

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the CFA training college at Fiskville

Melbourne — 18 May 2015

Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Mr Brad Battin

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Daniel Young

Staff

Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

Research officer: Dr Kelly Butler

Witness

Mr John Cutler.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome you to give evidence to the public hearing.

Mr CUTLER — Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — I will go through a few procedural things first, and then we will be all ears to listen to you. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript. Following your presentation the committee members would like to ask you questions, and of course feel free to tell us whatever you like. Over to you, thanks John.

Mr CUTLER — Thank you very much for this opportunity. I can read the letter that I wrote — it is only a page and a bit — if you would like me to, but if you are privileged to that letter — —

The CHAIR — That is your submission?

Mr CUTLER — Correct, yes.

The CHAIR — Yes, we all do have a copy. If you would like to go through it, you can, but we do have a copy as well — maybe to start you off.

Mr CUTLER — Yes, okay. I am writing to you in regard to your call for submissions about the circumstances at Fiskville, the CFA training wing. I apologise in this preliminary correspondence that I cannot claim complete accuracy in regards to actual dates, but what I am suggesting would be very close.

I was the owner of the property 4084. It was situated some 6 kilometres south of the CFA college. I owned and resided at the property from February 81 until July 2010, which constituted approximately 20 years. During that time I shared the house with other people. The individual stories of these people is as follows.

Personally I was diagnosed with bowel and liver cancer in November 2011. The treatment is successful to date, and I am a very happy boy. Thanks to the state of Victoria. I cannot tell you how happy a boy I am.

I also worked at Fiskville as an electrical contractor, so I visited the site on a regular basis from around 1982 until the late 1990s. Daniele was my stepdaughter. She resided there February 81 to 1984, and she was diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2002 and is currently in remission.

Nicole Blackmore, my other stepdaughter, resided there in the same time frames. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2012, has subsequently had a mastectomy and is currently under treatment.

Jamie and Jocelyn — all good; no problems there.

Kathy Diamond, who used to live around in Hamills Lane, which is just around the corner from Fiskville, and then moved into my home, was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2014 and currently is under treatment.

The thing that concerns me, I suppose, is that I am not going to be brave enough or silly enough to assert that Fiskville was the cause of this sequence of events. I have no professional ability to make that claim. But whilst I was under chemotherapy the teacher at the primary school, who used to reside just above it, is subsequently now deceased with oesophagus cancer. Another friend of mine who lived about another 5 ks around the corner, she is now deceased with liver cancer. There is a young fellow, who currently still lives in Mount Wallace, just up the road, is in remission from testicular cancer. They are statements of facts.

What I am concerned about is I never felt brave enough or strong enough whilst I was in my healing process to come forward, early days, because as my friend said, 'John, put your hand up. Tell the story'. My focus had to be — clearly I had to get better, and I had a very positive attitude. I did not want negativities creeping into that process. Now I feel like I have fully recovered. I am not bashful; I feel like I can cope with this sort of environment.

But what I am concerned about is the incidence of cancer. What I would like to see is some sort of scientific study or an analysis to see what was the extent of cancer, particularly in that south-south-west, which is the prevailing wind from Fiskville. Is that an ordinary statistic, or is it an exceptional statistic? Possibly that might help you guys with your work to identify do we have a problem. I think that is the responsible thing to do.

How do you ensure then that you are getting all of the information? How do you know? With Peter, for instance, who is now deceased, and his family has gone, Peter is just a statistic nowadays. He was the teacher at the primary school, and I sat opposite him in the chemo chairs. The people that worked there — and there is a lot of cancer. I do not know — I have got no idea, and it is not for me to name names — but I can think of three to five to six people who I know straightaway have been sufferers of cancer who worked at the premises. Was it a consequence of Fiskville? I do not know.

The CHAIR — Is that worked as in the CFA or worked on the facility?

Mr CUTLER — They were civilian residents that actually worked at the CFA. One particular woman, her daughter had bowel cancer subsequently as well. I can name Dorothy, because her son-in-law is Justin Madden, and Justin Madden was public about Dorothy's demise with, I think, spinal cancer. She just lived around the corner. It seems to be incredibly strong numbers, without making any statements of fact because I cannot. I just think a good comprehensive study should be conducted to actually analyse and do some hard research into this to find out what has to be an exceptionally high incidence. Basically what I am asking for is the research.

The CHAIR — What do you think these people had in common? Was it the smoke blowing over? Was it the debris in the air? Was it drinking the water? Is there anything that you see was common?

Mr CUTLER — How can I make a comment, other than the smoke belched out of Fiskville, and we always thought that was normal. If there are solids, they have to settle, so I suppose the north-westerly prevailing wind, which was going to blow the residues over the Beremboke area and the Mount Wallace area — it is all supposition. Those residues go into our water tanks, because we all drink water.

The CHAIR — Is it better if I ask what did you observe where you lived? What did you observe in terms of the effects that the Fiskville activities had on where you lived?

Mr CUTLER — All I ever saw was smoke, to be perfectly honest. That is all you ever saw. It appeared to be managed well. I do not know. Whilst I was an electrician there, I would attend on a regular basis and do maintenance work and installation work. Never an issue; never a health issue for me at the time. I am not brave enough or silly enough to make an assertion, because I cannot support the assertion, but the statistical data and the comprehensive study that I think needs to be done may well.

I am sure there is analysis and data of cancer clusters — I think you call them — and what the propensity of types of cancer may or may not have been. I suppose you could never be conclusive with this sort of stuff, which is the dilemma you guys face. There are very strong indications at the moment appear to me to be the case, but without making an assertion.

Mr McCURDY — So you were on tank water as well as most of the houses that were in Fiskville?

Mr CUTLER — Every property; the town water stopped at Fiskville, or Maurice Conlan's was the last house. They were all supplemented by tanks. Every one of those people who I have mentioned was on tank water, yes.

Mr McCURDY — During those years did you feel that there was anything that you needed to alert people to? Was it just business as usual for you?

Mr CUTLER — Business as usual.

Mr McCURDY — Until all this has come out in the paper and starting to put two and two together, you thought it was business as usual?

Mr CUTLER — Correct. Yes.

Mr McCURDY — So it was not as if you had alerted the CFA to make some changes and they did not or anything like that?

Mr CUTLER — Nothing like that at all, no.

Mr McCURDY — Thanks, John.

Mr CUTLER — I own the hardware store in Ballan, and we used to supply them with pallets, because they used to want material for starting the fires and things like that. Their truck would come in every three to five months and take back a truckload of pallets. That was all innocent, what I would have regarded as business as usual, as you describe it. Yes.

Mr YOUNG — You were an electrical contractor there.

Mr CUTLER — Correct.

Mr YOUNG — You said that you went there on a regular basis. Exactly how many times would that be?

Mr CUTLER — Hundreds — literally hundreds of times, yes. Sometimes you might have had a project, and you would be there every day for a week — regular small call-outs, because there are a lot of homes there. We would go into the various homes to do minor maintenance. The PAD was always a very physically active place, so there were always things being broken et cetera. We wired some new buildings there.

Mr YOUNG — And a lot of that would have happened during the operation of training?

Mr CUTLER — Yes. Very much so, yes.

Mr RICHARDSON — To take your attention, John, to the broader health impacts and the Monash report that we have heard about today are focused on the affected firefighters, but it seems that your experiences in your community goes well beyond that to people who served in the community and in the area who were not firefighters. Could you elaborate more on that and what your thoughts are on that?

Mr CUTLER — The firefighters came and went very regularly, so other than a couple, I had never really developed friendships or acquaintances with the CFA personnel as such. But the CFA civilian staff, I will call them, they were there for much more extended periods, because the fireys would come and go on two, three or four-year consignments — I hope I am using the right language there — whereas the civilian staff would be there for 20-odd-plus years. The residents were born and bred there and lived in that environment their entire lives. I would have thought that the propensity — once again I am out of my depth, and I apologise. You would have thought the propensity for cancer would have been greater with people there for longer periods, which were not CFA personnel as much as residents. But that is not to say that — I know nothing about cancer. You could pick it up in 5 minutes, for all I know. It is all likelihood.

The CHAIR — You are doing well explaining that, so that is good.

Mr CUTLER — Yes.

Mr RICHARDSON — I think your point is well made, though, that it needs that broader consideration, especially for those who were not in the CFA and were not firefighters and what else were they exposed to but for that proximity to Fiskville?

Mr CUTLER — Yes.

Mr RICHARDSON — I think that is a good point.

Mr CUTLER — In saying that Fiskville was a — if you take away this component, it was certainly an asset to the community. It is a lot of work, a lot of employment — an enormous amount of employment and economic stimulus. Was it worth it? Probably not — or possibly not, I should say. It is a shame that it has gone, but it is a shame that it was ever there in conjunction as well. I suppose if it was run well and within guidelines, then it could be an asset to the community, still. Yes.

Mr RAMSAY — John, given the Fiskville site was 6 kilometres away from where your residence was, I assume it was mainly the smoke. Being 6 kilometres there probably would not have been so much water contamination. I am only supposing. You can tell me if I am wrong. Having access to potential toxic smoke, as to a plethora of illnesses within your family, I do not know if that is historical or not, but did the doctor make commentary about whether that could have been a potential cause of the illnesses, or is there a history of illnesses that is perhaps more relative than smoke?

Mr CUTLER — It is interesting. There is no genetic relationship between myself or any of these other people. That cuts the family thing out for myself and the other people who shared the home with me. I have spoken to Jocelyn, the mother of Daniele and Nicole, and I asked her that specific question. She cannot recall any incidence of breast cancer within her family line. Kathy Diamond does have a history of breast cancer within her family. Her sister is deceased, and her other sister was a victim of breast cancer also. So there is a genetic tendency with Kathy, but certainly not with the Blackmores, and as I said, there is no history of cancer in my family. I do not know if there is any correlation between breast cancer and bowel cancer. I have no idea.

Mr RAMSAY — The reason I ask that is because as far as I understand it, the two acts currently are the CFA act and the Workers Compensation Act. Any presumptive legislation, if it comes through, will cover firefighters but it will not cover those people who may well have been affected by the conditions at Fiskville that may be linked to cancer clusters. I am wondering if there is any medicinal advice in relation to that potential link, because we are concerned it has not been included in the Monash report, and yet there has been evidence today that suggests people outside the Fiskville facility are actually concerned about how the connection between the waterways and the smoke was affecting their health.

Mr CUTLER — I come back to the comment about the smoke. The black in smoke is particles. They have got to go up, and then they have got to come down again at some point of time. With the dispersion, I suppose the further away you are the greater it is. Whether 6 kilometres is far enough or close enough would depend on the weather patterns at the time. Then the question I ask is — and I am totally out of my depth here: how much can those particles have an influence on your life? What about breathing car fumes? Is there a higher propensity for it in the city as opposed to the urban lifestyle? We are consuming our own meat — does that participate? You know what I mean? There are all these other variables that kick in.

I would like to see some really good, hard research done in that area, and we are not talking about many houses. It is probably 25 to 30 houses on that south-west side. We need to look at the history of those houses, and analyse what the propensity or frequency of cancer was within those residences.

As I said, Peter Robinson is now deceased. He was brought up living next door to the Mount Wallace Hall. He was brought up there as a child, and then he returned and became the teacher at the school. That family has been removed from that area for many years, and the only reason I know that Peter is now deceased is because we sat opposite each other for days and days getting chemotherapy. I never put two and two together at that stage. It was not even on my radar. It would not take a lot of work to do that in-depth analysis of the history of the people, I would suspect, and that might assist in drawing conclusions.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask, in your particular case, did you drink the water or use the facilities at Fiskville? You are in both camps in a way, aren't you?

Mr CUTLER — Yes.

The CHAIR — You used the facilities there as well as living nearby.

Mr CUTLER — I certainly ate there, and I certainly drank the water there, clearly because I was working there. They were very, very hospitable people. You always got morning tea and lunch when you were working on the site. So, yes, I ate and drank and there.

The CHAIR — The dam — did you have any contact with the water in the dam?

Mr CUTLER — No, but Daniele and Nicole could have because they used to go eeling with Maurice's kids. I remember Maurice always used to talk about looking for eels, and Dani and Nicole would have done that sometimes. The manager at the time had two daughters, and my girls used to go horseriding with them around the dam and all of that area.

The CHAIR — Okay. The smoke, then, when you were doing work around the PAD, was the live fire training happening?

Mr CUTLER — Yes, constantly. That is what it was there for, wasn't it?

Mr RICHARDSON — John, on your property and the vicinity in that south-western corner, are you aware of any testing that was done by the CFA or the EPA over time at all through them?

Mr CUTLER — No, not at all. Not to my knowledge, no. I certainly was not asked if that could occur; definitely.

The CHAIR — You do not need to have all the answers or know the all the connections. The more people we hear from to tell their experiences and what has happened and what affects may or may not have happened, the more we hope it builds up to a whole lot of evidence that will give some direction and at least inform some recommendations. It is also good to hear your suggestion about having a broader study than the one that has already been done. I am not sure if there are any other suggestions you might have around people who might have been affected by Fiskville, in terms of their poor health.

Mr CUTLER — I am making a broad generalisation here, but country people tend to be a little bit more reserved and possibly not quite so likely to put their hand up. That is a broadbrush statement, I appreciate, and I think people are less likely to want to put their hand up and contribute to this sort of thing. This just popped into my head: there might be a little bit of social pressure not to, because the community want it reopened, certainly because of the economic stimulus that it provided. I think we all do, but we want it run well and professionally, simple, like it should always have been. Let's hope it was.

The CHAIR — Did people know you were coming today?

Mr CUTLER — I have not told anybody, no, except the people I have known here. I have obviously got their consent to talk away about them.

Mr RICHARDSON — The point about eel farming in the dam, after we have heard about some of the issues with the water, to elaborate further on that is interesting in itself.

Mr CUTLER — I do not know if you have spoken to the Conlan boys.

The CHAIR — I am not sure, but there have been submissions that mention fishing for eels and people with health issues.

Mr CUTLER — Maurice, who is now deceased, and Dorothy, who is now deceased, their boys would have gone eeling all the time with their dad. Maurice used to graze the land at Fiskville as well. He was sort of the farm manager there at the time, and both Maurice and Dorothy both worked there.

Mr RAMSAY — We have the EPA, which is responsible for air quality, and I am reminded of the Alcoa power station in Anglesea, which has just recently been closed due to a lack of a potential buyer. The community was concerned about the air quality around that coal station and also the quality of water, because sulphur dioxide and other things were permeating both the air and the water, and there was significant testing was done following community concern. I am interested to know why there was not that sort of concern around Fiskville, because the first port of call surely would have been for the EPA to do the testing for air quality and then through the water quality. I know this is going back to the 80s and 90s, and we have moved on since then, but you were 6 kilometres away, and the Anglesea community was less than a kilometre away. I am wondering why the EPA was not more active in that space at that time.

Mr CUTLER — You have embarrassed me a little bit, because you have just reminded me of something. Naivety is the word, I suppose. What makes it even worse from my perspective is that I have been an electrical contractor and I work in the chemical industry in Melbourne, so I was very, very familiar with processes and procedures. It never ever crossed my thought processes when I walked into Fiskville with a different mindset as it did when I would go to Melbourne and walk into Dow chemicals, PRA or Nufarm or any of those places. You create a wholly different mindset, because the switch goes on about OHS, work safety and permits.

As I said, I am feeling a little bit embarrassed now because I should have asked those questions in actual fact. But then I only know what I read in the paper, and I was always under the impression that the stuff that they burnt there was pretty benign. But apparently that is not the case in actual fact, and that is concerning. But you have got to have a degree of trust, I suppose, don't you, when you work in these places that the people are being responsible, and let us hope they were.

The CHAIR — Do you think that you understood the petrochemical industry was an unsafe place whereas you trusted the CFA because they do so many good things for the community?

Mr CUTLER — Yes. It gets back to your mindset, doesn't it. As I said, if you walked into Dow Chemical or Nufarm, you got a permit to work every 4 hours, you did all your safety, even back all those years ago. You did all your risk assessments and you asked the appropriate questions because there were flashing lights when you walked in the gate to tell you that you are in a dangerous environment. You leave your cigarette lighters at the front counter. We did not have mobile phones in those days, but if you did you would have had to have left them at the front. That was the culture that existed in the chemical industry then.

But it is an interesting point that you raise, because with that experience that I had there, why did I not adopt or ask those same questions? I suppose this gets back to trust. Clearly I thought they were all benign products that they were burning, but possibly they were not, which is a concern, isn't it — without making an assertion.

The CHAIR — Thank you again for coming in and providing that information to us. It was really helpful.

Mr CUTLER — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I am glad about your health.

Mr CUTLER — I am very happy.

Mr RICHARDSON — All the best, John.

Mr RAMSAY — Good luck.

Mr CUTLER — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.