

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 31 July 2007

Members

Ms J. Duncan
Mrs C. Fyffe
Mr C. Ingram
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Witnesses

Mr R. Grant;
Mr G. Rothe;
Mr K. Broome;
Mr G. Connley;
Mr P. Carrick;
Mr R. Bilney;
Mr N. Barraclough;
Mr J. Mulligan;
Mr K. Stuart; and
Mr K. Barling.

The CHAIR — I welcome Phil Davis, who has been with us all afternoon and is again with us tonight at the community forum.

On behalf of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee I would like to warmly welcome you all to the community forum as part of our bushfire inquiry. We are spending three days in the Gippsland region. We are in Bairnsdale today, Heyfield tomorrow afternoon and Traralgon on Thursday. The majority of you were at the different presentations we had this afternoon, and I thank you for your commitment in staying around and engaging in exchanges. I also welcome some new visitors. A community forum is not something that parliamentary committees normally do, but we took the view that with this inquiry there is a significant amount of interest, and we are conscious of being accessible. We are conscious that not everyone wants to put things in writing but may want to be given an opportunity to make a few comments and presentations. We might have an exchange of questions et cetera as part of our information-gathering exercise.

For those who have not caught up, just recently the Parliament amended the committee's terms of reference to include the impact of bushfires on the June-July Gippsland floods, which we think is entirely appropriate and timely. The committee is inquiring into the impact of public land management practices on the scale of the frequency and intensity of bushfires in Victoria, including East Gippsland. I encourage you to participate in the forum by making yourselves known to one of our committee staff — Derek or Michael — if you are interested in making any comments. I would rather keep a list in order to give people a bit of a go. As I said prior to the dinner break, my preference is to hear from people who have not made presentations this morning, but we will see how we go with time and the contributions people want to make. Once you let Derek or Michael know that you are interested and they give me the list, we will then invite you to step up to the microphone and make your comments to the committee. We ask you to keep your comments brief and relevant to the bushfire terms of reference — something like up to about a 5-minute contribution or presentation or whatever you would like to make. Members of the committee might like to ask the persons doing so some questions and get their opinions. We will then move on, in order, to the next person who has indicated that they would like to make a contribution.

I advise everyone present that evidence taken at this forum is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the forum may not be protected by such privilege. All evidence given this evening is being recorded, and witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks, together with details of what to do with those transcripts. The first person who wishes to make a contribution is Rob Grant from the Wildfire Task Force, Gippsland. I ask Rob to join us up here.

Mr GRANT — Thank you very much, John, fellow politicians and the committee.

The CHAIR — I encourage everyone to speak up because we did get a few comments earlier in the session from people wanting to hear the contributions from the back of the room. Whilst we are all talking from one direction, the presenters are talking in the opposite direction, so we ask you to be conscious of that.

Overheads shown.

Mr GRANT — This is an oral presentation that you have very kindly accepted. I am a farmer in this district. I farm at the interface of the Mitchell River National Park between Bairnsdale and Tabberabbera. Over many years I have watched the fire sequences come through, from 1950 to 1965 — 1983 being Ash Wednesday — and 2002–03 and 2006–07. I would like to talk to some of these slides. We will go through them as quickly as we can because many other people want to speak.

Looking at this system where we had floods afterwards, this was a pyrocumulous cloud between the Wentworth and Bullumwaal, which delivered a huge thunderstorm into the Wentworth. Since then, naturally, we have had east-coast lows come down, and in the geography where I farm there was 1 millilitre or 4 points off 13 inches of rain. As you can imagine, all the uplands country that was badly burnt was very hydrophobic, and the steepness of it, naturally, in the catchments of the Mitchell, the Tambo and the Nicholson did huge damage. The number of birds and animals, apart from domestic animals, that were killed was frightening. We found many animals and birds in the fire zone that were either singed to death, de-feathered or de-haired, or we found them dead where, perhaps, the heat of the smoke had killed them.

Rohan and Roger Bilney spoke about the common phalanger or possum species and the recruitment after the 1952 and 1965 fires between here and Dargo and the Birregun, which runs up towards Dinner Plain. A common species

is the ringtail possum, the greater glider, the sugar glider and all of those. They went back over the same geography, but they probably only recruited at 40 per cent of their previous numbers. Now, with these fire sequences in 2002–03 and 2006–07 their genetic base has toppled to a very fine line — not because of inbreeding, but the gene pool lessened. I think that with some of the next generation of these common species — the brushtail possum and ringtail possum — the sad thing to say is that under current climate cycles and, perhaps, global warming, we might not see these animals we love. That particular one was a sugar glider in ironbark country and, as you can see, burnt again.

There were fish kills in the Mitchell system, towards Dargo. Some of those fish, which numbered nearly 100, were in roe and milt and perhaps ready for breeding. I would say that would be the deoxygenation of water and the turbidity with ash also in it.

The slides are rather gruesome. That is one of our swamp wallabies; the next is a ringtail possum. Another interesting thing is that in the Dargo River, the Wentworth and the Haunted Stream area there were many Samba deer which perished in the fire. On numerous occasions you could either smell them, go and observe them or find them in the stream where they tried to find refuge at riparian level and in the water. But for the first time — and I would say post the 1939, 1952 and 1965 fires — this particular fire sequence eclipsed 2002–3, because it burnt nearly every riparian right to the water's edge. In the previous fires — and I was born only a year after the 1939 fire, but can remember very vividly as a young kid — those riparian and temperate rainforest edges that protected our streams were not burnt. This time they have gone. Naturally, domestic animals that were in close proximity went. Exotic, introduced animals — the Samba deer from Asia — and a lot of our native animals in refuge did not last.

That photo was taken between the Thomson and Aberfeldy on an ironbark ridge, and that is a greater glider, which is the biggest of our phalanger species. He and quite a few of his mates were found dead on that particular day, and we had travelled from the Thomson across to the Crooked, then on to the Dargo, and then on to the Wentworth, to Haunted Stream and then on to the Tambo, so we had gone right through the fire sequence from the start to the finish.

The next slide is of a sugar glider and it was not in a state of burn, and yet we found some of its mates in close proximity just shrivelled up. That is it. Thanks very much for your time, it is not a very nice thing to talk about, but it is reality. If I can field any questions, with my knowledge of the geography and the fires that have gone through post 1939 up until 2007, I would endeavour to help.

Mrs FYFFE — My question is very broad. Do you think anything could have been done to minimise the effect of this wildfire, prior to it occurring?

Mr GRANT — In 1998 we reincorporated the wildfire task force that was originally started by Jack Treasure at Dargo. Some said that perhaps Jack was very imperious in his viewpoint and very oriented to grazing, but if we looked at a more level system, we did ask for rib and ridge lines to be burnt from the Birregun back down the Danes and Mathiesons track. It was very steep country where this fire went through into the Wentworth. Many of us feel that if that project had been taken out it would have stopped a lot of the easterly movement, because by the time the fire had come out of the Wongungarra and the Crooked River towards the Dargo, the season and the nights had changed. In their approach the nights were cool and we were getting easterlies. Up until it going from, say, Seaton back through to behind Castleburn and Bulgaback, I do not think there would have been a stopping ability at that stage. But from the Dargo towards the Wentworth and then naturally on to Martha Vale and the Nicholson, and then on to the Tambo, I think there would have been, if they had carried out rib and ridge line burnings, a fair possibility, with night crews changed, that that fire could have been put to sleep.

Mrs FYFFE — Excuse my ignorance, but if you burn the ridge and the fire is coming up, obviously it is not going to get up over the other side because you have burnt it back?

Mr GRANT — No. Naturally it is going to be fast up to the top of the ridge, but when it gets to the other side and it is a drop down, if you are changing a night crew, that fire, the closer it gets to the equinox, goes to the ground of an evening. Now, I think there was a big chance then. I do not want to be nasty or derogatory to any of the endeavours, but I do feel, pre-emptive of the 2002–03 fire, if they had taken on those methodologies and listened to more local knowledge, there would have been a big possibility of stopping that fire just north of Dargo.

Mr INGRAM — What would you say should have been the sort of frequency of the fire regimes on those ridges, and I suppose you probably should explain what type of vegetation classes are on those ridge lines?

Mr GRANT — On the ridge lines and facing slightly north and slightly to the east, you will come back into snow gums, but once you drop back down onto the southern side, into the deeper basalts, you will come to messmates, blackbutts and woolly butts, and usually going to the ground there it is holding more moisture and would not travel downhill and south as rapidly at night-time. The frequency that perhaps those rib and ridge lines should have been burnt was leading into 2002-03, when they were dry enough and could have been burnt post-equinox and probably into winter, because we quoted the least snow for 32 years in that sequence pre-emptive of 2002-03 fire. And even post-2003, leading into 2005, there was very minimal snow again from the Birregun and Dinner Plain back towards Dargo.

Mr VINEY — Rob, thank you very much for your graphic presentation. I do not have any questions.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you, for a very comprehensive and great presentation. I have one question, if I may. We have heard a lot about strategies and numbers of staff and resources being put into fire prevention by Parks Victoria and DSE. In your opinion, are we currently reducing the incidence or intensity of wildfire in these areas? Obviously you have vast experience historically of these fires. How would we have managed these with less resources?

Mr GRANT — Historically there was more local knowledge, and I suppose the forestry in select log harvesting was a different methodology in those days. Today it is slash, burn and log coupes that perhaps open up, and then you get an acidification of those soil types that give us what we call the primary vegetation types that die rather rapidly in tight years, and they give you the vertical fuel load to start the next fire. I think there has got to be a lot of listening and a lot of cooperative work to actually try to stop the intensity of fire. If we put a quantum of global warming, we must have even more cooperative work to stop these holocausts, because they just do not stop at the fire, they do not stop at the animals, they stop our water.

Mrs FYFFE — You may not be able to answer this, so if you cannot it is fine. With your knowledge of the rivers — and the other knowledge you are expressing about the river banks having been burnt and having no vegetation left, and then the heavy rainfall, which I understand was not quite as heavy as the previous floods — were these floods so bad, because there was no vegetation?

Mr GRANT — There was no vegetation at riparian level, but the fire had not just stopped at riparian, it went right to the ridge lines so the actual angle of the run of water was very steep into our major streams, and they were all bare, whereas we have had previous fires that left a mosaic of rhizome rooted species that actually held up the water. This time it was just a whoosh.

Mrs FYFFE — If we had not had the fires and we had this rainfall, the floods would not have been so bad because the ground would have absorbed more of the water.

Mr GRANT — Yes. It would have been nowhere near as bad. We would have been praying to God and thankful for the fact that the sequence was like it was.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mr Grant. We very much appreciate your time; I know you have been around all afternoon.

Someone who made a contribution earlier at a different hearing has requested to make a further contribution. My preference at this stage would be to hear from somebody who did not present to us this morning and who wishes to make a contribution. You need to let us know who you are and if you are representing any group, say where you are from because we will need some contact details from you so as to send you the transcript of your comments. I would rather do that first than rehear people who have had an opportunity to make a presentation and have questions asked of them. Is there anyone in that category, because there have not been a lot of approaches to Derek or Michael? Mr Rothe, I know, that you have asked to be able to participate, but first I would rather, if there are other people who did not have an opportunity earlier in the day, hear from them, and then if there is time, come back to anyone else who did participate.

Mr ROTHE — The only thing is I would like to put a personal contribution in rather than speaking for a body.

The CHAIR — That is fine, I am happy to do that.

Mr ROTHE — I am Gilbert Rothe, as some of you know. I am very passionate about and take to heart what is happening in our environment. I have brought along all this stuff to prove a few points. You might think, ‘What is he doing with all that?’. I would like to make reference to this book about an inquiry, as you know, into the Victorian bushfires. That was one that was done for the 2003 fire. There was also the *Hansard* report from the House of Representatives. Then there was the national inquiry — mainly because of what went towards Canberra, but it was still a national inquiry. The CFA got in on the act and had the campaign about putting the fires out. We have the code of practice, and various other things. Another main one I want to point out is the roadside management plan. All these things are relevant to what we are talking about. I feel that some of them are due to the mismanagement of all these things that are contributing to the problem we have now. You might ask, ‘What has roadside management got to do with it?’. In this area and a lot of others, as you would know, they want more native vegetation along the roadsides et cetera. In reality it is creating a problem. In this area also on a lot of the roadsides there are a lot of dead trees et cetera. We are not allowed to remove them — they are either going to fall on the road and people will run into them or encourage more wildlife along the roadsides, which drivers then have accidents with. There are all these things to contend with.

I have also brought this old textbook. You might ask, ‘What is that for?’. That is where I got my reference; somehow it turned up at home. After 1974 or 1975 I started writing a letter to the LCC about a concern over the bush being locked up at that time. I can prove that as well. In more recent times — in 1999 as it turned out, according to this — there was a biomanagement plan, a fire protection plan. We went to the Wy Yung pub over there, not far away. There are a lot of interesting facts in here, as it has turned out, that I have overlooked because I have not checked on this lately. This was how bushfires were going to be managed. Also in the back of the book is a map showing — I can show you; it is not that relevant just now — yellow areas, which is where they were proposing to burn. Some of those areas dated back to 1993; they have been on the three-year plan ever since. The first few that got burnt were in 2006, when a major bushfire came through. The DSE had never accomplished what it planned even since 1993. I am narrating a lot of this.

There are just a few different things. This was in a paper of 6 April 2005, titled ‘Living with parks and forests means living with fire’. Here is a government body putting that out, and yet it is not practising what it is preaching. This is another one that came out just the other day, Friday, 27 July 2007, called ‘Prescribed burning issues’. They are inviting us to comment again. We commented in 1999 or before. They ignore anything we say and we propose that could help our environment. They are not listening to us — whether it is DSE, Parks Victoria and the certain amount of other players in the field as well. I could list them off but I would prefer, if you were really interested, to do that that at another time rather than take up too much time now.

Over the years I have taken a very big interest in all this. After the 2003 fires I contributed. I was at Morgans in Melbourne; the Monash University ran an inquiry-type thing. I was one of the few private ones who actually put in a submission and they let me speak on the day. There is a bit of information there. I will leave it with you. I think I sent out 13 registered letters after the 2003 fires. Craig got one, I think this man here got one, and Tony Plowman was one. Tony Plowman was the only one who ever rang me up. I have got plenty of letters saying they got my submission, but Tony Plowman was the only one who rang. He was on the mobile; he had been to Bairnsdale and did not have time to talk to me and so he spoke to me on the way back to Sale but the line fell out and that was the end of that.

It is interesting to note that after putting the effort in we are not getting a lot of attention. And I am not the only one; a lot of these people here, as it turns out, are the same people who keep coming back to these meetings — because they care about the bush. There are a lot of blow-ins. They are here today, gone tomorrow. They do not care; we are the ones who care, and we are not being listened to, which is disappointing. This was a submission I put into the Alpine grazing task force, for what it was worth. This was a point made — I will not read all these things out to you, but will just run through a couple: if it is good enough to recognise the contribution of volunteer labour — for instance, the CFA personnel et cetera — it is good enough to recognise the contribution to the planning and direction of events. That is the main thing that needs to be said from that.

Four or five years ago I went to Canada. We were at Banff, and they were talking about whatever was going on there. There was a good adage there — I am always after these adages — which was: negative or positive goodwill that does nothing is of little use; we need fierce loyalties to back action. That is what a lot of these people here again tonight have got — if only we can get our feet in the door to contribute to you people. We do not want to run

the country; we just want to help you with decisions which we hope will make it better for us all. We are not greenies, as such, and we are not the opposite — we are just people who are worried.

The code of review came up — I did not realise; I put in my prior submission today, it was 18 months ago. It turns out it was in 2005; two years has gone already. As far as I know the new code has come out. There was a delay, but I suppose I have it; we have had a few reviews. A questionnaire was sent out asking us how we thought we would respond to it, and whatever. I have incorporated a copy of that.

I will not leave this one with you. This was something I made up a few years ago on workplace management. What are the objects of the act? This is for WorkCover or WorkSafe for workers, but more to the point what I really want to say is that the objects of the act are set out: to secure the health, safety and welfare of persons at work; to protect persons at work against risk to health and safety; to assist in securing safe and healthy work environments; and to eliminate at the source risk to health, safety and welfare of persons at work. I feel that the government bodies are falling down on that. They are not providing a safe place. You cannot tell me that someone volunteering, or even getting paid, to go to a bushfire and working in 50-degree heat is more acceptable than if we had a prescribed burn on a day when it was only 30 or 35 degrees. It is going to burn just as well for what we want to achieve as having something which is 50 degrees and incinerates everything.

Mr ROTHE — Just as a point of interest, that was another one from Canada, the Rocky Mountains. They give you a screed on how fire fits into the balance of things. I did put here that Bruce Esplin — I have met with Bruce a couple of times, and he even remembers who I am now — is not really listening. Why is he not here today? He was your frontman only recently. The last time he was at Cann River — when was it? — a few months back, anyway.

Mr CONNLEY — It was 18 months ago.

Mr ROTHE — Was it that long ago? I must have seen him since then. We saw him somewhere, anyway. Why is he not here also listening to what we have got to say? He is not here because he has heard it all. But that is not the answer, because if he had heard it all, we would not have had the catastrophe again this year.

I would like to add something which I proposed a few years ago. We need a new panel especially for bushfires or bushfire mitigation, where the members are concentrated mainly just on the fire regime and not involved with the CMA or the CFA in particular. Everybody has got to put in, and I am saying we also have to work together. Do not think I am trying to take it out of the hands of anyone, but we have to have an equal contribution where the people who are not the authority now can have an equal voting right so that we can get our foot in the door. As has been proven, it just has not gone the right way in the last 30 or so years.

I could go on for a while — I have a heap more stuff in there — but I will not, because I furnished that to the people's review. In the end they kicked me out. Just as a point of interest, if I can just roughly show you on the map there is the straight line of the border between New South Wales and Victoria. Bairnsdale is just back there somewhere. These black lines, as it turns out, are SEC lines. We do not want to lose our power. Mallacoota was off again, I think, due to that fire at Boulder Creek for a day or two. This goes back to Licola. This one goes to Benambra. This one goes to Gelantipy. I have not continued it right through. It goes right up to there. There is Wulgulmerang, so it goes right up there. There is another one here to Combienbar, and this one must be out of Cann River, which does not go very far. If you look at where the black lines stop in relation to the border — and there is only the Bonang highway that needs one as well — you have nearly got the strategic breaks in place that the CMA man Graeme Dear was talking about today. If we did a bit more work to protect the SEC lines, I do not think anyone would be against that.

Just as a finishing comment, I wanted to pile all that up to show you that you probably think that is a load of rubbish there and that it should have a match put to it. That is just like the forest floor. Thank you.

Mrs FYFFE — Do you agree with the previous speaker, Bob Grant, that if the ridge and rib lines had been burnt, the effect of the fires would not have been as disastrous?

Mr ROTHE — Considering where the bush is at now, except for what has burnt — in the next 10 years that will be back in the same state as what we have just had — yes, in the area to the east we have got to start on the ridge lines in the cooler times of the year so that we can form a break to burn to or from. Then in the springtime you have got to put up with a few spring burns some of the time. Also you will be able to get further back down the hill

and let it run up to what you have already burnt, which will create a natural firebreak. Also you have to take into consideration — which I did bring up years ago through all my paperwork there — the altitude of all these areas. That map I had there actually is an ex-air force map, which is very interesting also, because it shows up to 500 metres, 1000 metres, 2000 metres and 3000 metres. The point I am trying to make there is that you will get fires to burn below 500 metres any time that it is dry enough, whereas above that it will decrease with the time of year or how the weather is performing.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for your submission. You have been working on this for quite some time, obviously. Are permanent breaks along ridge lines combined with cool burns the best solution for the issue of wildfire, or are the issues of reduced timber harvests and cattle grazing intrinsic with that as another method of fuel reduction as well?

Mr ROTHE — One contributes to the other, and I would be a fool to say one burn is going to stop every fire that might occur. That is what I am saying: it has to be a persistent and consistent approach all the time. It is a bit like if you are going to write a report; you cannot just pick up the pen and write the whole report in 5 minutes. You have got to work on it for a while, and that is exactly what this is all about. The ridge lines are only a starting point, and you can do what you like after that, whether the cows eat the grass or you do not do anything with it or whatever. But as John Mulligan would have shown you in some of his photos, an area that has been burnt is a lot more habitable to a lot more of the fauna and even the flora over a period of time. As was also said today, without going on too much about that, if an area gets incinerated the way these bad fires have been going, it will wipe a lot of it out, and it may never come back again.

Mr INGRAM — You obviously have detailed information over a number of years, and you have written a lot of submissions to different inquiries and so on. If you were to ask us to make one recommendation to government to address what you see as the problem, what would it be? What is the one key thing that you think we can do to solve the issues? Give us a succinct recommendation.

Mr ROTHE — The main recommendation I would like to put to all you people is that you have got to work with us, the people. We have got to delegate someone who attends an inquiry like the one that you are on, and we have to work together. We cannot fix it sitting here at tables, and we cannot fix it within 5 minutes, but if we can have the input and if our experience is recognised — some of it has been handed down; some of it has been inherited over a lot of years — I think that is the way to go, rather than saying, ‘Get out there and take a dozer and run around’ or whatever.

Mr INGRAM — Just on that, basically the department has the arrangement that it works with the CFA, and most of the local expertise they would consider would be with the local CFA. Where is the local organisation which the DSE or government has to go to?

Mr ROTHE — This is what we have not got. This is what we need to form. That is what I am saying: you need to pick out some of these people who have been turning up for years. Do not pick out someone who blows in tomorrow and says, ‘I want to be part of that’. Look around, and you will see the ones you need. It is not just here, it could be in Heyfield, it could be in Mansfield or it could be anywhere like that. As a point of interest, this was something that was sent out years ago, and what I was proposing — this is not gospel, of course — was a fire strategy liaison officer. You need one of them in nearly every town — someone who is responsible, someone who can refer back to the authorities, someone who can take the initiative and someone who knows when to take the initiative. As John Mulligan was saying, you need two or three people you can send out on a day when it is appropriate to burn. What might be appropriate at Wulgulmerang tomorrow will not be appropriate in Bairnsdale or Orbost, Cann River, Heyfield, or wherever it might be. We need to find trusted people also, and that is the reason I have put the submission in with the task force today because I think as a community body we have a hope of being listened to. As an individual like me here tonight, no-one will really listen, but I have said my bit.

Mrs FYFFE — We are listening.

Mr ROTHE — Yes, but I cannot pull any weight, whereas if we are a formed group and, like I said in that prior submission today, we had 80 people at the Cann River hall. Not only that, if I can also say I went driving dozers at the fire so I was not at home all the time at this last fire, but at the Mount Taylor hall where I live, just north of Bairnsdale here, we had about 180 people at one of the CFA meetings. They were all worried then. Where

are they tonight? They are not worried, are they, because there is no smoke, there is no ash fallout — there is nothing like that. But they are worried when it happens.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Gilbert. We appreciate your contribution and feedback. The next person on the list is Kevin Broome.

Mr BROOME — Chair, members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, I am not going to try and follow that last act, but I have worked in the bush all my life. I have lived in East Gippsland all my life. I think a fire in May through to September is far, far preferable even if it is bigger than it should be to what we have been having because it will not do the damage, but we have a situation there now where we have 30 to 50 years of fuel on the ground, and it is going to take a lot of care to bring that into line before we get a mosaic.

You have my submission. I put in a personal submission to this inquiry. There is no point in reading any more of that, but I will bring a couple of points out. I forecast what was going to happen to the rivers because I saw what happened in 1983 in the Cann River area. At that time I was in contracting and I cleaned off about 1300 kilometres of roads subsequent to the fire, and I saw the state of the head waters. There was just nothing left, whereas in cool burns, that never ever touches the rain forest. The rain forest remains as a filter. The ridges go but the rain forest remains as a filter. Once you get these hot fires, these environmental disasters, the logjams that have been there for years are gone, so you get the cascades of water. Has anybody ever tried to work out just how many megalitres of silt are represented by thousands of tonnes, of course, in the Glenmaggie Weir? That is water that the weir will not hold from now on as a result of this last fire

Mrs FYFFE — I am sorry to interrupt, but is that what impacted to the amount of water coming over the Glenmaggie? Would that have contributed as well?

Mr BROOME — No. The amount of water coming into the weir — not what was going out. What was going out was probably taking some of the silt further on, although to see pictures of the Glenmaggie with that huge debris against the wall, it is going to rot down into the bottom of the dam when it is finished. It just gives you some idea because that is the light stuff. The heavy stuff is where the river runs into it. That gets the positive first. That is the main thing. I do not think you can manage these things from afar.

I definitely concur with what I have heard today and this evening, that we need people on the ground locally to take responsibility for these decisions, because it has been shown they cannot be managed from afar. Wrong decisions are made, people are pulled out before they should be pulled out, and this sort of thing. I am very much against huge firebreaks. I have helped construct them. I am very much against them. They are unnecessary. You need access to be able to create a firebreak, but do not disturb the country because it is only going to lead to disaster later on and that is what we are seeing. I thank you for your time but I will not hold you up because I concur with what has been said. I think we need much, much more. We have to get back to where we have got a bush that will cool burn, even when it gets alight, under adverse conditions.

Mrs FYFFE — So you support access roads, not firebreaks?

Mr BROOME — Not firebreaks as such. The things like they are building, as I understand they are building — and I have seen photos of — around the Melbourne catchment. If they are just built as firebreaks and they are not burnt under cool conditions, the major fire that will wipe out that type of forest, those firebreaks will not mean anything. They will just make the firewall jump them. It is just no place to be. When the fire is in control, that fire line is no place to be.

Mrs PETROVICH — You have obviously spent a lot of time in the bush, which is great historical knowledge for us today. I am very interested in what you are talking about with your burning of the rain forest right down to the riparian areas. What are the long-term effects of water catchment and water management as a result of the intensity of those fires last season?

Mr BROOME — I cannot answer that because those things have developed with cool burning over many, many years. They came to us. We inherited them. We did not cause them. We inherited them. So now they are gone. It is just about anybody's guess. The lady that spoke from Gelantipy today was extremely worried about the moss beds, and I can be worried too because the seed has gone out of them. They are an ash bed now; they are not a moss bed, and if you do not do something about reclaiming them — and how on earth you do it, I am not

prepared to say, I do not know how you will reclaim them, but we might end up the best place to be will be one of these estuaries because that is where the silt will be in 50 or 80 years time.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thanks for having a crack at that.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We appreciate that.

The CHAIR — The next person on my list is Graeme Connley.

Mr CONNLEY — Like the last three speakers, we all come from Cann River. I am a fourth generation that lived there, and I have been farming all my life in Cann River and have also worked and I also fought fires in 1983. I also drove dozers in the 1983 fire. My big concern is we are totally interfering with nature right from the word go. My big concern is that we are putting out all lightning strikes. Lightning strikes were there well before we even started, and we have all survived. I can remember back 50 years when I believe — and everybody who told me was a lot older than I was at the time — they said that while the lightning strikes burn, they get rid of all the fuel that is on the floor, and it does not matter where it burns or where it starts. Because of nature, the fire would start here but it would always run into another fire or run into another area that had been burnt a year or two prior. Whether or not we like it, in my lifetime I can remember the bush as being totally safe but there were animals right throughout everywhere.

Unfortunately today I believe a lot of the government personnel are not taking any notice of history. I think we have got to go back a little bit and take notice of what has been said previously, and what was done and what was written. Today it is no good trying to say that we have all this modern equipment and modern technology to fight fires when the thing is that we should not have fires. They are only what we have created. We say we cannot put a fire out, and we have proved in the last few years that we just cannot. Like everybody else has said, nothing can be done today or tomorrow; it has got to be done over a long period of time. I have already made a submission on the same issue. It can be proved that 50 years ago we had nothing to do with any government personnel or any government institution, but government personnel started to come in in the late 1950s or the early 1960s when the first sawmills came into the area, and from that time we have been under instructions that the government does not want to see any of the timber burned. The timber was there when the government came in there, and it could see it. It was there for the harvest.

Unfortunately we had the 1983 fire. I think a lot of the people here will back me by saying that we had a period prior to the 1983 fire when a few forest officers were saying no more fires in the bush, and then they started putting out lightning strikes. It was only a short period from then until the 1983 fire. The fire started and there was too much fuel on the ground. Our big concern was after the 1983 fire, and I think everybody would have to agree. Everybody is talking about 2002 and all the later fires. We were in Cann River; we lived there. The 1983 fire burned two-thirds of our forest, and that forest now is 90 per cent regenerated. I would be quite sure in saying that I believe less than 50 per cent of that regeneration will ever come to a harvestable product. Therefore, I believe that what we have there, in the coastal country — the black sandy stuff and the spear grass plains — we should be trying to get rid a lot of that fuel there now because we get a lot of lightning strikes, and if it gets into that lighter regeneration, that is of no commercial value.

I would much prefer to see 50 per cent of that lost with a cooler fire and retain 50 per cent, rather than have a bushfire in the summertime. We will have another Nadgee, which is a bit further towards New South Wales than where we are, where I think the fire burned 100 000 hectares in 4 hours. We could have exactly the same thing. All of ours is regenerated, and it is there for anyone to see. We have no canopy, it is all on the floor with all the dry stags just sitting up on top. I believe that we have to have a fire through there in the latter part of the summer or in early spring. Any time it can be burned, it should be burned to try to save what we have got. Being so far away from Melbourne it is out of sight, out of mind. The logging that is going on there now is another thing; it is just totally destroying a lot of areas, and I believe that a lot of common sense has got to be taken into consideration. You can say 'local knowledge' but I believe we have got to go back and start from the word go and say, 'We are interfering with nature by putting out all these lightning strikes. We will have to go back and get a little bit of older history'. We are only talking about 50 years of destruction.

There are a few of us here who are still old enough — I think there are five or six here from Cann River tonight. We are all here. It costs us money to do what we are doing and we are not going to get anything out of it. All we want to do is see our forests saved because we knew it as a beauty and it is certainly not that today. So far as flora

and fauna is concerned you can go out into the bush and in parts you will not even hear or see a bird. That is a pretty big statement, but we can go out there and prove it. There is just nothing there. There are three or four of us here now and, as I said, history is history. We used to go and shoot kangaroos in that area. Now there is not even a bird. Kangaroos and emus were there throughout the bush. Now there is absolutely nothing, and it breaks our hearts to see that. I am a farmer, and I understand the soil and I understand the bush. I believe we are doing the wrong thing, but it is going to be very difficult to fix it, and we are going to have to see a big loss. But it is a better to have a big loss and be able to retain the bush and see something. If we do nothing, we will have nothing.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Graeme. Any questions?

Mrs FYFFE — There is so much there. Thank you for your passion, and for expressing it.

Mr INGRAM — Graeme, I have been and had a look at some of the bush out there with you. I think you should explain some of the spear grass plain stuff and what you have seen over a lifetime in some of those grassland-type environments, if that is okay.

Mr CONNLEY — I can only speak very honestly about our area. I have ridden horses all my life, but we used to have cattle in the bush — be that good or bad, who would know? We have spear grass plains out there — and when I say spear grass plains there are thousands of acres, not just one or two. I think every spear grass plain in the world carries animals. When we were kids we would put cattle in the bush, and they would go out there and just roam around on the spear grass plains every winter. They would be there for two or three months, and we would go out there and round them all up — there were no fences — and bring them home in the spring. Those spear grass plains were teeming with wildlife.

I would like to take you people out there today and show you. You will not see a thing. They have locked it up for whatever reason. Unbeknownst to a lot of people here bureaucracy does a lot of funny things. I have got no idea why when they know, and common sense and history tells us, that those places should be a habitat for animals. For whatever reason, we have all got our own ideas of why these sorts of things happen, but unfortunately a majority — or a bureaucracy — do not see common sense. If you sit back, and like Gilbert was saying a while ago, one man can do nothing, but if you form a body, which we are with the wildfire task force in Cann River, you can try to bring it to the public's notice your concerns. It is all right, like a lot of people, to sit back and do nothing and complain about the government not doing something, but somebody has to stand up and say what we think, and we think just a little bit differently to the government. But we live there, and 40 or 50 years ago we were safe because we never got burnt out in a bushfire because there was no real fuel on the floor.

Mrs FYFFE — Are you saying that the locking up has kept the animals out, or is it the previous fires that have killed the animals?

Mr CONNLEY — Locking fires out of the bush. Fire rotated over a period of time — —

Mrs FYFFE — Not burning off?

Mr CONNLEY — Keeps the green grasses coming back, and also makes a safe habitat for all wildlife. They would go from here because the fire burnt here over to where a fire burned, say, two years ago.

Animals know, and they can go to safety. Out there now, when you walked through the bush for five days it would tear your trousers; you would have virtually no trousers on by the time you walked to the other end of the 5 miles. Going right through all that scrub there is nothing there for you to eat and there is nowhere that any animal can get down to water. Those streams that we had when the cattle were in the bush, which was only 20 years ago, we had the mountain bush and we could give them clean water, and we had those little minnow fish — bullheads or whatever you call them. Those same streams there today are all red slime. There is undercover vegetation like the ferns, tussocks, reeds and scrub over the water. The water is not exposed to daylight, which I think is half the problem for the water. But for the animals, if they cannot get into the streams there is nothing there for them. There is no way known that any animal can eat that dry or rank spear grass. I love the bush. I was very lucky that I had Norman Wakefield as my uncle, by marriage. He could walk through the bush; he had long legs. He loved the bush. He was a botanist. I have had a pretty good background in understanding how the bush should be and what was in the bush.

Mrs FYFFE — It comes through very strongly.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I now welcome Mr Paul Carrick.

Mr CARRICK — I would like to talk to the issue of fuel reduction burning. I think the government should engage in fuel reduction burning and should have it as a policy. It has worked in the past and it is possibly one of the only aspects of what has to be done to really get the ball rolling and get it done properly.

Paul Collins wrote a book called *Burn*, which is more or less the history of fires in Australia. That goes all the way back about 80 or 60-odd years and it also features the 2003 fires. He preaches a lot about the need for fuel reduction burning. Of course the Esplin report also had a whole chapter, which I photocopied, about fuel reduction burning. The department itself has a lot of material, including a lot of journals, pamphlets and flyers about the issue. It also has draft codes of practice.

Parks Victoria and the government also put out material about the national parks and everything. Then, unfortunately, they cut funding and the number of people who worked there. I do not know why they cut the number of people who worked there when they should be employing more. They should be employing people who have a knowledge of the local areas and the local environment, like the cattlemen and also the people involved in the timber industry, and then they should use their expertise. Let us just say that the cattlemen's cattle keep the grass down. They do not really affect the timber, shall we say, in the Alpine National Park. Just personally, I do not see anything wrong in them chewing the grass down and keeping it nice and low, so long as they do not trample on the moss beds; and I put in a submission and posed the question of why they do not just fence it, just as people would put fences around the bog areas. That would make sense, I think.

Then of course there is the issue of the fuel reduction burning, which is very important, so long as it is done properly and so long as the assets are protected. The people who live near the parks would need to be looked after properly and compensated. They should not be expected to rely on insurance alone, because sometimes through their own trouble when they go to insurance companies they find they are out of pocket. I hear on the radio that sometimes people come to the government for help and the government says more or less that its hands are tied and it cannot really help. I think those people should be helped better. Seeing that these people are living right next to the park I think they should be looked after in the proper way because they have to put up with the wildfires and also the wild animals and everything. They have to modify their ways of farming to suit what the bureaucrats say has to be done. With their decades of accumulated knowledge and books like *Burn*, I do not think they should be just left to the history books — they should be consulted. That is all right. I think all people would agree with me in that regard.

Then there is the other issue of the timber salvaging up in the high country after the fire. A lot of people are concerned about the timber salvaging. A lot of people may think the forest interests treat it differently from the mountain cattlemen, who got kicked out. But they are engaging in the salvaging of timber up there. Some people might think there is a bit of a double standard there about the way the cattlemen have been treated. Then there are the Samba deer, but that is not really an issue; that just shows another aspect of the management of parks and public lands. Then there is the silt.

There is a need for fuel reduction burning. There is an ecological need for it too, because that helps the plants to grow. It creates the fertiliser, of course; the nitrogen goes into the soil, and that is the circle of nature. That is environmental science. That is science; that is nature. There is a need for a certain amount of proper burning in proper places. We do not advocate that we should get to the situation that occurred down at Wilsons Promontory. Of course in that case they left a tree smouldering. That is why I mentioned the issue of not having enough people on the ground. They left a tree smouldering and it caught on fire, and we all know what happened there. There are a lot of issues like that. If we concentrate on the fuel reduction burning when it is a suitable time, we will be able to get a certain amount of the fuel burnt away. I cannot see any other way of doing it. You cannot get thousands and thousands of people, like you can in China, scraping everything up and taking it all away. We cannot do that, so it has to be burnt, and it has to be burnt at the proper time so that we do not have these wildfires where everything is destroyed and everyone finishes up as losers. You cannot have that. That is a terrible thing and everyone suffers because of it. That is all I would like to say. Does anyone have any questions?

The CHAIR — No. Thank you very much, Mr Carrick, your information has been very comprehensive. Welcome, Mr Roger Bilney.

Mr BILNEY — Thank you once again, Chair. I just thought I should raise the issue of native fish, especially in the Mitchell catchment. The Mitchell River is the mainstay of the bass fishery in the Gippsland Lakes catchment. Other streams have very rare occurrences of the fish. It is a fish that does not go basically beyond the midstream of the river — in other words, beyond about the Dargo. Since the fires the flows that have come down have contained a massive amount of soot, and I believe the whole population has probably been wiped out. We have a situation where we may not have Australian bass left in the Gippsland Lakes catchment, or what few there are will be very, very few. And as it is probably genetically slightly different to the Snowy population — —

Mr INGRAM — Which are under threat as well.

Mr BILNEY — Which are under enormous threat. I just ask the committee to please consider that, first of all, one of your recommendations be that there be a survey of the river, once it settles down, and that you also consider that some of these animals around I believe can be used for captive breeding. I think they are in New South Wales, aren't they, and they have held a small population in Gippsland Lakes, and Bass, and that they be restocked, especially back into the Mitchell because it is the only stream that really supports the bream fishery in what is left of the Gippsland Lakes and Bass. It has been a very productive stream for a long time. It is kept sort of a quiet secret, but certainly you saw some of those pictures, and there were a lot of fish in the stream.

The CHAIR — Quite secret until now. Thanks Roger. Any particular questions in relation to these particular issues?

Mrs FYFFE — No, because we talked about them earlier in the day.

Mr INGRAM — I assume you would expand that comment about surveys of impact on species, not just to the river systems?

Mr BILNEY — No, it is separated.

Mr INGRAM — But also to some of the other impact of animals?

Mr BILNEY — Good heavens, yes, I would hope they would be coming up with other stuff because even though animals occupy after a fire, it does not necessarily mean that the fire is what really helped for increasing or maintaining their numbers.

Mrs FYFFE — You referred to someone's submission earlier about the need to bring them in.

Mr BILNEY — That is right, I just do not think there is a need.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I welcome Mr Neil Barraclough.

Mr BARRACLOUGH — Chair, parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the chance to talk tonight. Firstly, I start with a question. The inquiry has been expanded to include the floods. Access to the Macalister area — and it was the Macalister area that I grew up in — is presently restricted and I was unable to prepare my material for this. Can you tell me when the deadline is for further submissions?

The CHAIR — The dates have technically closed. But because the term for that particular reference on flooding really only applies for the last week or so, I would be happy, with advice from our officers, to take some additional written submissions, just specifically for that particular added term or reference.

Mr BARRACLOUGH — You understand access is still restricted?

The CHAIR — We totally understand. It was one of the considerations in coming to the region. We thought maybe we would defer coming here, but the feedback was that we should come to the area and people were prepared to talk to us, but maybe we would like to visit again sometime in the future when some areas are opened up. That is one of the things being considered by the committee, to have a look at additional areas of Gippsland, once they are reopened and some of those communities have settled down. But I am happy to take an extra written submission on that particular term of reference.

Mr BARRACLOUGH — Thank you, Chair. I said earlier, when representing the beekeepers association, that I support virtually all that the other bushmen have said. I am going to differ in one respect tonight. I have very

grave reservations about letting lightning strikes just burn, and I think we have to be careful there. Yes, when we first came here — when Europeans first came into Gippsland — it was an open grassy understorey, with widely spaced trees, it was regularly burnt by the Aborigines, and lightning strikes were not a problem. The 2003 and 2006-07 fires were predominantly lightning origins and they were catastrophic environmentally. We have made a mess and I think we have to relate to that mess differently to what we would do in a natural situation. Yes, put lightning strikes out during the summer and use discretion with putting them out later in the autumn. Presently the vast majority of areas that are subject to fire are only subject to fire during conditions when we cannot contain it — that is, in a drought summer with bad weather conditions, or in a drought summer generally, and you get a massive fire in a massive fuel load where we should be subjecting the areas to the fire in the cooler part of the season.

I heard earlier today about fuel reduction targets. They are still talking about the same targets they have been talking about in the past: 130 000 hectares, which I think was for all of Victoria. When they have previously raised that figure it has meant 50 000 hectares for Gippsland, which I think is 2.57 million hectares, and a fire frequency of about once in every 52 years. That is just more of the same and it is more ecological catastrophic in the future. Naturally we have got to be looking at fire frequencies for most areas of less than a fire per decade, or more frequent than a fire per decade, and in some instances, more often than that. In the discussions that DSE had to date, it was not even considering anything like that.

I am a CFA member of over 30 years. A couple of years ago I had to do a minimum skills course and answer questions like how many litres of water you should drink every 2 hours, and I had no idea. A fellow gave me a rake-hoe and asked me how I would put in a rake-hoe line. I remembered the book said that you scrape the rubbish back toward the fire if you are going to do a back-burn and away from the fire if you are not going to do a back-burn, but anybody that has put in a lot of rake-hoe lines I think would realise that you scrape the rubbish downhill, it is much easier. Anyway, I gave the answer out of the book, that you scrape it towards the fire if you are going to do a back-burn and away from the fire if you are not, and I added that there is no point in putting in a rake-hoe line if you are not going to do a back-burn. I got a rap over the knuckles and just about failed my course. 'We do not do back-burns anymore' they said — this was a couple of years ago — 'because of litigation'.

I had some involvement in the 2003 fires, had some involvement in these last fires, and one thing that I think is lacking, to me, is an absolute will to put the fires out. That has just got to be it. You are out there to put the fires out. We are all following regulations, and I could not identify that will from the hierarchy in the CFA and the hierarchy of the DSE. Yes, we were following guidelines. Yes, they kept the CFA out of the action, and we were going around blacking up burnt-out areas and so forth. We listened to the radio and heard what heroes we were, but the will to put those fires out did not appear to be there from the hierarchy, until they got up to the private land interface and by then it was one massive fire. So what do we hear? It was a 'marvellous effort' — the greatest length of back-burning they have ever done. Yes, because the fire got to such a huge size.

We have heard about the need for fuel reduction burning to reduce the fuel loads. Try putting in a rake-hoe line in scrub up to here where you can hardly walk through it. You just cannot do it. Those fires were not put out when they were small because DSE has not got the ground staff that they once had. Ground staff that I have known for some 30-odd years — and also I did four years on the summer crew — and some friends of mine that I spoke to said — I will not name the fire because it will identify the individuals — they were sent in to this fire, they put a rake-hoe line around it and they were instructed that they were not allowed to back-burn from the rake-hoe line. They said that they really discussed it themselves. They were out in the wilderness and they discussed just ignoring command and doing it anyway to put the thing out, but they did not have enough numbers on the ground to successfully get a rake-hoe line around it and put it out.

The best historical precedent that I can think of for a rake-hoe line putting out a fire without a back-burn was when King Canute in England drew a line in the sand to try to stop the incoming tide. Yes, there are litigation issues, I guess, if it gets away, but I think there has got to be a realisation that we need to put it out, and that to me has been lacking. I heard before that a 20 to 40-metre rake is not adequate to stop a wildfire. That was from Greg Flynn. A rake-hoe line with a proper back-burn around it will stop a fire.

The basic principle of high behaviour is: the worse the fire weather, the quicker the fire travels and the more intense it is when it reaches the containment line. With a back-burn from a containment line you have the fire at the containment line when it suits you, under the weather conditions where you can be on that containment line. If you wait for it to come to the containment line, simple probabilities will have it arriving there in the worst possible conditions.

When I went to my minimum skills course I was told beforehand that there would be a period afterwards for discussion of it. We went through a heap of things, they gave me a heap of questions and I got most of them right, so they said, 'You passed, and you can go home now'. There was no time for discussion — or I would have had a bit to say. Afterwards I raised the issues of no back-burning from a containment line with my CFA bosses — the paid staff — and also some of the crew leaders. I asked the paid staff the question, 'What is the reason for back-burning?', and the reason I was given was that it removes the fuel between the containment line and the fire.

Yes, it does, but you have also got the reason that I raised before, that it does it at your time. But I will give you one other example: if you send a crew onto a containment line and you say, 'Right, go in there and back-burn along that containment line', we walk along there with our drip-torch, we light it up, it starts burning away, and as soon as we light that up we have a safe haven of burnt ground. If you send us onto the same containment line to wait until the fire comes through, we have no safe haven. If there is a wind change or an unpredictable wind, it is different. It is a totally different situation in relation to safety if we are sent in there to do a back-burn.

I understand there was a consultant's report on the deaths at Linton, and I understand the consultant's report was suppressed. My superiors did not have an understanding of the safety issues I raised in relation to producing the safe haven of burnt ground when I back-burnt, and because that consultant's report was suppressed I can only wonder if it would have contained information that would have really enlightened my superiors. Were there any factors like the volunteers being removed from the fire line, which was providing a safe haven, and when the wind change came they did not have burnt ground to get onto? I do not know, because it was suppressed.

There is a lot of discussion of helicopters and aerial firefighting. I was out with the CFA on the Bruthen fire — one side was burnt out — when a helicopter flew over and about 10 minutes later on the unburnt side of the containment line we got a spot-over. It was a calm day, and there was no apparent reason for it. For a helicopter, as best I can see it, to get close enough to a fire so that the water has not all evaporated and to hit the fire there is quite often a reasonable amount of down draught. Did that down draught blow embers over the containment line? My personal view is that a couple of blokes with a drip-torch are of more value than a helicopter in containing a fire, though helicopters are extremely valuable for asset protection. But otherwise I think they are an extremely expensive media circus.

In my submission I detail the value of the protective burning of the mountain cattlemen pre-1939 with the alpine ash. The mills all around the highlands of Gippsland where they were harvesting the ash resource post-war were all getting it from the areas where the cattlemen had protectively burnt it. The cattlemen regularly burnt the alpine ash, and it stopped it from holocaust fires like 1939 that went through those areas under far worse conditions than we saw in 2003, 2006 and 2007 and in worse conditions than we saw in the Caledonia fire.

Those fires have devastated the timber resource, and we have to learn from that. I spent a lot of time in the early 1980s going around doing ring counts of the alpine ash dumps, and they were of very mixed age. Pre-1939, when it was regularly burnt, you had regular regeneration and you had very healthy stands of diverse age. When I start talking about the mixed-age stands of alpine ash now people tell me it grows in single-aged stands. The tragedy of that is those dumps have virtually now all gone.

Clear-felling: I have heard speakers tonight and this afternoon saying how originally they were selectively logging and it was much more friendly to the forests. Clear-felling is really very bad ecologically, but the other thing is it does not lend itself to protective management with fire. I think the science in relation to alpine ash being a single-aged stand stems from the fact that it supports clear-felling, and that is where the science was directed. You cannot protectively burn the young stands, and that is creating a fire hazard.

There are issues of safety with selective logging, and I do not have any answers there, but I think we need to understand that those forests need regular fires, the same as any other forests. The timber industry has been devastated by these fires, and the analogy I have used is that the thinking of the environmentalists has done to the environment what the thinking of the timber industry has done to the timber resource. I will leave it at that.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr BARRACLOUGH — I missed one point, if I could? Climate change was raised before, and this is a graph of sea levels for the last 22 000 years. The last 6000 years have been very stable, but 18 000 years ago the sea level was 110 metres below what it is now. Over a period of about 12 000 years it raised about 100 metres, at some stages rising over 1 metre a century. We are told with climate change it could — —

The CHAIR — What is the source of that graph, does it say on it?

Mr BARRACLOUGH — The source of that graph is taken from *Practices and Principles of Physical Geology* by Arthur Holmes. It is a reasonably old book, but it is really the geologists' bible. The interesting thing is there is a very small rise here. You have got these massive changes in sea level, but there is a very small rise here which you can hardly see, which is the climate change that is being attributed to carbon dioxide emissions. I said I am a bit sceptical. All this rise here was natural, and this minuscule bit here is caused by carbon dioxide emissions. It is being inferred that the problems we are having with our fires are not mismanagement of the public land but could be caused by climate change.

These are maps taken from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology website from changes in rainfall for the first two decades of its records, which is the decades from 1900 to 1910 and from 1910 to 1920. In the last decade, most of south-east Australia has been slightly wetter than in the first two decades of last century. We heard David Tainsh rattle off all the fires, starting from 1926, but the first two decades of last century were drier than the last decade has been, and this is just rainfall for Australia. The last 50 years of last century appear to have been wetter than the first 50 years of last century, so we are told that climate change is going to be causing massive droughts. I asked this inquiry to produce all the scientific data which is going to suggest climate change is going to cause all sorts of problems, and I get told, 'We're not a library'. It looks as if I am not going to get it. I do not believe they have anything which is going to stand analysis by an uneducated bushwhacker like me. If they do have — produce it.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Neil, but as I told you earlier on in the day, it is not our role to do that. We are hearing from the public; we are happy to be the ones on the receiving end, rather than on the giving end. What we do is give you time. I gave you 25 minutes tonight and 40 minutes earlier in the day. There is a lot of valuable information, and we appreciate that.

John Mulligan, I understand you just wanted to clarify a couple of quick things.

Mr MULLIGAN — Thanks for giving me the chance. It was a couple of points that were made by DSE this afternoon. One point I noted with them was that they were asked about staff, and I think David Tainsh said that all their office staff and everybody else is now trained in firefighting — as though they were the staff we needed for fuel reduction burning. The thing is people might be trained in firefighting, but it does not mean they have bush sense and can go out and know when it is a good time to be burning off or not burning. I mean, because they come out of the office and learn how to put the hat on and put the heavy boots on, it does not make them bushmen. I think DSE are only kidding themselves if they think those people would be useful up in the bush deciding when to drop a match and when not to drop a match.

The other thing that surprised me a little was, as I said today when I put that map up, the figure that we have from the DSE for burning in the Cann River area in the last 12 months is 31 000 hectares. The area of the Cann River district is 450 000 hectares, so that represents something like they have burnt about 1 acre, or 1 hectare in 15. So on that basis we are never going to get around it unless they speed it up. Waller said that the area that they were managing to burn — the limit was more based on their funds and their people and their ability to get the job done than the amount that needed to be done. So we have got to get over that hurdle; we have got to get the amount done, and if that means more money or whatever, that will have to be done. The other thing I wanted to make a point of while I am here — I think I have still got a minute, have I?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr MULLIGAN — Is the difference between fire — I mean we talk about 'The fire ran through'. Some years ago we had a fire at Cann River, in 82 — that big fire I showed you. A couple of years before that we had a fire up in what we call the Welong country, Black Jack Gully — it is between the Cann River and the Genoa River — and it had quite a bit of feed on it. That whiskery bloke over there and myself put a mob of cattle up there, and anyway we got around to the time in the spring to take them out —

The CHAIR — Just for the record, the whiskery bloke is Graeme Connley — I am assuming. There are a few whiskers around the place, but he is the one who responded most.

Mr MULLIGAN — Anyway, we took our cattle out and I struck a fellow named Clive Hodge in Bairnsdale, who was in desperate straits. It was drought time and he had no feed for his cattle and he was quite a

bushman, so I suggested to him to go up and have a look, so we went up together and he had a look and he said it was the best feed he had seen for a long time.

This was an area of country north of what we call the WB line, which is a road along the ridge top — north of that, and between the two rivers, the Cann and the Genoa. Anyway that burn was in that area. He put his cattle up there, and then when the 82 fire came through — he lived at Heyfield — he did not have a chance to get up and get his cattle out. The fire went straight through the lot. South of the WB line where it had not been burnt two or three years before, it was absolutely incinerated — there were trees burnt off at the butt and everything else. North of the WB line, where the cattle were, it burnt right through, but he did not lose a beast; they survived the fire. That was because it is the degree of heat in a fire; it is the damage that is done when there is so much fuel on the ground. That is just an example of it.

As you were saying, I think Craig asked Graeme about the heathlands. When I was up there 60 years ago I used to go every year mustering cattle between Mallacoota — our family had cattle out there between Mallacoota and Wamboin, a little bit into New South Wales. There were a lot of coastal heathlands out there. They were like grassy paddocks. You could ride along, canter along, no trouble at all — plenty of wildlife: kangaroos, emus, everything you wanted out there. These are big plains — 3000 or 4000 acres of them. Anyway the national parks people took it over, locked it up, and you were not allowed to go there. What they called the Nadgee fire — I think Graeme mentioned it — in 4 hours it went from the highway to the sea, through regeneration — that is the type of bush we have got left now after the 83 fire. And those heathlands were covered with prickly Moses and stuff 8, 10, 12 foot high. We went in there after the fire and kangaroo carcasses were stuck in the scrub — they could not get through it. That used to be open, beautiful heathlands, with all your orchids and flowers and everything else you had. Thank you

The CHAIR — Thank you, John. We very much appreciate it.

The lucky last presenter before we break off to finish the night and break off to a light supper — because I know many of you have not necessarily had the chance to have a bite to eat and you have been here for many hours — is Ken Stuart.

Mr STUART — I am Ken Stuart, a volunteer fireman. I am here as an individual. I have been a volunteer fireman for some 40-odd years. I am currently the captain of Mount Taylor and have been the captain for the last nine years. During this summer I closed my business down for two months whilst the fires were on to play a role or to be on the fire line. We are talking about fuel reduction burning — on 11 January the fire spotted from out of what we call the Sisters area in towards Bullumwaal — probably a 5–10 kilometre range where it dropped. There was a fuel reduction burn that was two years old in that area, which cut the fire off from virtually wiping out Mount Taylor and Clifton Creek.

In the top end of that area, where there had not been a fuel reduction burn, there was a wind change which took it towards Waterholes in a hurry. I estimate between 25 and 30 kilometres was burnt in an hour and a half, and then we got a wind change which helped protect us. We knew the fire was to our west and we were pretty vulnerable, and it moved across from Dargo to the north. We joined forces with the Sarsfield fire brigade, and between the two brigades we burnt 95 kilometres of back-burning over the duration of the event. We virtually adopted sections of the control line so we made sure it was dealt with properly, manning our trucks day and night for several days on end. Initially we started off on 12-hour shifts but found that that was too much of a man-killer. We dropped back to 8-hour shifts and found that our crews were recycling much quicker and everybody was able to attend to their home duties as well as attend the fire. I just wanted to make the point that yes, it was the two-year-old fuel reduction burn in that Bullumwaal area which really saved our area, which is just north of Bairnsdale, and the involvement of the two brigades that worked together to make sure the job happened properly.

Travelling back after the fire and looking at the areas that have not been burnt except for the wildfire since 1965, you could see there was no vegetation of any significance with life in it. The area closer in on the interface had been burnt regularly. When it was back-burnt it was burnt in the heat of the day with a strong southerly to get an effective back-burn. After the first shower of rain there were green shoots of grass in that area. The point I would like to make is we have to have a grass cover on the ground so it can be burnt at a safe time. With the unmanaged forests that we see today, they will not burn in a cool burn because you have nothing to carry the flame on the ground when you have the scrub at a certain height.

A point that I see is an issue coming up is that the large areas of the bush which have been burnt severely now are going to germinate the black wattle — the dogwood. They will have a grass cover for the first couple of years, and if no fuel reduction burning takes place in those areas within the first few years, the dogwood and the wattle will choke out the grass, and there will be nothing to carry a quiet fire at the safe time of the year. In the event of a wildfire coming, if you have a grass cover on the ground you can burn it of a night when it is safe. It is not as intense as burning it during the day.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Ken. I now welcome Kevin Barling.

Mr BARLING — My name is Kevin Barling, and I am a bait fisherman in the Gippsland Lakes. I would like the sandworm to be classed as a fish and included in an investigation into the species affected by the floodwaters.

The CHAIR — You can make a contribution. I will ask you to give us some address details later on so we can send you a transcript of what you say, because it is all on the public record. Feel free to go ahead, please.

Mr BARLING — I would like the sandworm to be included when you are looking at the species affected by the floodwaters. Most of the time for us a drought on the land finishes up being a drought in the water with the species of the sandworm. I will give you an example. After the 1978 flood there was something like 26 tonnes of sandworm harvested in the Gippsland Lakes. Around about 1988 or 1989 there were only about 4 tonnes in a drought situation. The same thing has happened over this drought.

I think there are only about two full-time bait fishermen. The rest of us are part-timers, and we go away working. I would like to see the impact looked at. They call us — and we may be — the dinosaurs of the industry. We have been there 30 years, and we believe there is an impact from your spray fire retardant. It does affect the worm. I have not got any proof, but just going on what we saw happen after the 2003 fire, our worm just did not come good at all. We reckon it was the retardant coming out of the Mitchell River onto the major beds — which we call the cut — which affected them.

I would like to get to your ears on something, either now or outside the reference. I have a shop in Lakes Entrance and some flats — where I have done a bit of swimming this year in the floods! There are probably four things. When you have a mass of water it has got to get out, and our entrance is a shocker. It has to be fixed. A lot of people do not realise that there were about 300 metres by 300 metres of sand under Kalimna. If you drive down through Lakes, at the last car park if you look straight down under there you will see this large build-up of sand. That has been built up since the 1998 flood. On my estimation with 300 by 300, you are looking at 9000 metres. That hole under Kalimna used to be 6 metres deep. I cannot even drive my boat over it, which is a little dinghy, and I would only be drawing that, and I am running aground. I feel for Paynesville and Metung, because I believe that that water was held up and could not get out quickly enough. It has to be moved.

We have got a little hill called Kalimna Hill there. They have built up all the land to go into what they call the turning circle there. That was after the 1978 flood, which was 30 years ago. Nothing has been done with the hill. It is sandstone, and every time we have a massive amount of water — which we did — especially from the south or south-east, it just pelts in on it and softens it up. We had massive landslides there. They were there for nearly two weeks cleaning it all up. We had only one lane of traffic. We were in lockdown for two nights.

I believe that the police and the SES did an excellent job, especially with the police locking us down, because the biggest problem we have is four-wheel drivers roaring around in water putting up waves this high and pushing them into your properties or whatever. It is a bloody disaster, but they kept them all out, and it was really good this year compared to 1998.

We have a private airport. About four different departments, including the police and the SES, have backed that airport hopefully to get 24 hours in. If we had had a disaster with head injuries, an accident or whatever that night down the other end, which is your bulkier town — because you could not go one way — we would have to have gone back through Nowa Nowa and out to Bairnsdale. Our safety would have been a huge problem that night if something had happened. There are about half a dozen trees holding this airport up from being opened up as a 24-hour airport. Admittedly it is a private airport, but the safety of our town comes first when it comes to that airport. The government departments used it — the air ambulance, the police and the SES — when the fires were on. That should be open for 24 hours. If that were open, Lakes Entrance would have a chance of picking back up a bit of tourism, because the 30-seaters can get into that airport. The man who owns it has spent about 3 million

bucks, and from talking to some of the pilots I know, they put it into the top two private airports in Victoria. Here is a facility at the disposal of the Lakes Entrance community and the public departments to use, and it is held up with a few trees. Can we have something done about it, please?

The CHAIR — Thanks very much. I thank everyone for joining us tonight. There has certainly been a lot of very valuable and interesting information that we will absorb. We still have a number of public hearings in Gippsland and around the state, so we will be building up more of this, but I want to particularly thank you all for your interest, your work, your commitment and all your valuable knowledge that you are sharing with us. I want to particularly thank those who have spent more than 8 hours — nearly 8 and a half hours — in the room with us. Thank you all very much.

Committee adjourned.