

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 26 February 2020

#### **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

**WITNESS**

Mr Leigh Ewbank, Coordinator, Act on Climate Victoria, Friends of the Earth Melbourne.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearing. Before we begin today there are some important formalities that I must outline. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely, without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you have 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 from in our final report. I understand that you have been informed that today's proceedings are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Please be aware that footage from the website can only be rebroadcast in accordance with the following conditions. The material must only be used for the purposes of fair and accurate reports of the proceedings and must not in any circumstances be used for satire or ridicule or commercial sponsorship or commercial advertising. Broadcasting material must not be digitally manipulated. Any excerpts of proceedings must be placed in context to avoid any misrepresentations, and remarks that are withdrawn are not to be rebroadcast unless the withdrawal is also rebroadcast.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today. Could you please state your name and your position before beginning your presentation.

**Mr EWBANK:** Leigh Ewbank, Act on Climate Coordinator for Friends of the Earth.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific; over to you, Leigh.

**Mr EWBANK:** I would like to thank the committee for allowing us to speak today. Good morning. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

In my time at Friends of the Earth I have seen an incredible commitment of Victorian communities to tackling the climate crisis. Friends of the Earth is a community-driven organisation formed in 1974. We have been a strong voice for environmental protection and social justice since then. We have engaged on the issue of climate change for over two decades and worked towards cutting greenhouse gas emissions and building resilience through practical programs and advocacy.

Friends of the Earth Food Co-op & Cafe in Collingwood is a case in point. With produce from 150 farmers across the state, the cafe serves organic, seasonal and vegan meals to our community every day. The intentional use of local produce minimises the embodied carbon emissions from excessive transportation, and each year the cafe serves 24 000 plates of food, including to vulnerable people in the neighbourhood. The co-op has also pioneered local organic waste composting to demonstrate ways to reduce methane emissions from food waste going to landfill and to encourage low-carbon food production. All the compostable waste from the cafe is transported to a nearby primary school, which is only a couple of hundred metres away, where it is composted and used by the students to grow vegetables and educate them about the benefits of urban farming.

In addition to these practical examples, Friends of the Earth has been actively involved in advocacy. Each night of the week dozens of community members work together on positive solutions. These groups of community members tackle the problem in a holistic way and seek to cut emissions across the whole economy. Some are focused on decarbonising the energy and transport sectors while others work to protect forests as carbon stores. Community campaigns to protect forests, rivers and vulnerable species aim to give the natural world a fighting chance as the planet heats up.

Inspiring community action can be found in all corners of Victoria. Communities are organising info nights, market stalls, radio shows, podcasts, community energy projects, citizen science, tree planting, community gardens, policy work and advocacy. I encourage the Committee to pay close attention to the following examples for insights into how governments can support communities.

Firstly, citizen scientist Aileen Venning from the Bass Coast Climate Action Network has documented dramatic coastal erosion in Inverloch. The local surf beach has seen 50 metres of beach lost to the Southern Ocean since 2012. The surf life-saving club's patrol box has been moved several times at great expense and has been put onto a sled due to the pace of change. The Bunurong Road and the multimillion-dollar surf lifesaving club are now at risk. The State Government has provided emergency funding to arrest the coastal erosion thanks to community members sounding the alarm. Imagine the situational awareness that the Government and authorities could gain by supporting citizen science across the board.

The small, rural community of Tarnagulla in the Central Goldfields is worried about climate impacts. Community members are concerned about increased heatwaves and bushfires—an issue compounded by the fact that the CFA has shrunk from 45 people to just 10. Thanks to a community grant from the State Government, Linda Kennedy and the Tarnagulla Alternative Energy Group have developed a resilience plan with the support of RMIT University, but will it be able to find resourcing to roll out the plan?

When it comes to climate mitigation, community action in the Hepburn shire is a stand-out example of leadership. The community-owned Hepburn wind farm produces enough renewable energy to offset the carbon footprint of all the homes in Hepburn Springs, Daylesford and Leonards Hill. It has helped Victoria avoid 87 000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. The successful Hepburn wind farm created a platform for the Hepburn shire to develop a plan to cut emissions across the whole economy to achieve zero net emissions by 2030. This outcome would ensure the shire does its share of keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees. Will it be able to access the start-up funding to kick off implementation?

Based on our longstanding efforts to tackle the climate crisis and engagement with communities across the state, we encourage the Committee to consider the following recommendations. Firstly, the Victorian Government can show leadership by centring climate change science in policy development. For example, the Andrews Government will soon set interim emissions reduction targets for 2025 and 2030. With climate impacts occurring much faster than predicted, the litmus test for governments is whether the targets and whether climate policies help keep global warming below 1.5 degrees.

Secondly, people of all persuasions are taking action on climate change. The Victorian Parliament has an opportunity to reflect this fact. Bipartisan support for the *Climate Change Act*, which enshrines the target of net zero emissions by 2050 into law and sets out the process for target setting, among other things, is an essential step. A public commitment to the *Climate Change Act* from the Victorian opposition would give communities confidence that efforts to rein in emissions will continue regardless of which party forms government.

Thirdly: a dedicated Victorian climate change action fund. The community demand for start-up funding has outpaced what is on offer, and it is time for governments to catch up. In 2017 the Andrews Government established a \$4.3 million Victorian Climate Change Innovation Partnerships grant scheme to provide start-up funding for community groups, local councils and businesses. The grant scheme, however, was dramatically oversubscribed. Despite receiving more than 240 applications, there was only enough funding to support 24 projects. Nine in 10 projects missed out on grant funding. Friends of the Earth estimate that a fund of \$70 million would have been needed to support all those who applied. A dedicated fund of \$100 million, a Victorian climate change action fund, would fill a key gap. Given that climate impacts and solutions are highly context specific, a statewide fund would help communities roll out projects that are relevant to their needs.

Four: deliver Victoria's first climate budget. Each year the Victorian Government demonstrates its values and priorities in the budget, and Victoria has never had a budget focused on driving climate action. If the State is to achieve the objectives of the *Climate Change Act 2017*, deliver emissions cuts and implement the forthcoming climate strategy and climate adaptation plans, we will need to see a down payment on action. The climate budget concept is not just about the level of investment, it is about better accounting and transparency. The Government cannot afford to fly blind when it comes to the impact of public expenditure on climate change. The Department of Treasury and Finance would benefit from adopting tools to evaluate the climate dimension of budget decisions to ensure investment flows to initiatives that cut emissions and not increase them.

We recommend governments adopt a commitment to climate justice. The onus for cutting emissions should be on those most responsible for producing them. It would be unjust to place the burden onto those who have contributed the least to the problem and future generations, and we would like to highlight the crucial need to

seek out the views of First Nations people and ensure that they have the support they need to have an active role in policy development.

Tackling climate change means cutting emissions in the electricity sector and across the whole economy. Communities currently dependent on fossil fuels and extractive industries will see a lot of change in the years ahead. This is why we believe a dedicated minister for transition should be established and a scaled-up Latrobe Valley Authority could be expanded into a statewide authority. These are two practical steps to give communities the support they need to prosper while we move towards a zero carbon economy.

The final recommendation is a public education campaign on climate action. Leadership from the Victorian Premier and Government can emphasise the importance of climate action for the general public and deliver results. In the 2000s the Bracks Government undertook a public education campaign to build consensus for tackling excessive water use during the millennium drought. Victorians rose to the challenge, changed their behaviour and helped the state achieve dramatic water savings. The Victorian Government and this Committee can draw inspiration from this approach and embark on a public education campaign that elevates climate action as a State priority.

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present to you today, and Friends of the Earth look forward to seeing the final report.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I do have a couple of questions to commence with before I hand over to my colleagues. We had the opportunity early on in the Inquiry to visit the Hepburn community wind farm, and we have heard evidence from other communities that they would like the same opportunity to build their own community-owned renewable energy plant for their own communities. If we were to make a recommendation to the Parliament about establishing it, what might some of the parameters be around what that might look like? Would we limit it to a certain number of megawatts? Would it be an expression of interest process? How might we structure something like that to enable communities to aspire to and develop their own renewable energy on a similar scale to what Hepburn has done?

**Mr EWBANK:** Well, firstly, there is the recommendation for a Victorian Climate Change Action Fund. That would provide the startup funding needed to do prefeasibility and feasibility studies. But I think when you talk to community energy experts what they are really looking for is a mechanism, a policy mechanism, to drive and incentivise community energy projects. One way of doing that is to isolate part of the Victorian renewable energy target for the deployment of community energy.

**The CHAIR:** So they are not competing against the big boys, for want of a better—

**Mr EWBANK:** Yes, that is right. The nature of the VRET mechanism is that it does really benefit the big developers, so there is that need for a niche kind of policy tool. I think one of the parameters will be just the preparedness of communities that are ready to go. So if there is a mechanism that is adopted to roll out community energy, there probably will have to be some piloting periods, just to kind of catalyse the sector. But, yes, one way of doing it would be to isolate, say, 100 megawatts or so of the Victorian renewable energy target towards community energy.

**The CHAIR:** For projects of, what, let us say less than 10 megawatts—would that be the sort of scale, so to try and do 10 of them?

**Mr EWBANK:** Yes. I mean, it is difficult—you do not want to put a cap on the community's ambition, and there is potential for community developer partnerships that could actually see projects of a larger scale. If you look at Hepburn Wind, for example, their two turbines are 2 megawatts each with a total capacity of 4 megawatts. With the improvements in turbine technology we are starting to see turbines approaching 5 megawatts each, so a Hepburn Wind today could be 10 megawatts, and I would not want to see any policy putting a lid on the level of ambition.

**Mr HAMER:** I just want to tease out some of this climate action fund. It has been brought up by a number of other parties through our hearings. In your mind, that would be, I guess, somewhat unrestricted. You said in the previous round up to \$70 million would have been required to fund all of the projects. So your vision would be that provided that it meets certain threshold guidelines, then every project would be funded; is that the intention of a fund, as you are proposing or recommending?

**Mr EWBANK:** Yes. So to give a little bit more detail, I think it would be worthwhile adopting criteria that really advantages the communities that need the support and also the local governments. So you would want to kind of incorporate some, you know, social justice aspects of where the money is being allocated. But as a template or an example of how it could look and how it could be rolled out, the New Energy Jobs Fund, which was administered by Minister Lily D'Ambrosio, that was a \$20 million fund. It allocated money over a four-year period of time. So at least initially the Government could establish a \$100 million fund and allocate the funding on a year-by-year basis. And I think the other factor to keep in mind is the Victorian Climate Change Action Fund should be viewed as like a startup fund, so it is about driving innovation and supporting new offerings from community in terms of mitigation and adaptation, and that is kind of very different to what has been on offer previously.

**Mr HAMER:** And would you see it as more, when you talk about the startup, just actually almost getting that to a business case so that the private sector or community can be an investor, because often at that real starting point it might be hard even if it is \$50 000 or \$100 000 just to actually put in, to get that, or would you see it also as actually like a co-investment in the actual delivery or development?

**Mr EWBANK:** Yes. I mean, it could be either/or. I guess if you look at the community energy sector, for example, and projects like the Hepburn shire's Z-NET project, every dollar that you invest in those types of community enterprises delivers many times more value, just by leveraging private investment and philanthropic investment. So I think there is scope for it to be supporting projects that do have support from outside of government, but once again there will be communities where they have been kind of in a low socio-economic area, for example, that just need the funding to get going and you would not want to see onerous burdens placed on those communities just to be part of this story of taking action on climate.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask: so we have talked a little bit about community-aimed renewable energy. What is a good example of a global leader that is doing that well? Which jurisdiction might we look to to say, 'That's something we might consider'? Have you got a number of jurisdictions you could identify that really are global leaders in that space?

**Mr EWBANK:** I am not a community energy expert, so I highly encourage the committee to reach out to Hepburn Wind, the community power agency, so on and so forth. As I understand it, Scotland is doing some interesting work in this space, and it is quite advanced in terms of community-developer partnerships, so it could be worth taking a look at what Scotland is doing on that front.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. And obviously with the Victorian renewable energy target we have got the big players globally in that space here in Victoria. Should we look at some ways in which communities might say, 'We want to partner with that commercial project and have an additional turbine that we as a community own, which we will do in partnership with a big player'? Is that something that might work?

**Mr EWBANK:** Yes. Friends of the Earth are very supportive of community-developer partnerships. There is a successful example. I believe it is the Sapphire Wind Farm, CWP, in New South Wales, where they actually had a huge groundswell of community investment for the community ownership component, and there are also community members in Woodend that are exploring a community energy and developer partnership to roll out wind energy and potentially some other renewable energy and storage in addition to that.

**The CHAIR:** So could the VRET potentially require, with a 100-megawatt, let us say, wind farm that a certain portion of it must be community owned? Is that something that we should look to do with potential future rounds?

**Mr EWBANK:** With the previous auction round of the Victorian renewable energy target there were criteria that did look at local procurement to incentivise local manufacturing jobs and so on. So it could be worth at least exploring, if not adopting, similar criteria around: can you look kindly on offerings that people that are bidding into those auctions where there is that community portion of ownership.

**Ms GREEN:** I just want to say can you pass on to Cam Walker thanks for his efforts as a firefighter in protecting the Alpine areas over the summer? I followed his Facebook exploits with great interest.

**Mr EWBANK:** Will do.

**Ms GREEN:** For the others, Cam works for Friends of the Earth.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. I think we have pretty much finished our questions, so thank you for coming along, and enjoy the rest of your day.

**Mr EWBANK:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**