side, if it could be divided up into several — or 10 sections — say, burn the first section in year 1, the next section north on year 2, through to year 10. That way you are always burning back to the previous year's burn, so you are eliminating that

risk factor of it escaping into previously unburnt country. This would perhaps create a safer regime that would help with the mosaic effect that we are not burning great slabs of country all in one afternoon, as happened in 2006. It is giving the fauna a chance to be able to escape into areas each side of the previous burn, so that they have actually got somewhere to go.

We would like to see a simplified code of practice. The time frame to get burns up and going is too long. It seems to be a very long and protracted process. There seem to be too many stakeholders with a finger in the pie. You look at Parks Victoria and DSE as two separate agencies, that cannot seem to agree on a lot of points of view, and now we have got CMAs that want to have a say. There seems to be lots of different interested parties at all times and we cannot seem to get a job done because there seems to be lots of things in the way all the time. No one is prepared to make a decision.

Point 3 is the impact of prescribed burning and recent wild fires on the biodiversity. There was 50 per cent of the park burnt in one afternoon in 2006, and we think this is just devastating to wildlife in general. If we can get a regime of burning up over say a 10-year period where we are getting blocks done, we are not going to get the same sort of impact in one afternoon, as we do if we just do burning in a regimented regime.

We are also trying to manage 100 years of build up of fuel in some areas and it is something that we have got to work on and try to contain. If we do this we might actually get on top of things a little bit.

The reporting process is point 4 and we think it is overly complicated. The FOP process is complicated and everyone, except for the adjoining land-holders, seems to have a stake in what happens. We seem to be the ones with the most to lose when these fires escape from the park. The regulative process is pretty well the same as part 4.

Point 6: we feel that effective breaks and control lines are pretty well nonexistent. They are more concerned with the rehabilitation of firebreaks, and the cost of doing this could be better spent elsewhere. This distorts the cost of firefighting overall with the clean-up process.

Regarding the provision of water points, water authorities think it is not their main responsibility to provide water for firefighting. They think there is adequate water in the parks; we think there is not. An example of this is at the head works at Willaura. We are trying to get permanent storage, which could also serve firefighting purposes, catering for the needs of aircraft rather than relying on private land-holders. We need sufficient water for fire trucks, and we need sufficient water resources for aircraft to land and make quick turnarounds, so these water points have to be at strategic points throughout the park.

Point no. 9 is the impact of traditional land uses. On the point of camping we would also like to see camp fires banned during the fire danger period. We feel it is an unnecessary thing that adds another risk of wildfire over summer. We feel that tracks are not wide enough. Fire trucks have trouble getting down tracks to fight fires as a first attack, and there are not enough turnaround points. A lot of times fire trucks have to go down a track, but there is nowhere for them to turn around, then they have to back up, which is a dangerous practice. There is a chance of leaving firefighters trapped without the ability to turn around. We feel that the interface between public and private land also needs to be better defined so there is not the worry of trees falling and destroying fences that were put up along the edge of parks 12 months earlier at around \$7500 a kilometre.

We feel that a more structured approach may help combat larger fires under the extreme conditions we may start to get with climate change. If we are going to get these tougher conditions, we need more active fire prevention to prevent bigger fires, and we need a quicker response to outbreaks of fire, such as better-defined tracks and aircraft that are up and flying earlier in the day, as well as things such as infrared technology and perhaps satellite technology that could find these outbreaks of fire earlier, when they are smaller, so we can attack them more quickly before they become major fires.

We feel that there is not enough emphasis placed on the local skills, especially those of the stakeholders adjoining land-holders. There is too much control from a central point such as Horsham. Particularly when the Mount Lubra fire occurred a lot of decisions were being made from there which we had no control over, and if we wanted equipment or information, it was not forthcoming. Our local input was not particularly well recognised, and we would like to see this changed.

If we could run things from our end, we feel we would probably do a better job. Regarding local input I think the difference between our submission and some of these other submissions is that the lifestyle submissions are those

from other people, and we are trying to rely on our livelihood. Every time we get a severe fire out at the Grampians or these areas it is affecting our livelihood severely, and it is our lives that are at stake. It is not just a hobby for us.

The last point contains several points, and I will just go through them. With regard to radio communications we have a lot of trouble with radios that do not work in smoke, which is a fairly major problem when you are relying on radio communication during a fire. The first thing you have got to worry about is that they are not working because of the smoke. In relation to private fire units the current process for buying ex-CFA units used is a tender process.

We feel that the price of these ex-CFA trucks should be up-front so people know what they are worth, and they should be available at a price that is reasonable for private land-holders to buy, because at most fires private units are the first trucks on the scene, and they do a very good job. They are actually another arm for the CFA, and if these trucks were provided to private land-holders at a reasonable price, I think there will be benefit in more ways than one.

We would like to see newer trucks with resources such as A-class foam. During the Mount Lubra fire A-class foam was a great thing for putting out trees, including red gums. If you put A-class foam on trees, it is about 20 times more effective than just water alone. If you put a tree out with some A-class foam, you are pretty sure you have saved the tree rather than it catching fire again.

The ICC at Horsham — I have covered that. I think we would like to see a bit more decentralisation in the decision-making so we can have more control over our own destiny. Another point is that the catchment management authorities were offering subsidies to land-holders if they moved their fences in so many metres. Unfortunately as far as land-holders moving their fences in on private land, there is going to be this new wildlife corridor, supposedly, growing along these roads, but it is not going to be managed by anybody. If money is going to be provided to land-holders in order to just put new fencing up 4 or 5 metres in, it should be necessary for those people to manage these areas. I would like to call them wildfire corridors, because they are along the edges of roads, and they are going to hinder ingress and egress of emergency vehicles in the future.

On a final note I would like to talk about the worry of litigation and safety ahead of common sense in today's lifestyle. A lot of the feeling is it is better to do nothing than something. We like to feel that if you are having a go, you are going to be rewarded for having a go. It may not always go right, but you are doing it to the best of your ability at the time. But as we are becoming more and more safety conscious in this litigious world we feel that you need to make people keener to have a go rather than less keen to have a go. That concludes it. Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you want to add to any of that?

Mr CRAWFORD — No, I think that has covered it from my point of view, just in a very broad sense. One issue I would like to add is the management of a fire of this magnitude. I think it is almost impossible to get enough power from the people at the top to be able to cut across all the various organisations and groups that are involved in a situation like the Grampians fire. You have Parks Victoria, DSE, CFA and the catchment management authorities involved, and then you start to get into local government and private enterprises of all sorts.

I have actually probably favoured the notion of having a single fire manager, who is there virtually 24 hours, 7 days a week until that fire is controlled and extinguished. They would have the ability to cut across most of the impediments that could be in the road.

The ACTING CHAIR — We have got about 8 minutes for questions.

Mrs FYFFE — I have actually got about 10 things I wanted to ask you about, but I will only ask you one. I wanted to touch on fencing, prescribed burning, firebreaks, the radios that you mention become smoke affected, and water points. But I will just concentrate on this: on what basis do you say that 5000 hectares is not sufficient to be burnt each year for the next few years? On what do you base that?

Mr HEARD — Over the past 20 years they have burnt an average of 3000 hectares a year. The park is 168 000 hectares. As a percentage of the park there is a lot that is unburnt. Where the burning is done, it is very good. An example is the Mount Lubra fire. A burn was done in the previous 12 months, and that stopped a lot of

the forward progress of that fire and lessened the severity. If we can get a bit more of that effect, we may slow fires down enough, and it may restrict the spotting activity into the open grasslands.

Mrs FYFFE — We are, of course, getting the other argument that that is too much. May I ask you the rest of the questions in the break after the hearing finishes?

Mr HEARD — Yes, sure.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for that very comprehensive submission.

Mr HEARD — It might have been a bit too comprehensive.

Mrs PETROVICH — No, it was pretty interesting. One of the things that you did not discuss at length but I read in your submission is about the burn-off in those zonings. I was pretty interested about the fact that you talked about zone 3 and what changes your group would like to see to zone 3, which relates to no specific high-value assets to protect, which is what zone 3 refers to. Could you highlight for the committee the assets that are discussed and how you would like to see the changes to that zoning formula?

Mr ARMYTAGE — Yes, thank you. The zoning area is devised I believe by Parks and DSE. They put a different value on things than a lot of the rest of us do. The area around Halls Gap is considered a lot more valuable or precious than, say, the area around Dunkeld or the rest of the Grampians. I consider all of the Grampians to be precious, so I therefore fail to see why we do need a zoning area based on what someone else considers to be more important than, say, I do. That is how they come to an arrangement — one zone is to be burnt every three and five, and some every 10 and 20, and some not all. I believe prescribed burning should be done to achieve something, not just because it is a mark on a map.

You cannot go and burn around Halls Gap for fire prevention because it just does not work. It would be like trying to burn out the front of this building for fire prevention; you do not do that. We do not believe zoning is necessary. It is just another hold up in the process of defining where the burning shall be done. You cannot burn all the Grampians for the sake of fire prevention. We all know that, or we should know that. But we do believe it can be strategically done, and we do not need a handicap like zoning.

Ms LOBATO — Thanks for your presentation. I would like you to expand a little bit on the previous question. I wonder whether there are areas that clearly have some very valuable environmentally significant species of both flora and fauna. Should that not be considered more important, so to speak?

Mr ARMYTAGE — I could not agree more, but it could be done without it having to be zoned. I suppose you can zone it if you want to do it that way, but it is too defined and too big an area. There are areas that should be zoned down as important this end, as there is in Halls Gap, but it does not seem to be like that. The zoning areas seem to feature probably too small an area, it should be opened up and made bigger, but yes, I agree with what you are saying.

Mr HEARD — Can I add to that that there are significant areas that are high heritage value, that when you get fire as devastating as what we had last year, they get burned too, and nobody wants to see that. If we can try to be a bit more systematic in the way that we do things we may be able to save some of those areas.

Mr WALSH — Bill, can I take up the point of your suggestion about a single fire manager — and I thought the control centre actually was supposed to provide that across agencies — can you give us some examples of where you believe there has been a breakdown, where that overall management was not actually successful, or was an impediment to the fire operation?

Mr CRAWFORD — Yes. I live in Victoria Valley and we appear to have some sort of a management centre at the Mirranatwa hall, that is where the people were assembling for the fire that is on our part of the mountains, not the part that went up through on the east side. The DSE, I suppose, were bunkered down in its organisation in Horsham, and the CFA were bunkered down in its organisation south of Hamilton. It is a huge distance from where the action really is.

I believe that unless the person at the top can get around and have a physical inspection on a fairly regular basis to see what is going on, to get the feel of the wind conditions, the fire conditions, the vegetation conditions — all the things that are influencing what is happening — and I think it starts to break down on how you manage to make

decisions on how you go forward with a plan to slow it down and stop it from doing even more damage than it has done. I think we did have a breakdown there.

We arrived one morning at the hall and everyone had packed up and gone. I think they must have presumed we were going to be burned out, but it is a terrible presumption to make because really an asset like that is not going to burn anyway, there were too many fire trucks around it.

Mr WALSH — Who, in your mind, would be the single agency that is the top of the tree?

Mr CRAWFORD — I do not think it is a single agency, I think you want individuals. There are very eminent people in the community who have had an enormous amount of experience with fires. I cannot physically name them right here and now, but there must be a good panel of people out there, and they are not required very often. You might only have 2, 3, 4 or 5 fires for the year. You may not have any, some years, so is not a particularly onerous situation, in time. It might only be one incident every so often that you have to actually attend to. It is like a panel of international cricket umpires I suppose. You have got the people who have got the capacity and they are the people who are called on to do the job.

Mr WALSH — As long as they are not in Pakistan.

Mr CRAWFORD — We used to have Red Adair to put out oil well fires — so something like Red Adair. But I will give you a quick example. I was at Mirranatwa one night and we asked for two graders for firebreak work and we got eight Porta loos.

Mrs FYFFE — We should not laugh, we will draw an analogy there.

Mr HEARD — They were trying to say something, were they?

The ACTING CHAIR — I am sure you have had comments about that.

Mr HEARD — There are plenty of those sorts of examples throughout the fire. On the Tuesday night, they were going to close the staging area down at Willaura. By Thursday 450 firefighters were fed breakfast there. I do not think the left hand knew what the right hand was doing.

Mrs FYFFE — Is that because of the intensity and speed of this particular fire, do you think?

Mr HEARD — I think they thought we had been burnt out on the Sunday, there was nothing left to burn, the fire was over. But then Australia Day came along and suddenly it could happen again — the lack of foresight! I think it was such a big fire that the central point just did not seem to have a whole concept of what was going on.

The ACTING CHAIR — You talked about the fuel reduction burns done this year having gone from being okay to mediocre. From your point of view, how do you evaluate the benefits of a reduction burn?

Mr ARMYTAGE — The first one we did was late March, early April, and it was still a bit hot. I will admit that, I should not but I will, being an honest person like I am. Then the moisture came, we had a little bit of rain, the moisture levels increased and it did not burn as well. It is the same with any fire, if there is moisture it does not burn as well, or better, whichever way you look at it.

The ACTING CHAIR — Was this a particular zone burn, was this a one, or a two?

Mr ARMYTAGE — The later the burns were, the cooler — —

The ACTING CHAIR — No, I meant within the code of practice.

Mr ARMYTAGE — No, well they were marked on the map to be done.

Mr CRAWFORD — They would be zoned three or four, would they?

Mr ARMYTAGE — I am not really familiar with them. I am not into zoning to tell you the truth.

The ACTING CHAIR — When you do fuel reduction burns, who oversees that? There is a code of practice.

Mr ARMYTAGE — DSE and Parks Victoria do it and that takes them a week to work out which one is going to be in control of it. We give them a lot of encouragement — heaps of encouragement — and then we offer our services as CFA.

The ACTING CHAIR — So you are there to back up what is essentially a DSE production burn?

Mr ARMYTAGE — When it goes wrong, we take the blame and back up, yes.

Mr HEARD — I think an effective burn is one that has removed a lot of ground litter, it has burned probably a bit of bark off some of the trees, and these lower scrubby type trees, it cleans them out a bit.

Some of these unburned areas — you can barely walk through them, you have got to fight your way through them and afterwards there is a sort of a clear passage through them. That is what we are looking for, to try on those extreme days, where you have not got this intense fuel load, that is going to be absolutely unstoppable.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, gentlemen, for putting in that submission and sharing your time with us this afternoon, and for your ongoing support for fire suppression in the Grampians.

Witnesses withdrew.