

**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 G. Harper, manager, assets, Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water

**The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan)** — Welcome, Gary. I just need to read out a statement about the process of Hansard and to welcome everybody who is here.

I acknowledge the former minister for lots of things, the Honourable Roger Hallam, and the local member for Lowan, Hugh Delahunty.

I would like to welcome Gary Harper, who is the manager, assets, Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water. I need to tell you, Gary, 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. If you would like to make a presentation to us — keep in mind though that we would like to spend some time asking some questions.

**Mr HARPER** — Thank you for the opportunity. I have presented a signed copy of the submission you have before you now for your consideration and use later. Basically I was just going to run through the GWMW's (Grampian Wimmera Mallee Water's) role in bushfires in Victoria, which is not a major role. Our main concern with bushfires is really about the after effect — in terms of what effect it has on water quality. We have a number of reservoirs that are located in and around the Grampians National Park — the ones I will specifically speak about. Essentially those catchments are pristine, as we see them; bushland catchments managed by Parks Victoria, essentially.

Although there is tourism and public access permitted, other activities are pretty well controlled, as you would expect in a national park; there is no development permitted other than normal infrastructure, such as roads and so on for the benefit of tourists and park management.

We have a series of water supply systems that include water treatment plants and so on that take water from the reservoirs, treat it for urban supply and then distribute it for farm and domestic and stock use throughout the Wimmera-Mallee region. So that is essentially where water comes in: the headwork storages in and around the Grampians. The most recent fire we had was the Mount Lubra bushfire, as I am sure you are well aware. Fortunately for us in one aspect, we did not have a major rainfall event immediately after that fire, as was experienced in the north-east. When they had a rainfall event a large rainfall event of 50 millimetres or more caused major water quality problems for them.

We did not have that in one way, although we are desperately short of water in this region, and it would have been nice. But it did not happen, so we did not get the same problems. We had a number of small rainfall events, which did give us problems with ash and soil erosion because the catchment was essentially denuded. There was nothing to hold it there. It gave us some problems with water supply and the control of movement of water, but essentially it did not have a significant impact on us. On the issue of prescribed burning we have no hard evidence that it has any adverse impact on water quality.

Our belief, though, is that it lessens the impact of major fires throughout the catchment and, from that point of view, assists somewhat with water quality, but I have no hard evidence to back that up.

The second particular area of interest I noticed was the involvement of GWMW in prescribed burning and wildfire management activities. Again this is spelt out in more detail in the submission in front of you. We have a very good working relationship with both Parks Victoria and DSE. They communicate with us on their plans for the upcoming year or longer term. We are able to have input into those plans and talk about particular issues in a particular catchment, if we have some concerns, which essentially have been minimal because the prescribed burns have been parts of catchments rather than whole catchments, as you would expect. I would describe our involvement as minor, but we do have a good working relationship, and we are consulted on prescribed burns.

The third particular area of interest is supply of water for firefighting. Essentially we make available our water supply for the firefighting authorities. In the Mount Lubra fire the firefighting helicopters, Elvis — I do not know the proper term — as you may know, was used and took water supply from Lake Bellfield.

Our attitude is that in the grand scheme of things the amount of water that is taken for firefighting is small compared to the capacity of Bellfield, which is, say, 78 500 megalitres. So overall it is a small amount that is taken even though Bellfield is low at the moment. We do not have an issue with making water available for firefighting

purposes and do so and work with the authorities to facilitate access and make it as easy as we can for them to take water. Again, that is not an area of concern for us.

The local legislative and regulatory arrangements for prescribed burns and bushfire management — again, we are really on the very outside of that. We leave that to the fire management authorities to do that. As I said earlier, they consult with us, so I think our input into that is minimal. We rely on their expertise and better judgement in what should happen, and we have no issues with that.

The fifth area of interest raised in the letter was the impact of firebreaks and containment lines in the Grampian region on water quality management. Again, we would see the impact of those in themselves as being extremely minor compared, of course, to the damage caused by a fire. Overall we would assess firebreaks and containment lines as beneficial in terms of minimising the amount of damage that does occur overall in the fire. We assess the impact as beneficial, I think, in summary.

Some members of the public may see the firebreaks or whatever as an access track and may come into areas and carry out activities that may lead to erosion and so on, so there is a need to revegetate those areas and limit public access to normal activities in a national park rather than four-wheel driving or whatever. Our assessment overall would be that they would be beneficial and assist us in protecting water quality in the event of a fire. So that is, I suppose, my summary of the five areas of interest that you asked for. I am happy to answer questions.

**Mr WALSH** — Gary, with the building of the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline, as I understand it, there is a review process taking place as to what storages may or may not be decommissioned in the future if they are not needed?

**Mr HARPER** — Yes.

**Mr WALSH** — Is the availability of water for fire control part of the mix in the discussions about those particular reservoirs?

**Mr HARPER** — It is. Just as background — we are about to pipeline our system, which means our requirements for the channel-fed system as it is from our reservoirs is about to change, and we need to look at how we operate the system into the future and what our requirements are for reservoirs. We have established a stakeholder working group to assist us with that, and we have members including local councils, Parks Victoria and also catchment management authorities to make sure that the range of community values for our reservoirs are considered.

We have been focusing, I suppose, on water supply, tourism and recreation. A number of the reservoirs that would be key supply sources for, say, the Grampians in terms of Bellfield, Moora, Rocklands and Wartook are essentially required storages in our system going forward. There may be some options in how we operate those storages to fully supply. So they may be operated at a lower level to reduce evaporation to save that water and make it available for environmental flows, but essentially our view is that those storages will be required and will continue into the future and will be available for firefighting purposes.

**Ms LOBATO** — I do not actually have a question for you, but thank you for your presentation, and thanks for being here today. And congratulations; it sounds as if you worked well with all the other relevant agencies. Thank you for your support in that way.

**Mr HARPER** — Thank you.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — Thank you again for your presentation. It was most informative. I just have a question on firebreaks. Do you believe that firebreaks such as those used in the protection of the Thomson would be of any assistance in the protection of your resources?

**Mr HARPER** — Sorry, I do not know. I am not aware of the difference between the firebreaks we use in this area and those in the Thomson.

**Mrs PETROVICH** — I think the significant difference was they were much bigger.

**Mr HARPER** — Okay, is that in terms of width?

**Mrs PETROVICH** — Yes.

**Mr HARPER** — I feel a little bit as though I am speaking out of school. I would prefer to leave that to the firefighting authorities, but I understand that width is an important consideration in terms of firebreaks being jumped. I would say from our point of view, given the area of the catchments — both Bellfield and Wartook catchments are about 100 square kilometres; one is 90 square kilometres and the other is 100 — and in terms of the significance of the firebreak compared to the total catchment, it does not seem to be a major issue.

It is more one of maintenance of the firebreak for the various authorities and having that assessment of what is needed to stop the fire jumping the firebreaks. I really do not feel that qualified to comment, but I would just like to stress, in terms of the size of the catchment, the firebreaks are not a significant area for us.

**Mrs FYFFE** — Thank you, Gary. I look forward to reading your submission in detail later. Another Victorian water authority has expressed concerns about the run-off from poorly maintained access tracks having a negative impact on local streams and water quality. Is this an issue for you?

**Mr HARPER** — It certainly is, and that is one of the things we would like considered in terms of ongoing maintenance of the firebreaks. Our assessment would be that, overall, the adverse effect on water quality from the bushfire is much greater than the adverse effect by the run-off from a small area of firebreaks in the catchment. It is one of balance for us. The greater problem would be when a fire occurs we have a massive inflow of adverse material.

**Mrs FYFFE** — If these tracks were better maintained, would it be better?

**Mr HARPER** — Yes, certainly; it does contribute to a deterioration of water quality. If we have these tracks and they have been used by four-wheel drive people or whoever cutting them up and then we get run-off into the storage, then yes, it does have an impact. I would not say it is a major impact, but it does have an impact.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Gary, in terms of the maintenance of the tracks and whether it is poorly maintained or not poorly maintained, would it be true to say that in some ways a poorly maintained track reduces access and therefore perhaps you have less erosion?

**Mr HARPER** — It certainly does. The poorly maintained tracks limit people visiting in two-wheel drive vehicles. That would be my simplification of the issue. So it cuts down the number of people who can access that area and cause damage.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Is public access an issue for as far as water quality is concerned?

**Mr HARPER** — In itself public access is not an issue. Bushwalking is a popular pastime. People walking through the catchment, that is fine; there are no real issues from that — there are, but they are very minor. It is more the vehicle traffic.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — ‘Vehicular’ I think it is.

**Mr HARPER** — Yes, I think that is the right word. It is more the vehicular traffic and the effect that has on just churning up tracks, turbid water running into the reservoir and that sort of thing. That is where we have issues.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Also, where they create tracks or firebreaks in the course of a fire and bulldozers go in, is it your authority’s preference that those tracks be restored to as close to original as possible.

**Mr HARPER** — Yes, after the fire is extinguished we would push for those tracks — and I have said this in the submission — and that area to be revegetated; yes.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Just one other question: you talked about the water coming out of the Bellfield dam and you said that while it is low, the amount of water that was taken to fight the fires was minimal in the scheme of things.

**Mr HARPER** — Yes.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — About what amount of water was taken?

**Mr HARPER** — We do not know. For Bellfield we do a reading each day and then a calculation of the volume based on the depth of the storage. Essentially we were finding very small changes in that. We only know from day to day the change. What I am saying is that, what account evaporation had in that as opposed to taking water for firefighting, we have no idea. We could possibly source information from the fire authorities to say how many loads there were, if they have people doing that, but we have no way of distinguishing between what caused the change in the day. How much was evaporation, we would not know.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — But from your point of view it is negligible?

**Mr HARPER** — Yes, it is negligible, especially when you consider that bushfires mainly occur in summer, which is when we have our highest evaporation losses. Hot windy days is when we lose a fair amount of water from a reservoir, so it is occurring anyway.

**Mrs FYFFE** — What about the use of chemical fire retardants?

**Mr HARPER** — Yes, we have had a look at that. I think the last two pages in the submission cover that. We have done checks on the Phos-check material that our local authority has used here. What we have found is that — again getting back to the amount of water — if it flows into our reservoir and is then diluted in a huge water body, the levels do not concern us. They are well below the threshold limits for safety, so it is not an issue. If there was a change of the material used, then we would need to look at that and reassess. But as to the one they are using at the moment, we have had a look at it, and we are satisfied. They just cannot use that much chemical to make a difference in a large reservoir. I am talking about our reservoirs not an individual farm dam, which is much smaller. From our point of view, it does not make difference.

**Mrs FYFFE** — It is because of the volume of the water in your reservoir?

**Mr HARPER** — Exactly right; it is the dilution of the material.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**