

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

Mr M. Duke, manager, infrastructure development, and

Mr P. Rogers, manager, infrastructure operations, Northern Grampians Shire Council.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome Mr Martin Duke, manager, infrastructure development, and Mr Peter Rogers, manager, infrastructure operations, from Northern Grampians Shire Council. I need to remind you again that all the evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, and is 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. You can make a presentation to the committee before we ask questions. We have about half an hour, so could you organise your time in such a way that we can have some time for questions.

Mr DUKE — Thank you, Acting Chair, for the opportunity to come and address the committee. The Northern Grampians Shire Council is appreciative of the fact that you are going through this process. I think it is quite a complex topic you are trying to grapple with, and I know the council wishes you all the best. We did previously make a written submission. I have further enhanced that written submission, and I am happy to pass a copy across to each of you.

We have tried to address each of your questions one by one. A lot of times we feel we are not expert enough to be able to give you clear, definitive answers on things — rather, we can give you a general perspective of the common person and from the council's perspective, too. As it shows at the end of my submission, I have the role of emergency resource officer and the municipal fire prevention officer — Peter Rogers is my deputy in a couple of those things — as well as my normal role of manager, infrastructure development.

What I have given you is about three pages. The back of the last page — the pretty picture — shows the three recent fires that have affected our municipality. Up the top it shows that in the year 2000 a fire went from Dadswells Bridge and ran in an easterly direction. The Deep Lead fire started on New Year's Eve. I was involved with that one, so I have got experience of that one. That fire ran down beside Stawell. There is also the Grampians fire, which has been a major focus, running in January and February. The areas indicate the size of them, but it is indicating that we have these sorts of events every few years.

In answering your questions on the extent, timing, resourcing and effectiveness of prescribed burning, I will make the general comment that we believe consultation and collaboration are imperative, and the best way is that freehold and Crown responses have to be complementary to be effective. I have seen over the years that sometimes they have worked in isolation and it has not helped; however, we do respect the CFA's perspective and Parks Victoria perspective on a lot of these things. On the manner in which prescribed burning is conducted, again we are not heavily involved with those things. We believe the Crown land managers for Parks operate those things, and we have not focused on those things.

Your question 3 is about the impact of prescribed burning. Again, Northern Grampians has not done any scientific analysis of those things, but can I make the personal observation that there seems to be diversity of biology due to the different burning frequencies. The example I can give is that a lot of our roadsides have good growth of native orchids, which is because, to its credit, the fire brigade has been burning the roadsides on a yearly basis or every two years, and that has enhanced orchid growth. However, anecdotally I understand that mountain ash trees cannot take that frequency of burning, so whilst it might suit the orchids, it might not suit the larger trees. Clearly there is complexity and different regimes for controlled burns, rather than a one-in-ten-year burn as a simple answer to everything.

On the reporting processes applicable to prescribed burning, integrated fire management planning, which has been a major focus of the state government for some time, is going to see the opportunity for a better integration of a lot of the prescribed burning and the processes there. We are of the belief that those consultation networks help in the event of fires. An example was identified from fires in the year 2000. Halls Gap was identified as being of particular risk due to the proximity of the park. The council helped set up a subcommittee to its municipal emergency planning committee, which is the Halls Gap community safety subgroup. This consists of police, CFA, DSE, council and a representative of the tourism group. We have meetings frequently — quarterly — and well in advance of the fire season, in particular to focus on the clean-up day before the fire season, whereby the council takes off the local law which prohibits burning in its towns for the last two weeks in October and the first two weeks in May. In the middle of that time my council has a free pick-up of green waste in the towns and also free tipping, which is a combined action between Parks Victoria, DSE, the CFA and ourselves. That combination is what I am seeing integrated fire management becoming after a time — that we all integrate and work together so that any work the council does in the town will complement any work that the Parks or DSE are doing. To give

credit to my predecessors — I have only been here 2½ years — they and the other agencies set that up, and it really is a smooth-running operation that I believe is the model for integrated fire management.

Question 5 is about legislative and regulatory arrangements of prescribed burns. I am not aware of the controls and those sorts of things on Parks Victoria or DSE, so I have not addressed that one.

On the effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed firebreaks, my understanding from the Grampians fires is that this may not be practical in more remote areas of the Grampians, because you physically cannot get there. That is one question I throw back. We understand that it is a good form of fire control, but challenging for biodiversity and four-wheel drive access. We understand that for public land managers general four-wheel drive access needs to be controlled, in that you do not allow open access all the time.

I will make a general comment about flora and fauna corridors across permanent breaks. As a committee you are working your way through those issues, so I am not sure whether or not I am repeating some of the questions you are thinking about yourselves.

I will make some personal observations about the Deep Lead and Mount Lubra fires. Firebreaks cannot maintain wildfires on certain days, with the wind speed and the dryness of the land and the bush — for example, I understand that during the Deep Lead fires the fires were running at 20 or 30 kilometres an hour and were spotting well in advance, which made it a real challenge and which made firebreaks a bit of a nonsense for those days. My understanding is that the fire danger index for that Deep Lead fire was very high on that day, so the CFA and DSE experts can elaborate on those things. The observation we made is that the understanding of how wildfires have operated in the last 20 or 30 years has grown tremendously, and that that knowledge, I think, is helping our understanding of how things operate. From my own experience and from family history there was a lack of understanding of how fires started in the 1940s and 1950s, as compared with how we all understand fires spot now, and that information is flowing a lot better.

It is understood that this is complex, it is not as simple as, 'Let us create a 20 metre break here or there'. We understand some breaks will stop fires, and then there is the difficulty of understanding how the small fires can be contained by the breaks. The local fire brigades understand and have seen that, and so they have a lot of allegiance to small firebreaks and are keen on those things, as distinct from the more scientific attitude that perhaps those are a little unnecessary. We believe some further investigation needs to be carried out on these things. My understanding is that the Deep Lead and Mount Lubra fires were uncontrollable on particular days, at particular stages; it was more a sort of steering of the fires, rather than controlling or containing. An observation is that the cooperative effort to carry out firebreaks is something that is also advantageous for the teams, for the working between fire brigades and DSE. There is an advantage there of not only the work you carry out but also the cooperative effort that happens there.

On water points — topic 7 — we are not aware of particular issues, but we would like to be informed and kept informed of the outcomes of any water storage points. Topic 8 on the impact of traditional land uses, we are basically saying management planning should be collaborative and open to all the community so that full understanding of the different perspectives can be understood. And the same for 9 which is on service access tracks. There are different perspectives. Parks Victoria has a different perspective. We need to understand how the different agencies operate and why they operate.

Topic 10 is something that is closer to our understanding: the impact on climate change. This is a major concern especially if fires are to occur more often and are to be the campaign style, unlike earlier fires where they did not rage for weeks and weeks. We have just got a concern that for local government this is going to be a major resource imperative, and that is a slight change in needs. The experience we had with the Grampians and the Mount Lubra fires was that it was the responsibility of local government to support the agencies, but it also meant that other council responsibilities were put aside. Normal council responsibilities were put aside so that we could keep the support going for the fire agencies. We believe that if climate change is happening, as has been suggested, there is going to have to be a greater focus and greater understanding by local government and support for those things.

Topic 11 is about additional measures required to provide a mechanism for skills and knowledge. Again, collaborative planning is needed, and the difficulty of balancing the scientific knowledge and local perspectives is a real challenge. The collaborative thing that we are doing here in Halls Gap is helping the sharing of that knowledge.

Topic 13 is on collaborative planning and better cooperation and communication between DSE and CFA. Something that I have seen in the last 14 and 15 years has been a tremendous improvement between DSE and CFA. The communication and the openness between the two organisations is a credit to them. I saw 14 or 15 years ago an inability between CF and L fire rangers and CFA people to communicate properly. From my personal experience on the day of the Deep Lead fires, I had been instructed and requested to open the municipal emergency coordination centre. I went up to the fire station at Stawell and the first person I saw was a Parks officer, in close collaboration with the DSE, working on how to manage the fire that was happening; so at that point I thought, 'Tremendous!'. I have seen a huge change in the last 14 years. I believe that is happening; it is improving.

On the last topic, I emphasise that that local knowledge and understanding of how the communities work helps in emergency situations as well.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is that it?

Mr DUKE — Yes.

Mr WALSH — Thanks for your well-thought-through contribution, in addition to the written stuff. You mentioned in your verbal presentation the issue around the fact that council, fulfilling its fire roles during those bushfires, neglected some of its traditional or normal work load. Has council actually put an actual cost on what those fires either cost in hard money or in lost work that should have been done for other areas?

Mr DUKE — One of the simplistic ones — this is not hard and fast, but a simplistic one — was the fact that we claimed from the state government recompense for our response and recovery phases of around \$196 000. At the same time in that same financial year we underspent our Roads to Recovery expenditure by \$146 000 in our own source funding. That indicated to me that our works team had been focusing on response and recovery, and so our own normal routine road maintenance repairs was deducted by \$146 000. It was interesting to see that the two were closely aligned — so that sort of figures. It was very interesting to see that the Deep Lead fire, which as you will see in the pictures is a relatively small fire, but because of the shape of the Northern Grampians it consumed the vast majority of that \$196 000, whereas the Grampians fire response and recovery did not have to be as great because it was not affecting as much private land.

Mr WALSH — Did you have to actually send back the Roads to Recovery money?

Mr DUKE — The council had to go back to Roads to Recovery in Canberra to say, 'We underspent our own funds'. To be eligible to have the Roads to Recovery funding, we have to commit our own funding each year. There is a 1999-2000 figure that came through, and council has to spend that much on roads every year. In that particular year, due to the fires, council underspent its own funds by \$146 000, because we had to focus on the support, the agencies during the fires, and the recovery phases.

Mrs FYFFE — Point taken.

Ms LOBATO — Thanks for your presentation. I was very interested to hear about the project that the shire has in conjunction with the other key agencies with regard to the clean-up days. I wonder if you could elaborate on that any more, and I was thinking particularly in the areas of cost to the shire perhaps? The committee may be interested in that you stated it was a model. Certainly I am not aware of that throughout the very fire-prone areas in my electorate, so I would like more information on that, if that is okay.

Mr DUKE — All right. Admittedly, again, I came in only 2½ years ago and it had been running for 4 or 5 years, before I got there. It was a reaction with each of those agencies realising that we have to focus on how we let the tourist community know there is a fire and how should they be reacting. The group has identified ways of notifying the tourism operators. We have created a tent card, and I think Michael Boatman might be talking about it later. The tent card pamphlet that we have circulated to all the accommodation places, which indicates that you are in a fire-prone area and this is what you are supposed to do during a fire. We have created key tags which we have also passed out to the accommodation places, giving them information about how you notify the tourism groups. This is an idea we had and, to our credit, we have also been successful in gaining some grants to be able to fund these sorts of things each year. That committee has then said, 'How do we cooperatively do fire prevention in the town?', and so one Sunday in October council allows free tipping of green waste at the transfer station and also sends a mulcher and a truck to pick up the green waste and mulch that for the Halls Gap community. My council's contribution is not a lot — it is only thousands, not tens of thousands of dollars for that — but equally Parks

Victoria is chipping in and helping out with plant and equipment during those times. We are all working together with a single voice to say that these things should be happening.

Ms LOBATO — Fantastic. Thank you.

Mrs PETROVICH — From an infrastructure and asset protection aspect, do you agree that it has been proven that firebreaks and mosaic burns would protect the shire's biodiversity and physical infrastructure?

Mr DUKE — What I am trying to say is that it is such a complex thing that I could not give you a straight yes or no answer to that question. I think that perhaps it works in certain areas. With certain wind speeds and with dryness of land it works in those areas if you have a low-speed fire. I do not think I can give you a categorical yes or no.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thanks for trying.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you very much for making the submission to us and for making it in detail. Given that you have such a large influx of tourists during that risky time, I quite understand the difficulties in reaching them all and I admire the work that you are doing. One of the issues that has come up continually in submissions and in conversations is the tracks and track signage in these hilly areas and other areas. Do you believe they have been kept cleared and open enough to give access for two reasons in your shire: one is to control the fires and the other is to get the tourists out?

Mr DUKE — I do not think we have formed an opinion on that.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay. You have obviously got a great interest in the fires, because you have talked about the Mount Lubra fires and the Deep Lead fires.

Mr DUKE — Yes.

Mrs FYFFE — But your shire covers Halls Gap and the areas around here, and you have so many people wandering around.

Mr DUKE — The topic of challenging Parks Victoria or DSE has not been raised. I am not aware of having taken issue with the land managers about that.

Mrs FYFFE — Is it a topic that the CFA has raised with you at all?

Mr DUKE — That topic has not come to my attention, no.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay. Our terms of reference relate to all bushfires and not just the ones you have experienced here, which were of such intensity that I think most people just thought, 'I've got to pray and hope that nothing too bad happens'. We had that sort of experience in 1983 in the Yarra Valley. We also have to look at all the other bushfires that happen — on a regular basis, sadly.

Mr DUKE — So by public land, do you also mean roadsides?

Mrs FYFFE — Yes.

Mr DUKE — But you are not focusing on private land or freehold land?

Mrs FYFFE — We are talking about bushfires overall, because wherever they start and wherever they spread would apply to this inquiry. You say you have not heard anything about problems with access tracks. Do you have any other areas where you think it would be difficult in either getting people out or controlling a fire, in your experience as the manager here?

Mr DUKE — Halls Gap itself, by its very nature, has the problem that it is surrounded by parks and those sorts of things. We have that difficulty in the layout and geography of Halls Gap itself, with the single-access track down at Dunkeld and the single bridge back to Stawell and Ararat. My council has been worried for a long time about that particular Delleys Bridge. VicRoads, to its credit, has replaced that in the last two and a half years. The highway and the council road access have, I think, been addressed, but council is well aware of that too. That is why it is trying to work in cooperation with the Halls Gap community safety group to address those issues together.

The ACTING CHAIR — That two weeks of clean-up that you have where you remove permit conditions for burning — —

Mr DUKE — Council takes the local law off; it puts aside the local law for two weeks.

The ACTING CHAIR — Are you aware of that happening anywhere else?

Mr DUKE — I am not aware of it happening anywhere else. My council had some difficulty with it because we have other towns in the shire. They looked at the circumstances of Halls Gap and said, 'We will exempt Halls Gap because of its proximity to the surrounding national parks'. No, I am not aware of any other areas where that is done. I have worked in South Gippsland and the Phillip Island area, and it was not done there, no.

The ACTING CHAIR — You mentioned climate change; is the council trying to manage and plan for what climate change may bring?

Mr DUKE — The council is just starting to address that issue, and that is a topic we are preparing papers for. Council of course has been involved in Cities for Climate Protection and those groups involved in energy efficiency and those sorts of things, but perhaps it has not yet conveyed that to the structural side of works and maintenance. To its credit, our council has had a strong focus on water reuse and stormwater reuse, and we are capturing as much of our stormwater as we can. For example, in Stawell we have created an innovative water wetlands system with part DSE funding and part council funding to capture stormwater for reuse for the watering of our central park for the Stawell Gift, but we are also doing something similar in St Arnaud by recirculating class C sewage water for the watering of our football grounds. Peter Walsh pressed the button for that to start. But that water is also available for firefighting purposes, which has been suggested to me.

Mrs FYFFE — I have one more question before you go, as I am interested. You highlight the impact of climate change on bushfires and so on and the importance of forward planning and continued support. This may be on record, but what level or manner of support do you believe should be given to councils in bushfire-prone areas to handle climate change?

Mr DUKE — It is a real challenge for councils to refocus on that instead of on rates, rubbish and those things. For councils to say, 'The focus is now on fire prevention more than it has been in the past' may be a fair challenge. I do not think we have come to a concept of how many dollars are required or what sort of support is required. What I have seen coming through the integrated fire management is regional support for us in our fire prevention works. If that regional support could be happening through DSE and CFA, that would help us as a local government in complementing our normal integral fire prevention planning and operations.

Mrs FYFFE — I am aware of the costs that councils seem to carry in many areas that perhaps they feel should be handled by a more central funding body.

Mr DUKE — With that integrated fire plan methodology, my fear when that was initially called the integrated municipal fire prevention plan was that I would see the onus going straight back onto local government, because we were supposed to develop all the committee meetings and bring the information together. I am hopeful that the model will be on a regional state government agency basis and that we will merely be supporting that rather than the onus being purely on local government.

Mrs FYFFE — I am sure that if you sat down and actually analysed the total cost — for any council in a bushfire area, not just yours — it would mount up.

Mr DUKE — It does, but I suppose we are recognising where we live, too. We have said that is where we want to live.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks, Martin, Thanks, Peter.

Witnesses withdrew.