

Open hearing resumed.

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the CFA training college at Fiskville

Melbourne — 15 June 2015

Members

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Mr Bill Tilley

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

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Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Daniel Young

Mr Tim Richardson

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Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

Research officer: Dr Kelly Butler

Witness

Mr Andrew Bishop, Country Fire Authority volunteer.

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

The CHAIR — We are now going to hear from Mr Andrew Bishop. Welcome to the public hearing. On behalf of the committee, we look forward to hearing from you and then hopefully we will be asking you some questions. I will just go through some of the formalities before we begin.

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 a proof version of the transcript. If you would like to begin your presentation perhaps first by introducing yourself, and then feel free to say whatever you would like.

Mr BISHOP — Thank you very much for having me in here today. I am Andrew Bishop. I have been a CFA volunteer for nearly 22 years now. I first started in January 1984, did 12 years and then got out for personal reasons for 9 years and rejoined some 10 years ago. In those times I have been a member of three different brigades, being Werribee, Hoppers Crossing and now out at Wallan.

The main concerns I have raised — and I am sure you have got a copy of my statement in front of you — are some of the practices of the mid to late 80s and early 1990s of the CFA up at the Fiskville training college. In those days a lot of the concrete PADs that are now in existence and the training props were not in existence. A lot of the training was done on virtually the dirt surface, sometimes being contained in 44-gallon drums or 205-litre drums. Some of them were in open-top trays which they would fill up with flammable liquids. We were not too sure what was being put in there, but they were burning, and they were burning quite hot, and they were giving off a very black, putrid smoke.

I did raise concerns at one particular training exercise that I was doing where we had what was known as a running fuel fire. My concerns were that the CFA instructor at the time, who was a career officer — I do not recall his name at all — was actually encouraging the volunteers to fight this fire from a downwind position, which goes against all the rules of firefighting. We try to fight them from upwind as much as we can and keep ourselves out of the smoke. As has been previously mentioned by other witnesses, breathing apparatus was not being used at these times. At the same time as I was doing this particular course in the early 1990s — I do not remember the exact year — I was at that stage employed as a firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, so I had some pretty good training behind me also. When we attended that course I did not actually tell them that I was an MFB firefighter; I referred to myself as being a bus driver, which I was doing as a part-time occupation at that time.

I raised concerns as to the practices that they were teaching some of the other volunteers. Some of these other volunteers I do recall had come from small brigades around the state that may have only attended half a dozen to a dozen calls a year, so they did not have a great deal of experience. The way that we were being taught on this course, if these guys went out there one or two years later, or even longer, and they had a similar sort of incident, they would say, 'All right, we've done this, and we've done it from downwind'. It was teaching bad practices.

Besides that, in the other training drills that I have done up there I never knew exactly what was being burnt at the time. There were not too many gas prop drills up there at that stage. I do not recall until probably the mid part of the 1990s, just before I left the CFA, really wearing breathing apparatus up there. We had no idea as to what was actually being burnt, but it was not the normal sort of smoke you would see at a house fire or grassfires or car fires. It was a lot blacker. You came out and you would be blowing this stuff out of your nose for days, and your ears and so forth.

I do not know whether it has had any actual effect on my health at this stage. Earlier this year I was diagnosed — or very recently — as probably having a deranged kidney, so I have been to specialists about that. At this stage they are not really raising too many concerns, but they want me to get checked every six months instead of the normal 12-monthly thing because I did have quite a few readings that were going up pretty quickly. My second son has been born with a speech impediment. Whether that is a direct result of what I have been exposed to over the years, I have got no idea either. Unfortunately he was also born premature when he did come into the world to join us. But I have got no way of proving whether these things are related to what I have been exposed to up at Fiskville. We have got no idea. No-one seems to tell us the truth.

You might also notice that in my statement I have mentioned that probably in the late 2000s — around 2008 it might have been; I think it was, before the Black Saturday events of 2009 — I was at that stage employed as a tanker driver, and I was involved in carting class A recycled water from the Werribee treatment plant up to Fiskville. At one stage we continually ran that truck for at least 24 hours between a couple of drivers, just trying to replenish the dams. We were standing next to those dams at the time. As it was going in it was splashing, so there was vapour around, or water particles getting around. Whether that has had any effect on me, who knows? I do have great concerns as to what has been burnt in the past. There have been reports that there have been out-of-date chemicals and virtually whatever else the CFA could get their hands on, but no-one is willing to really say what was there at the time.

The CHAIR — Just on what you are saying about wanting to know the truth and what has happened, have you at any time approached the management of CFA to ask them for any information or to — —

Mr BISHOP — No, I have not.

The CHAIR — I think they offer various health checks and things like that.

Mr BISHOP — No.

The CHAIR — Have you been involved in that?

Mr BISHOP — No, I am not, because from my understanding from reading the prerequisites for a lot of the monitoring I was not really there enough to really qualify for them or to be placed into a medium or high risk. I could not tell you how many times over the years I have been there. It was numerous times for various types of courses.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks, Andrew. How do you feel about the closure of the site, and what do you think has to be rectified in the future to continue training for the CFA?

Mr BISHOP — I am disappointed that the site has closed and the fact that it was a reasonably good training facility for both the career and volunteer firefighters of the CFA. That is now a resource that we have lost. I do not believe that the site would be able to be rehabilitated to a sufficient level to be reopened, so I would like to see that there is an urgency pushed through and a new training facility established.

Mr RAMSAY — Just on that, at Burnley I understand the MFB have a training facility, which was a full training facility but now because of contamination is only a training facility. Why could Fiskville not be used in the same way that Burnley is for the MFB?

Mr BISHOP — I would not know, because I do not really understand how the Burnley facility is being used because I have been out of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade since late 1998.

Ms WARD — You had challenges presented to you when you put forward your concerns about fighting the fire uphill with the smoke. We have had people talk about the culture at Fiskville and the difficulties that some had in either being listened to regarding their concerns or being too afraid or being apprehensive about putting forward their concerns. Have you got comments on the culture that you saw at Fiskville?

Mr BISHOP — I just noticed with the culture up there at the time that they did not really give great concern as to our general health and our wellbeing by having us — —

Ms WARD — Who do you mean by ‘they’?

Mr BISHOP — The CFA instructors who were up there at the time. I have not had any real discussions with any management or anyone in power up there. It has only been instructors at the time. It was just the way that they were getting us to train on these fires. I had great concerns as to how they were really looking after us.

Ms WARD — Did recruits and trainees talk amongst themselves regarding concerns about the use of chemicals or the state of the water, the smell of it, how it looked?

Mr BISHOP — Not that I can remember.

The CHAIR — When you were there you were not using any breathing apparatus when you were doing fire training, were you?

Mr BISHOP — Yes, we were doing fire training in the late 1980s and early 1990s but very little breathing apparatus was used, especially the 1980s. It came in a little bit towards the mid-1990s, but not a great deal. Since I have been going back there from 2005 when I rejoined the CFA, breathing apparatus has been used a lot more up there.

The CHAIR — A lot more, but not in all cases? Do you think that in all the cases it should be used it has been used?

Mr BISHOP — It has not been used enough. People have still been getting within the vicinity of the fires without wearing breathing apparatus, whether that is because they were not qualified to use it or not. Sometimes people were probably getting a little bit too close to where they should have been, and they were not being pulled back by the CFA instructors.

The CHAIR — You said whether they were or were not qualified to use it, so it was not a matter of whether the fire required, as a safety precaution, to use it or not, it was more whether the person was actually trained to use it. Was that the reason that you did or did not wear it, rather than the safety aspect?

Mr BISHOP — Not always, because on particular training drills they would have allocated breathing apparatus crews and they would only put a limited amount on the trucks as we could carry but you would have more people there, so not everyone was able to wear the breathing apparatus anyway.

The CHAIR — So there were not enough of the units?

Mr BISHOP — Not on the trucks that we were actually training with at the time.

The CHAIR — There would also be cases where there were people who were not trained in it and therefore they could not use it either.

Mr BISHOP — That is right.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you.

Ms WARD — With the around 10-year gap in your attendance at Fiskville, when you came back in 2005, what changes did you notice in the safety practices and how they were implemented?

Mr BISHOP — Probably in the safety aspect a lot more development had gone on in that 10-year period. There was not the amount of fuel that was being burnt; it was mainly gas-fired props up there. Whereas in the early part it was all just disused fuel or expired fuel or chemicals or whatever they could get their hands on at the time. But you still had the build-up of the soot and everything on the buildings over the years and the run-off water going into the dams, so it was all still being recycled. Probably there was a little bit more emphasis on safety, but it was still the same water.

Ms WARD — So the water still seemed exactly the same to you — the same sludge and the same colour?

Mr BISHOP — Yes, you could walk past the dams at any time and they never looked healthy.

The CHAIR — It is great to hear your experience because it all contributes to our knowledge and understanding of what happened at Fiskville. Thank you for coming in to talk to us today.

Mr BISHOP — No worries. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.