

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 16 July 2007

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Mr S. Ramsay, president, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR — I welcome Simon Ramsay, president of the Victorian Farmers Federation. I remind you, Simon, that all evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, which is provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and the Parliamentary Committees 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 transcripts over the next couple of weeks.

We thank you for joining us today. We know you have done a lot of work in your own meetings around the state, getting feedback from your members and communities. We ask you to make a presentation, and if it is okay we will ask you a few questions at the end of it.

Mr RAMSAY — Thanks very much for the opportunity for the Victorian Farmers Federation to be able to present at this hearing. Preparation of the submission has involved extensive consultation with a large number of VFF members from fire-affected areas across the state. The process began with community meetings in Bruthen and Heyfield, where members of the community were able to voice their concerns regarding the fires which have monopolised their lives for much of the summer. The VFF involved Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin at these meetings.

Unfortunately fires can no longer be considered isolated, random incidents. We can no longer treat fires like other natural disasters. We must pre-empt their occurrences in the summer months, by planning throughout the year. Since the 2002–03 fires, the way in which we manage fires has been reviewed extensively. The VFF has taken a keen interest in these reviews. Many changes have been made. However, there are more recommendations yet to be implemented.

In reviewing public land management practices, this parliamentary inquiry should seek to ensure that recommendations from previous and current inquiries are implemented. The consensus is that the proper, practical management of natural resources can limit many of the losses of assets and biodiversity caused by fire. Rather than proactive fire mitigation, reactive fire management has become an accepted institution approach, predictably resulting in large recurrent bushfires and loss of natural resources. Predictions of climate change place an extra importance on the parliamentary inquiry, which the VFF expects will provide full recommendations which will guide fire management on public land into the future. This committee has asked me in my presentation today to address six issues relating to bushfire management.

The first one is the impact of fire on the farming community. The cost to the farming community from bushfires is significant. The VFF believes that the cost communally is the total of the following factors: farmers' contribution to the fire services levy, which funds the CFA; direct financial cost due to the loss of assets, mainly stock, crops, fences, improvements et cetera; the time farmers spend away from farming activities in either protecting their own property or volunteering to protect others; and the emotional stress and associated medical costs. These costs are extremely difficult to quantify. However, there can be no doubt that spending on fire prevention will generate savings in fire response and recovery.

The second item is the effectiveness of firebreaks. The VFF supports the establishment of permanent firebreaks to enable more fuel reduction burning to be carried out and protect assets during summer bushfires. The establishment of a permanent firebreak during the recent bushfires was successful in protecting the Thomson Dam, which supplies water to Melbourne. In future it should not be left until assets are threatened before strategic firebreaks are established. Indeed public land managers cannot wait for the findings of this parliamentary inquiry in June 2008 to begin establishing permanent firebreaks. These firebreaks must provide protection for private as well as public assets. A recurring concern from the public following the 2006–07 bushfires was the management of containment lines by public land managers. The vegetation and fuel cleared from containment lines to protect townships and other private assets were then replaced onto cleared areas. It is the view of the VFF that special planning and management arrangements, which promote cooperative management of the interface areas, should be established for the interface between public and private land. These arrangements should aim to facilitate the establishment of appropriately sized firebreaks. Through annual maintenance, public land managers should be required to maintain the firebreaks, buffers and containment lines free of vegetation, fuel and weeds.

The third item is the use of water from private storages. Authorities responsible for the management of public lands have actively decommissioned dams on public land, reducing water resources available for fighting fires. Authorities responsible for monitoring the storage of water must recognise the importance of reliable water storage for firefighting. The state's fire response now relies heavily on water points situated on private land. The

government's policy of reimbursing land-holders for water taken ensures land-holders continue to make water available. The VFF believes this policy must be maintained into the future. Restrictions on the development of farm dams has reduced the availability of water and subsequently weakened Victoria's fire preparedness. Farm dams play an important role in helping individual land-holders protect their own assets during fire breaks.

The following are recommendations that we make. Where necessary, public land managers seek to recommission previous water storages and establish new water storages on Crown land. Authorities responsible for controlling the storage of water must seek to always maintain a critical amount of water in certain storages for use in the event of fires. The Victorian government's policy of reimbursing land-holders for water used in firefighting efforts must be maintained into the future. Authorities responsible for regulating the establishment of private dams must take into consideration the need for water points in firefighting efforts.

Issue 4 is the management of buffer zones along public and private interface. Buffers along Crown land interface areas are essential in providing protection for private assets. A clear track inside public land adjoining private land from which back-burning can occur would provide better access and reduce the need to back-burn off farms, thereby minimising the risk of damage to fences and pasture. To protect both Crown land and private assets, the VFF believes that appropriate buffer zones along Crown land boundary fence lines must be provided. The fire protection zone must be appropriate to the prevailing land type and vegetation. For example, in forested areas in north-east Victoria the zone should extend a minimum of 30 metres — or the minimum accepted distance to meet occupational health and safety and WorkCover guidelines — from boundary fences.

This area should be kept largely free of vegetation to ensure the protection of the boundary fence and to provide an appropriate access track and firebreak. Buffers around private land boundaries will also improve access for weed management and control in the interface areas. The VFF seeks a commitment to the provision of appropriate buffers on Crown land boundary fence lines to help with the overall management of fire, weeds and pests and in the maintenance of fencing.

The Fences Act requires adjacent private land-holders to share the cost of construction and maintenance of fencing between properties. However, there is no onus on the government to contribute to the cost of boundary fencing between Crown and private land. Private land-holders are penalised in a number of ways in managing the risks associated with Crown land boundary fencing. Successive governments have refused to adopt an equitable arrangement in sharing the cost of shared fencing. Fencing constructed along the interface attracts high risk emanating from Crown land, with fences being damaged by fire, falling vegetation and animal incursions. Finally, the cost of insuring fencing to cope with the increased risks is increased by 82 per cent through government taxes and charges on fire insurance. The government must accept responsibility as a good neighbour and end the inequitable arrangements for Crown land boundary fencing.

Issue 5 is the current regulatory framework governing fire management on private land. As mentioned above, the VFF believes that, if appropriate buffers are not provided on Crown land interface areas, the current Fencing Act must be amended. Recent amendments to the Victorian planning provisions increase the amount of vegetation which can be removed around houses for fire prevention purposes. However, disappointingly these exemptions come with stringent conditions and unnecessary red tape. Under the new amendments, no trees within 30 metres of your house, other than those overhanging the house, can be removed. No more than 50 per cent of shrubs can be removed, and native grasses must be maintained at a height of 10 centimetres. Furthermore, the removal of native vegetation beyond 30 metres of your house is only permitted after a site assessment and a bush survival plan have been undertaken and submitted to the DSE. The VFF believes these regulations must be simplified to allow landowners to take the necessary steps to protect their homes.

Issue 6, the last issue, is the involvement of the local community in the management of fire. The involvement of local communities is vital to Victoria's fire response. However, this resource is often not fully utilised. The VFF believes there are considerable opportunities to utilise those engaged in traditional uses of Crown land to improve the standard of fire management. Groups engaged in traditional uses such as timber harvesting, grazing, four-wheel driving, hunting, mining and prospecting by definition all have a strong interest in preventing bushfires on Crown land and carry a significant amount of practical knowledge about fire management. It is disappointing and unfortunate that to varying degrees traditional users of Crown land have been removed from the fire management decision-making processes. Over time many of these groups have had their access to Crown land restricted by government authorities. As a result, these users have been disenfranchised.

The challenge for government will be to re-engage with traditional users of Crown land to improve fire management. Local resources and local knowledge have been lost as a result of the demise of public utilities. Of particular concern to the issue at hand is the loss of equipment and manpower available to fight future fire outbreaks.

Changes to the roles of forestry managers have also resulted in the loss of the intimate local knowledge of the terrain and vegetation within parks that is critical in fighting fires. The government's contribution to resources for fire prevention and fighting is not in proportion to the area of land that it is responsible for. Firefighting should ensure that the immense value of local knowledge in the suppression of fires and the experience of group and brigade officers is recognised as an integral part of the management structure and resource pool. The involvement of this expertise is essential for safe, practical and timely decisions at the fire front.

The VFF believes the integrated fire management plan initiative has the potential to facilitate the use of more local knowledge in fire planning. The VFF encourages firefighting and government agencies to continue to support the IFMP initiative and, when complete, to implement the required changes.

That is a very brief outline of some of our submission. We appreciate that it is a little more extensive than that, but we thank you very much for the opportunity of providing it to this hearing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mr Ramsay. If I could ask the first question. In your submission you highlight — and we have had a number of submissions that do the same — that there has been a change in public attitude to the view now that fuel reduction should be more frequent and more appropriate than it was maybe 10 years ago, when the community had different views about these things. You suggest having more community engagement around prescribed burning, involvement of communities and better education of communities and industry as well. I am just wondering what type of community education programs we should introduce and what particular industries we should be targeting from your point of view.

Mr RAMSAY — We made the point, I think, that the community is now more aware of the responsibilities involved with fuel reduction and fuel reduction burning to minimise risk. We believe that the community was initially concerned about the smoke that developed during fuel reduction burning. Community members did not understand the methodology of fuel reduction and what fuel loads do to increase the fire risk.

As far as education goes, we have in some part — and I believe the government has in some part — been making the community more aware of the obligations the state has to reduce fuel loads on Crown land in particular to reduce the risk to the community. I think that is evolving over time. People understand now what is happening when they see smoke, particularly during winter months when there is some cold burning done, and they understand the commitment the government has to meet fuel reduction targets in relation to the amount of area being targeted during the winter and spring months. There is a general acceptance by the community that this work has to be done to reduce the risk during the summer months. That is an education program that I believe both government and industry as a whole has a responsibility to continue.

Mr VINEY — Following on from the Chair's question, my question also relates to the issue of prescribed burning. We had a submission before yours from Dr Tolhurst that was essentially — I hope I am doing it justice — putting to the committee that there should be a change in the objectives that we are setting in terms of fuel reduction burning and that in fact there should be objectives not of fuel reduction burning but of proper land management, of which fire prevention is a critical part, and that the spin-off benefit of that changed approach or that changed fundamental would be significantly improved protection from wildfire. But I think Dr Tolhurst was suggesting that a prerequisite of that was to have significant community engagement. My question is: as a representative of farmers, do you think that farming communities would support a changed perception that said that the changes need to be about proper land management rather than about simply asset protection and fuel reduction?

Mr RAMSAY — Unfortunately I came in late and missed a little bit of that presentation by the doctor, but I think we would agree — in fact I think the previous submissions would indicate that we agree — and we would support a different type of land management on public land. It is not all about fuel reduction burning; it is about access, and it is about opportunities for grazing in certain areas. We have identified the pest and weed control areas, and again I do not have knowledge of what the discussion was previous to my submission, but we certainly believe there should be a common approach between managing land as such and reducing the risk, and I see that going

hand in hand. I am not sure if that has answered the question, but if I knew specifically what the doctor had mentioned I could probably say whether we support it or not.

Mr VINEY — I suppose I am not seeking your view as to whether the farming communities would support that particular policy. What I am trying to understand is where you see the farming community is at in terms of looking at it from a land-management point of view rather than from a fuel-reduction point of view? Representing country Victoria and having a bit of knowledge of Gippsland from most of my life there, it is understandable that farmers' principal objective in the summer — particularly when you are bordering on Crown land — is protecting their private asset. But the submission we had before was saying that the fundamental needs to be about the proper land management of that rather than putting in firebreaks because you want to protect the fences, or doing fuel-reduction burns because it is getting out of control. It should be about the proper process of managing that whole environment, which includes probably increased prescribed burning. I am just trying to understand how you see the farming communities in terms of their preparedness to look at it from that perspective rather than just protection of their assets.

Mr RAMSAY — I think the farming community would believe at this moment the philosophy tended to be, perhaps even more historically, that it was a lock-it-and-leave-it approach. The state government or the Crown believe that we need to preserve certain areas of the state. With the preservation, though, there did not come the responsibility. It is easy to lock up land for natural vista or for community vista, but there is a responsibility in managing land. We should know — we manage 66 per cent of the mass of Australia.

I think our view would be that the government has a commitment to provide parks for the enjoyment and for the long-term benefit of the habitat and whatever else, but when you are doing that it becomes your responsibility to manage that land. I think the point you are trying to make is: does the farming community support — or would it support — better land management rather than fuel reduction or risk mitigation, whatever you want to call it? I would say yes. We believe we have responsibilities as landowners privately, and the government has the same responsibility if it wants to manage and own and continually transfer land to Crown or to parks or anywhere else. It is and should be a responsibility of the government or the owners of that land to manage that land appropriately. We do not believe they have.

Ms LOBATO — Thanks, Simon, for presenting and for your submission. I am interested in a recommendation that you have that fire agencies investigate the possibility of providing improved legal protection for firefighters. I was wondering if you could provide any examples of firefighters having insufficient legal protection.

Mr RAMSAY — You could help me out. Could you point me to the item number in our submission from which you have drawn that so I can quickly refer to it?

Mr INGRAM — It is on page 6.

Mr RAMSAY — I am on page 6. Which item is it, 5 or 6?

Ms LOBATO — It is the recommendations of no. 5.

Mr RAMSAY — There were two issues — and this came out of the meetings we had at Bruthen and Heyfield. One was that there was not a lot of clarity about responsibilities, particularly those firefighters or volunteers who use private vehicles under a fire ground management and whose responsibility it is to protect those volunteers, given that we found private vehicles often — not so much in public land fires, but certainly in private–public they are first on scene — tend to be quick action and then withdraw to allow the public agencies to come on board. There has been some talk about, even on CFA tankers, the obligations, not under WorkCover, but in relation to the legalities of who is responsibility for whom on fighting fire ground. Those people who are working under the CFA are required presumably to come under the sanction of the CFA in relation to legalities for life and safety, but with those who are not, we wonder who they are responsible for and who is taking responsibility for them on the fire ground, so we need some clarity about that.

Ms LOBATO — Okay. So they are not necessarily CFA members — is that what you are saying?

Mr RAMSAY — They are volunteers fighting fire, but they might be sitting under the CFA — that is one aspect to it. Also there is the legality of the CFA itself. I guess after the Linton fires we found that there are

obligations now. As a CFA volunteer you are required to do certain management plans and certain upskilling in relation to meeting the minimum skills. But then again, with the obligations as a CFA volunteer or a non-CFA volunteer on the fire ground, there is some murkiness in relation to what protection they have and who is responsible for it.

Ms DUNCAN — Thanks, Simon. Thanks for the submission. We were talking before about buffer zones on Crown land. Could you guesstimate how many buffers there would be or how much land management or land clearance is going on on private land as buffers against Crown land? If it is not possible to put the buffer on Crown land, for example, are you aware of how much private land with a Crown land interface would have fire buffers on the private land?

Mr RAMSAY — Not in area, I am sorry. We have seen the experience up in the north where farmers are proactive in providing a buffer on their own land. They do that at a cost, of course, because once you take that ground out of production — whether it is vegetation, grasses or whatever — there is a cost on the producers themselves, but as for actual area, no.

We are always of a view that we would not ask anything of ourselves that we are not asking of anyone else. We have to reduce risk ourselves on our own private land, and we do that obligingly and willingly, yet our neighbours — basically our Crown land neighbours — do not take on that responsibility. To me, I find it unacceptable that you have shared fencing and shared land, yet one owner takes some risk mitigation and one does not. Then a fire starts, say, from the side of the person who does not, yet they take no legal responsibility for the damage. I find that unacceptable, and we do as an organisation. We believe that if you own land or you are managing land, you have a responsibility to reduce risk both to yourselves and to your neighbour. The reason we identify buffer zones as being a strategic part of that is that risk mitigation between both neighbours, both public and private.

Ms DUNCAN — With the 30-metre clearance of the native bed, do you think that in some circumstances 30 metres is not enough? I suppose I have two questions: what do you think is enough; and secondly, would the VFF support more stringent conditions on building homes in areas that are clearly high fire-prone areas?

Mr RAMSAY — The first part of the question — in 2002–03 we had commissioner Bruce Esplin in the areas in the north-east, and we looked at a lot of the interface areas. We spelt out quite clearly that we believe buffer zones should be anywhere between 14 and 30. I believe it is horses for courses — different areas will require different buffers — but it was clear to us that we need, both for the safety of fire vehicles to get in and out and be able to turn around and come back, that their vegetation should be cleared to a point where whatever meterage the trees are, if they fall they do not actually impact damage on either the neighbour's fence or the volunteers or emergency vehicles providing some support in those areas.

Again, I do not want to put a figure on it. We felt that 30 metres provides a reasonably adequate buffer zone in most areas, but, once again, different geographical and topographical areas will require different buffers to meet the risk mitigation. To us, 30 metres seems to be a good start to provide that safety.

Ms DUNCAN — Do you think there is ever a point where planning provisions should state that it is unsafe to build houses in this area with a 30-metre buffer? Do you think it is legitimate for councils to impose planning provisions that would prevent homes being built in these areas where they are going to have to clear the 30 metres? There will still always be a risk in getting in there to fire fight. What sort of restrictions should we put on managing land in that way?

Mr RAMSAY — Perhaps you are inviting me to get into some planning issues which — —

Ms DUNCAN — I am.

Mr RAMSAY — Again, I think responsibility has to be taken by local government and homeowners themselves that once again if they are building in a high-density fire-prone area they have to take certain precautions in relation to cleared areas around their home. I do not think I want to get into local government planning issues at this moment, because again it is horses for courses. If you suggest a specific planning directive, I guess, in relation to fire mitigation for one council, there might be different needs for a different one.

The buffers we are principally talking about are the interface between private land and Crown land. As for houses, again we have identified that there are requirements under certain acts where there is a need to remove vegetation, and we saw that at Mount Buller where that was acted upon and it provided significant safety for the residents of Mount Buller. I suppose that is a firsthand example of the use of the removal of vegetation, and we see that being applied in other areas. I suppose you have to provide some flexibility in some of the planning issues in relation to fire mitigation and common sense.

Mr INGRAM — Thank you very much, Simon. We very much acknowledge the work that went in when you visited Gippsland to get some of that information. You mentioned the 2002–03 fires before. In a submission it is very hard to get some of the angst or, if you like, frustration that community members and your members feel about the public land management on their boundaries. Would you like to explain some of the frustration that your members feel with that lack of prescribed burning or like protection on their boundaries, particularly looking at things like their requirements under native vegetation retention and their management on their boundaries, and yet not being able to have adequate protection on their boundary fences, which you mentioned before, and just the impact on their businesses through both 2002 and 2003 and the last fires?

Mr RAMSAY — You almost led me into the answer, Craig. What you say is right. As a result of the 2002–03 fires there were the Esplin recommendations, and again we are disappointed to see, as I understand it, that only 36 of the 39 — I could stand corrected but there are still half a dozen or eight or nine recommendations still outstanding and not fulfilled. But the major fires came out of Crown lands for a range of reasons. Lightning was certainly instrumental in the most recent fires, but due to the lack of action by the land carers at the time, which is the Crown, the fires out of those Crown lands provided a significant risk to those private land-holders. And yes, we have felt somewhat nobbled by the commonwealth's Native Vegetation Act which does not allow us to remove native vegetation, particularly from areas of risk.

We have been concerned that there is a lack of responsibility by the Crown land managers and owners in relation to reducing fire risk. It is the farmers who are invariably called upon to provide a volunteer base and to protect their lands when there is a fire on Crown land. In 2002–03 — perhaps unfairly to some degree — the DSE bore the brunt of a lot of criticism in relation to the way those fires were managed, and unfairly again, particularly for the on-ground workforce, I believe is some of the state government's philosophy on how it has managed that land and provided that risk mitigation.

We would have hoped that lessons would have been learnt from 2002–03. We are pleased to see that the government has now committed to some fuel reduction targets, which we strongly support. We are pleased also to see that there was significant funding in budgets just gone by in relation to fire access tracks and water storages. I think the message is slowly getting through that some of those areas that we have been identifying for the last few years are now bearing some fruit in relation to some action, but again there has been this mistrust between the farming community and government about how this is still to be managed in the future. We are hopeful that out of this inquiry there will be some very strong recommendations to continue, I guess, the work that has been done in relation to reducing risk, particularly in the interface areas between public and private.

Mrs FYFFE — Thanks, Simon. Your submission talks about apiarists and the declining number of sites for hives in various areas. We are hearing that overseas countries are concerned because their bee populations for various reasons seem to be declining. How many sites have we lost and what impact do you think it is going to have on the produce that is grown — the apple orchards et cetera?

Mr RAMSAY — We are talking about the bee industry particularly?

Mrs FYFFE — The apiarists need the sites to collect the honey, but we also need bee colonies too.

Mr RAMSAY — Yes. Again I do not have the information on the statistics. I am not sure where or how much damage was done to that industry and also, I guess, the on damage for the bee industry. In the Grampians we know there was significant damage up there. Again I do not have the numbers or stats.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay. In your submission you talk about the Otways sites now being closed to all bees. Do you know how many sites that means we have lost?

Mr RAMSAY — No, I do not.

Mrs FYFFE — Could you provide that information to us?

Mr RAMSAY — We can try. We actually encourage our bee industry people to be members of the VFF, then we probably have it on hand, but unfortunately they are recalcitrant at the moment.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you, Simon, for your submission. It is very important to hear the views of the Victorian Farmers Federation. Can you explain the cost and consequence for farmers and infrastructure as a result of dislocation of topsoil and burnt timbers caused through fire erosion which was washed down, blocking bridges and roadways during the recent floods in Gippsland?

Mr RAMSAY — Probably a pretty hard question to ask at the moment given the floods are still flowing. We have not had a full assessment yet. There is no doubt that the bushfires contributed to a large part of the damage done due to the East Gippsland floods. I tried to hitch a ride with the Treasurer and the Premier on the helicopter to get to Licola where most of that damage started — as you will appreciate, up in that area they have had drought, bushfires, mudslide and now flood — and where a large part of that vegetation came from. I was not able to get access there, so I do not know how much damage has been done up there.

What I can tell you is that there is no doubt that the bushfires contributed to a large part of the significant damage to fencing and silting of pastures and, as you said, the bridges that are now in disrepair. Without putting numbers on it, and I believe the damage is still piling up — we have got fencers, as you know, out in the field at the moment, we have got people working for fodder drives, we have got insurance agents assessing damage to houses, there has been local government assessing damage to bridges. I do not believe anyone yet has the sort of information you are seeking. What I can say to you is that there is no doubt that the bushfires in that region contributed to a large part of the damage in the East Gippsland fires.

Mr WALSH — Thanks, Simon, for your submission. Can we touch on something that is probably not in your submission — that is, have you got a view on the pressure that is being placed on CFA volunteers in having to fight fires on public land, particularly with these large fires where they are doing routine tours of duty in fighting those fires and given the fact that the CFA is funded by insurance levies and manned by volunteers principally to fight fires on private land rather than public land?

Mr RAMSAY — Thanks, Peter. We do have a view, because we have, as you know, been spending a considerable amount of time and resource not only in the fires in the Gippsland and northern areas but also in the south-west — the Grampians fire, as we call it, and the Willaura fires — a huge amount of manpower resource, volunteers. Principally they are farmer volunteers. They have put their time aside to man the CFA trucks. We are hearing, disappointingly I guess, that there has been a lack of support, not so much a lack of support, the lack of will and also the lack of opportunity now for people to be able to man many of these CFA units across the regional areas and rural areas.

In Birregurra, my own little town, we cannot actually man the truck now because we do not have enough people in the township. That is the reality; unless the farmers are prepared to drive in 10 or 15 kilometres, a lot of these trucks do not even get out of the shed. I think the government needs to have a quick, hard look at that. Apart from, as you say, providing a significant cost burden of funding the CFA through fire insurance levies and the stamp duties and the costs associated with the premiums themselves, they are also giving up their time.

It is getting to the point now of asking: is it fair to ask employers to give up their employees' time? Anyone who has fought fires knows that a lot of the time you sit on a staging ground for hours or days, not actually getting near the fire if you are there as the strike team. That employer is willing to give up those people's time maybe two, three or four days a week. Somewhere along the line I think we have to acknowledge that that cannot continue. There has to be some acknowledgement of those employers giving up employees' time to man CFA vehicles to fight fires.

There is no such recompense for farmers. They give up their time willingly, as they do their farm workers, in relation to manning volunteer CFA trucks. They do it willingly. Again it has to come to a point in time where there has to be some acknowledgement in a government system whereby they are recompensed in some order. I do not think you can continually ask the farming community to subsidise the CFA and its operations through the fire service levy and continually ask them to give up their time and their businesses to man trucks and to give up their employees' time to man trucks. We are not talking 2 hours; these people travel, as we did in Birregurra in the south-west to Bairnsdale, for two weeks out of their lives to provide support. We do that willingly, as I say, but we

cannot do it forever and a day at a cost to ourselves. At some time someone has to bite the bullet. I am not sure that that answers your question, Peter, but I think there has to be some recognition of that time value at some point.

Mr WALSH — Has the federation got any views on how that might be done?

Mr RAMSAY — We certainly believe there are opportunities by the government to recompense employers in some form. Without being specific, we have identified a few areas to the Treasurer. As far as farmers go, as you know, we do not believe the fire service levy is an equitable way to fund the CFA. We have continually asked the government to re-look at funding that service. It was all right in the old days when the CFA purely fought fires, but many times now they are actually attending road accidents. There are whole lot of social services — filling extinguishers for schools et cetera. This is a community service now, of which we believe the community are beneficiaries, and the community should share the cost.

One way would actually be to get rid of the fire service levy. That has not met with much excitement by this government at the moment or the Treasurer himself. We certainly want to persevere, on an equity basis more than anything else, with the view that the fire service levy is an unfair cost burden, particularly to the farming community that has large parcels of land to insure and where the cost is greater.

Other methods of helping employers: we could look at the reduction of payroll tax, WorkCover premiums — there are a whole range of things that we believe government could do to at least acknowledge the contribution that that community is making.

Mr WALSH — In writing the recommendations, if we were to recommend the abolition of the fire service levy on insurance, how would the federation recommend that that money be raised?

Mr RAMSAY — There are plenty of other services that the community benefits from and the government pays for through consolidated revenue. We do not see this as specific to the insurance agency. We see this as a community service, as we do the police, the ambulance and other emergency services. Once again we believe there needs to be equity in the system, and there are opportunities for government to provide for that cost burden across all communities who benefit.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Ramsay, and in particular for the number of meetings you have held around the state to assist you in your submission to us. You will be receiving a transcript of the hearing in the next couple of weeks with instructions on what to do about them, but we thank you very much for your presentation and your submission.

Committee adjourned.