

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 3 July 2007

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Witnesses

Mr C. Andrews, acting captain, Halls Gap Rural Fire Brigade, and
Mr K. Erwin, representative, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Duncan) — I welcome Mr Colin Andrews, acting captain, Halls Gap Rural Fire Brigade, and Mr Kevin Erwin, representative, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria. 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 transcripts in the next couple of weeks. Mr Andrews or Mr Erwin — would you care to make a presentation to the committee? We will start with Mr Andrews. If you are happy to share that time, that will give you about 10 minutes and gives us about 5 or 10 minutes for questions. Does that suit?

Mr ANDREWS — That is fine. I should take only about 6 minutes anyway. Acting Chair, I would like to thank you for allowing the Halls Gap CFA to contribute to this inquiry. Even though I have limited experience in a leadership role I am currently acting captain of the Halls Gap brigade as our captain is on leave for three months. However, from my experience as a firefighter and recently in a lieutenant role, I would like to put forward some observations pertaining to this inquiry.

The extent, timing, resources and prescribed burns, both of Crown land and freehold land — the past 12 months has been difficult for everyone involved in fire management and prevention. As a result there appears to be a heightened awareness of the importance of controlled burns. Due to the nature of controlled burns, the weather, fuel loads, moisture and a host of other criteria constraints, only a small window of opportunity each year is available to conduct effective burns. The difficulty for CFA volunteers in combining with DSE and Parks on these events is that they are often scheduled on weekdays. Therefore volunteers' work and family commitments impede the availability to attend. Adding to the difficulty in attendance is the dilemma of sufficient funds to cover the costs of the CFA and the welfare of personnel attending.

In regard to fuel reduction there are many varied views in the community. From the CFA viewpoint fuel reduction burns involve burn plans, training, the consideration of various viewpoints of the community and, most importantly, the time spent by volunteers. Halls Gap is in the unique situation of being located in a national park.

A considerable amount of the population is tourism-based — for example, accommodation, food and tour operations. This, in turn, leaves Halls Gap struggling to achieve sufficient levels of volunteer membership. With further development planned, the risk of structure fire is ever increasing. This also places extra pressure on volunteers' time in regard to specialised training over and above wildfire training. Therefore, reporting processes applicable to wildfire and prescribed burns need to be quick and efficient so that the people fighting or partaking in these events can effectively and efficiently complete their duties.

The effectiveness in maintaining permanent firebreaks and containment lines, in conjunction with serviceable tracks and signage, has considerable importance in both wildfire and controlled burns. Sites such as helicopter pads, water points, tracks and signage, to name a few, are imperative for the effective running of such events.

The tracks and firebreaks need to take into consideration the clearance factors for CFA vehicles, as previously done by forestry industries — for example, a Halls Gap tanker, a typical appliance for the CFA, holds 3000 litres of water, is a four-wheel drive, and needs a clearance height of at least 2.8 metres and a clearance width of 3 metres. A further safety requirement is the turning access for vehicles of this size. This applies not only to tracks and firebreaks; it also needs to be noted that access within the township needs to meet the same risk assessment criteria as out on the tracks.

Signage for tracks, water points and helicopter pads needs to be more fireproof, as made evident in the Mount Lubra fires. There was a loss of a lot of signs, nothing sort of stood up.

In summary, the reduction and sometimes exclusion of forest industries, with their bushcrafts, and laying and maintenance of tracks, has led to an increase of fire hazards. It is therefore imperative that on all levels of consultation a fire plan be developed that will improve the effectiveness and handling of prescribing burns and wildfires. Just as a passing gesture, it may be our choice to live in the bush, but it is everyone's responsibility to take care of it. Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you for that.

Mr ERWIN — Just a bit of background on me: I am the Stawell fire brigades group officer, I have been since 1999, and Halls Gap is a brigade in that group area. I am also a councillor with the Northern Grampians

Shire. I will be using the submission made by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria as the basis of my submission today. We all recognise that the Grampians is a tourist icon, and it is also a heritage-listed national park. On that basis I make these comments on behalf of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria contends that prescribed burning, where it has been successfully implemented, has been effective in reducing the impact of wildfires across the broader landscape and in reducing the threat to private and public infrastructure in built areas that are largely protected by CFA volunteer fire fighters. In this context Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria supports the continuation of prescribed burning as a strategy to reduce the impact of wildfire on the environment; reduce the likelihood of large fire development; provide areas of reduced fuel that form buffer zones from which to initiate more aggressive attack containment strategies and provide enhanced protection adjacent to communities and public assets.

In particular, the VFBV emphasises that, in the absence of effective broadacre landscape fuel reduction, the likelihood of more intense and longer duration, unplanned wildfires is inevitable. This not only has a devastating impact on the environment and threatened communities but also requires a more extensive commitment from volunteers to engage in the protection of those communities.

Prescribed burning should be planned on a 10-year in-principle horizon and implemented on a five-year rolling program with appropriate budget flexibility to achieve required outcomes in the event of the program's failure to achieve objectives in any particular year. Prescribed burns should be implemented — it says here 'in Victoria', but in the Grampians it is no different — based on site and species-specific prescriptions that recognise the key factors affecting fire behaviour; priority fuel management zones; affording priority to community and firefighter safety; reduction in the frequency and extent of wildfires; minimisation of the impact of wildfire on public infrastructure and private assets; and a safer working environment for firefighters.

The government must ensure that the Department of Sustainability and Environment is provided with sufficient resources to achieve its fire protection and mitigation programs, including prescribed burning, on an annual basis where weather and fuel conditions permit. For example, if conditions are suitable to continue the prescribed burning program beyond a particular annual target, there should be sufficient budget flexibility to allow for project firefighters to be engaged prior to the normal summer season and retained beyond an arbitrary cut-off date established at the commencement of the fire season. This would then provide a benefit in subsequent years if the windows of opportunity is compressed due to adverse seasonal conditions.

CFA volunteers should be provided with opportunities to participate in prescribed burning programs, particularly where there are immediate benefits to the communities they protect. Colin has mentioned the point about the availability of volunteers during weekdays; most of them have jobs, so it is a well-made point. Prescribed burning in collaboration with volunteers will need to be planned and executed around the availability of volunteers.

Point 2 refers to the manner in which prescribed burning is conducted, including how applicable codes of practice are employed. Prescribed burning should be based on reducing the hazard associated with the excessive accumulation of wildfire fuels on the landscape — i.e., across both public and private land. Planning for prescribed burns should be risk-based and treated holistically regardless of land tenure. That is a problem around Halls Gap, because of the interface. It should be treated as one, rather than be separate. Prescribed burns should complement DSE priorities, including the commitment to an aggressive first attack on any new wildfires, by taking into account site and species-specific fuel characteristics that may have, if allowed to accumulate, compromise the ability to initiate a first attack successfully. Prescriptions for prescribed burning should be reviewed to increase the flexibility to achieve the required outcomes under a variety of suitable weather and environmental conditions. DSE's internal policy should be designed to provide maximum support to staff charged with the responsibility to conduct prescribed burns. This approach must recognise the inherent difficulties associated with conducting prescribed burns and that, in some instances, the execution of the burn may not always go according to plan. We have all seen those.

In principle, asset damage as a result of a drift outside the prescription should be eliminated by the implementation of a holistic risk-based approach to asset protection in the first instance — that is, if the asset could be a risk from a wayward prescribed burn, then it would surely be at risk from a wildfire. The department, in conjunction with CFA community educators, must strengthen comprehensive community education and engagement programs that emphasise the overall benefits of the department's fire management programs and minimise adverse community reaction to the activities, including prescribed burns.

Point 3 on the agenda refers to the impact of prescribed burning and recent wildfires on Victoria's biodiversity, wildlife and natural assets including water and quality. The key issue arising from the recognition of the destructive impact of high-intensity wildfire is the need to establish a fire regime that seeks to replicate the environment that existed historically through regular ignitions either by indigenous populations, by settlers and squatters following colonisation, or through natural events. These regular ignitions resulted in an extensive mosaic of burnt and unburnt country. In this context the continued use of prescribed fire on the planned broad acre basis is to be encouraged. The reporting and process — people want to prescribe burning programs, the VFBV (Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria) considers that reporting process of a prescribed burning should be comprised of a performance-based indicator directly linked to planned objectives. This is particularly important for measuring the effectiveness of prescribed burning is. In this respect post-burn reports should focus on the achievement of the extent of the fuel reduction burn obtained. VFBV had no comments on the legislative requirements of prescribed brands and which grow management.

Mr WALSH — Kevin, we have got the submission. So, Acting Chair, we might be better asking questions for discussion?

The ACTING CHAIR — We have about 8 or 10 minutes left.

Mr ERWIN — That is fine.

Mr WALSH — There is interesting stuff in here we would like to explore further.

Mr ERWIN — I think there is just a point about water points, properly maintaining them. One point I would make in here too is there is enormous pressure to do burning off. I think the way that the DSE conducts those burns is the guy with the match has to wait for the nod from well up the chain to actually do the burn. Sometimes that window of opportunity is lost when the conditions are right to do those burns. So perhaps in the way of the reporting, a little more faith in the guys on the ground might be something that they could look at.

The ACTING CHAIR — Good.

Mr ERWIN — But you do have the submission, so that is what I have based— —

The ACTING CHAIR — Are you happy to stop there?

Mr ERWIN — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — We might start with Peter. Are you happy if we direct our questions to either one of you?

Mr ERWIN — Yes.

Mr WALSH — I suppose the first one would be that the issue was raised in one of the other submissions about camp fires. I know it is only the minority that ever do anything wrong but should we actually change the regime for people being allowed to have camp fires during the summer period rather than just being stopped when there is a high fire danger?

Mr ERWIN — I think that is the way in national parks, isn't it?

Mr WALSH — I am not just talking about national parks because fires can go from private land to national parks as we well know, and vice versa as we have seen.

Mr ERWIN — So you are talking about specifically camp fires?

Ms LOBATO — Or state parks?

Mr WALSH — Or state parks, yes. I do not think you were here when we started but we need to get people's feelings on the record so when we go to actually write a report if there are recommendations that we want to make, it has actually come from — — .

Mr ERWIN — Yes, a number of volunteers have expressed that they would like to see that they were not allowed through the fire summer danger period.

Mr ANDREWS — I agree with that.

Mr ERWIN — It is certainly a problem close by the park on the private lands.

Ms LOBATO — Thank you very much for being here and presenting. We hear time and time again about the issue associated with the level of volunteerism, how difficult it is particularly when you have got people who work outside the area, and in these type of communities many people do. So I am wanting to know from either or both of you — either a personal response or from the association or your brigade — what would increase the level of participation for volunteer firefighters?

Mr ERWIN — Halls Gap is probably a bit unique in that it is a tourism icon post, and you get a high turnover of people who own the holiday establishments. So it is a very difficult brigade to manage as personnel go. There are only 200 or 300 permanent residents in Halls Gap, and some of them are getting into those senior years, as I will put it. Perhaps the government should look at having a core group, a type of reserve of trained firefighters to manage some of these bigger wildfires. I do not know how you would do that. That is for wiser people than myself to do, but perhaps a core group of trained firefighters that can be located where the need is.

Mr ANDREWS — There are always ways of trying to work out how to attract people to the CFA. A lot of people just look at it and say, 'I ain't going anywhere near a fire', especially after they have seen what just went through. Yes, we have had a few people step up and say, 'Yes, okay, I have seen what happened and want to be part of this protective system', but as Kevin said, a lot of people are transient population. They come in, they make their money and they go. We spend all this time and effort on training them up and they are gone. They might move to another area and can be used there but they do not see it that way. They say, 'We are only here to make money and we are on our way'. So it makes it hard for recruiting. We are always looking at new ways of trying to get new people in. And the young ones — all country towns have that problem. You train them up as juniors and — bang! The city takes them.

Mr ERWIN — You have got all the good firemen.

Mr ANDREWS — So we all know what that is like. Some stay, but they are too busy having fun and having parties, so we have to look at a social aspect with the CFA as well — trying to get something social as well. That is what we are trying to approach now.

Mr ERWIN — There are nine brigades in the group, and they extend through a little place called Marnoo through to Stawell, and generally their numbers are not too bad, but you do have limited equipment on the side of the state — that is reality. And it takes time to get other equipment over to this side to fight such a thing as we had at Mt Lubra and the new year's eve Deep Lead fire, too.

Mr ANDREWS — Another aspect is Pomonal which is 12 kilometres down the road and has no problem. It is all community-based farms and stuff, where 12½ kilometres down the road, because we are in the tourism industry, our population changes and their population is stable. They have 80, isn't it, up in Pomonal, on their books?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes. We have got 36 I think and out of that, only 18 are active.

Mr ERWIN — So it is a little bit of where you are, too.

Mr ANDREWS — Our crew volunteered for the north-east fires, and I know a bunch of us volunteered for the floods, so the ones that are in it are keen and do the best that they can because there are very community-oriented.

Ms LOBATO — Thank you very much for your presentation. I think it is great to hear from people who were actually on the ground fighting fires. It is very important to the process we are going through at the moment. One of the things raised I think by Colin was the localised aspect of firefighting and training. How are additional firefighters and response strike teams being trained in specialist localised skills over a diversity of terrains?

Mr ANDREWS — We basically have minimum skills, which is a Victorian-wide training for a wildfire situation. Where we have a unique problem is where we have to do structure as well, which is a completely different form of firefighting. It is breathing apparatus, how to go into a building, how to contain a fire to a particular building, which is an added training that we have to do. We do both roles. Stawell, for example, has a

rural and an urban — they split it up. We are rural and urban here in Halls Gap. We have a lot of pressure on us to keep our skills up, so for diversity we need more members we can split; people who do not want to go to wildfires are happy to fight a house fire. We are looking at ways of getting those people interested now, but it is becoming more and more prevalent as Halls Gap gets bigger.

Mr ERWIN — Just to add to that, wildfire minimum skills does cover between grass fire and forest fire. I guess the point to make is that not a lot of people who fight grass fires get the opportunity to go and fight bushfires. They are two totally different types of fires.

Mrs PETROVICH — This is an aspect that interests me, because I think we need to look at the best way of utilising that local and historical knowledge. From your point of view, as the people on the ground, how can we best achieve that?

Mr ERWIN — I think the training is reasonably satisfactory. I guess the only way to learn is the hard way in some cases. Probably this group is fortunate in that we have that interface between both, and so the skill level is probably quite high compared to some other brigades throughout Victoria.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you.

Mrs FYFFE — I have a question for both of you and they are different. First, thank you for making the presentation. I appreciate it, and I appreciate the work you do. Coming from a fire-prone area, I am very much aware of the dedication you have. We have heard today concerns about the decreasing availability of volunteers and also the ageing of the CFA volunteers and the fact you have got tourism businesses here which reduces the number of people who would be available for call-out whenever it is needed. If you take out the emotion and desire of CFA volunteers to go and fight every fire, to want to assist with every fire; taking all of that into consideration do you think CFA resources should be used in fighting fires on Crown land, or should that be totally handled by DSE and CFA resources, then reserved for fires on private property? Should the CFA also be involved in conducting prescribed burns?

Mr ANDREWS — The enemy here is the fire. It does not matter what agency you are, you need to work together and pool resources. It saves money for the CFA and it saves money for the DSE if we work together, and it is critical that we do work together. We have an age-old problem — they are paid, we are not, but the attitude of a lot of people in the brigade is that it does not matter; the enemy is the fire, and we pool our resources wherever we can. If we get a fire out there, DSE and Parks Victoria come out and help us too. So it works both ways — and it has to work both ways.

Mrs FYFFE — That is good. The DSE helps you with the urban fires.

Mr ANDREWS — Not with the structural ones, but with the farm fires, stuff like that. Quite often they are out helping us.

Mrs FYFFE — That is good to hear. Did you want to make a comment, Kevin?

Mr ERWIN — I will make a comment, and I will use as an instance the Deep Lead fire, the new year's eve fire which happened three weeks before that Mt Lubra fire. The DSE was tremendous in working together and helping in the incident management team and on the ground at a later date up in what is known as the Black Range just south of Stawell. We do work together, and we need to continue to work together. The CFA is not always available, as Colin pointed out, but that skill base needs to be there because fires do not know boundaries, and they cross that line between Crown and private property.

Mrs FYFFE — It is good to hear about that working together. For you, Kevin, in the submission the VFBV notes that some volunteers are of the view that the importation of interstate and overseas firefighting contingents has the potential to disenfranchise volunteers who may then withdraw from opportunities to maintain their skills and experiences. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr ERWIN — I think the point we are trying to make there is that, basically — and it is probably a poor choice of words — we want to exhaust all avenues of CFA volunteers. They do not often get the chance to do the work in the IMTs and at a management level, so when the opportunity is there it should be used to train and improve their skill base — for instance, there might be a time when volunteers are needed and they are the only

ones available we need to make sure they are capable of doing the job. So it was with that view that the VFBV made the submission that all the avenues of the locally-based people be used up first.

Mrs FYFFE — Can I try and interpret that? What you are saying is that the resources that are used for bringing in interstate and overseas firefighters may be better utilised in training up the people we have on the ground here — or am I putting words in your mouth?

Mr ERWIN — No, not necessarily in that context. It is always a fine line as to when to draw on those overseas and interstate people, but I think some people feel they get overlooked in the grand scheme of things and that the possibility of gaining some valuable on-the-job training has passed them by and they feel a little bit disenfranchised. They think, ‘They didn’t want me. I am not good enough’, and all that sort of thing. That is the context, I think.

Mrs FYFFE — It is a very important point, thank you very much.

The ACTING CHAIR — Can I quickly follow on: you or Christine mentioned the use of the CFA in fuel reduction burns. Do you do any of that?

Mr ANDREWS — We have not done any for a number of years. I am not sure of the reason because as I said, I have limited experience in the top rank of the brigade, but I do not think anyone in the CFA at Halls Gap, if there was going to be a roadside burn, would say, ‘No, we are not going’. They would say, ‘Yes, we will be there. When is it?’. That is the dedication of volunteers.

Mrs FYFFE — You cannot help yourselves.

Mr ERWIN — Gluttons for punishment! Generally around Stawell there is quite a bit of combined burning between the DSE and the local brigades, and that happens on a fairly regular basis.

The ACTING CHAIR — And that works well?

Mr ERWIN — That works well.

The ACTING CHAIR — And the volunteers are happy with that?

Mr ERWIN — As long as the timing is okay with them and they are available.

Mr ANDREWS — Can I just add something? We do get invited to some of the burns. It just that in the last couple of years it has not worked. Because especially in the last 12 months we have been going everywhere and anywhere. If we can do it, we will join in with them.

Mrs FYFFE — So you do not want the invitations getting lost in the post. You want them to come?

Mr ANDREWS — They are welcome to invite us all the time. It is not a problem.

Mr WALSH — Kevin, I know it was a throwaway line but you mentioned that getting new equipment over this side of the state was a bit slow sometimes. I talk to the volunteers when I go around, and they all say, ‘We want to stay volunteers, but we want the very best equipment to work with all the time’. In your view, is it slow getting good equipment over here, and could it be speeded up?

Mr ERWIN — I think the equipment is good. We have come a long way since Austin trucks and so forth.

Mr WALSH — Could it be better, though?

Mr ERWIN — No, I think the equipment is adequate. Because we are at the big end of the state it does take time to get the equipment over here. If you have a lot of jobs going on statewide, perhaps it is a case where the pool closer to Melbourne is higher than for this side of the state — if I could say it that way.

The ACTING CHAIR — You could, Kevin. Thank you both so much for your time, your experience and your knowledge and for being there on the ground for all of the people around here. It is much appreciated.

Witnesses withdrew.