

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 3 July 2007

Members

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Witnesses

Mr M. Stevens, and
Ms A. Stevens.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — Were you here when we did the bit about the privilege and recordings and all of that stuff?

Mr STEVENS — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent. Do you want to just start?

Mr STEVENS — We are property owners at Pomonal, affected by the Mount Lubra fire, one property back from the Grampians National Park but adjoining private bush which was the main effect of our properties. We both grew up on sheep and cattle properties in South Australia and moved across here. I will declare here at the moment that I am currently employed through Parks Victoria as a ranger in the Grampians National Park. This evening I will be speaking as my own person, not as a representative of any agency or government and that sort of stuff. The views I will present tonight are my personal views — our personal views — and no reflection as a result of my employment. I suppose the first point is information. Deliberate false and misleading information is being provided by some sectors of the public with private agendas, that in turn are driving government objectives and the fuel reduction burning impetus.

The three main things that are attackable at the time are the lack of tracks, water points and fuel reduction burnings. The Grampians has over 800 kilometres of tracks already, quite an extensive track network, which is a legacy of the old forest management days. Any more tracks would be just ridiculous. Water points from an aerial attack point of view, there are 97.6 per cent of the park covered from an aerial attack from helicopter access to water points, and from a ground attack point of view 100 per cent of the park is covered from internal, park-based water points that are accessible. Water is a non-issue. Again, we are in 10 years of drought, how can the park be expected to fill a water point if there is no water?

Fuel reduction burns increase — deliberate misinformation that there has been no burning. From pre-declaration of the park — up until 1983 — there was about 3000 hectares burnt each year. From post-declaration of the park — after 1983 up to 2005 — there were 3500 hectares burnt roughly each year. Quite clearly there has been an increase in average area burnt each year from fuel reduction burns after the declaration of the park. When you look at agency and government response post Ash Wednesday, after 1983, the total net figure of burning has actually gone down in the park. That is not from a lack of fuel reduction burning, there has been increased fuel reduction burning but because the government put effort into resources, machinery, tankers, dozers, skilling up staff and training, it has actually decreased the amount of wildfire each year. What is happening is fuel reduction burning is going up, we are hitting fires harder and faster and that means they are not getting as big as they once were, which is resulting in a net area of land that is being burnt. When you look at a 30 or 40-year scale, there is obviously a lot more land available that has not been burnt and in extreme drought conditions that obviously results in what we had in Mount Lubra. It is definitely not because of a lack of fuel reduction burning.

Increased burn targets: the Grampians National Park had about 47 per cent of the park burnt and at the moment burning targets, although it has been bandied around in government that we will be moving away from targets, it is still being thrown up to burn, say, 5000 hectares a year, which is more than what was done pre-Mount Lubra. If you extrapolate those figures out over the next 10 years, it is three-quarters of the national park. From an environmental point of view that is completely unsustainable and would push our threatened species and last surviving pockets of vegetation to the absolute brink. We are hammering areas. When you look at the Grampians as a landscape and consider that about 70 per cent of Victoria has been cleared since settlement, these island habitats are the only things we have got left, and to burn three-quarters of them in a 10-year window is pushing things to the extreme.

Firebreaks: I have got professional firefighter experience, and I have seen firsthand that big, wide firebreaks do not work in extreme conditions. They are a waste of time, money and effort. There is a struggle to maintain the fire tracks already there. The effort would be better spent on employing people in getting extra resources involved to upgrade and maintain the existing track network that we have across Victoria rather than putting in these strategic catchment breaks, which would be a waste of time. These big, strategic firebreaks which are being proposed only increase erosion and increase fragmentation, which exacerbate the habitat fragmentation and animal impact. Weeds and erosion, we all know the impact of those.

I have alluded there to staff, and the thing I think government needs to focus on and what needs to be focused on across a lot of different agencies, whether it is CFA or various government agencies, is successional planning. If you look at any fire tanker from a volunteer agency at any fire ground, you will see that there are clear successional

planning issues going on, with the age of people that are attending fires. If you look within government agencies as well, and if you look specifically at some work centres, you will see that there are no younger people coming on board to pick up skills but also to continue that professional management. There is a move towards short-term contracts and a lack of permanent ongoing employment for people to contribute in small country towns and be part of those areas, and that needs to be seriously addressed, considering that I suppose the traditional baby boomers are moving towards retirement, and there is going to be a mass exodus from the workforce if you consider the next 5 to 10 years.

Fire recovery: there is a considerable lack of funding and support after major events in areas. In an area like the Grampians, where the park is only 20 per cent of the way through the walking track recovery program, 46 per cent of the way through visitor sites and about 60 per cent of the way through tree risk — again, the figures I am quoting tonight are approximate and would need to be checked by you — there is a massive program still to deliver in the Grampians National Park. Part of the issue is that the works are insurable, but the program needs to be bankrolled, and that program needs to be underwritten by government to help management agencies get on with the job and get places open.

Accurate mapping is also required after fires. There has been some excellent work with post-fire mapping, but that needs to be continued right through to the fuel reduction burning program. To clearly plan you need clear information on what work has been done beforehand, and accurate mapping is integral to that.

With regard to property protection I suppose from our involvement we think there needs to be a higher impetus on people to protect their own properties. There is a big expectation that people will see a big, red fire truck at their back door, and it just does not happen. When the proverbial hits the fan, people are fighting fires and cannot get to each person's property, and a lot of people need to be more educated about what they need and what to expect, because at the moment — I will use Halls Gap as an example — when there are fire awareness weekends, six people turn up. So something is missing. It may be more of a problem that I am bringing to the table, but there is a solution there which is not being seen at the moment, and people still expect the big, shiny, red fire truck to be at their back door, which does not happen in bad situations.

Ms STEVENS — I will not take up too much time, because I know you probably want to get home. I am a small business operator in Pomonal and a resident there with my husband. I moved here from the city probably about three years ago, so I was a little bit sheltered from all this bushfire thing. I moved here from the city for the national park. It was the attraction — the lifestyle, the birds, the kookaburras, the koalas and all that sort of thing. I had no fire awareness, no fire training or anything prior to the bushfire that came through. When it did come through my husband was not there, and I was left on my own to prepare the property. He got back just in time.

A huge mistake that people make is they expect someone to show up and save them, and my mum is a clear example of that. She does not live anywhere near me, but she rang me on the Saturday and said, 'Don't worry. Someone will be there to save you'. I said, 'You're joking, aren't you?' She was actually serious, and that sort of indicated to me that a lot of people have that mentality, and that is really where it can go badly wrong for people, because then they panic if someone does not come to help them. So my suggestion would be to educate people on what happens in a fire and what to expect, because as soon as you give them an expectation, it takes a little bit of the fear out of it so they do not panic and those sorts of things.

Probably no. 2: the national park I believe is established for biodiversity purposes for flora and fauna. That is why I moved here. I did not move here for the tourism, and I did not move here for the farms or any of that. I moved here for the park. I do not understand why we are discussing the impact bushfires have on us. We should really be looking at the impact bushfires have on biodiversity and the flora and fauna, because we have such little pockets of national park left in Victoria that my only suggestion would be that we really need to find a way to hang onto those, because that is all we have got left. That is it.

Mr WALSH — I am interested in education. Given that most people do not want to engage until it is too late, how do we actually get people who want to be educated?

Mr STEVENS — The documentary *Bushfire Summer* that was on TV not long ago was fantastic. Like any documentary, you can shoot holes through various bits of it, but there needs to be more of that. People do not want to pick up a brochure and do that sort of stuff. There needs to be more in-your-face 'This is what is going to happen' stuff.

Ms STEVENS — They, being government, seem to find a way to educate people about things like the effects of what happens when you smoke and what happens in different aspects of your life. They are obviously finding out how to market to that target audience, but I do not quite know how to do it, to be honest.

Mr STEVENS — The second string is that I think there needs to be a door-to-door approach with a simple, standard checklist to go around to properties to say: have you got this, have you got that, have you done that, do you have this, do you have that? I guarantee you that 9 out of 10 property owners will probably say, 'No, I haven't done that. Yes, my wood is stacked up beside the house. I haven't reeled up the hose yet. Look, I have got the pump in the shed, but I haven't hooked it up yet'.

Again that is time and effort which normally falls to the CFA people, who are thin on the ground and are members of the local shire and members of the local cricket club and members of whatever. CFAs need to be resourced to have the resources to do that, to doorknock and chat to the people down the road and go to those places to say, 'Here is the checklist. Let's work through it together. Do you need a hand? We will go down to the shop together, and we can get the fittings and set your pump up and do that sort of stuff'. That is the only way I think it will get through.

Ms LOBATO — I just want to make a quick statement, and that is that I think your examples then exactly reflect what is learnt within the fire guard groups, and they have been quite successful. I guess perhaps a further encouragement of those fire guard groups would do exactly that.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you for your presentation. Your passion is very obvious and I commend you for that, both of you. You said there were 800 kilometres of tracks in the Grampians?

Mr STEVENS — Roughly.

Mrs FYFFE — 'Roughly' — is that open tracks?

Mr STEVENS — All open track, but not all open to the public. There will be some that are management-only vehicle tracks, some that are seasonal-closure tracks, various degrees of what is classed as open, but all open for suppression activities.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay, so accessible for fire fighting?

Mr STEVENS — Yes.

Mrs FYFFE — Your knowledge of the area is great. It has helped quite a lot, because of time, I have just got to think this through.

The ACTING CHAIR — You can just say, 'Thanks for the talk'.

Mrs FYFFE — No, I may come back in a moment, but I will let Donna go.

Mrs PETROVICH — Congratulations on your passion, you are obviously committed to the area. You talked about the pressure and your concerns about over burning of the Grampians National Park.

Mr STEVENS — Grampians, I suppose, but also — in terms of the inquiry — across the landscape.

Mrs PETROVICH — Can you explain how much is too much?

Mr STEVENS — If I could answer that, I would not be in my current job.

Mrs PETROVICH — I am sure you would!

Mr STEVENS — I would, but I would be paid a lot higher. And that probably alludes to some of the other comments by other presenters this evening, of using appropriate science and learning from the information, that is the billion-dollar question or whatever: who really knows?

Mrs PETROVICH — On that basis though, you would still be supportive of cool burns as a means of protecting biodiversity and the environment?

Mr STEVENS — People keep using cool burns.

Mrs PETROVICH — Mosaic burns.

Mr STEVENS — Mosaic burns, cool burns — yes, but again, be very careful in terms of one shoe fits all. Grasslands in the outer Melbourne, need very hot burns in very early autumn. Some grasslands in this area will need hotter burns for biodiversity management. In some of the zone 2 areas which are across Victoria, they may need hotter burns to remove the heavier fuel loads to protect townships and areas. Zone 1 areas may need extremely hot burns because of life and property protection. I get nervous when people start bandying around the placebo, or the magic bullet of the cool burn, one size fits all.

Mrs PETROVICH — Are you suggesting vegetation mapping or land capability studies and biodiversity studies as a tool that we should be using?

Mr STEVENS — I think probably fire ecology strategies. People keep thinking fire ecology strategies? Oh it is only zone 4. Fire ecology strategies apply to the whole state of Victoria. You manage the landscape, you do not look at that little reserve there, it has to be all taken in context. Although we have different zones to be managed in protection, consideration needs to be given to how the landscape is managed and what each of those vegetation conditions need, not just looking at the one size fits all. What does each area need, but how does that fit in the broader landscape context.

Mrs PETROVICH — You would say you are a strong advocate for management of national parks.

Mr STEVENS — Management in what context? Visitation, fire?

Mrs PETROVICH — In the context of which you have just spoken.

Mr STEVENS — Yes, for sure. Fire has a genuine place in landscape management. How that is done and how much? I have no idea, and science is needed to help that.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for your frankness.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is just what I wanted to clarify as well. I think you said three quarters?

Mr STEVENS — Now 47 per cent of the parks has been burnt.

The ACTING CHAIR — Within 10 years?

Mr STEVENS — No.

The ACTING CHAIR — Since proclamation of the park?

Mr STEVENS — No. Mount Lubra burnt 47 per cent of the park. If we keep burning 5000 hectares a year for the next 10 years, it is 75 per cent of the park. Now, again, when you say how much is too much, I know that 75 per cent of that 10-year window is too much. I know that much. I do not know what the appropriate level is though.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, both of you.

Mrs FYFFE — Succession planning is something that is a problem in many areas of our lives, not just CFA and management. With the CFA, can I take it that you mean we are not getting enough young people in, to actually work through, or is it like in many organisations where there is a level of management that is not moving, so the opportunities are not there for people to come through?

Mr STEVENS — Both, yes, getting young people involved in volunteerism is extremely difficult, getting young people into organisations at a base level is extremely difficult because there is no job opportunity, and getting young people to progress up through the organisational food chains, is just impossible. Or I might not be trying hard enough.

Mrs FYFFE — I have got five children, I know exactly what you are saying, my children are all young adults and they are all telling me the same — basically, ‘Why don’t you retire so we can have your job?’. But we have got to find ways around it because you have raised a very valid point. We have to do succession planning.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you to everybody for coming here this evening and presenting, as well as just being interested and listening. I invite people for coffee and a bit of supper that we can share straight after the closure of this forum. Thanks again for coming.

Committee adjourned.