

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Bairnsdale — 27 September 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr James Purcell

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Simon Ramsay

Ms Colleen Hartland

Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

Witness

Mr John Mulligan (affirmed), president, East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce.

The CHAIR — Again, I am conscious that we have a short period of time here, so I will ask you, Mr Mulligan, to be as succinct as you can, and I will seek to ensure that committee members are equally succinct. Can you begin very briefly and explain your submission, which we have already accepted as evidence, I think, but this is additional material.

Visual presentation.

Mr MULLIGAN — Our statement of purpose — you have got that, so I will not go through that. It is in our submission. I would add that the people who are on our committee are all older people: bushmen, they have been logging contractors, forest workers, cattlemen et cetera.

Ms SHING — Is Mr Squires also a part of the group appearing today?

Mr MULLIGAN — No.

Ms SHING — That is all right. I just wanted to make sure you were not also a witness. My apologies. Thank you. As you were, Mr Mulligan.

Mr MULLIGAN — He is going to help me. That is the make-up of our group, the East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce. The title of the inquiry — the inquiry into fire season preparedness — is what we are responding to. The subparagraph items 1(a) to 1(l) we have not addressed individually as these points will be adequately covered in our general presentation.

It will become very clear that we as a state have not been prepared in recent years and are even less prepared now to prevent large fires. We have built up a large and expensive firefighting capability which is ineffective in mega-fire situations for many reasons: OHS, steep terrain, firestorms, lack of adequate fuel reduction burning et cetera. All of this leads to very huge fuel loads in the bush now. We have virtually abandoned fuel reduction burning in the deeper forests in favour of the working together program; that is to concentrate on settlement protection, virtually abandoning the deeper forests, which is where the bad fires will come from. To prevent mega-fires we are clearly unprepared, and previous governments over many years are all at fault.

This presentation is an attempt to show that the south-east forests of Victoria are in grave danger of being completely destroyed and/or changed forever due to the fact of regular fuel reduction burning and consistent burning carried out by the original inhabitants. Arguably the two worst fires in Australian history were those of 1851 and 1939. In 1851 the reason for such a fire was the fuel load build-up after the Aborigines were decimated by disease and no longer carried on their traditional burning. The build-up of fuel leading to the 1939 disaster was because the newly formed Forests Commission — I think they were formed in about 1919 — had introduced a no-burn policy to the Yarra, West Gippsland and Alps regions, here again allowing a build-up of fuel for 20 to 30 years or so.

We are now facing another such disaster, with fuel loads all over our bush country of 20 to 30 tonnes per hectare plus, in both country burnt in the 2002, 2009 and 1983 fires and bush country that has not even been burnt. The only way for you and your committee to appreciate the deplorable neglect of the state of our forests and parks would be to take a two to three-day tour. As this does not seem to be possible, we will attempt to show you the deplorable state of our forests with the following photos. Hopefully the coming summer, due to a wetter than normal spring, will not be so fire volatile and will give management an opportunity to work at fuel reduction burning if they could only be so encouraged.

Now we will go on to the next picture. This picture — I just want to explain it a little. It will take me a few minutes. That is looking across westward from the Cann Valley Road towards the fire. The fire came down that far hill. Behind what you can see there is farming land. We were on the farming land putting out spot fires. The fire was coming down the hill from the west. It was half a mile above the farms, and as I said, we were rushing around putting out spot fires. Then this great fireball, and you might find this hard to believe, passed us. It came out of the fire. It did not burn the country between the fire and us. It just came out through the air. It landed down below us. As you looked up, all you could see was this great big swirling cloud of smoke, fire, sticks and leaves. It was rolling like thunder, I suppose. Trees 18 inches through, it just ripped them off and threw them down the hill.

Ms SHING — A firestorm.

Mr MULLIGAN — Then it rolled down across the flat, and that white you can see is the force that went through the river, and that is the white sand out of the river being thrown up. Then it travelled up here to the right into the bush and away the fire went.

Ms SHING — Where was that photo taken?

Mr MULLIGAN — It was taken on the West Cann Road about 9 kilometres up from the township.

Ms SHING — And when?

Mr MULLIGAN — When? The day of the fire. It was taken then.

Ms BATH — What date was that?

Ms SHING — Sorry, I do not have the details of that. I cannot see it all.

Mr MULLIGAN — That was the 1983 fire.

Ms SHING — Thank you.

Mr MULLIGAN — Had we been in the path of that, we would have been dead. It is lucky we were just a bit to the side of it. We looked up, and it was most horrible sight you have ever seen in your life. Now, that is, for want of a better term, a firestorm, such as in the 2002–03 fire. I heard the other day the comments of Dr Gill, who had a house on the outskirts of Canberra. He said the 2002 fire came — the Brindabella Range was about 40 miles west of Canberra. Then you came down to the foothills, and then there was probably 10 miles or so of pasture land and then the edge of Canberra. That fire was approaching, and according to Dr Gill, he was on the roof of his house when across the cleared country came these great balls of bouncing fire. The country adjoining the houses at Canberra was all eaten bare because they were horse agistment paddocks. There was nothing on them. He said these balls of fire just rolled across and into the houses.

That is something that comes from huge fuel loads, a stinking hot day, stinking hard wind and the heat from the burning fuel. I do not get a lot of support in this from some scientists, but this is what I believe: it releases the eucalypt gas out of the leaves of the eucalypts, and that is what contributes to this gaseous sort of fire that is in these fireballs.

Ms SHING — So evaporated oil, in effect?

Mr MULLIGAN — Whatever, yes, it is an oil.

Ms BATH — Mr Mulligan, it is very interesting. I realise you have got a lot of slides, and I do not want to say this, but you might have to move through them.

Mr MULLIGAN — Well, we will jump that. Then we go to the map. You can see from there that just looking at it, I think there was 43 per cent of Victoria's bushland was burnt in that fire. There is a section down here east of that red piece down the bottom, which was the Cann River fire of 1983. If you take that into account, more than half of Gippsland has been burnt by major fires since 2002.

We will show you some pictures to point out how thick our bush is. This is the turn-off to the Genoa Peak Road near Genoa. That is looking north. The next one shows the same area looking south. David Packham was with me when we took those photos: 30-plus tonnes per hectare, he says, of fuel.

The next one: this was 5 kilometres up along the Genoa Peak Road — the same thing. And this, bear in mind, is about 3 kilometres to the west of the farms along the Genoa River. Now, this is what is at their background. This one was off the old Bismuth track west of the Wingan River. This was burnt in the 1983 fire. You can see the dense saplings in the background.

Ms BATH — John, they are eucalypts?

Mr MULLIGAN — Eucalypts; silvertop mostly. This is on the road just near where that last one was taken, showing you the dense growth of silvertops. Now, near the road, near the light, you have got the bigger trees. As you get back into the bush, they get smaller. That is just another one showing how dense they are. I do not

know what Garry and his friends are going to do about it — we have got 250 000 hectares of that, and it is a big resource — if anybody can work out how to handle it and save the forest at the same time.

Ms SHING — Just on that, we have heard evidence in relation to roadside growth becoming a wick for the flow of fire.

Mr MULLIGAN — Yes.

Ms SHING — I took not dissimilar photos when I was in Mallacoota a couple of weeks ago of just how dense it is: once you get 50 metres back from the road, it is completely impenetrable. How, in your view, should we manage the roadside and adjacent area fuel as far as burning or managing that, and will that have an effect on the spread of fire — i.e., will the road serve as any sort of break?

Mr MULLIGAN — Well, yes. You know, how long is a bit of string? It depends on how well you burn back from the road and how far you burn back.

Ms SHING — That is right, yes.

Mr MULLIGAN — It all helps. We can fight fire with up to probably 20 or 30 tonnes per hectare if we have got no wind and no heat. But as soon as you throw the wind and the heat in, then it is just an inferno and you cannot get near it.

Ms SHING — So what is the most manageable? Again, I will just pick you up there because I have got some questions around this. Twenty to 30 tonnes per hectare is a large amount of fuel build-up. We have looked at it. The evidence we have heard says that it could be as high as 50 in various parts of the very dense forest, and again that sits at odds with some of the evidence we have had that nature regulates itself around the processing of fuel through microbes, through small insects et cetera. How, in your view, with a focus on fuel reduction, as you have made it in your submission, do we actually reduce that build-up in the most sensitive way to preserve and protect biodiversity in that very dense public land?

Mr MULLIGAN — In that very dense stuff there are going to have to be a lot of risks taken in burning it. It is the only thing we can do. We can probably mechanically handle some of it.

Ms SHING — As in removal or bulldozing?

Mr MULLIGAN — In removal. But there is too much for that, so we have got to also burn a lot of it, and the burning will of course kill the weaker plants and leave the stronger ones growing, we hope.

Ms SHING — But a cool burn could actually minimise the adverse impact on the environment? What is your view on cool burning and on mosaic-style burning to actually reduce the temperature and intensity and spread?

Mr MULLIGAN — Well, I am all in favour of burning, cool burning particularly. The Aborigines did it.

Ms SHING — Certainly did.

Mr MULLIGAN — The early settlers did it.

Ms SHING — Certainly did.

Mr MULLIGAN — We did it. When I grew up at Gipsy Point as a lad, we had no fire trucks, no bulldozers, no nothing, and everybody lived in the bush happily. We put up with the fires; we could handle them because there was continual burning. There was no great build-up of fuel. Right, so where do we go now if we are in a hurry?

Ms SHING — No, keep going. I have just used my questions up, so we have got your — —

Mr MULLIGAN — I am sorry.

Ms SHING — No, they are good questions to answer, and I appreciate it. So, as you were.

Mr MULLIGAN — This is just on the west of the Wingan River, showing the dense bush on each side of the Princes Highway. This is just a spot off the highway near Storey Creek, showing the huge fuel loads. Another one is showing the dense bush on each side of a cleared powerline break through the forest.

This is near Cabbage Tree, which shows a fuel reduction burn. It is probably 12 months old, I think. I am not sure. Garry might know better than me, but about that, I think. That shows that is fairly safe bush. That is not going to cause great fires.

This is an area near Cann River, near the weighbridge, which has been maintained by burning fairly regularly over the last 100 years, probably. You can see that there is a light fuel load there, probably 5 or 10 tonnes to the hectare or something, which is manageable, except under extreme circumstances.

This one is on the road to Dargo. It shows a burn. The canopies are okay. It is just a light burn, but the bush there is pretty light too, so that photo is not of a lot of significance.

This is going up between the Cobbannah and Castleburn, showing a build-up of the high fuel loads again.

This is just north of Dargo, the area that was burnt heavily in 2002, I think it was. That hillside is completely denuded of eucalypts, and just solid wattle.

This is going further up the Dargo Road showing the regrowth in those 14 years. Why I wanted to get that photo is because the humus has been burnt right off the soil; there is nothing left, and there is a lot of that through the mountains.

This is taken on the same spot looking east. You can see along the skyline the bare patches, the odd trees, and down through the closer bush you can see bare patches. As you well understand, when you have got a big fire going like that, it goes in fits and bursts depending on the wind and so forth; hence you have got little patches that did not die.

This is further up, heading up towards the high plains. This is going through a patch of woollybutt. You can see the growth that is coming back in that 12 or 13 years. It has come back in amongst it. It is as dense as dense. You cannot walk through it. If we get a fire in that one again, you have got all that dead timber to fuel it as well, so what it will leave after another fire I do not know.

This is looking west off the Dargo Road. Just as far as you can see is dead timber.

This is destroyed mountain ash that is just up a bit further from the previous photo.

This shows a patch of mountain ash where the fire obviously slowed down a bit. Probably it was night time or such. It has damaged some of it, but it has left a canopy and it is not too bad. That is what all that country should have been like.

This is on the alpine road looking north from the Star Mine lookout. That just shows the fire-killed timber rolling away into the distance. That is the situation that we have got. Half of Gippsland has been fire killed or fire damaged seriously. The remaining 50 per cent is due to go any time, plus what was burnt before.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time. We are going to get kicked out at any moment.

Mr MULLIGAN — I am going as quick as I can speak.

Ms BATH — You are doing a tremendous job.

Mr MULLIGAN — Mega-fires are becoming an increasing phenomenon worldwide. I think it was in 2007 that there was a meeting in Sun City in South Africa. I am not sure who called it, but it was attended by forestry people from all over the world.

Ms SHING — Yes. Mr Packham referred to that in his evidence yesterday and went through that in some detail.

Mr MULLIGAN — Did he? So you have got that?

Ms SHING — Yes, we have.

Mr MULLIGAN — Righto. But that just found that the mega-fires have only come since the regular burning went.

Ms SHING — And that was his evidence.

The CHAIR — Stopped, yes.

Mr MULLIGAN — The next one is that preventative burning is cheaper than fire suppression. That was published in a journal in December 2006, an American journal.

Ms BATH — I think Mr Packham also brought that up, and he highlighted some quotes from Mr Cheney.

Mr MULLIGAN — Did he? He pulled the rug from under me, in other words?

Ms BATH — But you are showing your consistency, John.

Mr MULLIGAN — That is available. I have got a copy here if you did not see it or want to see it.

Ms SHING — We have got that already. That is very useful; thank you.

Mr MULLIGAN — Righto. This one is in our submission, but I think it wants mentioning again. Dr Phil Cheney, a senior principal research scientist and project leader for bushfire management and behaviour in Canberra, described this situation as presented to him by a former department CEO. The quote is, 'Why should I carry — —

The CHAIR — John, I think we are going to have to finish up, because we are literally going to get thrown out. I have two very quick points to make. The first is we have heard contradictory evidence today from two local East Gippsland environment groups. We would appreciate you examining their submissions and making any commentary that you wish to support or rebut, as you see fit, on any of those points, because the evidence is contradictory.

Mr MULLIGAN — I realise that.

The CHAIR — I will make that point. We obviously need to come to resolutions on some of those. One of the quotes given to us was, 'Wildfires are horrendous enough, but to deliberately burn bush where native animals find refuge is absolutely criminal'.

Ms SHING — And that was the friends of Gippsland Lakes.

The CHAIR — They also made the point that science does not support preventative burning almost of any type around houses.

Ms SHING — There was a reference to cool low-intensity burns being of some use, but that the data and biodiversity needs to be mapped and that research needs to be done before any burns can take place that might threaten unknown flora and fauna habitat.

The CHAIR — I am relaxed if you do not want to respond to all of that now — I am conscious of the time — and if you want to make some further comments.

Ms BATH — You could read the Hansard transcript that we provide and make some comment on it.

Ms SHING — We will send that to you, if you would like.

Mr MULLIGAN — I would rather take it and respond to it, but I would just add here: did the Aborigines have scientific backing when they burnt the country before?

Ms SHING — We will take that as a rhetorical question, John.

Ms BATH — Point taken. John, coming off the back of that, my question relates to your early life in Gipsy Point, which you mentioned. We have heard submissions about water — concern for water degradation and that

it becoming too dangerous to drink when there have been massive fires come through, soil erosion and species, so fauna probably because they can move. In terms of that, in your early experiences how was that when you had those low fires or cool fires?

Mr MULLIGAN — It was never a concern in those days — a bit different to that big fire that went through Licola, when we went up there after that and the rain had come after the fire when everything was bare and denuded for miles. The fires that we had were all just patchwork burns. Nobody ever put them out because you could not. We only had garden rakes and a box of matches. That is all we had to fight a fire with. I can talk for half an hour if you want it.

The CHAIR — No. We were actually due to finish at 3.15 p.m., and it is 3.15 p.m. right now, which is our cut-off time. Hansard need to pack up their equipment, and we need to hand the room back.

Ms SHING — We may follow up, though, with further requests for information once we have received what you provide to us via the secretariat.

Mr MULLIGAN — We would definitely like to respond to those.

Ms SHING — That would be great.

Ms BATH — I may put one question on notice so that you can respond when you are responding to the others. You mentioned that there are great risks, and that burning would have to be done under risks. I would like you to address your idea of how you can manage some of those risks. Not now, but would you think about it and come back to us as well?

Ms SHING — Add that to what you provide.

Ms BATH — And what you see as the different agencies — CFA, DELWP or Parks — working in with that.

Mr MULLIGAN — Yes.

Ms SHING — And what does acceptable risk look like is the other thing.

Mr MULLIGAN — It is hard to say. If I was given charge of the burning now, I would be dead scared whenever I tried to do it because of the loads of fuel in the bush. Unless you strike a day with no wind and not too much heat, you are going to be in trouble.

Ms SHING — You would not be the first to give us that evidence.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for your evidence. I thank Hansard for their forbearance and work over the last couple of days. I thank the council again for the use of the facilities, and the audience, who have been here through much of the day. I note the presence here at this late hour of the local member, Mr Bull, who has been here I think the whole day.

Ms BATH — Chair, I think we are unable to take any comments from the floor at this point, are we?

The CHAIR — No, we are not.

Ms BATH — If anybody has comments they would like to make, please provide them to the secretariat. Unfortunately they cannot go into the transcript, but please send them in to the secretariat.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much.

Mr MULLIGAN — Thank you for letting us have a say.

Committee adjourned.