

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Bairnsdale — 27 September 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Khalil Eideh

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr Jeff Bourman

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr James Purcell

Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

Witness

Dr Nancy McMurray (affirmed), Friends of Gippsland Lakes Parks and Reserves.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Dr Nancy McMurray. I am conscious that we are going to need to be succinct, including questions, to ensure that we meet our deadline to hand the building back to the shire. Dr McMurray, if you would like to begin your submission. As I said, we are on a tight time frame so if you can step through this succinctly.

Ms BATH — Dr McMurray, that is no fault of your own. We apologise.

The CHAIR — I am pointing out the committee members will be succinct with their questions as well.

Visual presentation.

Dr McMURRAY — Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the group. You have the FOGL submission in front of you and I will start with a quote from Hans Brunner:

Wildfires are horrendous enough, but to deliberately burn bush where native animals find refuge is absolutely criminal.

There is increasing scientific evidence that inappropriate and planned burns result in serious loss of habitat and biodiversity, release of carbon into the atmosphere and devastation to plants and animals. The submission has all of those references. Those are not exhaustive references, but I would think they were sufficient to indicate that this is what is happening. This destruction is increasingly recognised by the community, which is why we are here today, and the community want to say what is happening.

BirdLife Australia recognised planned burns are key threatening processes and petitioned the government to list planned burns, and New South Wales and Queensland already do. Researchers at La Trobe and Deakin universities have done heaps of research over the years. Their research was awarded the Eureka science prize for outstanding research in 2014 and they conclude that burn policies damage habitats for over 100 years. Neil Comrie stated in his report in 2014 that planned burns have adverse environmental outcomes. We are increasingly recognising that. The latest *Victorian State of the Environment* report in 2013 cites critical habitat loss that is occurring at alarming rates. It is recognised as one of the most significant threatening processes. They note in that report that planned burns, post-fire salvage operations and slashing roadsides are contributing to this critical habitat loss. So the state government already recognises that.

There is increasing scientific evidence that prescribed burning can increase fire risk. This is not an opinion. There are scientists who are making this claim that it can select for fire-prone species, so you burn an area and those species that are fire prone come back up in greater amounts, and then they say, 'We need to burn this again', so they burn it again. We are increasing our fire risk by some of this planned burning. Burning destroys the organisms that actually deal with the leaf litter and recycle it and do the composting. So it is like, 'Why are we doing this?'

Slashing roadsides has been known to destroy native species, to promote weeds and to increase fire proneness, again. There is evidence that healthy bush does not need burning. It is a myth that you have to burn the bush. Even the woodiest seed pods will open without fire. There are some who would have you believe that you have to have fire, but you do not have to have fire. There is natural decomposition of leaf litter by animals and organisms, and that is occurring all the time, and many of those organisms are killed by planned burns.

Fauna responses to fire are not comprehensively known. Most burn plans are based on plants. Because we know more about plants, the plants are used as surrogates in planning. The surveys are not conducted. There is no long-term monitoring for impact on biodiversity. We simply do not know. We have not put the resources into the research that we need to know about what we are doing in the long term to our biodiversity by the burning regimes that have developed as basically an industry. So more research is needed, and until we know what we are doing, FOGL would say that we need to enact the precautionary principle, which is basically if you do not know what you are doing, do not burn.

Robyn and Louise showed you photos of Moormung Flora and Fauna Reserve. This is a nationally threatened ecological community. The Gippsland red gum grassy woodland is nationally threatened, and 163 hectares of critical habitat was basically incinerated. That was not a cold burn. It was not a mosaic burn. It was a very hot fire that destroyed everything. It is surrounded by farmland. There are no wildlife corridors. There is nowhere for animals to disperse. It contained many, many old-growth trees with large nesting hollows in them, and they are gone. It is likely that that will never recover.

The FOGL submission addressed three of your terms of reference. In regard to 1(c), there is overwhelming evidence — and the research is cited in our submission — that burning the bush any distance from built assets will not protect all those assets in a wildfire. As Louise just mentioned, there is some scientific evidence that burning the bush immediately surrounding a home just prior to the fire front coming through can provide some safety to that home, but burning Moormung is not going to save a house 5 kilometres away.

This is a quote from Malcolm Gill. He is a scientist at the Australian National Herbarium. His claim was that not all plants are fuel:

While all plants may be said to produce fuel, only a small proportion contribute significantly to the fuel which carries the fires.

He claims that:

Removal of the fuel contribution of most species will make no difference to fire spread.

That is an important aspect to understand. Others would have you believe that there is this much fuel of grasses or whatever, that this is really important and we have to reduce it. He would refute that. We need to be reminded again, as Robyn said, that so-called fuel is often very critical habitat.

In regard to term of reference 1(d), there is substantial scientific evidence that burning the bush puts many fauna species at risk, initially through lack of food and shelter, and also increased predation because they have nowhere to go. So why do this when burning the bush does not protect built assets? If there is overwhelming evidence that fuel reduction burns do not protect built assets, then why are we doing this? Most of these burns are fuel reduction; some are listed as ecological, but there is insufficient evidence for the reasons for ecological burns. The pre-burn research is not done, and I would think it is largely because of culture and that the biodiversity is not valued as much, but lack of resources is very important as well.

In regard to term of reference 1(e), there is substantial evidence that planned burns put many species of flora at risk and they contribute to greater fuel loads — again by selecting for fire-prone species, and they disrupt the natural decomposition process.

There is clearly a burning industry. It involves jobs, careers, empires, or whatever, egos — lots of egos. If people can claim, ‘We are burning the bush; we are saving people’, they want to be seen as heroes. There is a lot of psychology involved in what has been happening here.

The government likes to be seen to be doing something to protect people. That 5 per cent burning was a kneejerk reaction to the Black Saturday fires, because the government needed to be seen to be doing something. There was no scientific evidence for that.

The CHAIR — Just on that, we heard evidence from the royal commissioner — excuse me for interrupting there, but this is quite a critical point — and he in effect indicated that they had come up with a recommendation there after they had convened expert panels and sought advice from both interstate and overseas. I think it is probably unfair to describe that recommendation as without background or evidence.

Dr McMURRAY — Well, what do you want me to say to that? You are just — —

The CHAIR — I am just interested in — —

Ms SHING — What is your response, perhaps, to that particular evidence that we have heard already from other witnesses —

The CHAIR — The royal commissioner.

Ms SHING — and the royal commissioner in fact in relation to the points that have been made?

Dr McMURRAY — What was the evidence for 5 per cent? Were you given the evidence that 5 per cent was somehow going to protect assets?

The CHAIR — Yes. There was detailed evidence given to our committee by the royal commissioner as to the process behind that figure. He indicated that they had formed specialist panels that had worked over a period to come back with consensus — so far as possible — recommendations about the levels of burning and how

that might occur, including the taking of interstate and overseas evidence and bringing experts here for that purpose.

Ms DUNN — But in fairness, Chair, he did go on to say that the approach taken now is probably one the commission would support. It was based on the best evidence at the time, but now what we know is that he supported a risk-based rather than a percentage-target approach, in fairness.

The CHAIR — But he did not count out some longer term target either.

Ms SHING — A risk-based approach also includes the notion of preventative or prescribed burning as well, though, so that is something that we are trying to reconcile in the context of what your evidence is.

The CHAIR — The point is that we have had contradictory evidence. You have made an assertion there, and that is why I am bringing back to you some other evidence that has been put to us.

Dr McMURRAY — Okay, well, so perhaps they came to that, given the evidence that they had at the time. They have now reversed that. We now do not have a 5 per cent. I do not know how the behaviour in the meantime has contradicted them to say that we do not need 5 per cent or that 5 per cent is destroying so much biodiversity. All the evidence is such that burning the bush does not protect assets. It does not protect life.

Ms SHING — But a risk-based approach actually includes and incorporates preventative or prescribed burning as part of an overall framework, so that is where we are interested in hearing your evidence.

Dr McMURRAY — Yes, I understand that. But if there is evidence that burning the bush does not protect that asset, then why would you do it? If the evidence is such that that is not protecting that, then the risk-based approach would not burn that. What we have been seeing is that that is being burnt because there is a 5 per cent target we have got to burn. But a risk-based approach would say, 'If burning this is not going to protect that, then we do not need to burn that'. A risk-based approach will not burn it.

Ms DUNN — If that risk-based approach said that burning this would protect this, is that something you see as being part of the preventative burn landscape — —

Dr McMURRAY — If there was evidence.

Ms DUNN — Yes, on the assumption that there is evidence.

Dr McMURRAY — If there was reasonable evidence. But a lot of it is not evidence. A lot of it is just people's assumptions —

Ms DUNN — Assumption and culture.

Dr McMURRAY — and it has not been proved. There are lots of instances, some of which Robyn and Louise spoke about, where there had been prior burning and it did not save anything. So there is a lot of evidence to the contrary about that.

The psychology of a lot of this is that there is an industry and there are egos involved. A lot of people have invested a lot in doing what we have been doing. Also there is a very strong dynamic in that the public wants to believe what they are told — that burning the bush keeps them safe. They need to believe that, especially those who live in the bush. This whole cognitive dissonance thing is when our behaviour does not match our beliefs or our attitudes. We have to change one or the other, and so if people say, 'Oh, I love to live in the bush and be surrounded by it and all that sort of stuff, but the government is going to do burning so I will be safe', they want to believe that. But increasing amounts of evidence indicate that is not so. The people who have invested in a career of burning want people to see them as heroes and want people to see what they are doing as positive, and the public wants to believe it. The data do not support that. A lot of data do not support that.

There is a lot of psychology literature which shows that when we have our belief systems, we discard disconfirming evidence. So when people say, 'I think it ought to happen this way', and they are presented with evidence that challenges that, they disconfirm it by saying, 'But that doesn't count'. That is a very entrenched human trait. We need to change the culture, because I think in the burning industry the culture is not to protect the environment — it is to burn. That is entrenched.

There are lots of other fire management options. We can replace introduced grasses with natives, especially around roadsides and firebreaks. The natives are often green during the summer.

The CHAIR — Is there much more of your presentation to go?

Dr McMURRAY — Not too much.

The CHAIR — That is all right. I am just conscious of the time.

Dr McMURRAY — We need to retrain employees for ecological work. Those who are just engaged in fire now would have to be retrained if we were going to use them. FOGL feels that we need a fire ecology strategy that aims to protect and enhance biodiversity, that values the public natural assets and that is always based on the best available scientific evidence, because a lot of what is happening is not, and it needs to be overseen by an independent biodiversity officer. That officer should not be employed by DELWP and should have veto powers. I was astounded when I learnt that our biodiversity officer down here cannot veto a burn. It needs to be funded generously. It needs to be based on ground truthing and fauna and flora monitoring pre and post-burn if there are burns to be had. That is not happening. It is just not happening yet.

There needs to be a community education program. We need to replace fear and ignorance about fire with understanding. We have to stop perpetuating the myth that fuel reduction burns protect communities because increasing amounts of evidence indicate that they do not. We need to be open and honest with the community. The scientific data on limitations of fuel reduction burns need to be put out there to the community. Basically FOGL states we have to stop pretending that planned burns protect communities and do no harm to wildlife.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for your evidence, and we will certainly follow up a number of these points. It is contradictory to a series of other submitters to the inquiry, and that is welcome, but I think my central point is the one I made partway through, so I will leave it to Ms Shing to move forward.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Nancy. If there is anything further that you can provide in the context of what you would like to see in practical terms to equip us with the inquiry around better preparedness for bushfires that goes beyond the preventative burn and the prescribed burning issues and you would like to put that to the secretariat, I would welcome that further perspective in terms of not just what the problem is from your perspective but also where the solution or solutions lie.

Dr McMURRAY — Thank you.

Ms BATH — Following on from that, I think in your commentary today — and thank you for it, Nancy — you said that there was evidence that there is good advice that before a fire front comes through to burn around the house immediately prior. The thought I had about that is the marrying of the conditions that would occur for the fire to be there in the first place, coming down over the mountain range, and for me to set fire to areas immediately bordering my property. Do you see where I am headed here? The fire conditions would not be safe for me to be doing that. If you have the evidence around that, could you share some of the theory behind that? If it is not now, it could be later on.

Dr McMURRAY — Yes, I can send through some references to that. It would probably be burning quite close to — not on the day or as the fire is coming over the ridge but perhaps in preparation for it.

Ms DUNN — Thank you, Nancy, and my thanks to the Friends of the Gippsland Lakes Parks and Reserves because you are incredibly important environmental volunteers and do important work. In your presentation there was a whole range of references to overwhelming evidence — substantial scientific evidence — and there was a slide that I know had ‘destruction’ in the title and had three points that I think listed some other evidence and data. What would be incredibly useful to this committee is to have any evidence that you can provide us to support that.

Dr McMURRAY — You have maybe 10 or 15 references in the submission.

Ms DUNN — Yes, I did notice in your submission there is quite a — —

Dr McMURRAY — I write the submission in such a way that each statement or assertion is backed up by evidence, because FOGL thinks that is very important. They are not exhaustive, but they are a lot.

Ms DUNN — They are not bad. Thank you, Nancy.

The CHAIR — Nancy, thank you. We will be in touch for further contact on some of these matters.

Witness withdrew.