

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Bairnsdale—Thursday, 24 October 2019

MEMBERS

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Cr Natalie O'Connell, Mayor,

Ms Fiona Weigall, General Manager, Assets and Environment, and

Mr Stuart McConnell, General Manager, Place and Community, East Gippsland Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the Bairnsdale public hearing for the Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities. I also extend a welcome to any members of the public and the media present here today. This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee is conducting around Victoria to inform itself about the issues relevant to the Inquiry.

I will just run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that no legal action can be taken against you in relation to the evidence that you give. However, this prediction will not apply to any comments you make outside of the hearing even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted in our final report. Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. Could each of you please introduce yourselves, including your titles, before you begin your presentation. Over to you.

Cr O'CONNELL: Thanks very much. My name is Natalie O'Connell, I am the Mayor of East Gippsland Shire Council. Thank you for providing the opportunity to present a submission here today and for holding the public hearings in regional areas, especially in Bairnsdale. It is very much appreciated.

Visual presentation.

Cr O'CONNELL: Just a little bit about East Gippsland. Obviously it is a very large regional municipality, being the second largest in the state only by about 100 square kilometres. It is about 10 per cent of Victoria and a large proportion of the land is public land, about 75 per cent. The physical characteristics mean that East Gippsland already manages a high degree of risk when it comes to events that impact the community and the environment. We have got a very long history of fire and floods and we are also in the midst of a long-lasting drought, which is impacting much of our shire at the moment. The very dispersed nature of our townships means they are often very small and sometimes quite remote, and we also have a higher proportion of older people in our community. So together with an economy that is very significantly linked to the natural environment and primary industries, these all add to the vulnerability of our community.

We like to consider that as a council we are a leader in considering climate change at an organisational level when compared to other like councils. We have a three-person sustainability team within council and have also addressed climate change within our planning functions for almost a decade. Lakes Entrance was one of the first areas in Victoria to have planning controls that considered sea level rise. Over the past five years council has invested over \$5 million in climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives. Approximately \$3 million of this was via competitive funding programs, with the remainder funded by our council cash. We have also been formally recognised with sustainability awards for our aquatic and leisure facilities and via a United Nations award for our Bright Futures energy consumption initiatives.

Today our submission outlines adaptation measures that are needed to help East Gippsland around three themes: building adaptive capacity, planning for the future and providing infrastructure to support our communities. Today I will provide an overview of some of our work and initiatives to date before handing over to our general managers to discuss the areas where we consider there is room to improve adaptation and mitigation responses.

Understanding how to support effective and ongoing action to both mitigate the impacts and adapt to a changing environment are considered critical for East Gippsland. Council's approach to date has been to focus our efforts on working to reduce our organisational climate impact and footprint, plan effectively for

sustainable growth and infrastructure provision, and support the development of capable and resilient communities and also minimise the negative impacts on our economy. We have initiated a range of programs designed to improve access to information for our community to support effective decision-making, such as quarterly 'Environment Connect' newsletters and a *Building Resilience* guide to consider climate change approaches for East Gippsland houses.

Beyond providing access to information we also recognise the importance of developing the capacity of community members to plan for their future and their response to events. Example actions include working with communities to develop local incident management plans and continuing to work on and improve the way councils and agencies work with communities impacted by events and providing a community grants program. The number and diversity of places across the shire means that council has a significant task in working with those communities to understand and to increase their capacity to plan for the future and to recognise the actions that they can take themselves. We have got over 40 communities across our shire and the distances can spread up to 4 hours from one end of the shire to the other. Most recently this has seen council piloting an approach to the development of place and community plans across several quite different communities to understand how best to develop this place-based approach.

Council has taken the view that to be able to engage appropriately with the community about mitigating community impact on the environment we need to be proactively engaged in reducing our own carbon footprint, so a range of projects have been undertaken, the most notable being the Bright Futures project, which occurred across two stages, the first being energy efficiency upgrades at council facilities and street lighting upgrades. Stage 2 has focused on identifying and investigating opportunities to deliver renewable energy solutions appropriate to our region and to increase the use and production of renewable energy. Technical reports were developed that provided council with priorities for action and investment, and these have resulted in the implementation of a solar bulk buy program, multisite feasibility study and piloting an energy information hub and the development of the *East Gippsland New Energy Technology Roadmap: Business Case*.

Council has also made a commitment to install solar PV and undertake energy efficiencies on council buildings, committed to the TAKE2 initiative and committed to attend a process being run by the MAV for a power purchase agreement for Victorian councils. Further details on these initiatives are available in our submission and via case studies that we can make available to the panel members.

Now I will hand over to Stuart McConnell, our General Manager of Place and Community, to discuss the adaptation in more detail.

Mr FOWLES: Sorry, Mayor. Just before you go, you referenced a couple of things there—the TAKE2 initiative, which is?

Cr O'CONNELL: That is a program statewide that we are a part of in terms of—

Ms WEIGALL: Taking 2 degrees off climate change. It is a commitment to taking 2 degrees off our emissions, yes.

Mr FOWLES: There was one other program you referenced about a paragraph before which had lots of words in it, which I did not recognise.

Cr O'CONNELL: The *East Gippsland New Energy Technology Roadmap: Business Case*?

Mr FOWLES: Yes, those are all the words! Which is?

Cr O'CONNELL: With that one we looked at what were going to be the best outcomes for us in terms of working with our community to reduce emissions. We looked at three things there: one was the solar bulk buy, one was developing a business case to work with industry about mitigating their own emissions, and there was also a lot of—

Mr FOWLES: But they are energy emissions primarily? Is that the focus? Yes, okay.

Cr O'CONNELL: They are energy emissions. The report of it is in your takeaway pack. There was a lot of talk about, 'Well, get yourself a solar farm', so we did a lot of work about what was actually going to have the

best impact for our community and reduce emissions the most, and those were seen as some of the ones that were most easy to implement and would actually reduce emissions the most.

Mr FOWLES: Yes, thank you.

Mr McCONNELL: As the Mayor said, my name is Stuart McConnell. I am the General Manager of Place and Community at East Gippsland Shire Council. Planning for a municipality like ours, which is very large and quite diverse, is complex and presents some real challenges in terms of both the policy but also the physical setting and the things that that poses. We have been working to better understand the best way to manage growth in the context of both the pressures on our community but also the pressures that come from climate change and stepping our way through those. Some of these are significant challenges in terms of both maintaining the safety of our community but also ensuring there is a sustainable future for our communities. Developing certainty in terms of where and how growth and development can occur is a really critical issue, both, as I said, for protecting safety but also for ensuring that there can be development, jobs and growth within the municipality at the same time. Often uncertainty around these issues can lead to people being hesitant to invest, so it is important that we do this work to create a sense of confidence around the future for our communities.

East Gippsland presents a unique intersection of a number of climate-related challenges. Each of these are issues that we have dealt with over many, many years, but clearly climate change is contributing to these being more frequent and more intense. We have drought, and there has been a lot of discussion recently about the impacts of that drought, but certainly in a Victorian context they are most pointed in East Gippsland and in Wellington Shires.

We have a long history of fire, as the Mayor outlined, and the context of increasing severity and frequency of some of those fires, this is leaving some of our communities feeling vulnerable in that respect. I think one of the significant things in that is that where there are repeated incidents of fire that wears on communities and wears down their resilience. The other area which is very significant for us is in coastal erosion and inundation issues, so we are working with our communities around each of those issues.

I will talk a little bit about the Lakes Entrance growth and adaptation strategy. You have got a handout in your packs in relation to that. I use that because it is, I think, a particularly good example of some of the challenges that we face in terms of coastal inundation issues. For those who are not aware, the simple story for Lakes Entrance is that already, when we get high tide and high river flows, areas in the main part of Lakes Entrance are affected by flooding. That is only going to be exacerbated as sea level rise occurs.

The CHAIR: What height is Lakes Entrance above the high tide line at the moment? Are you able to reference sort of an average?

Mr FOWLES: Point nine.

The CHAIR: Point nine of a metre above high tide? Okay.

Mr McCONNELL: That sounds about right. When we get flood conditions occurring in the major rivers the lake levels will rise, and there is a limit to how much water transfers through the entrance. Then when you get high tide those two things come together and the main business area within Lakes Entrance is impacted.

So I think already we have got some very real challenges there, and that is going to occur. All the projections are that that occurs more frequently into the future, so—

Mr HAMER: Sorry, can I just ask: how often is that occurring at the moment?

Ms WEIGALL: It already does—

Mr HAMER: Over the last 10 years how often has it happened.

Ms WEIGALL: The last time that we had a bad flood in Lakes Entrance was 2014, but there have been incidents since then. It is a combination of a high tide and a rainfall event. So a lot of it is actually coming from

the catchment. It is about the catchment coming down into Lakes Entrance; it acts like a bath, so it fills up to a certain point. If it cannot get out through the entrance because you have got a king tide, you get inundation.

It really depends on the culmination of those events. We have not had a bad one, because of the drought conditions, for the last three years but they happen periodically. You can get them happening two or three times a year.

Mr FOWLES: So is the more immediate concern the effect that the king tides have on freshwater inundation or is it the fact that if sea levels rise 0.9 metres, you would effectively end up with a new shoreline?

Ms WEIGALL: It is both. So you end up with a new shoreline, you end up with infrastructure that was built for certain conditions which is ageing and is not able to withstand that impact—

Mr FOWLES: It is going to end up under water.

Ms WEIGALL: It ends up under water. We have got seawalls. It has always been happening. We have had seawalls in Lakes Entrance for over 100 years, but the seawalls were built for a certain time and a certain condition and those conditions are changing. So it is really about, when we get to talking about infrastructure, how our infrastructure can help to respond so that we make sure that our only response is not retreat, that we can actually adapt and mitigate at the same time.

Mr McCONNELL: I think there is a very real issue there for communities about how frequently they can manage that kind of impact. It has happened over decades, but if it happens infrequently, communities are well-placed to be able to manage that. If it is happening very frequently or more frequently, the question is: at what point does that become a real challenge to people continuing to live and to operate businesses and so on in this area? And whilst we talk about this as a case study, it is very real because that area is where people live and work today.

The CHAIR: Can I ask: how has the insurance sector responded to the issues in Lakes Entrance? Are people able to secure flood insurance for flooding?

Ms WEIGALL: Some can, some cannot. Insurance levels in some area have actually quadrupled. So you can still insure, but at a dramatic cost. We actually did some work a few years ago in looking at how we could help home owners assess their vulnerability. In the end we chose not to publish that work because of what we thought it would do to those properties' ability to insure. So unless it was done across the state and it was equitable, we felt that we were putting our home owners at risk by providing that information because of the way the insurance industry is dealing with it. There has always been an element of risk, but as soon as it is an identified risk point it is virtually impossible for those home owners to seek affordable insurance.

Mr McCONNELL: So this is a difficult problem, and the insurance question is one where you have probably heard that, similar to in bushfire-prone areas it is difficult to get insurance in some of those areas. That is part of the challenge of increasing severity and frequency of these natural disaster impacts. So it is a difficult issue. Council is working with support from funding from the State Government to address that, and the project outlined is one in which we want to step through and get the best understanding we can about what the likely frequency and so on of impacts are over periods of time within Lakes Entrance and then to develop the options for that. We are at the point now where we are getting towards the end of the process of identifying impacts and the risks associated with that, and we will start to shortly move into questions around what are the best options to manage over time within an area like Lakes Entrance. The issues that we are working through in Lakes Entrance are issues that other places will be dealing with as well, so it is important to work through.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask in a really practical way, if I owned a house in Lakes Entrance, it was an old house and I had a desire to knock it over and build a new house, how would council deal with that in terms of the fact that you are 0.9 of a metre above sea level and that over the next—I think the IPCC reports are suggesting a 1-metre sea level rise by 2100.

Mr McCONNELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: So how would council at this stage deal with my practical example of wanting to build a new home?

Mr McCONNELL: Already there are in our planning scheme some interim controls that put in some specific requirements for planning around inundation. Those requirements differ depending on whether it is an existing development or whether it is a completely new development. Some specific interim controls are already in our planning scheme, and I think part—

Mr FOWLES: Are there permanent controls in front of a panel at the moment, or are they coming?

Mr McCONNELL: Sorry?

Mr FOWLES: Are there permanent controls coming?

Mr McCONNELL: I think work such as the project we have outlined for you is part of helping us to understand what the future pathways are to good adaptation within the Lakes Entrance context, and then we can come back and look at what the planning scheme controls need to be in the future.

Ms WEIGALL: So those controls have been there for nearly a decade and really are permanent controls at the moment, and they are controls that are now being replicated. I guess one of the issues, one of the points we want to make today, is about that having generalised planning controls across Victoria that do not recognise local conditions, and local issues are one of the challenges. For Lakes Entrance access and egress is an issue for us, but it is a slow issue. We have up to 3 days' warning before these sorts of events happen. It is not a high-energy coastline that we are dealing with. So therefore is access and egress as much of an issue for us because we know we can get people out within safe time frames?

Ms GREEN: Thanks for having us. I have actually been a visitor in the shire immediately post flooding events in the past, so I have sort of seen it firsthand and how difficult it can be. I just want to acknowledge our colleague Tim Bull in the audience, the local MP. We have been kicking around the show for a long time and it is good to see him here.

I want to firstly say how brilliant this booklet is. I have previously been Parliamentary Secretary for Police and Emergency Services and I am a 13-year veteran of the CFA, so I have turned out to flood events and fire events, and I just think this is the best booklet I have seen anywhere. So well done on the support you are giving to your community from that.

My question is really that I have sort of been thinking about other LGAs that would have similar dynamics, particularly like Lakes Entrance. Maybe on the Bellarine there might be some similarities, but I am thinking it is probably more New South Wales where they have got big catchments and rain events together with storm surges—maybe Byron Bay, northern New South Wales, where those big rivers come in. I am just wondering how you would compare yourselves in preparedness to them and whether you have dialogue and sharing about what some of the adaptation options might be.

Ms WEIGALL: So we have set up as part of this plan a community reference group, where we are having that dialogue around how to communicate and what it is that are their triggers. Is it the severity of the event or is it the frequency of the event? Are they are going to get sick of going out in their gumboots or is it about a big event? So we have started that dialogue. We have been part of a group of, I think, five or six councils across Victoria that did a lot of the data collection. The Port Fairy area is one that we work with a lot, and also Wellington shire. We have been trying to work on that. We have been a member of various coastal committees at a national level and have been really trying to keep ourselves abreast of what is happening.

We are a little different to a lot of our counterparts because our coastal communities are on a lakefront rather than on a high-energy coastline. So if we look at what is happening in say Bass Coast shire at the moment, that is not the same sort of issue that we have here. Our erosion is not immediate erosion, it is slow erosion over time. It gives us time to plan for our adaption and build infrastructure, but of course that comes with a cost. As a smallish council with very few ratepayers, it is a challenge for us. We are certainly keeping abreast of what our counterparts are doing and trying to work with our communities. We are having a conversation with them so that this is something that we are developing collectively rather than it being imposed.

The CHAIR: From your perspective what support could be provided by the Parliament to help you do the work that you need to do and map, identify and put in place local public policy responses to the challenges?

Mr McCONNELL: Already this work is supported by government funding. That is a good thing. But I think responding to these challenges is one that is going to require support from all levels and work from all levels of government and from community. I am conscious that as we step through the solutions or at least the options for action around Lakes Entrance, they are things that most likely are going to require investment from State Government, from local government, from communities together. I am conscious that in that, whilst we need to understand the local context and respond in the local context, State Government is going to want to be mindful of where else these issues might occur in terms of how it decides about investment and so on and what actions might be taken. So there are some precedent issues in this that we need to work through, working closely with State Government to understand how it plays out in different places and make sure that we can move forward, rather than the risk being that whatever is involved here, people are fearing the level of investment and therefore are balking at taking action.

Ms WEIGALL: If I could just add to that, I guess we can work with Government to develop an implementation plan. We need to also work with Government to fund and resource the implementation plan. For Lakes Entrance some of that is around some of that first line of defence: things like our seawall infrastructure, our drainage. We will need to completely reconfigure a new approach to it. That is too much for a council of our size to bear. We have done some costs. To replace all our seawalls in Lakes Entrance—remembering it is not our only coastal community—it is \$35 million to replace all of our seawalls. At a time when we really need to work with Government on this we are also seeing that the funding that used to be available for those sorts of initiatives is no longer there. The coastal risk funding—we have sought funding from that twice to do some of our early works in Lakes Entrance. We understand that that funding may no longer be available.

If you extrapolate, if it is \$35 million for Lakes Entrance and it is just one of the coastal communities across Victoria, I think we are seeing ageing infrastructure across Victoria that is going to need a fairly concerted funding effort so that we can mitigate those impacts. I guess it is not just in the planning phase that we need that partnership; we also need it in the delivery of different infrastructure solutions. We can over time maintain infrastructure. We find it really difficult to do that stepped change and that big investment in infrastructure. At the same time the national disaster recovery funding has been constrained, so it is now really just transport infrastructure: roads, drainage, culverts, bridges. All the community infrastructure that is part of these communities is no longer able to be funded for replacement through those previous relief funding sources. So we have collectively got a very large challenge ahead of us, I think, to just make sure that we are implementing the infrastructure and the solutions in a really timely fashion and that they are fit for purpose, so we have not got one solution for all of Victoria and we recognise that different places will need different things.

Mr FOWLES: So we heard some evidence yesterday about councils seeking I guess statewide guidelines or perhaps planning controls to assist them in providing the right controls for the longer term impacts of climate change. If I understand you, you have sort of said you want a bit more local flexibility in relation to that. How do you see the planning controls falling out over time?

Ms WEIGALL: Over time the local policy content in the planning scheme has been reduced and reduced and reduced. I think we need to see the local content in planning schemes go back up so we do not just get this carte blanche ‘This is what is happening’ across the state, so that we do have that nuance around what is required at a local level and so that we have the ability in our local planning schemes to recognise these differences and adapt. Whilst we do need statewide guidance and support, I am not sure that our council believes that statewide controls, set at the same level to mitigate the highest risk, will work for all our communities. We have seen boat ramps and jetties that have been built to the current standard; now, other than in a flood, people cannot actually get to their boats because they are built too high. So we have got to be practical about this as well.

Mr FOWLES: Finally, how busy is Lakes Entrance? I have not spent a huge amount of time down here; how much boat traffic is actually going in and out?

Ms WEIGALL: I think there was a study done around the value of boating on the Gippsland Lakes a couple of years ago: \$160 million per annum was the estimated value. Lakes Entrance has over 500 000 visitors per annum as well as having Victoria’s largest stationary, stable fishing fleet. So it is busy.

Mr McCONNELL: From the adaptation planning and how the planning controls work I think there is also a need to consider the lifecycle of investments. As Fiona mentioned we have got examples where infrastructure has been built with that 2100 period in mind that is not suitable for now. We need to be mindful that our communities are living and working in these places now and are continuing to work over a period of time. It is not simply a case of moving directly to the end point but rather a progressive series of steps on a pathway to managing the impacts of climate change and enabling our communities to continue to operate well in the interim.

I might move on briefly to drought issues. Again, we have been doing some ongoing work in that space to support our communities. We have established a reference group. We had done a piece of work with Wellington Shire Council jointly around what we think is needed in our area in relation to drought. We have given you in your packs a copy of the *Looking Ahead* document. That sets out the key things that we are looking for in relation to a response to the current drought conditions. The thing that is important in that is that there is a combination of immediate relief type actions, but also, particularly through the agriculture futures component, a focus on how we help farmers to transition and support them to transition, because they already are, to ways of operating that are going to be more resilient to the impacts of climate change into the future. You have got that in your packs. There has been a fair bit of discussion around those issues in recent times, and we are happy to take questions on that.

The other thing that I would make a comment on is that our communities already are working in this space and are tremendously resilient, particularly some of our more remote communities that for many years have had to manage issues with less outside support than others. Our Mayor mentioned earlier the local incident management plans that many of our communities have developed to help them come together and manage what to do in the case of fire or other incidents, as a community. I think that that is tremendously important.

The other one that was mentioned earlier is the pilot we have been doing in terms of community planning. Again we are in the process now, and hopefully council will shortly consider for approval some plans in relation to three areas: Twin Rivers, the Cann Valley and then the Snowy Errinundra area. Whilst that program in itself is not fundamentally about climate change, what it is, is building connection and resilience within community. I think that is a foundation, I suppose, for communities to respond well to the kinds of impacts that we will see through climate change. So I think at that point I will hand over to Fiona and she can take you through some more of the infrastructure issues.

Ms WEIGALL: Thank you. I am Fiona Weigall. I am the general manager of assets and environment here at council. I think we have touched on quite a bit of the infrastructure issues. I am expecting that you have heard a lot around the infrastructure issues in all of your hearings from local governments. I guess our message is that council is not sitting back and expecting others to do this for them. We want to take a partnership approach. But the way that our budgets are structured, the way that our rating is structured, means that really our budget is focused on maintenance and replacement of existing infrastructure. We need to work in a partnership to work out how we are going to make that step change in our infrastructure so it is resilient. That will come with a requirement for funding streams other than our normal rate streams to fund that.

We have taken initiatives, as we have said, in Lakes Entrance. When we have been replacing seawalls we have been making sure that they are designed so that they can be adapted over time. We have not built them to the 2100 levels, but we have built them so that we can raise them over time, so that as it becomes an issue we can raise them, but they are still functional at the moment.

I think that one of the things is that we all recognise that many Victorians choose to live by the coast, whether that is the lake or the coast or by a forest or by a river. It is where people want to live. So we cannot relocate everyone. We really need to understand that retreat is not the option that most Victorians are going to respond well to. So what are the infrastructure changes that can help, along with the planning changes, to make sure that we are resilient into the 21st and 22nd centuries?

The CHAIR: Fiona, it has just occurred to me: in many different parts of the state the management arrangements of our foreshore are different. Is council the predominant foreshore manager in the Gippsland Lakes or is it Parks Victoria or is it a mixture?

Ms WEIGALL: In the urban areas arrangements are slightly different. We are the committee of management for foreshores in urban areas. In other councils there is often a reliance on local volunteer committees of management. Not all councils take that responsibility for the committee of management. We have for the last 19 years been the committee of management for urban foreshores, and then Parks Victoria and DELWP manage the non-urban areas. So it is a slightly different model here. It means that we can coordinate, we can work with Government to develop infrastructure. So if we use the seawalls in Lakes Entrance example, when they were starting to fail we could work in partnership with Gippsland Ports and DELWP to develop the design that was appropriate for that location and others and then work collectively to work out how we could fund that. There was an ERSC bid put in to the State for funding. Unfortunately Lakes Entrance did not get that funding. It is still an issue for us. We are systematically working through it, but it really needs to be a partnership for the way we manage it.

The CHAIR: Are the existing foreshore management arrangements appropriate? Do they work? Would you like to see some change? If so, what is that change?

Ms WEIGALL: It is really interesting, especially round the seawall. If we look at foreshores this is where a lot of agencies put their infrastructure—all of the utilities are in there, we have got VicRoads roads, we have got our infrastructure—so when we did an assessment of the foreshores there was over \$70 million worth of agency infrastructure on our foreshores. So it is not just protecting the buildings and the business and the ambience of Lakes Entrance. Sorry, it was about \$39 million, not \$70 million, worth of infrastructure that was also at risk. So I think the foreshore management arrangements are appropriate for us.

For our council area there has been I think until very recently a lack of understanding between all agencies about who is responsible for seawalls, and therefore we have been maintaining but not replacing them. As we have said, the infrastructure is now often 100 years old, so it is well beyond its depreciated life, and it was designed for a different time, so we need to design new infrastructure. Recently council elected to take over the committee of management for another area in Lakes Entrance, Bullock Island, but elected to not take on the seawalls because we saw that the replacement of those seawalls was infrastructure that we were not able to financially fund the replacement of. We are actually starting to look at, when we take on a committee of management, can we really afford to take on the responsibility for this.

Mr FOWLES: What are the advantages for taking on committee of managements? Is it just actually the planning is done locally rather than out of Melbourne?

Ms WEIGALL: It is that. It is that we can invest in it. For our communities our foreshores are the main areas of recreation, so they perform a really important part of the lifestyle here. I think because we work and live with our communities we are able to invest in our foreshores, whether that is jetties, fishing platforms, boardwalks or just whether our parks and gardens teams are actually maintaining them. So we are probably able to put more money into the maintenance of that than we are currently seeing DELWP and Parks Victoria able to put into the maintenance of their areas of foreshore. We are reasonably happy with taking on the maintenance responsibility. What we are finding hard is when we are expected to replace major capital infrastructure. That is beyond our capacity.

Mr FOWLES: So other than the Lakes Entrance seawalls, what is the total scale of investment required do you think to protect against the effects of climate change across all the other seawalls you have referenced?

Ms WEIGALL: We have just started to look at Mallacoota, where it is probably about \$12 million. Paynesville is approximately \$12 million to \$14 million as well, and they are just the next two. They are also at that critical part. We are starting to experience failure in Mallacoota, another one of our important tourism destinations for Victoria. Then beyond that, as I said, most of our towns have got some sort of seawall, so we have only really in the last three years started to investigate the standard and their vulnerabilities.

The CHAIR: Which State Government department or agency is responsible for seawalls? Is it DELWP?

Ms WEIGALL: It is DELWP because it is on Crown land, unless, and this is where it gets complex.

It depends. Is there a road reserve there? Does a road reserve go into the water? You know if we talk about our Metung community, the seawall is actually within the road reserve so officially is a Regional Roads Victoria responsibility. I think unpacking that is part of the challenge for agencies.

The CHAIR: Seawalls potentially have ended up being built by port authorities as well, haven't they?

Ms WEIGALL: Absolutely. If we are looking at seawalls as being one of our major and first lines of defence, we really need to look at who is responsible, how we are designing them. You know, we had to locally develop the designs for how we were going to replace them. What is the statewide approach, and then how do you localise that depending on your condition?

Mr FOWLES: Do you have a view, and we will not hold you to it, about the preferred model then of managing those seawall assets right across the state? I mean, do you see it as being a DELWP responsibility in the first instance, probably the appropriate level of local engagement, or would you prefer that the local councils take it on and be funded to manage them?

Ms WEIGALL: Look, I cannot speak for all local governments, but I think with our local government, if we are funded, we are prepared to take it on because we are here and we are local and we can respond quickly in those instances. The maintenance of it, we are prepared to take on. The wholesale replacement and ownership of that asset I think needs to sit with the Crown.

Ms GREEN: I am hoping we have not cut into too much of your presentation time with our impertinent questions. My question was sort of about drought and longer term adaptation. Scanning through your presentation around that was that some farmers will transition out of this, and I know that the Lindenow Valley proposal to largely expand horticulture has been around for some time. In terms of the economic impacts—not the individual household ones—what do you see as the long-term future in terms of food and fibre income if some of the farmers that are in the other parts of the shire are looking at transitioning out, whether it is livestock, and what are the opportunities? And in terms of the actual economy, would it be an up or a down if you were able to grow that Lindenow Valley proposal?

Cr O'CONNELL: Agriculture is our third-largest industry in East Gippsland, so it is obviously a huge factor. The drought has been a massive problem for us in the last few years, so the announcement around the \$10 million water storage for the Lindenow Valley was a good outcome, but that is only sort of limited to the growers who are able to irrigate. You have obviously got your dryland farmers as well. So I think there is greater ability out of there for not only the irrigators but also dryland farmers if there was further storage out of the Mitchell. But, yes, it is a huge industry for us, and it is growing. Our three biggest growers for horticulture out there are continuing to grow, and then you have got your beef and sheep growers as well, and the farmer-led group, the Gippsland Agricultural Group, which we have seen on our council land out at the airport there. So we do have some really great farmers in that space who are looking at ways to adapt their practices, and I think it is about making sure the education, I suppose, is getting to all of those farmers. But I think naturally you will see some transition just due to the fact that it has been going on for so long.

Ms GREEN: But in terms of, say, the jobs and the ag/hort income in the region, do you think that the increase in horticultural production would replace, overall, the local economy? Would it be enough, the potential? If you are looking at a certain number of dryland farmers transitioning out and the decline in income in the area, would that be replaced by the expansion in horticulture, or have you not done the projections yet?

Ms WEIGALL: I think some of it is also around, for our main horticultural areas, the irrigation licences are fully allocated. So we have not got that capacity to continue to expand in the Mitchell River. There are some other areas within the shire where there is opportunity, but we really need to work through how we get to that. So we have got the Tambo Valley and the areas around Orbost, which have the ability to expand. The Mitchell River is challenging because without some other options around water storage the irrigation licences are really at their peak.

Mr McCONNELL: I think the focus is on supporting our farmers to continue to adapt to still be productive in the changing environment, and there are areas where we can increase value, as Fiona outlined. But if you think in a broader statewide context, these farms and the agricultural production in our area are a pretty critical state-level resource for food security and other perspectives. It is important that we continue to work with our farmers to help with the transitions that are needed to continue to adapt to change, and they are already working in that space.

Ms GREEN: And you might be aware, Stuart, from your work north of the Divide, or on the Divide—and that is how we know each other—a number of local government areas have actually been doing future land use planning. Has East Gippsland shire been doing that? Some of the councils south of the Divide in the greater Melbourne area are now going, ‘Well, do we go into stone fruit production?’ because the projections for Shepparton, for example, are that maybe by 2050 desertification there will mean that they can no longer produce stone fruit, and more grain production for, say, the Southern Grampians area. So has that sort of land use work been done?

Mr McCONNELL: So there is some work that we have been doing in terms of development of a rural land use strategy, which is in progress, but that is some of the work that we need to continue to do.

Ms WEIGALL: And some of that was informed by—when the department of agriculture funded these sort of studies—a study that looked at the Omeo area. It looked at a few areas around the state and looked at what that meant in terms of cropping, and it actually saw it as being more of an area for orcharding over time. We believe that there is a need for that continued level of expertise from the State to help us with our land use planning. We can put planning controls in place, but what is the research that is informing that?

Ms GREEN: Unfortunately the Member for Murray Plains as agriculture minister between 2010 and 2014 was the one that actually moved that out; it was taken out of the department. But fortunately they have all gone into I think it is Deakin uni and they are the ones that are going out and assisting councils to do that. I have met with them on a number of occasions and they are doing some great work but, yes, it is disappointing that it is not within the department anymore.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of the time. If you have got any final comments that you would like to make, probably now is the time to make them before we move to our next stakeholder.

Ms WEIGALL: Thank you. We have made quite a lengthy submission that had 20 recommendations that we will not go through now. I think our final message is that we believe to tackle climate change it has to be a partnership approach—it cannot be any one level of government—and it needs to involve the community. It needs to look at being place specific so that we can respond to the different conditions in different places. We are also looking, where we have got funding, for funding to be in programs so there can be continual funding. What we are seeing at the moment is that it is project funding—it changes all the time so we cannot get that ongoing continuity in our programs. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present today.

The CHAIR: It was a fantastic submission.

Witnesses withdrew.