

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

King Lake—18 June 2007

Members

Ms J. Duncan
Ms T. Lobato
Mr P. Walsh

Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. Pandazopoulos
Ms D. Petrovich

Chair: Mr J. Pandazopoulos
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Witnesses

Mr B. Flowers, Mayor, Murrindindi Shire Council; and
Mr A. Daly, Municipal Fire Prevention Officer, Murrindindi Shire Council.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much. We have with us Councillor Bob Flowers, the Mayor of Murrindindi Shire, and Andy Daly, Municipal Fire Prevention Officer. We thank you very much for joining us today. All evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committee Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence being given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. Mayor, and Mr Daly, I ask you to present to the committee. Thank you for joining us.

Mr FLOWERS—Thank you very much indeed. Firstly a very warm welcome to Murrindindi, although the weather is not warm.

Mrs PETROVICH—No, not a warm welcome at all.

Mr FLOWERS—Thank you also for the opportunity to contribute to this review and the improvement of public land management practices in relation to fire. I would like to make some comments on behalf of council on the various issues that were listed in the correspondence that we have had from you: the first being the extent, timing, resourcing and effectiveness of prescribed burning is of prime importance to our shire. Council endorses cool burns. It has the effect of reducing the intensity of fire beyond that point. It can also arrest fire, so the communities feel much safer with that. There is a limited time in which these burns can take place, both for climatic conditions, especially in a region like this that can often be fairly damp in some years but certainly not in others like we have experienced. The other effect which needs to be taken into account is the local operations when these prescribed burns are occurring that there are, as has already been mentioned by the CFA, effects on local operations such as tourism. Sometimes the prescribed burns have occurred at times that certainly have not been ideal so far as our local tourist operators are concerned and people have returned home from their holidays early within the area because of the amount of smoke and the conditions that prevailed at the time. The manner in which the burns are conducted is very important. I think, and it has been outlined to us today already, that there certainly needs to be strategic planning often for, I would believe, some years in advance as to what these burns may be. That plan may be modified over a period of time because of the climatic conditions and other factors that occur in the interim period. We also need to identify the key assets that we have within the forest itself, obviously on adjoining public land as well, but also within the forest that there can be adequate preparation for the prescribed burns and also wildfire.

The prescribed burns and obviously wildfire can have significant impact on water quantity and quality. The more intense the burn, the greater the exposure of soil and as a result there can be an amount of soil exposed and loss of topsoil through erosion. This obviously can have long-term degradation of land and water as a result. The degradation of the water supply can obviously have a severe impact on the domestic supplies for townships and communities downstream. The effectiveness of the reporting process of the prescribed burns is very important in gaining local cooperation. Increased communication, better communication leads to better understanding. It also has the effect of minimising the impact on local operations. The suggestion could be made that there be a communication plan put forward by government authorities for a 12-month, three-month and perhaps one month's notice to council and communities prior to the prescribed burns occurring. This would tend to alleviate the community perception of some confusion—whether that be true or not, I am talking about perceptions here, and perception in this case can lead to unease. This information would reassure our communities. I think that that can do nothing but good for cooperation between local communities and government agencies.

An associated issue with this too is the management of the media. The media, I believe, can be irresponsible at times, concentrating on the negative aspects and perhaps the more sensational aspects of burns. I think that thought needs to be given to that when reporting on prescribed burns. The maintenance of firebreaks, containment lines and, may I add, bridges is really very important. It is necessary for the access to the forests, the control of wildfire and we would as a council like to see council and local input into the placement of the breaks because we believe that it would better protect our local assets and it also could possibly have the effect of maintaining vistas along tourist routes because we are promoting ourselves as a tourist destination, especially outdoor recreation. These sorts of issues, if they can be taken into account, would certainly be greatly appreciated. Signage is another issue. In many instances council believe that the signage is both inadequate for recreation and emergencies currently. An upgrade of that signage, if you can take that into consideration, would certainly be appreciated.

The involvement of local communities in the management of fire is really essential. We need to work together. The input of local knowledge for especially the emergency and the recovery phase really does give the best outcome and it can tend to minimise problems that occur. There has already been mention made today of the Fire Recovery Committee that was set up, and it worked very well in this district. The concerns that we would have with the involvement of the local community are along the lines that again have been mentioned by CFA personnel that we have population growth. This is one of the areas of the shire that is growing in absolute terms. There is also migration in and out of the area, that we have a turnover of people, residents living here. By and large it is often a commuter belt where people go down off the mountain to work and return at night. There is not always this social and community cohesion that you might find in more distant places from Melbourne. All of that leads in to the need for continuous communication and a focus on that, that people are informed.

The other aspect is that our population is ageing. With an ageing population we need to consider the evacuation procedures that may occur, the level of risk that is involved for our communities. Probably the level of risk is in some way in proportion to the familiarity that our communities have with fire and rural life in general as to what they might need to do off their own bat in preparing their property and perhaps working together with neighbours to do that. The other issue that we have is volunteering. In this atlas, which I read recently about the figures from 2005 about regional matters in Victoria, Murrindindi has between 47 and 64 per cent of its population volunteering for something. A good percentage of that is going to be concerned with fire, CFA, the SES and other associated volunteer organisations. But at the same time there is a limit and we are seeing this—we have had in this shire two years recently where the volunteers have been stretched. They have been deployed both within the shire and also beyond the boundary. That limit to goodwill is on the part of the individuals who have to leave their domestic and work situations; it is also on the part of the employer who has to release the people. What we need to do, obviously as the CFA have alluded to earlier on, is to make sure that our continued efforts are there to promote volunteering and the benefits of it.

Some additional comments that I would like to make are that council supports the idea of what we refer to as a working forest in the sense that we do not want these areas locked up. We want them to be accessible, that people can get into these, that they can gain, they can participate in the beauty of the surrounds of the area and this will lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the great outdoors. Water storage is another associated issue that obviously is, I believe, high on everybody's agenda. There are two water issues here: one is tanks and one is dams. We have no reticulated water. This is a township, it is not residential. The difference is one has reticulated water, the other does not. We have what I believe is the largest population in Victoria without reticulated water. There are inherent disadvantages obviously to that. The tanks—through Andy's good work and others obviously—have been strategically placed, but it is an ongoing program that we have. They need to be in the right spot. They need to be fitted with the right fittings, that everything is uniform, everything is accessible to the CFA. Dams: there really does need to be some inventory of the dams, not only where they are but to a certain extent if it is at all possible some capacity, not total capacity but what they contain at times; where can people go both with a helicopter or truck to get water? There needs to be thought given to developing some policies for the reinstatement of that water too, as to what issues are involved. I am not sure if you have it, but I have certainly brought copies of our submission to you and I can hand these to you. There are concerns that are outlined here on that issue of the policy and what it might contain listed here which I perhaps will not go into right at this stage.

The resourcing is another issue. It does not necessarily apply to prescribed burns but it certainly would—in a way it does. There are two issues from a funding point of view that council would like to put to you today: one is the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre that is established during times of emergency, the MECs. These are often established on a 24/7 basis and can run for a couple of days through to weeks as we have seen in Mansfield Shire this year. What we do find is that staff are diverted from their normal duties to undertake duties in the MEC and they can then facilitate all of that advantage that is provided by the MEC. But unfortunately we have not received funding back for all of that expenditure and we would ask that you consider that matter. The second one on resourcing that I would like to mention is road funding. That is where we have harvesting of salvage logs. We have greatly increased traffic on our roads and this can lead to substantial expenditure on the part of the shires like ourselves here to maintain those roads. We would welcome anyway increased funding on that matter, perhaps from the royalties that are gained from the harvesting of such logs.

The final point I would like to make is that forests form a critical part of our carbon cycle. I think that we as a community and perhaps as a government agency could investigate questions about the importance of these timber aspects as a carbon sink, that is both in relation to prescribed burns and also wildfire and also the implication of what it is, what effect do prescribed burns have on this carbon cycle and our carbon neutral position, especially with the aspects of climate change being, at this stage, perhaps led largely by community willingness. In conclusion I would simply say here that the effects of badly managed forests go a long way beyond the immediate incident. We do require good management. I think the reporting of your findings, and I think that is in about 12 months time, will be very important and we certainly look forward to that. I wish you every success in your endeavours. Thank you.

The CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Mayor and Mr Daly. If I can ask a first question: I am particularly interested in your comments earlier on being an area that focuses very much on tourism. You highlighted the area of your concern about the regime of the accuracy of information to the media and to the public about prescribed burns, when there are fires on and the impact that that might have on inaccurate information being portrayed by travellers or potential travellers to the region. Would you like to elaborate on any particular examples that you have had in relation to that, that there was inaccurate information provided directly to the media about localities of fires or whether a burn-off was a much larger fire, those type of examples.

Mr FLOWERS—In relation to the prescribed burns, two years ago there was an amount of prescribed burning occurred around Marysville along this range further to the east within our shire. The climatic conditions at the time certainly meant that smoke became a real hazard for Marysville. There were reports of numbers of people returning from holidays early. Not only were the bookings curtailed for that Easter—it was an Easter period that this occurred—but also it tends to have the effect that when they go home they tend not to rebook and the advertisement is not as good as we would hope. With prescribed burns it really is a difficult job for CFA and DSE to undertake, I realise that, but there does need to be planning to try and minimise that effect.

The CHAIR—That is in relation to timing. I thought you also indicated that media misrepresented particular issues and whether that was because of inappropriate information being made available to media or maybe not as responsive to media issues. I would imagine these people driving away might be ringing 3AW and saying, 'Looks like there's a bushfire at Marysville.' What is your understanding of how those things are made—is there a response to media by someone centrally in order to provide accurate information to both people in those regions and visitors and potential visitors to those regions?

Mr DALY—Mr Chairman, basically people do ring up. Recently this year when we have had the opportunity to have the DSE in, CFA had the opportunity to do the prescribed burns, there was a fairly big smoke problem for a few days, but people rang up and we put them onto the right people at the DSE and they were informed then of the problems. I think the local community radio station did a bit on it and said, 'Please stay inside, especially with asthma sufferers,' et cetera, but basically that was all that was done. We put them onto the right avenue and tried to help them out as much as we can.

The CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Daly. I might start on my right this time. Ms Lobato.

Ms LOBATO—Thank you very much for presenting. The shire's written submission recommends policy improvements regarding the replacement of water from fire suppression activities. I was wondering if you could explain what improvements are needed.

Mr DALY—I think what that was in relation to, when the water was taken from the dams—and it was substantial amounts—how much goes back into the dam or how much compensation is afforded. That is most probably what that represents.

Ms LOBATO—I see.

Mr DALY—I think that happened a couple of times where the information supplied was not read properly or understood. It was a little bit hazy—broad is probably the right word to say. It was very broad and it was not exactly A or B, it was a little bit in between there.

Ms LOBATO—Thanks for that. I thought you might have been suggesting some other type of fluid. I was not sure what that meant.

Mr FLOWERS—May I add to that too?

Ms LOBATO—Sure.

Mr FLOWERS—I think it is not only replacing the quantity of water but it has, especially this year, where the water supplies were diminished—if it was not replaced, or until it was replaced, much of that land was then not able to be used for agricultural production because the one thing that drove people away was water shortages.

Ms LOBATO—Of course.

Mr FLOWERS—There does need to be that replacement. The sooner that can be done the better, because if it is left for some time there is an inherent loss of production and the costs that are associated with that.

Ms LOBATO—Thank you.

The CHAIR—Ms Duncan.

Ms DUNCAN—I have a heap but I will try and confine it to a couple. Do the council do any prescribed burning on your own land?

Mr DALY—On our own land, in conjunction with the local brigades, if they believe the prescribed burn will assist in their area of management to reduce the fuel loads. I would agree that only after heavy consultation with region 12 and the brigades themselves.

Ms DUNCAN—Do you do that 12 months and then three months and then one month?

Mr DALY—We are undertaking one at Eildon at the moment and that is quite an extensive consultation process, and also information is in a letter drop, the local media and also the local radio station to promote.

Ms DUNCAN—Prior to the burn or—

Mr DALY—A couple of weeks beforehand.

Ms DUNCAN—Yes, because it is very difficult to get that 12-month notice and then the three-month notice and then a one-month notice, I would imagine.

Mr FLOWERS—The only thing with the 12 months—the council felt with the 12 months—was that given the right thing, there are certain areas where prescribed burns would occur, given the right climatic conditions that could be notified to the communities 12 months ahead with the qualification, 'That's subject to ...'.

Ms DUNCAN—Can you explain—this might be a question for Andy, I think—the differences in the regulation that applies to doing a burn-off on private land and/or on public land. Do council control the by-laws that apply to burn-offs on private land? How do the two regimes differ that seems to make one a lot easier to do than the other?

Mr DALY—Close cooperation.

Ms DUNCAN—Between council and DSE?

Mr DALY—DSE and Parks Victoria. We have a very close relationship up here and it works very well. We put in place and have come on board with the local Parks Victoria there at Kinglake National Park. Every year we have a very large meeting, a pre-fire season meeting, where I think it is 14 or 15 brigades from the surrounding area around the park. The Wallaby Creek water catchment, and other authorities—police, council—they sit down and chew the fat and try and work out the issues before the season comes about, that we know exactly where we are and where we are going. I think I have been now to four or five and it works really well.

Ms DUNCAN—Thank you.

Mr WALSH—Thank you, Mr Mayor, for coming in—and Andy. Has the council quantified the costs of council staff and machinery that was utilised in the fires in the 06-07 year, and have you split that between ordinary time costs that you cover the cost of, versus our ordinary time costs that the government recompensed you for? If you have done that would you like to enlighten the committee as to what those costs are, please.

Mr FLOWERS—I am not sure of complete details here, but over the period there have been three claims made. The first two claims were reimbursed in full, both for the use of contractors that might have been brought in and also the use of municipal staff working either in the MECC or related to fire in some way. The third claim, where contractors were brought in, that part of it has been reimbursed. The council's figures in quantifying the costs of diverting staff to operate the MECC and other fire related issues has amounted to \$85,000 approximately which is still outstanding and that, in relation to rates, for example, equates to a one per cent rate rise in our municipality.

Mr WALSH—That \$85,000 was during normal business hours.

Mr FLOWERS—Yes. There was some beyond it but during normal operations, normal business hours, our problem exists that, of course, the work that is not done during those hours where work is being done elsewhere, remains to be done and that bill then needs to be picked up.

Mr WALSH—What was the reason that the council was given that the third claim was not paid the same as the first two claims?

Mr FLOWERS—I am uncertain about that but there has certainly been an approach made to state government and I believe that there has also been some questions asked of the federal government with respect to this also, and the answers have been very similar at this stage. We hope they will be reversed.

The CHAIR—Mrs Petrovich.

Mrs PETROVICH—Thanks, Mr Chair. Mr Mayor, you spoke about the importance of maintenance for bridges and firebreaks. Can you elaborate on the type of work you envisage that would be required to assist in the achievement of these sorts of goals?

Mr FLOWERS—Andy, would you like to—

Mr DALY—Yes. In relation to that, Mr Chairman, through our Municipal Fire Prevention Committee, which I believe is very successful and we have a very active one, through the brigades we prioritise issues, especially our roads. We have completed a track out the back of this building by access track to get to the wooded areas around this community and that was completed this year. We had another large fire access track in Burtons Road in Kinglake West which is very strategically placed between the Kinglake National Park and the main Kinglake Whittlesea Road. That itself becomes a firebreak. This has worked in well with the local Parks Victoria in cooperating and coming together and completing Captains Creek Road which was an essential forest road that runs right through the middle of the national park. We contributed funds to the maintenance of that track and as it was in the 2006 fires it was extensively used and it was well done. It shows cooperation can happen between varying agencies. We continue to do that this year with Parks Victoria.

Mrs PETROVICH—If I may, Mr Chairman, you say "we" achieved those objectives.

MR DALY—The community, the shire and the other agencies, such as Parks Victoria, also through the CFA [FARSS] subsidy scheme which we apply for and have been recipients of funding and we use that funding to the best of our ability in placement of static water tanks for strategically aligned forester's tracks.

Mrs PETROVICH—Thank you very much for that.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much for your presentation and answering questions and remind you that you will get some transcripts with instructions in the next couple of weeks. Thank you for those attending in the gallery. I will close the hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.

Committee adjourned.