

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

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Mr David Hamilton (sworn), Captain, Strathbogie Rural Fire Brigade.

The CHAIR — David, if I could ask you to make a brief introduction and then we will follow up with some questions.

Visual presentation.

Mr HAMILTON — No worries. My name is David Hamilton. I am tertiary educated. I have seen fires from the mop-up of the 1990 bushfire to the present day. I have been fire captain since 2012. I recently underwent the Shelley burning course. My history, which I have abbreviated, includes strike teams from Limestone, Cheshunt, Whitfield, Wunghnu, Lancefield. The reason I mention this is because of the kinds of fires. I think I have seen them all — from heavy bush to fast-moving grassfire.

The local fires, which all seem to have got into the edge of the bush that we are all so worried about, have started from basically man-made events. We had the Ancona, which was actually done by a farm ute, we have had Creightons Creek twice — one was a motorbike that fell over, which turned into the Strathbogie fires in 1990 — fireworks and, just recently, lightning. The other one that eventuated in local fires was the Boho fires, and that was from a gas bottle.

So basically the courses we have all had are either lightning or man-made. Lightning generally we are prepared for it; we are paranoid, but we are prepared for it. We are generally there at the fire station. We are generally guided by the fire tower. So the only delay we get with a local lightning strike fire in the local area is generally by distance or by the thickness of the scrub and terrain. If we do not actually get it the next day and it pops up, which has happened before, it is generally subdued by rain, so our biggest problem is actually manual burning off and it is burning off which is out of control. People enjoy burning off and then going away and leaving everything and coming out after lunch to find that all of a sudden a whole heap of volunteers had to jump on a fire truck.

We have had angle grinders, mowers, gas bottles, bearings on cars, power poles, which basically leads to the issue of burning in public lands. In my opinion the biggest problem is actually the interface. That is between the private land and public land, and this also includes roadways. Currently the bulk of the roads up there are extreme. They have extreme potential — large amounts of bark, large amounts of small material or large amounts of pushed-up trees. They all are surveyed in a north-south or an east-west direction, which is generally in the direction of the prevailing wind. Unfortunately you cannot see too well here, but if you notice they are all going up and down there and Strathbogie is in there.

We have had attempts at doing some roadside burn-offs. A lot of the areas are that too far extreme that we could not even do a controlled burn because it actually ringbarked trees, which leaves heavily fuelled roadways leading straight into highly populated areas. This does two things: one, it cuts off peoples escape routes and, two, it cuts off our reinforcements.

I will now go on to organisation with the other agencies. During a firefighting event, getting on with them is great; there is no problem. In the preparedness, however, it is an absolute buck-passing feast. I have had over six applications for different kinds of burns. Two have been approved, and they are on local roads. We have got Broken Goulburn catchment management, which is in charge of creeks and waterways. They have generally put the kibosh on any burn we have ever proposed. Parks Victoria seems to enjoy passing everything off to DELWP. DELWP are only really concentrated on anything inside the bush and generally work from a firebreak inwards. So the areas from the fence to the firebreak have not been burnt since the 1923 bushfire.

The CHAIR — Since when?

Mr HAMILTON — The 1923 bushfire. The organisation for cleaning up inside the township is great. They have had machinery to heap up items, but as soon as you get outside that 60-kilometre zone it is an absolutely diabolical feast. The shire is in charge of looking after a DELWP asset. They are only currently worried about the 3 metres from the curb or the 6 metres from the centre of the road. They love just piling trees up outside that, increasing the fuel load.

The CHAIR — To let someone else take care of it then — outside the area.

Mr HAMILTON — Well, DELWP are in charge of the vegetation management. The shires are in charge of the roads, and I am actually surprised that the Strathbogie shire did not have any person here today. They

generally have a policy where if a tree is pushed down, they just heave it onto the side of the road. As soon as it is outside that 3-metre arc off the edge of the road, it is not their problem.

Now, the impact of a lot of the bigger burns that have actually been done — this is a side-by-side; this is me as actually a ratepayer as opposed to me as someone in charge of a fire brigade — is we generally see large amounts of what I say are macropods, so we have large amounts of kangaroos, wombats, wallabies and deer. They physically get displaced every time there is a big fire. The small ones generally cannot out run it, but the macropods do. They are the ones that end up on our ratepayers' land. Considering one kangaroo is about half a cow, my last survey, which was actually done by a person who works in the department in Benalla, counted in his own verification 150 kangaroos on my back paddock. So I am paying rates to feed the equivalent of 75 cows worth of wildlife.

In my opinion the targeted areas should be, one, the interface between the fence and the firebreak, that will actually help us stop the fire before it gets into the bush, and two, the roadsides, which are that thick they are danger to every single person going up there. We have other issues. Bert actually said that there were 20 CFA units around our area, but considering our roads are the worst part, we are actually 600 metres above sea level. You are not 600 metres above sea level here. It takes 20 minutes for a fully laden fire truck to even get up the hill, plus response time. We are looking at 30 minutes for a backup. There are three brigades with four and a half trucks on top of the plateau. So if we do not get to the fire within half an hour, it is already too big for us and we are waiting for that half an hour response time. Generally, though, the planes and everything are improving the situation, but we still have problems with that.

I said I would make it brief.

The CHAIR — No, you have done very well, and I have got two questions for you. There are about 50 I would like to ask you, but I am going to ask you two. The first one relates to the coordination, so you are pointing to the difficulties with the shire, with DELWP and with other agencies. How do we resolve that? How do we get to a better solution? I am interested in an outcome here. It is not the first time we have heard that there is confusion.

Mr HAMILTON — Generally if I feel that it is too big or the brigade feels that it is too big an area, they generally come to me, and I fill out the report which comes to me. It then goes to the vegetation management officer who then assesses it and then takes it to the various different people. The biggest problem is that there are too many people responsible for public land. We have got three responsible for creeks up in the Strathbogies.

The CHAIR — The CMA as well.

Mr HAMILTON — The catchment management authority, we have got Goulburn-Murray Water and we have also got the local water authority, because they actually supply the town with water and they get the water from the creek. We have got three different ones that are actually just in charge of public lands. We have got DELWP, we have got Parks Victoria and we have got Land Victoria, which are in charge of — —

The CHAIR — And council land on top of that.

Mr HAMILTON — And then council on top of that. So no-one is in charge and everybody has got an ability to buck pass.

The CHAIR — So the solution? I know that is a huge question, but do you have a — —

Mr HAMILTON — That they have one that has responsibility for and is in charge of public lands — an ultimate body that is in charge of public lands.

The CHAIR — Right; that is the first question. The second question is: you are a CFA captain in your area here, in the tableland area —

Mr HAMILTON — Yes.

The CHAIR — and do you have any comment to make on the current situation with the CFA, because it seems to me the three CFAs that you have got in your area are volunteer ones? You have certainly made some

previous comment, but I am interested to know whether you think the current dispute is going to impact on the capacity of your three brigades to provide the support you need in the area long term Goulburn-Murray Water.

Mr HAMILTON — With the UFU, the biggest problem we would have would be — I have made a couple of short notes — their vetos. We have brigade-owned stuff that helps us out. We have got root spikes which the rest of the CFA probably would not even know about. They are stainless steel pieces of pipe that we use for boring in the ground to put out roots that are actually in trees. If we did not have them, it would take us volunteers a lot longer to put out a root fire. That is not CFA approved. That is not union stuff.

The CHAIR — But you are looking after your local area.

Mr HAMILTON — If it is not union approved, it is vetoed.

The CHAIR — And that would not be approved by the union is what you are saying.

Mr HAMILTON — No.

The CHAIR — They do not even know about it?

Mr HAMILTON — They are urban firefighters. What would they know about a root fire? You have got problems like with the officials; the BASO has to be a UFU bloke. The only reason I could possibly work out why the BASO, who is the paid union bloke who is supposed to help look after the brigades, would have to be a UFU person would probably be to make sure that all the brigades are union compliant. Why that has to be I do not know.

The CHAIR — Union compliant rather than focused on the fires?

Mr HAMILTON — On the fires. There is no other rationale for it. The other one would be preparedness and training. A lot of our minimum skills assessments are done by volunteers. We actually have trained volunteer assessors, but they would not be allowed to actually assess the people.

The CHAIR — They would be cut out?

Mr HAMILTON — They would be cut out.

The CHAIR — That would be devastating.

Mr HAMILTON — We may be volunteers, but we have all done the courses. We have all wasted weekends on two-day courses on five weekends — for two days — all unpaid, and then all our accreditation is worth nothing.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you for your submission. You talked about roadside fuel loads quite a bit. I just want to get more of an understanding of how that affects you operationally. What are the processes you go through when there are dangers associated with that?

Mr HAMILTON — Our biggest problem generally with a fire is containment. A lot of the area is heavily grassed. By the time it is fully cured it braces with the wind. If we are trying to cut the fire off and it gets into a fire like that, we are talking about volunteers that are then tied up for days blacking out with heavy roadside fuel. It works like a wick, so it will just hit the thing and spread the front. Say, if it is coming from the west and then it hits a north-south road, it will just spread the front and make it even bigger. Therefore we are once again then reliant on the actual brigades that have to come up and black everything out. So it spreads our load, it spreads the potential and it makes it a threat that we are constantly battling to make sure the fire is controlled before it even gets into these areas, because otherwise we are nowhere. We are there for hours and days.

Mr YOUNG — Does it ever cause hesitation — going into certain areas because of those threats?

Mr HAMILTON — Constantly. Totally paranoid about half of the trees. I mean most of the trees on a lot of the roadsides are not stable without a fire let alone with a fire. If you are driving a truck that weighs 15 tonnes at 100 kilometres an hour and a tree comes down in front of you, you do not have that much braking space.

Mr YOUNG — Is your CFA involved in any back-burning along roads or anything like that to reduce that specific risk?

Mr HAMILTON — As I said, I put in an application for six different burnings of different kinds around the Strathbogie township. We were allowed to do two just outside the township. They were the only ones that were approved.

Mr YOUNG — Why were the other ones not approved?

Mr HAMILTON — One was too close to a creek. One was Parks Victoria and they did not want to know anything about it. The other ones were not deemed dangerous enough.

Mr YOUNG — What type of land were they on?

Mr HAMILTON — Largely roads or riparian areas next to the township.

Mr SOMYUREK — Just in terms of planned burns in Strathbogie, do you have a view on what should be the optimal approach?

Mr HAMILTON — Are we talking about bush, or are we talking about roads and the like?

Mr SOMYUREK — Well, you can answer this however you want — bush and generic generally as well.

Mr HAMILTON — Personally if I had dictatorial power I would probably be burning — —

Mr SOMYUREK — Just imagine you have for 5 minutes.

Mr HAMILTON — Okay, just imagine if I had. Generally I would be trying to do burning mid-late spring of most north faces sort of in a pattern, because those north faces are the ones that cure faster. They dry up. They are the ones with the prevailing north wind that the fire generally belts up and then escapes into a problem. A lot of it would probably be controlling or burning edge country. That is the stuff where the manual fires generally jump into the bush and then spread quite rapidly. That happened at the Ancona fire with the farm ute. It just hit the edge and bang, went into the bush.

Then if you were talking about roadsides, you would be trying to put small burns down the roadsides so there was actually a break from the wick effect, which is what it is. Start from the worst bits, working down the lighter bits, over years — just small bits at a time. I mean everybody lives in the Strathbogies for the environment. Well, you do not want to see the whole thing as just one burnt carcass.

Mr BARBER — Just on the issue you raised about your response times, can you explain a bit more: you have got three brigades I presume — we are talking around the Strathbogie region — around the forest, and then when you get the backup, where that backup is coming from and who it is coming from.

Mr HAMILTON — There are three brigades up on the Strathbogie plateau, there is Strathbogie, there is Kelvin View and there is the Marraweeney fire brigades. Below that there is a general circle of the other 17 fire brigades. On a standard call-out there is generally a three-brigade response. That is in fire times. Sometimes on an extreme day there would probably be five and sometimes they even jack it up to 10. However, if the pager goes off, generally we have got to get there to then upgrade how many tankers are required for the fire.

Generally with the plane, by the time it gets up there — because they are either from Shepparton, Benalla or Mansfield — they can be up to half an hour, and it all depends if there is another fire going on, or if it is in the evening, they will not come up. As soon as it is dark they will not come up. So we are reliant on the other brigades down the bottom. That is at least 20-odd minutes by the time they respond to their pager for an upgrade.

Mr BARBER — And you described the likely sources of ignition being humans, obviously — —

Mr HAMILTON — Yes.

Mr BARBER — You do not want to see that get into the bush. But the lightning strikes, for example, if they happen on public land, are you also responsible for the first response on public land, or does DELWP have to deal with that?

Mr HAMILTON — We are first response. It is first response until, basically, we identify it as DELWP. The last six fires have actually been on the public lands. Hancock's and us have beaten DELWP quite handsomely, and a lot of the time the response from DELWP comes from Benalla, because it is actually graded for Benalla.

Mr RAMSAY — David, you mentioned the interface between private land-holders and public land.

Mr HAMILTON — Yes.

Mr RAMSAY — Can you give the committee an indication of what you think would be a fair and reasonable barrier between public and private land — that is, a fire prevention buffer on the public land?

Mr HAMILTON — From heavy fuels you are looking at at least 50 metres if not 100 metres.

Mr RAMSAY — So what is the norm at the moment?

Mr HAMILTON — The norm? Well, I have got land that adjoins the natural bush, and there is zero. There is no buffer; there is nothing. There is just a fence.

The CHAIR — The fence is exposed? If fire breaks out where that fence is?

Mr HAMILTON — Yes, and we are responsible for 100 per cent of the fence if something happens to the fence too.

The CHAIR — That is why I am asking, yes.

Mr RAMSAY — I understand there is a maximum allowable buffer between public interface and private land. It was interesting that when the Thomson Dam was threatened by fire if you remember Premier Steve Bracks at the time had bulldozers running huge great buffers around the dam. The work on public land now almost prohibits any decent sort of interface buffer between public and private land. You are advocating something like a 50-metre buffer on public land?

Mr HAMILTON — No, I am not talking about denuding it to 50 metres; I am saying that if you have trees or vegetation, the fuel load should be taken down from extreme to moderate to low in that 50-metre area. I am talking about fine fuels. I am talking about bark. I am not talking about standing trees; I am not talking about the occasional branch. There is a lot of area there that has not been burnt since 1923, and that is fallen down heavy trim timber and five years of dead grass that has cured. Some of it is 1 foot of dead leaf material, and it is all on the boundary. It is not inside the DELWP firebreak or burn areas. It is outside that.

The CHAIR — David, thank you. It is interesting; 1923 is a very long period ago. There must be some areas there that are quite dense.

Mr HAMILTON — There are areas you cannot walk through. There are a lot of areas with a lot of blackberry and stuff that is incredibly thick. There are areas that were burnt in 1990; 1990 was generally down here. It did not get up there. So it is all these plotted areas. It is a lot of the roadways here that have not been burnt, whereas 1923, I am led to believe, took out the whole of the Strathbogie Ranges.

The CHAIR — Just one thing: on the different parts of the firefighting response — you have, by and large, a good relationship with Hancock's?

Mr HAMILTON — We have a very good relationship with Hancock's and DELWP when it comes to firefighting. There is no problem.

The CHAIR — Do you think in some of these dense areas your brigades are very capable of doing that and there is not a lot to be added by firefighters from integrated units or city or large town units? It depends on the nature of things?

Mr HAMILTON — City units are trained in low to high structure. They are not trained in bushfire. They have got pumpers; they do not have tankers. We need water. There is no hydraulic mains that they can tap into and start merrily pumping away. The largest dams up there are generally near a fire and generally one megalitre. There are a couple of nice big ones up there. So you have got the Polly McQuinn's Reservoir, but if they had to do a bushfire, they would be running hose for a long length.

The CHAIR — Finally, in terms of response, you have got the three brigades, and that is sufficient to cover the plateau?

Mr HAMILTON — It is sufficient to cover the plateau for a small fire.

The CHAIR — And as a first response?

Mr HAMILTON — But the drier it gets, the — whatever it is. Our biggest problem is literally the fact that we are all volunteers and we are all employed on other jobs. There are times during the day on total fire ban days I have actually had to tell two people, 'You're taking your pay from your uniform with you today because we are it'. So I was not even talking about a crew of five people; I was talking about that the only backup we had was a crew of three.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you and put on the record my thanks for the work you and your brigades do.

Mr HAMILTON — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.