

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Dunkeld — 4 July 2007

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Mr R. Hallam.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome the Honourable Roger Hallam, a former minister and upper house member representing this area. We appreciate your spending some time with us to make a presentation. Roger, you have about 15 minutes.

Mr HALLAM — Thank you, Madam Chair. Can I begin by giving you a little of my background to perhaps explain not only my bona fides but my interest in this issue. My name is Roger Hallam. I was raised on the family farm at Cavendish, about 20 minutes to our west. I operated a major business in the city of Hamilton, which is about 20 minutes to our south-west. For many years I have owned and operated a property at Mooralla, which is on the eastern boundary of the Grampians National Park, and on that property my wife and I grow Australian natives for furniture timber.

I have been an active firefighter for something in excess of 40 years with three district volunteer brigades. I am currently secretary of the Grange brigade, which has its territory on the eastern outskirts of the city of Hamilton. I represented this part of the world in the Victorian Parliament, and did so very proudly, for 18 years, but beyond that I have been a long-time critic of the public land management practices in this state, particularly in respect of wildfire prevention and control.

I begin by commending the Bracks government and this committee for conducting this inquiry on what I regard to be a critically important issue, and I commend you in particular for bringing the inquiry to the communities most directly affected, particularly insofar as the risk and reality of wildfire are concerned. I personally really appreciate the opportunity of the forum and to speak directly to the decision-makers in our community.

I have to say it is a bit ironic that we meet today with wintry conditions outside. One of the things that does is underscore some of the difficulties and some of the anomalies. You could not light a fire outside if you tried right now. That highlights the extent to which the management practices are driven by some really tough conditions. We have a relatively short fire season. If we took out, say, a dozen days at the height of the fire season, we could remove the critical risk. Much of the prevention work that we would want to do is made more difficult by seasonal conditions, and beyond that community apathy becomes a major issue as well. It is very hard to persuade someone about the risk of fire when they are shivering, which we do for a lot of the year down here. In many cases the risk only comes to the surface when it is too late.

I want to talk particularly about the Mount Lubra fire, which occurred in January of last year. I know it has been overshadowed to some degree by what has happened since in the high country and in East Gippsland, but the Mount Lubra fire was a truly terrifying and very costly experience for many in this community. We need to recall that the Grampians range — or the three ranges which make up the Grampians National Park — run almost north and south, from Dunkeld to not far short of Horsham through the middle of a very important grazing and cropping area. So in terms of its strategic location, it is of enormous importance, particularly in respect of wildfire.

I might also say by way of background, I had a quick look at the brigade records this morning. My brigade is not a big brigade but we had 19 of our members attend the fire at Mount Lubra — some of them several times, some of them many times — and so it became a very big issue for every firefighter in the region. I have to say that what happened with Mount Lubra, from my point of view and from that of those I rub shoulders with, is a classic illustration of why the popular notion that we can save a bit of territory by declaring it a national park and locking it up just simply does not work. Worse still, it is dangerously misdirected and even counterproductive. We need to understand that, and that is debated long and hard in this local community.

In January 2006 we had a number of really dramatic electrical storms. Fires ignited in many locations across this part of the state — I think from memory about 30 in the Grampians. So Mount Lubra was one of a whole package that was a major issue. DSE, with some support from the Country Fire Authority, spent a few days trying to contain the Mount Lubra fire and to extinguish it, and you need to understand it was in terribly difficult terrain with virtually no access by ground vehicle. Then we had the bad day, which we all feared would happen — 40 degrees and a rotten north wind, and the fire left the park; it roared out of the park on 22 January 2006, and we had the holocaust that so many had been predicting for some years.

The reason I was very keen to come and talk to you today is that my major concern in respect of that fire and what has transpired since is that I do not think we have learnt the lesson. What I am picking up from around the traps and particularly from those responsible for fire management, is that I still don't see the train coming. Before the fire, the major debate in the community in respect of wildfire management, particularly, across public land was the extent of

cool burning — pardon the pun, but that was an incredibly hot topic — everybody was talking about the extent to which the cool burn was taking place.

Since then the debate has shifted and we are now getting a much more, in my view pernicious, debate about whether the DSE actually met its responsibilities in respect of the Mount Lubra fire — the question of whether it could have been put out in the three or four days before it became a major emergency. In other words, was the organisation responsible for the management of the fire derelict in its duty? And that is a very clear message coming from some quarters.

But there is a worse interference, in my view, and that is that this is all somehow due to climate change and that those who are responsible for the management of wildfire can be exonerated on the basis that circumstances have changed. Now whatever else happens I would hate this committee to go away and fall for the line that somehow we should be making allowances because there is climate change. If climate change has had any impact, we should be upping the ante in terms of fire management and fire prevention, and I would love to talk about that, but perhaps in another context.

I would like to explain some of the background to the Mount Lubra fire which is not challenged. A lot of it has been challenged and you will hear contrary evidence from various groups across the community.

No-one would challenge that the forest fire started in a national park; that is the first point that we should all go back to. And secondly, notwithstanding the efforts of two separately funded organisations, the DSE and CFA, Parks Victoria and a whole host of other ancillary organisations which are better trained than ever, better supported than ever with not just fixed-wing but rotary-winged aircraft of several different varieties — it has to be acknowledged against that background that we had the worst fire in living memory during January 2006. So you do not have to be Einstein to work out there is something going wrong here. If we are better equipped and better organised than ever before, how come we have just had the holocaust? In my view that message is just not getting through.

Now we know that at least a majority of the park was burnt, I think about 80 000 hectares. Worse still, estimates vary between 45 000 and 50 000 of privately owned grazing and cropping land. Miles of fencing, thousands of stock, equipment, outbuildings, sheds, fodder storages — the whole lot went. And we lost two district residents, a father and son.

In response to some evidence I heard earlier, we lost thousands of red gums in open country too. Mature red gums either dropped their limbs due to the enormous heat or burnt like crackers because they had a hollow in them. We lost huge numbers of birds as well. Cockatoos were like confetti on the black ground. They simply dropped out of the sky.

My point then, Madam Chair, all this happened despite the dedication of the organisations, despite all the resources that we could bring together — and they were massive. The facts are that we did not put that fire out. It would not have mattered if we had had 10 times the trucks — we would not have put it out. It came with such incredible velocity and I think about a 35-kilometre front, with a terrifying background noise. We would not have stopped it. It got within about 1 kilometre of the town of Willaura and we had a wind change. We did not stop it. It was God's will it turned around.

If that wind change had been 10 minutes later, I think we would have lost the township of Willaura. So when I hear people say how well we did with restoring the Grampians, I am reminded that we came within a hair's breadth of it going to sea. That is my assessment, and I was in the middle of it.

One of the ironies is that we can actually luxuriate in this debate about how well the Grampians are doing, that it is safer today than it was before the wildfire, that we can sit and relax for a few years. I do not think it will make any difference what happens in the next few years because of that massive fire — and it was unplanned. I want to restate and reinforce that for those who were responsible for the management.

I went to a debrief last November conducted by DSE up at Mirranatwa, and I was really pleased to get the chance to talk to those who were directly involved and to talk about the outcome. All the local brigades were represented and invited to participate. We had scores of public servants, and I got the chance to raise the concerns that I am talking to you about today, and which go specifically to the terms of reference of your inquiry.

I have a major concern that our public servants and those who were responsible for public land management seem to be intent on arguing the merits of the existing policies. I forgive them because they are professional; I understand all that. But I think we need to break the mould.

If we learnt anything from Mount Lubra, it is that we need to do something different from what we have been doing in the past. At that meeting we spent more time inspecting and discussing the recovery rate of the park and the plants there than we did on anything else. That is fine; I understand all of that, but it struck me as strange that we did not actually go and look at the recovery of the private land. We went out and looked at the park. And then we were taken en masse to see how well the firebreaks had been regenerated! I could not believe my eyes. All of the time and expense and energy that went into creating these firebreaks was undone afterwards, and those who were responsible for the fires in my district argued that that was a very good outcome. I was aghast. I could not believe it. So it is on that basis that I say we have to do something different.

We were told that there was a target of 3000 hectares — now I understand it may be 5000 — cool burn in the future. I did a quick sum at the time and said, ‘That is about a 35 year rotation; I’m not sure I am impressed by that’. So I got up and said, ‘I am not in a position to argue whether 3000 or 5000 is appropriate — I am not qualified — but whether it is 3000 or 5000, it is in the wrong place, because we just got our private land burnt out with your fire’.

What I want is a grid, a matrix, of defendable lines across the national park and some defendable breaks on the boundaries, particularly on the southern and eastern boundaries where we know the risk is going to be greatest. When the fire came out of the national park it was unstoppable and we had no chance of even reducing the impact of that fire. So I do not claim to be expert about where the burns should take place or whether three thousand is good or five thousand is good, but I think, on the principle of being a good neighbour, we should be doing more to protect those who are on our perimeter, given that we know about the risks of wildfire; we have had 100 years of experience.

When I raised the suggestion that we need a permanent and defendable boundary line I was told, ‘That is not realistic, Roger, because many of the people we have to deal with are lifestyle people and they will not actually agree to a firebreak’. I think — and I said at the time, I am not stepping back — that is a terrible cop-out. All that simply means is you do not have to do something you did not want to do because you have found some excuse. I could introduce you to half a dozen landowners, and do it in this meeting, who would tell you they would love the chance to do something better to protect their assets, and if there are others who do not want that protection, than let it be at the election of the landowner.

It is as simple as that, and in my view it would go a long way to not just reducing the risk of wildfire in the future but to increasing the comfort, if you like, of those who happen to be neighbours. The vast majority of broad acre neighbours would be delighted to have a safety factor built in, instead of which they now have to sit and wait for the fire on public land to come onto their property and then hope like hell they can do something with it before it destroys their assets. In my view it would also have an important safety factor, because then we could send our crews into an area that was safe.

We sent crews into areas that were incredibly unsafe during the Mount Lubra fire — on tracks that did not allow them to pass or turn around, with overhanging undergrowth and so on — and to me that is just sheer nonsense. I want the crews to go in where they are safe and where they can actually do some good.

Now the bottom line in all of this, and it is what I wanted the chance to say, is that we understand that wildfire is a natural part of our life and it is not just a part but an important part of the management of our public lands; it has been so for hundreds of years. So those who understand it are not surprised that the Grampians National Park has recovered, because that is what it has done every time there has been a fire. In fact much of the vegetation that we want to protect actually needs wildfire to regenerate. But that does not apply to private land.

There is a fundamental division that we should be drawing. The farming community faces the opposite. They do not need fire as part of the management regime, and people live there — they do not live in the national park, they live on private land, and they have fundamentally different needs and wants, and that is where they derive their livelihood.

It is no wonder that there is some consternation in the community at the thought of having the risk of wildfire driven by management practices that do not recognise that fundamental difference. I am not suggesting it is easy; I

know it is not. I know there is some incredible frustration amongst the senior officers in DSE and the Country Fire Authority as well. Stop and think about it! These people are required to spend the six months when it will not burn trying to get it to light, and the other six months when it will burn trying to put it out! It is that frustrating. So you cannot go to the bloke who is responsible and say, 'This is easy' because it is not easy; it is very difficult.

The ACTING CHAIR — Roger, I am sorry, but I draw your attention to the time. Another couple of minutes so we can ask you some questions?

Mr HALLAM — Okay. One of the things which really concerns me is that fire services get better resourced because of bad fires. The authorities can then go and argue to government that we need more resourcing. So there is a terrible dilemma there. The question that is posed in the community is: what would have happened if the Mount Lubra fire had been put out on the first night? We would not have all these opportunities to go and argue for more trucks and for more equipment and for better services and training and so on.

My point is that the national park will recover, but some of the neighbours will not, and I think it is obscene that the responsibility of the public land managers stops at the park boundary. Once the fire comes through the fence it thereby becomes the responsibility of the Country Fire Authority. I cannot believe that we have not got past that. That is absolutely basic.

My view is that we need a major shift in management policies and responsibilities, and we have got to have better external input into public land management practices. I would add that to this date we have excluded one particular stakeholder to a large degree, and the irony is that that stakeholder is the one with the most at stake — that is, the neighbour who has his home, his livelihood and his personal safety inextricably linked to the fire management practices across public land. We all enjoy our public lands; you do not have to be a rabid greenie to do so. But the neighbours of our public lands have a special interest, and I think their views should be better acknowledged and better respected and in fact harnessed to overcome what I think is a glaring anomaly, and I would love to talk about the whole range of issues that go with that.

I really thank you for the opportunity to be here today, and for your courtesy in hearing me through.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, Roger. Could we ask a quick question each, starting with you, Peter?

Mr WALSH — So what would you do differently, Roger? If we are going to break the mould and do something different — we are writing the report, as I said before — what is the one thing you would like in those recommendations?

Mr HALLAM — I would love to overcome the division between public land and private land and the assumption that on one location it is someone's fire and on the other location it is someone else's fire. I just think that is absurd. I think the duplication of resourcing and the confusion on the ground is inexplicable and inexcusable. We should have a single authority irrespective of where the fire is, and I really liked the idea that Bill Crawford talked about before — that is, having a single person in control of individual incidents. That would overcome much of the problem.

I have no complaint at all about the resourcing on the ground. You turn up to a fire as a volunteer firefighter and you are blown away by the support. The community comes together like you would not believe, and you are fed every 5 minutes and so on; it is incredible. But in many cases you do not put a glass of water on the fire before you go home. There are people out there who are frustrated at the lack of central direction and the harnessing of the resources we do have.

Ms LOBATO — Thanks very much for your presentation. It also sounds like another recommendation of yours is to implement firebreaks — division between the park and private land.

Mr HALLAM — Yes.

Ms LOBATO — Do you actually see a physical, strategically placed firebreak around the park?

Mr HALLAM — Yes.

Ms LOBATO — If so, how big is it?

Mr HALLAM — At that meeting I called for a firebreak on our southern ridge of at least 500 metres. I have heard and understand that that does not stop a wildfire when it is spotting 6 kilometres away, but it means we could send well-resourced people into a safe area with a much better opportunity of actually stopping the fire before it gets to private land. As to the question I heard earlier about whose land it should be on, that to me is a given. It should most certainly be on public land where the fire starts. To me, that is absolutely basic.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for that elaborate and very passionate submission, Roger. You have a fantastic commitment to your community, and you have my applause. One thing that keeps striking me is that we talk about the Mount Lubra fire, but how could we, in your opinion, have better attacked the Mount Lubra fire more quickly?

Mr HALLAM — It is a bit unfair, because I was not there at the centre of control, but when I did get there I saw Elvis there on a number of occasions. I cannot understand why Elvis was not used in the first instance to put the fire out. Elvis was located either within or adjacent to the park and apparently was not used until the risk had expanded dramatically. That is my understanding of it, but that may be unfair on those who were directly responsible.

Mrs FYFFE — Water points, Roger, are continuously coming up on a regular basis. Naturally some of the existing dams that farmers have were made quite a long time ago and are too small for the collection of water by Elvis and so on, and we have been told there are water collection points in the national parks. Do you think there are enough or should there be more, and would the reason Elvis was not used be because of the amount of water it would have taken?

Mr HALLAM — I understand it was a factor, and I have to say to the eternal credit of DSE that more water points have been established, and last November we went and looked at the additional water points. Perhaps the Mount Lubra fire is not a good example, because when the brigades met last November and were invited to report to the review, I think all but one or two said they had no water. Cavendish had access to the Wannon River and Grange brigade had access to Lake Hamilton, but the majority of brigades had no water at all.

Mrs FYFFE — So that is no farm dams to pump water from and no rivers?

Mr HALLAM — They had no dams from which to draw water in the case of an emergency. It is pretty basic stuff. So the question of whether it should be provided in the national park in my view is just another one of the things we should be doing to better manage a magnificent resource. I remember when the national park was established, and I remember arguing vehemently to get water harvesting as one of the standard uses of the park. As it happens we have had a whole range of controversial things arise since, but in my view it was part of the original plan, and we should be going back and making much better use of the original arrangements.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you. I omitted to thank you for your presentation. I really appreciated it.

The CHAIR — Roger, in your presentation you talked about why should we be surprised that the holocaust occurred in that Mount Lubra fire. Putting aside climate change, do you not give any credit to a 10-year drought? Do you not think that was why we had a holocaust then?

Mr HALLAM — No, I do not. If you talk to older members of the community — and I suppose I nearly qualify there — they remember when long dry spells were registered in the 40s and 50s. They will quote to you the 1945 fires, they will quote to you the fires in the middle 60s where similar sorts of conditions applied. We carted water into the middle of winter in 1963 or 1964. There is plenty of room to argue that this is nothing more than the cycle, but I make this point and I keep going back to it: irrespective of whether the weather conditions are attributable to cyclical drought or true climatic change, we should not be using that as some sort of measure of the output. We should actually be using that as a need to crank up the response.

The ACTING CHAIR — Which is what is happening.

Mr HALLAM — Okay, but I have heard some of the views being put about that it is to be expected because we have had this climate change and that that does not just explain it but actually makes it somehow more acceptable. I do not accept that. My point is that if there is a climate change and if the circumstances are different, then we should be responding to that.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks a lot, Roger.

Witness withdrew.