

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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Ms H. McIntyre, communications officer, Victoria Valley Rural Fire Brigade.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome Heather McIntyre from the Victoria Valley Rural Fire Brigade. Heather, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and, further, subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. I invite you to make a submission to us, but I am under threat of death if I let it go too long, so if you can, try to keep it to 5 minutes. I know that is a very short period of time when you start speaking, but we would like to have maybe 5 minutes of questions. Is that okay? We are going to have few friends at the end of this process.

Mr WALSH — We have other commitments that we have to get to, that is all.

Ms McINTYRE — That is okay.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, Heather.

Ms McINTYRE — First of all, thank you very much for the opportunity. I did not put in a written submission. I do apologise to the gallery as well for keeping them here. I am the communications officer for the Victoria Valley fire brigade. You will excuse me if I am jumping around a bit, because I just made some notes and may not follow the proper procedure. Victoria Valley fire brigade is a member of GAP. We have been in attendance at that particular organisation and endorse its submission here today.

I would just like to make a few comments on things that particularly pertain to our brigade, which came up in conversation recently with the captain and which I would like to present to you. First of all is communications. We live in one of the black holes of the state where mobile phones are fairly fragile — the best word for it — because sometimes they get thrown.

Because they just will not work. In the case of the Mount Lubra fire, the Grampians fire, I know at one stage — and perhaps I will speak too for Mirranatwa — a lot of the people were there without phones and without any communications. Mobile phones are pretty useless up there as well. That is a very important aspect, and I think that, for fire prevention, communications need to be improved right throughout the state.

Secondly, I will just mention zoning. We are concerned about the areas that are farming land that embrace also the national park. Some of those areas are zoned not to be burnt for 15 to 20-odd years. We would certainly like to see that altered so they are more frequently burnt.

Fire tracks — please do not rejuvenate them. We are pleading, because the next time there is a fire there they will have to bring the bulldozers in so that they can open them up again for the fire trucks. We have a four-wheel-drive fire truck. It is a fairly big, cumbersome thing to get around. No way can you turn those things in a very small area, so it becomes a safety factor, and I know that has been mentioned today. If we had permanent, well-defined fire track areas that the locals know, there would also be a safety factor there; they would know where they are going. Sometimes you go into these places at night-time. If you go into an area at night and you do not know the track, and it is fairly overgrown and is fairly rough, you have a safety factor with your crews.

Buffer zones between private and national parks I think are a big issue. We would certainly like to see a reasonably cleared area — not denuded by any means, but cleared of undergrowth. These things can be done, whether it be slashed, et cetera, so you do not have the shrubs and small things growing and creating that real hot fire area. By all means we want the big trees left, but we had that cleared undergrowth for something in the vicinity of 300 to 500 metres from private land. Firstly, it protects the private land, but secondly, it also protects the national park. So I think there is a win-win situation there.

Water has been mentioned. We would like to see more roadside dams. The shire gentlemen have left, unfortunately. The only two dams we had in our brigade area were dry or nearly dry. We have a wonderful huge lake, which they call the freshwater lake, in our brigade area, and that has been dry for about three or four years. We have, through various letters to the DSE, asked that it be cleaned out and deepened so it would be a wonderful area for a water point. It is very accessible to helicopters; it is accessible to trucks, but we just cannot seem to get anywhere with it. On that point of water, I would have liked to have had a go at the mayor, Mick Leeming. Having one big dam on a farm property is completely impractical. We have property at about five different areas. With one big dam we would have to have about 40 kilometres of piping, and I think that is ridiculous — plus there is the

matter of who is going to pay for these big dams. There is a limit. Why should we be providing water for huge fires?

I think the shires through the DSE should be putting in more water points. Some of our country is sandy country, and a dam is absolutely useless because it will not hold water. Bore water is available, and if there were pumps there so that the bore water could be pumped into the trucks, that would be a very good idea. Mirranatwa has one that was very much utilised there during the Mount Lubra fires until someone broke the hose, I believe. But it was a good water point. Bryan Swamp was mentioned. That is in our brigade area. Someone mentioned the fire that went through and the trees that were burnt.

I was a strike team member of our brigade trying to put out those trees. It is not always easy and we used a lot of water, and water was fairly scarce at the time. So those things have got to be looked at on a practical level. Of course we love to leave as many trees as we can, but that can be a problem.

Bryan Swamp itself is of concern to our brigade. The amount of fuel on that swamp this last couple of years has been frightening, even though we mentioned that in our submission to the fire operations plan put to the DSE. We asked that something be done about it but nothing was done. If the fire earlier on this year had really got going in that particular swamp, it would have gone right through and actually our own property would have been one that could have gone.

There is a lot of cumbungi grass and all sorts, you name it, of grass in there, and it is higher than I am. It would have been an absolute inferno. It is the local people who know what the problems are, not somebody sitting in an office in Horsham, but they will not seem to listen to us, and I think that is our worry. We are south of there, and as has been brought up, weather conditions are often different.

I have only got two or three more points. We appreciate the fact of the cool burns that have been done this year. The brigade has really tried for those, and we are very happy with that. I would just like to make a comment about the ABC. During the Grampians fire I listened to it probably most of the time until I got absolutely sick and tired of the chatter, interviewing this one and that one about absolutely — excuse the expression — piffle.

The ACTING CHAIR — That's okay.

Ms McINTYRE — Sorry, I did not come prepared for this. We want information on a regular basis. We do not want a continuing magazine program, and that is what it became, because you turned off afterwards. If there was half-hourly correct information, it would have been of far more interest to a lot of people. So please put that one to the ABC.

I would just like to mention the public meetings that the CFA put on. There was one in Victoria Valley on the Wednesday night before Australia Day and that was excellent. Many community people were able to get information, but also it was a psychological support for them. They knew that everyone in the community was going through the same thing.

I have just two more points: financial support for private units — somebody mentioned ex-CFA trucks that come up. I think members of the CFA should get first priority on those at reasonable rates because it is usually landowners and the local people who are often first to a fire, and if they can have affordable resources and equipment, that is going to make the whole job a lot easier. Years ago there was a subsidy for pumps and water tanks, and an awful lot of people in our area got them.

I would just like to make one final point, perhaps as a woman giving this particular presentation. I am very thankful for the gradual recognition of women in the CFA. I have only been in it for a number of years but now we are respected by the CFA as operational firemen — firepersons, firefighters, I do not mind that at all. I have been on several strike forces. I have had three trips to Gippsland this year. The facilities offered to us are commendable.

I would like to say two things. The fire trucks are inaccessible when you are trying to climb in, and let's face it, if the CFA wants women but also older men to stay on as volunteers, it has got to look at those situations. I believe some of the new trucks are even bigger and harder to get into. It is also a safety factor. I actually fell out of a truck down there in Gippsland, because it had to pull up on the side of the road and I had to go and see to a hose, and once I stepped out — I am knee-high to a grasshopper, sort of thing — there was no road. I fell because it is so high

up, and you have got these little, weenie steps to get out on. So I think there are safety things that also need to be looked at not just for women but for older people. Perhaps I will leave it at that.

Ms LOBATO — I appreciate your participation as a female firefighter, and I could not agree more, that more are needed. It is great that the CFA is so appreciative or welcoming of women participating. Thank you for your presentation.

Mrs FYFFE — Thank you for your presentation. If I could ask you about the communications, you say that the mobile phones do not work in certain areas, and you said phones did not work. I presume you meant landline, too?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, because a grader went through it.

Mrs FYFFE — Okay. A previous submitter talked about the CFA radios not working because of the smoke?

Ms McINTYRE — In smoke, yes.

Mrs FYFFE — Is the CFA doing something about those radios; have you heard anything about that?

Ms McINTYRE — I am not certain. I believe there is supposed to be a new one coming out with some different frequency or some different mechanics, but that is not my field at all, naturally enough.

Mrs FYFFE — Does the community have access to purchase CFA radios so they can listen in?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, you have what they call a listening set, and we do encourage those within the brigade, because it does give the opportunity for people who are at home — particularly a lot of times women and families are at home — to hear what is happening with the fire, because then they can have some foreknowledge of that. But they do have a limited range, as you can understand.

Mrs FYFFE — It just seems appalling in this day and age, doesn't it, that you have not got a phone that actually works?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, that is right.

Mrs FYFFE — I know graders can go through and that is an accident that happens anywhere.

Ms McINTYRE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — You talked about wanting to burn, was it, Bryan Swamp?

Ms McINTYRE — Bryan Swamp, yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — And you made a submission to the FOPs process?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — You wrote a letter and formal — —

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, the Victorian Valley brigade.

The ACTING CHAIR — On behalf of the brigade?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — Was that acknowledged? Did they give a reason? Did you just feel that was a waste of time or they had more strategic areas? Was there some reason they gave or did you feel there was a reason?

Ms McINTYRE — No, we did not get any feedback on it, but sometimes you have to work on these things for some time before you really get any action, and we will certainly continue with that.

The ACTING CHAIR — I have no doubt about that, Heather.

Ms McINTYRE — Do not give up. One of the problems is that the swamps in our area have peat in them.

Mrs FYFFE — So they burn forever?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, that is right. Somebody mentioned earlier on the Victoria Range, about no fires ever coming out of there onto farmland. Well, that is a furphy — excuse the expression — because back in the early 1960s there was a fire that came from the Victoria Range right through to what we call Bundol Road, and it got into Mahoney's Swamp and burnt for about three years. There was a big trench put around it, and one man actually patrolled that, and we had to wait for a very wet winter. Only four years ago there was a fire started in that area, and that particular Mahoneys Swamp burnt for several months underneath, so that is why we have to be careful. This is where local knowledge comes into it. But the fire that was there earlier on caused a lot of concern for many people.

The ACTING CHAIR — Heather, thank you for all your work, for your submission today but also for going out there and fighting fires and falling out of trucks. Just on the issue of the trucks, how would you work that, because you could not have something that was hanging down there all the time? Could you just have a little drop-down ladder or something? How would you get out of the truck?

Ms McINTYRE — Yes, some of them, even from the back, have a drop-down step. But there is some structural change that could be made. Then they say, 'Well, you have got to have clearance', but it is behind the tyres at the front. Anything that that tyre goes over is going to protect the step there anyway. It is a little step like this, and I have seen men with great big boots jump out because they cannot get their foot in it. It is an OHS situation as well.

Mrs FYFFE — I am surprised the men have not done some innovative handiwork in the CFA sheds!

The CHAIR — Thank you again, Heather.

Committee adjourned.