

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne — 19 July 2016

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Ms Gayle Osborne (sworn), Secretary, Wombat Forestcare.

The CHAIR — I welcome Ms Osborne from Wombat Forestcare. If you could just make a short presentation, we will then follow up with some questions.

Ms OSBORNE — I have got a handout.

The CHAIR — Fantastic; thank you. Lead off, please.

Ms OSBORNE — I would like to concentrate on the Wombat State Forest and the Hepburn Regional Park. Under the 5 per cent target, the lack of public land suitable for planned burns meant that the Wombat forest and the Hepburn Regional Park were to have roughly 10 per cent of their area subjected to planned burns annually, and although there is now a risk reduction target, the Wombat and Hepburn park will be subjected to a similar regime due to DELWP taking a landscape approach to risk. Therefore large areas of the Wombat forest will still be burnt as this may lessen the impact of fire on a code red day. You can see on the map that we have provided how little of the Wombat forest remains, or will remain, unburnt. Many areas close to townships will be burnt twice, or have been burnt twice, in a 10 to 15-year period. This map was produced prior to the new risk-based approach, but from conversations with DELWP staff we do not expect very many changes.

The tool DELWP uses to measure the risk reduction is Phoenix RapidFire and is a landscape tool. We have been told by DELWP staff that the smaller fuel reduction measures close to townships cannot be measured and therefore are not being considered. If we take Trentham as one of the many examples, there are large areas of gorse along the road to Blackwood and on the start of Old Blackwood Road, so this will be a cross-tenure issue — VicRoads, DELWP and the shire. Much of the forest behind this gorse is sedgy riparian woodland and has already been subject to planned burns. This gorse is a high fire risk and should be dealt with instead of the plans to re-burn the sedgy areas.

The negative impacts from repeatedly burning these sedgy riparian woodlands will include the loss of large areas of sphagnum moss that filter water running into the Coliban River, the loss of hollow-bearing trees and therefore the impacts on fauna that use these hollows, which are the food source for the breeding pair of powerful owls that inhabit the area. These sedgy riparian areas should not be subject to planned burns. A study conducted in the Wombat forest, Tolhurst 1994, shows that the surface fuels return to pre-burn levels in 2 to 4 years, elevated fuels in 10 years and bark fuels in 15 to 25 years.

It is not surprising that surface fuels return to pre-burn levels so quickly. Burning kills the biological agents of litter breakdown and is unlikely to be an effective way to control litter. Little attention is paid to the loss of the leaf litter in the burns and hence the creatures that inhabit it. Our knowledge of invertebrate species is woefully deficient, with many species not yet identified and their response to fire barely studied. Bacteria, fungi and invertebrates help decompose organic matter and release nutrients for new growth. The leaf litter also assists with moisture retention and the maintenance of soil structure. The litter is a vital component of the life cycle of the forest. In many places, decomposition occurs mainly when litter is wet; however, in Australia's dry sclerophyll forests nature has developed species to deal with dry litter. These include caterpillars of the *Oecophoridae* species, a moth species.

I quote from *A Guide to Australian Moths* by Zborowski and Edwards:

The impact of these moths on nutrient recycling is very significant. Their litter-feeding larvae largely prevent the long-term build-up of leaf litter and this reduces the risk of fire enormously. Curiously, although their critical importance has been recognised for some time, no studies of these moths in leaf litter have been funded.

So without these and other decomposers we would struggle to walk through a forest. Where some people see fuel, a lot of us see habitat.

A more appropriate way to deal with the fire risk to many of the townships in the Wombat forest would be to undertake weed removal, clearing of shrubby vegetation, possibly burning of bark using a technique known as candling and patchy burns close to townships. Gullies within the Hepburn Regional Park have very large areas of gorse and blackberry, yet there has been little treatment of the weeds and the constant burning and re-burning of the park. It should also be noted that large areas of the Hepburn Regional Park and the Wombat forest west of Ballan Road are pine plantations that pose a great risk in wildfire, yet the surrounding native forest is repeatedly burnt to the detriment of flora and fauna. We do understand the high risk to Trentham, Blackwood, Daylesford and anyone living close to forested areas and consider that targeted control of vegetation close to and within

townships will more effectively reduce risk. Fire management needs to be carried out in a way that does not further put pressure on native flora, fauna and habitat quality.

So now I want to talk about some biodiversity issues. The code of practice for bushfire management on public land has as one of its objectives:

To maintain or improve the resilience of natural ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as biodiversity, water, carbon storage and forest products.

We consider that this has been given an unnecessarily low priority. A large amount of money has been allocated to fuel reduction, yet there seems to be a lack of funding for biodiversity officers and for flora and fauna surveys. Hence biodiversity officers are rarely available to inspect the proposed burn sites and are reliant on records from the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas to make recommendations regarding protection of endangered species.

The data held by the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas for the Wombat forest is inadequate, and over recent years Wombat Forestcare members have added considerable records including many threatened species. These include locations of *bossiaea vombata*, a leafless *bossiaea* that only occurs in the Wombat forest at a few locations. To our knowledge the only place on the planet where this plant exists is in the Wombat forest. One of these locations was to be included in a planned burn, and if we had not discovered this population, there is a high possibility that it would have been destroyed and no-one would have known that it had existed on the site. DELWP excluded this area from the burn, but we consider that other populations may have been destroyed over the years due to lack of surveys. The *bossiaea* has disappeared from the site where it was first recorded. A local naturalist said that this was a result of fire and then the area being invaded by blackberries.

We were surprised to find that only one known breeding site for powerful owls was registered in the entire Wombat forest. This was a site located by a Trentham resident and in records submitted to the VBA. Wombat Forestcare has located two more breeding sites and is tracking another two pairs of powerful owls. This is very important to their survival, as efforts can be made to protect their nest hollow and the surrounding Blackwood roost trees in a burn. There is also a management requirement to refrain from burning during their breeding season.

The Wombat forest contains approximately 28 flora species and 17 fauna species that are listed as rare or threatened at a state or national level. There is no way of knowing what has already been lost in planned burns. It is understood by Wombat Forestcare that the system for noting threatened species on burn plans is now automated and that records of threatened species prior to 1980 are not included, neither are records of threatened species where the accuracy of the record is 500 metres or more. This means that biodiversity officers do not get the opportunity to check the validity of old records. Species that are listed as rare are also no longer considered for protection in planned burns. Clearly biodiversity protections are being overwritten in the urgency to burn. For many years Wombat Forestcare was provided with burn plans and was able to verify that threatened species that were known to us were included with appropriate recommendations for their protection. We have legal advice that this is a public document; however, burn plans are being refused to our group.

There are many instances where protections have been overlooked and one example is a very large dwarf silver wattle — so it is a threatened species — that was unnecessarily pushed over during track works for a burn. This was an isolated population of just three mature trees.

So I would like to summarise what we would like to see. We would like to see a concentration of fuel reduction methods close to townships using a range of methods: regional fire management plans for coverall land tenures; township plans that involve community and coverall tenures; adequate resourcing for biodiversity officers to enable the maintenance or improvement of the resilience of natural ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as biodiversity, water, carbon storage and forest products; regulations for biodiversity protections in planned burns to be developed by DELWP in partnership with community representatives; and the protection of rare species and locally significant species in planned burns. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Gayle, can I thank you very much for your comprehensive presentation, and I should say that in talking with my colleague here we pointed out the magnificence of some of the species, the fauna, here in particular. And I should say as a longstanding member — although I am not sure if my membership is up-to-date — of Birds Australia, I look at these and I see the need to protect them.

And it is in that context that I want to put to you what I think — as I read some of the submissions coming into the inquiry and yours — is one of the tough questions that I think we will confront — that is, controlled, planned, thoughtful burning, and the undoubted risks to species that can occur with that — and I am simply putting this to you, because I want to hear your response — and the alternative, which may be more catastrophic burning. I think at one point you said that large fires do not always go through a whole area. Again I am paraphrasing, but I think sometimes they do. So there is a clear risk of those catastrophic fires leaving massive ecological damage both to flora and to fauna. How do we balance those two risks, if I can put it to you that way?

Ms OSBORNE — So this is not a no-burn-in-the-forest argument. Because we know the Wombat forest so well, we are using it as an example, so I cannot speak for the rest of the state.

The CHAIR — No, but you are a very good case study.

Ms OSBORNE — Yes, but you will see that there have been massive burns. So in the block of the forest that I live in, which is the Glenlyon block, in 10 years all that block has basically been burnt bar a strip down the centre, which is due for a burn. So in between a 5 and 15-year period, the entire block will have been burnt and some of it burnt a second time.

The CHAIR — So your argument essentially is the frequency — —

Ms OSBORNE — So we are saying that it is already over-burnt and that we need to pull back. We are not saying, ‘Don’t burn anywhere in the forest for a fuel reduction burn’. We are saying, ‘Pull back now, and look at where the real risk is’. You are talking about the risk to the flora and fauna for a big burn going through.

The CHAIR — I accept the edge of township, but my fear is the damage to flora and fauna from catastrophic burns, which go through on a much more comprehensive level and leave little response capability.

Ms OSBORNE — Yes, and I think we are beyond that now. If we keep burning over and over again, we are going to lose those species anyway. There is a massive map that you can see — —

The CHAIR — Yes, I see.

Ms OSBORNE — You will see how little — and we do have species that are totally dependent on long unburnt areas. So there is a patch of forest above the Lerderderg that is long unburnt, and that is where with our camera project we got a photo of an eastern pygmy possum. Now this is the only record for the Wombat forest of an eastern pygmy possum, and there is another record that shows on the VBA as being in the Wombat, but it is actually much further south in the Lerderderg.

Also in that area is where we got a photo of a brush-tailed phascogale — all the records of brush-tailed phascogales are far to the north up near the Hepburn Regional Park; this was the first record in that area, the same sort of forest — and a spotted quail-thrush. So we also need to keep some of the forest long unburnt and I think keep our fingers crossed that we do not have the massive wildfire straight through there, but if we burn that, we will possibly lose some of the species. If we have a wildfire, we will possibly lose them too, but if we burn, I think we have to have this patch.

The CHAIR — All right. The other point that I am curious about is that I am surprised that there is not more information about birds in the sense that there is information. I know Birds Australia has long records of birds in particular areas, so I am just surprised that there is not more detailed information. I really just make that comment. My question is about weeds. I was up near your park just two weeks ago, and I would concur with your views about the scale of weeds in certain areas, so what is to be done? What is your recommendation about what is done on the removal of weeds, many of which are remarkable tinder, if I can put it that way?

Ms OSBORNE — There is a whole pile of things. In some areas the gorse can be groomed, and that puts a thick bed of mulch over, and then they come back later and spray whatever has come up through it.

The CHAIR — So is the solution more weed management? Is it just that there is inadequate — —

Ms OSBORNE — Yes.

The CHAIR — That is what I am asking.

Ms OSBORNE — Sorry, yes. And that will also help native species in many areas, because large areas of blackberries are completely strangling the native plants. So, yes, there should be massive weed control.

The CHAIR — So that is community-supported and funded activities, or it is professionals coming in or —

Ms OSBORNE — It is professionals coming in. I think the problem in our area is so vast that the community could never cope with it.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Gayle, for your presentation and for the further information that you have provided above and beyond the submission that you have put in. I would like to pick up on two things. I am not sure whether you were here earlier when we heard from Mr Ingamells in relation to the national parks association public land management as well as that private-public interface in terms of land management and burns.

One of the things which came out in Mr Ingamells's evidence related to the use by Aboriginal cultures of small-scale, localised, on-the-ground burning, which might be replicated in part by an incendiary drop of, I suppose, catalysts for fire to burn and to burn in a way that is more naturally reflective of the way that natural fires burn rather than an en masse planned burn situation. Ms Bath, who was here then, asked about the way in which that has operated in Victoria as compared to Western Australia, where it has been implemented quite thoroughly. What is your view on how that type of burning might be undertaken to manage fuel reduction on the one hand, noting your concerns about over-burn, and what is your view on that as compared to other forms of undertaking planned burn activity, again from your perspective as the Wombat Forestcare group?

Ms OSBORNE — In the Wombat forest, even if they use incendiaries from helicopters, the big issue with a burn is that the department are so worried about an escape that they will burn a hard edge pretty well around the perimeter, because two days later you might have a wick where the fire comes out. Even if that is patchier within, we still get pretty well a perimeter burn, so I do not have an opinion on that one.

One issue, though, about the Indigenous burning is that in some ways that is not so valid now because we have so modified our landscape. The Wombat forest in some areas was very large trees, very spread out and a grassy understorey, and in other areas it was large trees and a shrubby understorey. In the areas where it was open grassland through the trees, a herb-rich foothill forest, I presume, there are reports that you could gallop a horse through. We have now had two lots of logging through there.

Basically by the late 1880s there was hardly a tree standing and the whole area had been turned over for gold mining as well. Then in the 1970s we had woodchipping and an over logging of the forest again. So we have got a forest with no old growth. Instead of 20 very large trees a hectare we have got probably over 100 medium to small trees, in some areas 1000 very small trees, per hectare. Where you might have considered burning in one way, it is so modified that that is barely how we can deal with it, and it is the same with the woodlands that were open and farmed and managed by Indigenous people. Most of that is farmland with a few large trees now and a different grass. We have got introduced pasture versus the Poaceae and Kangaroo grasses that we had before. So it is very difficult because everything is so modified.

Ms SHING — What about thinning then as an alternative to fuel reduction —

Ms OSBORNE — I suggested that.

Ms SHING — and in particular, not just overstorey or canopy, but again sapling reduction if you have got 1000 small to medium saplings, that inevitably leads to fuel build-up. We have heard evidence from Mr Ingamells on this. But I would be interested in your view.

Ms OSBORNE — I did suggest this because the department wants to burn an area that has got a breeding pair of powerful owls, so we have been scratching our heads for every alternative like, 'Deal with the gorse down the end'. They are suggesting bringing an Indigenous team in to burn parts of this area and I am going, 'What about we just thin these massive areas of re-growth?', and I was told that it will not make enough difference.

Ms SHING — Who told you that?

Ms OSBORNE — It was someone on the DELWP staff who is in the fire section who is a person who runs some of these burns.

Ms SHING — Now if you will bear with me, I just have one other question. In your submission you have actually indicated at — there is a double up of point 1 — point 1 the impact of preventative burns on biodiversity. If you go to the second page of your submission, there is the paragraph that begins, ‘However, this is rarely achieved and most burns leave very little habitat’. It then goes on to talk about the timing of burns and says:

Finally fuel reduction burning should not be undertaken in spring when wildlife activity is at its peak in terms of mating and nesting. It also means that wildlife will find it more difficult to find adequate food, water and shelter to get them through the drier summer months.

I note that evidence on the one hand in relation to biodiversity; the other evidence that we have heard, however, is that waiting until it is drier in fact increases the chance of planned burns getting out of control in a way that can cause widespread devastation to flora and fauna, and also places at risk life, property and livestock. How do we reconcile, in your view, the statement there about not doing it too early on and the other evidence that we have heard about not doing it too far down the track?

Ms OSBORNE — I probably cannot reconcile it.

Ms SHING — No, that is okay. Just any views that you might have about how to strike the right balance is I suppose what I am interested in.

Ms OSBORNE — I suppose if you are doing less burns you have got more chance of striking a balance. It is the proposal to burn and re-burn. A spring burn undertaken by the Indigenous people in the area that is going to have the powerful owls may not affect the bird life at all.

Ms SHING — So an area-specific approach —

Ms OSBORNE — I think a very area-specific approach.

Ms SHING — sounds like something you are talking about.

Ms OSBORNE — Yes.

Ms SHING — All right. If you do have any further views on that after the conclusion of this hearing, I would be interested in having them provided to the committee for the sake of ending off that question.

Ms OSBORNE — Okay. Thank you.

Mr BARBER — Just having a look at this map that you have given us, just eyeballing it, it looks like a high proportion of the area has been or will be burnt in a bit of over 10 years.

Ms OSBORNE — Yes.

Mr BARBER — That is obviously a lot more even than a 5 per cent or 20-year rotation.

Ms OSBORNE — Well, you see under the 5 per cent target there are whole areas that could not be burnt. One area of public land in the midlands area was Lake Burrumbeet, so that could not be burnt. Lots and lots of those sorts of examples meant that when there was a 5 per cent target, basically the Wombat and Hepburn Regional Park had a 10 per cent target because of the areas that could not be burnt, and areas on Mount Macedon that could not be burnt because they are so steep and abut private property.

The Wombat got pretty well stomped on and now it appears that it is not going to be much less because with running Phoenix, which is a landscape tool, people in the department are saying that unless they burn these ridges and they do these burns, there is risk to areas further away, like Macedon. So by doing those burns they will reduce the risk to areas like Macedon. The fire intensity will be less. So I do understand all that. It is just

that we cannot keep burning the Wombat at this rate and we have got to find other ways of dealing with the fire risk to Macedon, I think.

Mr BARBER — And your other evidence about individual species, what you are saying there is that there is actually quite a bit of information about where these things are in some cases but it is not taken into account during the planning of the individual burns. Is that what your experience is?

Ms OSBORNE — Where we know things are, the department will take those into account. In our local area we have got some really terrific people working in fire and in biodiversity, so we might have something like bushy club moss, which is a common species in Gippsland and in the Otways, but only known in five locations in the Wombat at this stage. So they are quite prepared to put that on the fire plan. If we bring it to someone's attention, they will look after it when they do not have to. Another really terrific example is that there is a Peregrine Falcon nesting — and they do not build nests, they usually use rock ledges — in a burnt-out old tree that must have a ledge in the top, and that is within a burn area and the department has sent a dozer to clean right around that tree in the hope that all of the dead stuff that is around that tree will be pulled away and the only thing then that will cause the tree to burn is if burning litter goes into the top. So they go the extra yard for us. They are very good.

But there are a whole lot of areas that could have endangered species that just are not being looked at, and unless we go and look at them, no-one else is. So what we are saying is that there needs to be proper funding for DELWP biodiversity people to do their job properly.

Mr BARBER — If their main response to finding these sensitive species is to just kind of avoid that immediate area, or as in your example simply bulldoze around that one tree, then going out and looking for more of them would just create more problems in a way that they would not be able to meet their target. Is that correct?

Ms OSBORNE — Yes. But I do not think, at the level of the local staff, they are trying to avoid finding things. They are very interested. Most of the local staff are interested in protecting things in the Wombat. But they are constrained by a lack of budget and those sorts of things. I think I mentioned in our first submission that there was a fuel reduction burn in the Hepburn Regional Park, where there was a leafless bossiaea — bossiaea riparia. It is on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas, and I did not know what it looked like so the person who discovered it and put it on the atlas took me to show me and it was gone. We could see the dead plant. It had completely shrivelled. You could see a great big patch of it, and the department did not even know it had gone. No-one had gone out to show the land crew what it looked like.

There needs to be enough budget in biodiversity for them to go out and talk to the crew and show them where things are, otherwise it is on the plan but no-one knows what it looks like. So it is a budget issue and an issue from above rather than locally.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you, Ms Osborne. That was very comprehensive, and as a result I have no further questions.

Ms SHING — If you do have anything further, though, that you would like to provide to the committee it would be very useful, particularly from that local perspective. I found it very valuable information that you have provided from a Wombat perspective. Anything else, Chair?

The CHAIR — No, that is really fantastic. Thank you, we are very appreciative. It is great material. Thank you.

Ms SHING — Thanks, Gayle.

Ms OSBORNE — Thank you very much for inviting us.

Witness withdrew.