

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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Cr R. MacInnes, Horsham Rural City Council.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome everybody and thank everybody for coming. I declare open the Environment and Natural Resources Committee hearing on the impact of public land management practices on bushfires in Victoria. I would like to welcome Cr Roslyn MacInnes from the Horsham Rural City Council. Can I just take this opportunity as well to say that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks.

Cr MacInnes, would you care to make a presentation to the committee before we go to questions? We have got about half an hour with you, so if you want to divvy up your time in such a way that allows us to ask you a few questions that would be fantastic.

Cr MacINNES — Certainly. Thank you and thank you for the opportunity to be able to address the committee. First of all, if I could I would just like to set the scene from the perspective of Horsham Rural City Council. The council area is something like 4233 square kilometres; although we are a rural city we do encompass a large area as well. Our main production is agriculture, and indeed the city of Horsham is basically the service centre for the Wimmera. We border the Little Desert National Park in the north-west and the Grampians National Park in the south, as well as the Glenelg River. We have within the municipality the Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park, as well as many other state parks. The Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park receives something like 100 000 visitors annually, so it is a very popular park and potentially there are some issues regarding that.

The council has certainly had a long involvement with emergency management and indeed supporting the CFA and DSE and previous government authorities. In 2005, in January, we had the Fulham-Telangatuk fires, which started from a camp fire along the Glenelg River and burnt a considerable amount of private land as well as state park in the Black Range; 2006 saw the Grampians fires which, fortunately, basically did not get within the municipality other than about 10 acres but were very much a threat. In 2006 as well the fire at the Little Desert came onto private land at Nurcoun, which did involve considerable resources.

The municipality has a population of over 19 000, of which there are just under 15 000 in Horsham and 4000 in the rural areas. Our council takes very seriously its role in supporting emergency services. Indeed we do have three highways crossing the municipality; the Wimmera River, which will flood again; as well as acknowledging that we do live in one of the most fire-prone areas in the world. We have 15 rural fire brigades within the municipality. I think that is something I will touch on a little bit later. I know there are some questions in the submission that you are interested in direct comment on. Perhaps if I concentrate on those and I would just like to add a little bit more on them if I could.

The ACTING CHAIR — Sure.

Cr MacINNES — The first one was the extent, time and resourcing and the effectiveness of prescribed burning on both Crown land and freehold land. We strongly support the prescribed burning or fuel reduction burning, and acknowledge that the window of opportunity can be extremely short. We would like to see more resources put into that because of that shortened window of opportunity. And local knowledge is so important; time and time again it is the local knowledge that is the key to making the right decision for that burning.

The next one was the manner in which prescribed burning is conducted, including how applicable codes of practice are employed. Having said that we strongly support prescribed burning, it is usually an extreme adverse weather event when things come unstuck. Normally everybody can handle a good fire; it is not a problem. It is the extreme, the unexpected adverse weather conditions that bring things unstuck. And I do not know how you can ever plan for that — it is just one of those things that really happens. But we believe there needs to be more public awareness of the need for prescribed burning, the fact that it needs to become part of our culture. It has been part of our culture or the environmental culture in the past, but I think the everyday public do not actually acknowledge the need for it to be part of our culture.

No. 3 was the impact on biodiversity of prescribed burning in recent wildfires. Fortunately within the Horsham Rural City Council area we have not had any great adverse impact on our biodiversity. I think we have been extremely lucky there. It is probably not something we can really comment on.

Also, there is the reporting process applicable to prescribed burning. Once again the only comment we had was about the notification to the public and the fact that it does need to become part of the culture. It needs to be part of the mainstream reporting to the public that this is going to happen in this sort of time frame so that people just become so used to the practice.

We are finding our community does get upset when they see smoke in the air, so they need to be aware that it is part of a normal process. We also did not have any comments on the legislative and regulatory arrangements for prescribed burns and bushfire management.

The effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed firebreaks and containment lines is strongly supported. Indeed as part of our municipal fire prevention plan we do have those strategic breaks. The expectation to maintain them is under pressure from the environmental lobby, but I think council, because of acknowledging that we do live in one of the most fire-prone areas in the world, needs to maintain those and remain strong in the maintenance of those. What we do is try to build on the existing road infrastructure, so you build on what is already there rather than create something completely new. But that is really a key component of our municipal fire prevention plan.

On the provision of water points on Crown land or on any land to assist the bushfire aerial task force, we do support bodies of water, but I think the learnings over the last couple of summers have been really interesting. From a council perspective, we have invested considerable time and resources. We have three tankers that are available — many litres per tanker — that are fully CFA compatible. These have been used numerous times. Council even went to the extent of providing staff on stand-by over the weekend periods so that they are ready to roll at any point in time. This is an expense to the municipality, but in light of the times we have been through I think it has been well justified, well used and extremely well received. That part was not part of normal firefighting practice three or four years ago but I think now it will become part of the practice and the response and how you respond to incidents like those that have happened in the past.

The other one that I would really like to comment on is the involvement of local communities and the impact of fire on them. In our rural areas the impact on the community is huge. In the city of Horsham it probably is not, but with our 4000 or so people that support our 15 rural brigades, it takes an enormous amount of manpower out of those areas. You have the CFA, the CWA, the Red Cross and the SES and they take out of those rural areas. Strike teams, and indeed many strike teams did come out of our municipality over the last few years, take the trained personnel out of the area. To me that is a real threat. It also weakens the community response to any incident that may happen locally. Indeed we did have some incidents happen locally where there was no manpower and no utilities to deal with it. There is an issue, I think, about when you take everybody away. The other thing about that is that, certainly from a firefighting point of view, you take people from north of Horsham — plains country, flat, not a hill in sight — and put them here in the Grampians or any other mountainous area, and it is totally foreign to them. Indeed some of the volunteers have said they will not be coming back on a strike team because it is totally foreign to how they have learnt their firefighting skills and they did not feel comfortable being in that situation. I think there are a few issues there.

The age of volunteers and the age of people in these rural areas is also an issue. I feel most times you could man a fire truck with people under 40. You could do it once, you will not do it a second time in that particular incident. Most people are in their 50s or 60s, and indeed you would have to ask the question about how fit some of them are to actually go and fight a fire or for a prolonged stint of duty. Many of them have family farms; they are short on manpower anyway. To take those people away, you are actually leaving the community very short of people able to respond in another emergency. So I think the impact on our community is considerable, and as a council we strongly support our volunteers for all emergency services, but we see there are some real gaps in there that are leading to some real angst amongst our community. That is probably about it.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you very much for your presentation and for coming here today. You have emphasised the importance the council places on firebreaks. One of the issues that could be described as farmers seeing as firebreaks the actual roadside burning of vegetation along their property. How does council handle that, and how much involvement does DSE, for instance, have with your organisation on what restrictions you put in place?

Cr MacINNES — That is really interesting, because from a council perspective we have not actually adopted our roadside vegetation plan and the management plan that is associated with it. Within our area we do not

have a lot of burning along roads. Certainly there are some bare areas; there are some more areas, and indeed in a few instances there are some cultivated areas but not a lot of burnt areas put in there.

Mrs FYFFE — Have you had much anecdotal evidence that fires have jumped across because there has been vegetation — grasses — because the roadside is not being controlled?

Cr MacINNES — Absolutely, yes.

Mrs FYFFE — Would you say that was a lot?

Cr MacINNES — When you look for roadsides to form that strategic break, quite often you are not able to use the roads as a break; they are just part of the vegetation that follows through. Generally I would say fires on open land — farmland — are usually contained reasonably quickly. It is probably the skill of the firefighters as well, and what they are dealing with. But you need to have that break to allow that control to happen.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you for your presentation. From a council perspective do you think enough has been done in engaging local knowledge in the accessibility and maintenance of fire access tracks, and talking to the community about the best way to approach prescribed burns?

Cr MacINNES — It is interesting. Here in the Wimmera there have been some major incidents in the last few years, and I think from that there has been some great learning and great cooperation between the emergency services. Prior to that I think there has probably been a bit of, 'This is your patch; this is my patch', and the local knowledge probably has not filtered through in the way that it could have. But currently it works quite well together. It really demonstrates that you need that local knowledge, and the local knowledge needs to remain in the area, or you build a new lot of local knowledge as well.

Ms LOBATO — Thank you very much for your presentation. You spoke about, and in your submission you talked about, the requirement for extensive notification to the public land owner and any local advisory groups or networks. I just want to know what current practices are in place through the shire for fire notification, and if there are any policies that you would like to put in place to see that better effected?

Cr MacINNES — Basically I think the emergency services receive notification and there are media releases out there, but the community as such does not pick them up. It is really the community angst that results from not knowing or not observing that prescribed burns are going to happen in the area and then they see that plume of smoke. Somehow or other it needs to become more media friendly, more community friendly, so the angst is not there. Certainly information does get out to the CFA personnel; I know that happens now, and to council, but there needs to be more community engagement in that process.

Ms LOBATO — Right. And does the shire have any plans as to how it could notify the community through community consultation?

Cr MacINNES — The council does not. We probably do not see it as our role.

Mr WALSH — Thanks for coming in, Ros. You mentioned the pressure on volunteers and the emergency services, particularly when there are major fires and an extended period of time when they are required. I would like your thoughts, or the council's thoughts — whichever — on the issue of how we address that, particularly when volunteers are called away from their day job or their employment to fight large fires on Crown land when they originally joined the fire brigade principally to fight fires on private land to protect their own property. How do we handle the issue that they are called away for extended periods of time to fight fires on Crown land and that potential issue of cost shifting?

Cr MacINNES — Thanks, Peter. I do not know the solution.

Mr WALSH — No, but if you just have some thoughts, that is all.

Cr MacINNES — It is extremely hard. Indeed probably when you compare rural CFAs and urban CFAs, rural CFAs can have a large number of members and a large number of trained personnel, whereas urban brigades do not. There are limits to the number of members they can have. I think it is somehow or other being able to better put that training across the community. Certainly the impact of the Grampians fires on Horsham was minimal, other than the smoke in the air. It did not disrupt daily life. But in the rural areas it was extremely disruptive. It

somehow or other — and I am sure CFA personnel can talk on this issue as well — crossing the boundary there and whether there is a bigger work force or a bigger force that is available that comes out of an urban area rather than a rural area. I think the other issue is that rural people probably see it as their obligation to society to be part of the CFA and to do the training and that sort of stuff, whereas I do not know that urban people feel quite the same way about it. Indeed I think there are issues when you need to leave your employment for a period of time, or three or four days at a time, that perhaps need to be addressed either in a monetary way or with some sort of recompense for the employer.

Mr WALSH — Just as a follow up, there has been discussion in some of the submissions we have had and in the other hearings about the CFA actually getting involved in prescribed burns to supplement DSE staff in doing that. What would your view be about CFA volunteers being involved in that?

Cr MacINNES — My first concern would be the manpower. I probably need to disclose a long family involvement with the CFA, and I know the difficulties in gaining manpower at any one point in time when you need to do that. I think CFA members would be keen because then they know exactly what has been done, but on the other hand I can see the issues with the personnel involvement and the time commitment in being able to do that sort of work as well.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks, Ros. Does council conduct prescribed burns on the land that you control?

Cr MacINNES — No.

The ACTING CHAIR — It has been suggested that one of the discrepancies with controlled burning on private land is that essentially there are council by-laws or no laws at all and that there should be more consistency between the approaches on Crown land and on private land. Do you have any comment on that? What are the by-laws here, for example?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly there are by-laws within Horsham and considerable resources are put into fire prevention. But really it is incumbent on the ratepayer to make good that area. Indeed, council does not conduct any of that sort of activity. It employs a contractor to do that and it is then billed back to the ratepayer. So council certainly does put in place the mechanism which means that the area is cleaned up in whichever way is appropriate, but it does not actually do it itself.

The ACTING CHAIR — So, for example, you might give a land-holder notification that their property is a fire risk?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly.

The ACTING CHAIR — If they do not take action you will then take the action and bill that land-holder, but they are quite able to do that themselves. Maybe they should apply for a permit, if it is in a permit period, to do it on their property?

Cr MacINNES — Yes, certainly.

The ACTING CHAIR — But there is no huge impediment to their doing that as far as any council by-laws?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly they would not be able to burn if they were within the city area.

The ACTING CHAIR — Just one other thing: you spoke about good communication between the community when there is a prescribed burn being conducted. What is the process now for notification of the community? You said the CFAs would know about a prescribed burn, but what is the process at the minute for informing the broader community of that?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly council does not perform any prescribed burns, so it is usually a DSE or Parks — probably a DSE responsibility, and I really cannot comment on that. I know the information goes out to a certain extent, but it does not seem to be reaching the community at large.

The ACTING CHAIR — So you would not be listening to the radio one day and hear every hour, ‘Don’t forget there is a prescribed burn happening today’? You do not hear that on a regular basis on the radio — or you do not hear it on the radio?

Cr MacINNES — No, certainly it is on the radio — it can be on the radio, but it is probably for the presenter to pick it up; it is whether it is in the interest of a presenter or not.

The ACTING CHAIR — As to how much they do that.

Mrs FYFFE — In your submission you highlight the number of tracks and signs that were not maintained or should have been maintained. Can you explain that and how it affected the firefighting capacity in this area — the maintenance?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly from the Grampians fire perspective there is a lot of local knowledge in the area. What was once a fire track and maintained, you could come back three years later and it is no longer accessible, so you lose that avenue. You need to plan where you go.

Mrs FYFFE — Can I just interrupt — is that because of gates or falling logs or just undergrowth?

Cr MacINNES — Overgrown.

Mrs FYFFE — Yes. Sorry, go on.

Cr MacINNES — What was once a clear track you cannot expect to be a clear track again. It is probably the lack of ongoing clearance and the lack of that knowledge being out in the community as well. There are a number of state parks within the council area, when you are perhaps planning your access, where the map says there is a track through there but there is actually no track.

Mrs FYFFE — So vehicles were actually prevented from getting closer to the fire. How did they handle it? What did they do?

Cr MacINNES — It is either a bulldozer — depending on the timing, there are a number of ways you can handle it. There is always another way round, but it can be a long way round. It is probably dependent on each circumstance. But the knowledge needs to be out in the community, and the community needs to have ownership of those tracks as well. Public land is public land; it is for all the public. So I think there needs to be community ownership of the public land perhaps more than there is at the moment.

Mrs FYFFE — So the four-wheel drive clubs or four-wheel drivers would not be using these tracks because they are prohibited or they have just stopped using them and keeping them open?

Cr MacINNES — Or they are just overgrown, so you cannot use them. But I think using people that have an interest in four-wheel driving or whatever to maintain tracks is a really good way of achieving a good community outcome from a fire access point of view. But it is also about not burdening another government body with more expense. It achieves both outcomes.

Mrs FYFFE — Because certainly the CFA have not got the time to go and clear the tracks.

Cr MacINNES — No.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you very much.

Mrs PETROVICH — We have talked a lot about local knowledge today; what are your thoughts on how we can best utilise this knowledge in planning and firefighting wildfire, because we know that this area has quite a recent history of fires but also historically? How best could we engage with the community?

Cr MacINNES — First of all, the acknowledgement that there is local knowledge is really important. It does not always happen. I think it is really building those relationships up and the fact that you need staff that stay in one area for a reasonable amount of time, to be somewhere for two years and then move on. Once you have built a relationship it is gone again. It is really about long-term employment in areas that builds up that relationship and builds up that local knowledge, and also the fact that you need to have a succession plan in place. Indeed here in the

Wimmera we are very fortunate that we have Geoff Evans with the DSE, who is well respected across all agencies. He has been absolutely great.

Ms LOBATO — I wonder whether the council has given any consideration to whether it be appropriate to encourage women's participation as volunteers. You spoke about the difficulty of volunteers being out of the area and that many are older volunteers. Has the council given any consideration to the role that women can play? I know that may also be a question for the CFA.

Cr MacINNES — Yes, certainly from the perspective of an initial response that is a CFA responsibility, and how it does that is probably its business. I know most of our volunteers who support us in our municipal emergency control centres — and the other one which I cannot think of — are women, but there needs to be a training process. Our municipality is really built on a strong volunteer aspect, but it is generally women who are in their 50s, 60s and 70s who provide that volunteer support, and they do that really at the drop of a hat.

Mr WALSH — Your council submission highlighted the fact that certain land uses should be banned during fire danger periods but did not actually specify what they might be. Have you got any idea as to what should be restricted in fire danger periods?

Cr MacINNES — Certainly we have concerns, probably not necessarily about land uses, but open camp fires on Crown land in the middle of summer are always a danger. The incidence of the Fulham fires really caused a lot of devastation. Luckily no lives were lost, but it was really only luck that there were not lives lost in that one. I think there needs to be some control, some thought not about banning camping but about what you can actually do. Do you really need a fire or can you use gas or some other portable fuel source?

Mr WALSH — I do not want to put words in your mouth, but should we actually ban camp fires for the whole summer fire period?

Cr MacINNES — Council has not actually resolved that it should be banned, but it is certainly something that should bear consideration. If the argument is really strong that there needs to be a camp fire, that argument needs to be heard as well, but from a community safety point of view there are certainly some arguments that perhaps open wood camp fires are not always appropriate in the summertime.

Mr WALSH — I press the issue because if we can get community support for that, there is more chance of our making a recommendation in the report, which the government may choose to pick up. So if people feel that way, we want it on the record, that is all.

Cr MacINNES — Certainly Mount Arapiles can be absolutely full of campers and camp fires are really important to them, but there may be an education process that needs to happen.

The ACTING CHAIR — Roslyn, thank you so much for being a witness and taking the time to present to us this afternoon.

Witness withdrew.