

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Echuca – Thursday 24 August 2023

#### MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

**WITNESSES**

Kate Burke, Think Agri; and

Tom Acocks.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, everyone. I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. Could I ask all those in the gallery to please take your seats. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised, and I do ask those in the gallery to please remain silent whilst witnesses are giving evidence.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and, as I just said earlier, remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence that is being taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I will just take the opportunity to introduce myself, and then committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

**John BERGER:** My name is John Berger. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Melina BATH:** Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you very much for that. With that, I welcome you to make your opening remarks. If you could please leave your opening remarks to about 10 minutes. Before you start, just state your name and the organisation that you represent, and then there will be plenty of time for us to ask you questions after that. So over to you.

**Kate BURKE:** Hi, my name is Kate Burke. I am a community member here in Echuca. I was raised at Elmore, educated at Rochester. I own a business called Think Agri and have a small farm out at Torrumbarry. I am a resident of Wharparilla Drive, which has river frontage.

Churchill once said, 'If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter,' and I am known for rambling. So I thought I would read parts of an article that I wrote. I wrote two, possibly three, articles in the *Guardian* during the floods, and then once I felt that we were getting a bit forgotten, I started something that I called TheFlog – the flood blog – which is a little video series. So this goes to one of the articles I wrote:

Flood-affected communities are getting conflicting information, right when we need consistency to make crucial decisions which will save lives and properties.

I wrote this on the weekend before the peak, or it was published on the Sunday; I think I wrote it in the middle of that week.

We were awake as the rain pelted our roof at 4am on Saturday morning. We are tired, emotional and fragile. Processing information and making decisions is getting harder as the anticipation and preparation takes a mental and physical toll.

The authorities urge us to be proactive ... their information needs to be clear, concise and consistent. The more tired and anxious we become, the more critical accessible, accurate information becomes.

Despite the best intentions of Emergency Victoria, the information flow is confusing and inconsistent. Government agencies and apps must be on message – the same bloody message.

The problem is conflicting information. The messaging at the live updates and community meetings does not always equal that of the Victorian Emergency App or the Bureau of Meteorology.

We are unsure and frustrated. Which number is the peak? Which agency knows best? Why does the Vic emergency app – the supposed sacred source of truth – not reflect the information provided by local authorities?

So via the CMA and the shire.

The decision to sandbag a property, shift animals or ultimately leave their residence hinges on the expected peak and the lie of the land. Hearing different levels of expected river peaks has hindered good decision-making, created confusion and added to anxiety.

Which number is the peak? Which agency knows best?

...

I found myself –

this is a true story –

directing traffic last Sunday as we fought to contain the Campaspe River.

On the Sunday I wrote this:

... I'll be directing information traffic, specifically river heights and expected timing of those peak heights.

I've had a bit of practice at directing information traffic. That's my day job. I make a living by helping people gain insight and apply foresight in complex situations. I even wrote a book about it. I help people recognise and manage the nuance of complexity so they make good choices under pressure.

Whether drought or flood, the process is the same: gather credible data, observe what's happening on the ground –

I repeat, on the ground –

derive the best and worst case scenario, and formulate Plan A and Plan B.

Gathering information 'is proving difficult'.

It's not easy to predict the movement of a slow moving riverine flood where three rivers collide ...

...

And it's hard to hear nuance when emotions and adrenaline are as high as the water level.

Emergency management fundamentals require one message delivered from one source, but that is not happening when it comes to ... river peaks and the timing of those peaks, thanks to complexity and nuance.

Technology has hijacked the –

delivery of –

... one message from one source in good time ...

... we have access to apps and different social media platforms ... the imperative of updating all these different platforms means the best practice of one clear message is not happening.

Each household needs to prepare for their own circumstances, but for starters they need the authorities to be on the same page and delivering the same message.

It's reasonable for the community to expect that authorities deliver the same message, particularly given all the reviews of emergency management after bushfires, floods and the pandemic in the past two years ...

I have utmost faith in the –

hydrology –

... models and local knowledge of the systems. I have less faith in the practical reality of delivering a consistent message. And that scares me, as confused messaging could cost lives.

Now, back to today. To be frank, it still scares me, and it is not just messaging under pressure; it is clear, consistent, strategic and practical leadership under pressure, and we did not see that here or at Rochy and

frankly we did not see it, I do not think, at the state level for three months. You need empathy as well as expertise, so how do we lead and serve better under pressure from Spring Street, Canberra, here in Echuca and Rocky? To be told by the BOM, 'You've got an app and so we're giving you the data,' when you cannot even read it because the writing is so small and you have to scroll down to the bottom to get your river height – that is not accessible information.

As technical experts in leader positions, we can be tone-deaf – and I have been there myself – and lack empathy, and we heard about the lack of empathy in Darrell's submission. I saw it in spades. Then you lose trust and credibility because of the mixed messaging, and it all goes downhill from here. What worries me is we have got no time to waste. Trust is so low. The bushfire season is around the corner, the energy transmission network is behind schedule and, most critically, flood survivors are suffering. So the challenge I pose to all levels of government in this post-flood, post-pandemic environment is to strategically rebuild trust, credibility and capacity and lead well under pressure, and I am happy to help.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Thanks, Kate. I am Tom Acocks. I am a farmer from Rochester. Our property is located 3 kilometres south of Rochester on the eastern side of the river. I will step you through basically how this event has impacted our business at probably a local level and then what I have seen as larger implications for our industry across the region.

As I said, I am a farmer from Rochester. Leading up to 14 October last year we had had obviously two years of significant rainfall and were into a third year of La Niña. There was anticipation that there may be a major flood event on the cards, but certainly the communication to landholders along the river and the community of Rochester was pretty limited in pinpointing whether or not a significant event would happen. We were advised a matter of days before the significant flood event that we would probably be inundated somewhere between 100 mil above the 2011 event or 100 mils below. That is pretty recent history, and we all understood what that would look like for our business. Basically, we have property adjoining the river, but we are also probably the first property close to Rochester where the river hits the flood plain, so we anticipate a level of inundation; that is just a given where the location of our property is. As the event unfolded and there were two days of significant rain on the Wednesday and Thursday into when we saw the river rising, the messaging was still very much around that 100 above and 100 below. Now, with our best estimate of where we ended up, we were somewhere around 40 centimetres above the 2011 event, so that caused significant damage to our property, to our livelihood and ultimately to the residents of Rochester.

To put it in context, our business milks cows, but we also grow grain and feed beef stock as well; we run a small feedlot. We employed, at that time, eight full-time staff plus family, and we were producing around 6 million litres of milk a year. The difficulty in planning for these sorts of events is, as Kate stated, the unknowing around the size and scale and where we should focus our attention on mitigation efforts. Given the communication we had leading up to the event; we felt we had done our best effort at any sort of mitigation that might be required. We understood there would be inundation across our property and we made plans to address that: shifting livestock, moving feed that we could access onto higher ground and basically minimal preparation around the residence that I live in and the residence that my parents live in, for that matter, which were both built well above the 2011 flood height.

As the event unfolded – this is on the Friday and into the Saturday of that weekend – it was pretty quickly apparent that any expectation of where we thought we were going to be at was going to be significantly exceeded. We relied on information from other landholders further upstream from us –

**The CHAIR:** Two minutes left.

**Tom ACOCKS:** to prepare for what was coming at us. There was very little – I would almost state no information from authorities as to the significance of the event that was unfolding. To that matter, we relied on streamflow data as well from remote stations along the various creeks and rivers that run into the Campaspe River, many of which were not functioning. So ultimately this created the perfect storm, if you will, for our efforts to mitigate what was unfolding in front of us. I am happy to open it up to further questions around what at an industry level we have seen across the region rather than individually on our farm.

**The CHAIR:** All right, thank you. I might kick off with a question: I have been listening carefully to what you said, and you said you were generally aware there was a big event coming but no-one knew exactly what

the size, and it became quite difficult as time went on to accurately predict how big; I am just wondering, though, how realistic is it in these catastrophic type of events to actually predict anything like this with accuracy? Do we think that it is now unrealistic to have accurate predictions – we know it is going to be bad, but exactly how bad?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Agriculture Victoria have remote weather stations that measure soil moisture across a vast area of land, including all of our catchment. They could tell you that we were at capacity, and any rain event coming of this magnitude – it does not take a lot of expertise to figure out the volume of water that would be coming at us if this event unfolded, and it did. But the messaging was somewhere in the vicinity of what we saw 11 years prior, so to me that message was wrong, absolutely wrong. Preparations would have been made completely differently had we been told, ‘This will be an unprecedented event,’ and then ‘Make preparations for an unprecedented event.’ That did not happen, full stop.

**The CHAIR:** So then in your view – and I have asked other witnesses this question, and I will get you to answer as well, Kate – if there were three things that you think need to be fixed, your top three, what would they be?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Well, absolutely, the monitoring of information when we are in the event needs to be operational – it just was not, full stop. The messaging around the type of event that is coming at us – and one source of credible information is critical, as Kate pointed out. But we also have to do a lot of work to prepare for the unexpected.

**The CHAIR:** Catastrophic event.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Catastrophic, if you want to call it that.

**The CHAIR:** I think it was.

**Tom ACOCKS:** But there was no preparation put into that, and that is why I feel we really dropped the ball.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. So messaging, preparation; and what else?

**Tom ACOCKS:** In my mind we need longer term planning around helping those that have been affected – twice now in 11 years – to put a plan in place so the next one is not going to have the same impacts on their businesses, but we just have not done that. We have put millions of dollars into planning for drought, and it is a well-worn path. Farmers in the region are prepared for dry times. These events do more damage in a shorter period of time, and we are not prepared for them.

**The CHAIR:** So floods need to be thought of in the same way as droughts.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Absolutely. Put a plan in place. We have got two datasets now 11 years apart, and we understand where the water goes, and we have got one that was only 10 months ago, and that is fresh in people’s minds. Let us go around and collect that information and help businesses that are severely affected by these events to put a plan in place – whether that is moving infrastructure or changing what they do within their business so that the next one is not going to slam them as hard as this one.

**The CHAIR:** Kate, what are your top three?

**Kate BURKE:** Credible messaging. I will just add I think to Tom’s. As Tom said, one is probably more structural at the bigger level – so if you think about the iceberg and what the structures are underneath it. I do not think that existing Emergency Management Victoria structures and separating out preparation, response and recovery to different agencies is helpful. There was a lack of coordination between states; we had different peaks and different timings coming out of the New South Wales websites compared to Victorian websites, and the river is there in the middle, so it was just the whole thing. It was the same with the bureau and how they fit into specific things.

We need better leadership at that top level. I saw victim shaming; I saw community meetings where the way they were trying to motivate us to act was by shaming Rochester residents for not leaving home. It was just disgraceful. I saw the first 15 minutes of most meetings wasted introducing each person in the room who was there in a uniform instead of going straight into what we wanted to know, which was: what is the range of

likely possibilities? So one of my top three is teaching people how to communicate scenarios and possible futures rather than trying to have absolutes; understanding probabilistic messaging. What would have been useful for Tom would have been to know: the 1 in 1000 chance is this, so the worst-case scenario is this, the moderate-case scenario is this and the most favourable scenario is this. Then it is up to Tom to decide which one he prepares for. What I saw was: understating it for the Rochester one, then going to the worst-case scenario and then being criticised for it at Echuca. Frankly, I think I would much prefer to prepare for the worst case. But then there was all this blaming about that being the wrong thing to do – and so lack of ownership of responsibility. It is not cool for the commissioner not to be taking responsibility and putting it back on local government, to a new council. So it is a lot about leadership I think and communicating – and utilising resources within the community that have skills. I would have been better off, along with colleagues like Daryl Poole and those experienced rural community and agricultural communicators, delivering the messages rather than filling up sandbags.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Certainly from my point of view, as Kate said, the difficulty in trying to make a decision around a best-case scenario is that that is probably what you are going to plan for and they will be the mitigation efforts you will put in place. For example, we shifted feed and livestock into places that we knew would not get wet under the possible scenario. They had 40 or 50 centimetres of water go through them. So we would have changed our planning had the messaging been on point. Another example is on I think it was the Saturday afternoon when we were still able to milk cows through this whole process. Someone rang me locally and said, ‘The weir at Eppalock has failed and there’s more water coming.’ But where does that information come from, and then where is the rebuttal to that? If you go and look for that information, is there something in the media saying that this is the truth or not? These are the sorts of things that –

**Kate BURKE:** Who do you believe?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. I probably understood that that was probably just a false statement, but you do not know that, and once those messages get out within community, they just cause more angst and more anxiety.

**The CHAIR:** And I think what you are alluding to is that everyone is looking for more certainty, but perhaps that is just not possible –

**Kate BURKE:** In an uncertain time, yes.

**The CHAIR:** because sometimes when these events are unfolding they are unpredictable by nature. That goes to my next question: did either of you or both of you have a plan in place prior to this flood event to say, ‘If I’m affected by a natural disaster, whether it’s fire or flood or whatever it be – helicopter falls on my house, whatever – this is what my plan is, and the only decision I need to make in an emergency is that I stick to my plan’? Did either of you have anything like that in place?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes, a plan in the sense that we will plan for this outcome and this is what we will do to make it happen, and then essentially you have got to stick to that plan. The cows have got to get milked, we have got to feed livestock –

**The CHAIR:** And your plan, because you are a business, might be different to someone who is in a residence, right, for example?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes, absolutely, but I could guarantee that half of Rocky, their plan was to stay home because they were told, ‘Your house isn’t going to get wet.’

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but my question is, though: before you are in a disaster, what plans have you put in place to stop having to make decisions in a crisis – the planning for that eventuality, should it come?

**Tom ACOCKS:** I will break that down into a couple of different scenarios, one being long-term planning, so: where do we place infrastructure so that it is not going to be inundated and what are we going to do about storing feed for livestock? How will we mitigate the immediacy of a flood event – which we did after 2011; we built infrastructure in places that did not get wet. This time they got wet. So then we have got to go and start a new plan and readjust again. That is fine. I could say the same for a lot of my dairy farming colleagues that are a long way from the river – these people live 40 minutes west of Rochester – that were inundated. They were underwater for weeks, and they made plans after 2011 because of the same event, and this time they were

affected again. Some outcomes were better because we had put plans in place. Some were probably worse. Every event is a little different. But the next phase is: okay, if this is the new norm, what do we do about it and how are we going to get some assistance and some plans and some processes in place so that the next event is not going to have the same outcome?

**The CHAIR:** Kate, what about you?

**Kate BURKE:** Well, in my day job I see people who are able to plan in advance and people who are always either in the clouds or in denial. Some people are good at planning and some people are not. I am a natural planner and I guess it is part of my mindset. Where we live at Wharparilla Drive, frankly because we are on the dry side of the road, bushfire is way more something that I worry about than flood.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, a bigger threat.

**Kate BURKE:** So we do have a file there ready to go if we need to go, and we have discussed that a couple of times on those really bad days in 2019. From a flooding perspective, the property we own has a watercourse through it, and being analytical, when we bought that property I knew that in a year like this we would be likely to lose a small percentage of that, so I had always planned for that. Knowing what I know about La Niña and IOD together – and they are the years you are most likely to get these floods – I started talking to people just in general community conversations about the risk of a major flood, probably in May last year, and people just do not want to hear it. I spoke to people in our street in September. I said, ‘I think, you know, we could be in for a big one. What are you doing?’ Our street on the river side has a flood plain and a lot of people have infrastructure on that flood plain. But ‘Oh, no, we know what to expect’ – 2016, fine; everyone is panicking, da di da di da. I kept asking our neighbour the same question every two weeks; they did not want to hear about it. All of a sudden they are in crisis. So some people will have plans. I feel what would be really good in a flood is to have something like a bushfire plan pack. There is no support like that for managing flooding, particularly for urban residents. I became the surrogate go-to person. My next-door neighbour across the road is a former city engineer. He pulled out his staff. We went and did levels for everyone along our street and gave them that certainty. So yes, that is it.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you both very much. I will move on. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for your presentations. You are very deep thinkers and long planners, so we thank you very much. Tom, you presented a submission to the inquiry, and I will refresh your memory on a couple of points. Piping Waranga–Mallee channel underground –

**Tom ACOCKS:** Did I? I do not think I actually made a submission in writing.

**Melina BATH:** Hang on a minute. There is Heather.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Oh, Heather, okay. That was my mother who actually submitted that, but I will –

**Melina BATH:** On behalf of your mother –

**Tom ACOCKS:** On behalf of Heather – she has got in before me. Obviously I did not take the time.

**Melina BATH:** Do you want to discuss that? Because it was raised yesterday, if you were there in Rochester, about the channel system and the potential of that channel.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. In the conversations I had in the recent week leading up to this there was a lot of discussion around the GMW, or Goulburn–Murray Water, channel infrastructure that was inundated by floodwater, which caused subsequent flooding for hundreds of farms that are a long, long way from the river. The commentary was around: could that infrastructure have been managed differently to mitigate some of those flood events that were not from the riverine event? They were actually caused by this channel system that crisscrosses the whole region filling up with water, and then it had nowhere to go. So the fact that that channel system was full leading into a catastrophic flood event – could we have done something about that in the weeks leading up? No-one needed the water. The channel system was just full in case someone required delivery. We were not going to need the water. So there has been a lot of commentary around the use of that infrastructure as a flood mitigation tool. Certainly in instances where the river does bank up against that Goulburn–Murray

Water infrastructure, could there be something done to actually see it get away under the channel before it overtops it then causes more damage to other farms?

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And a supplementary one from this report – I think it goes in line with it. It talks about:

South of Rochester on the west side of the Campaspe River the railway line and northern highway act as a barrier ... and extra culverts. That is all part of that scheme. It is looking at the water flow –

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. For example, a neighbour of ours who is probably 7 kilometres upstream measured the flood height at his property between 2011 and the 2022 event. It was 900 millimetres above the 2011 event. What happened is between his property and where we are located the river did actually break out across the railway line and head west of Rochester. If that had not happened, that meant the flood height on our property would have been 900 mil plus, and again, the damage in Rochester would have been far greater. So the simple fact that the railway line did, I suppose, give way and allow for that water to escape, probably saved –

**Melina BATH:** It was a blessing for some.

**Tom ACOCKS:** more properties, yes. For some, yes.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. That is the thing. There is always – I hate saying it – a flow-on effect. A win for one area can be a loss for another. I am using the same reference, but I will ask Kate. We heard yesterday about Lake Eppalock a lot of discussion around that and the spill potential for – is the term ‘increased air’?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Airspace.

**Melina BATH:** Increased airspace. I am from Gippsland, so forgive me on the terminology. But do you want to discuss: what is your position on that or feeling on that?

**Kate BURKE:** It is not really my area of expertise, so I will not comment on that.

**Melina BATH:** That is all right. Tom, do you want to comment on what the community was saying?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. Lake Eppalock was obviously constructed as a tool to store water for irrigation – that was its primary purpose. It was not built for flood mitigation. It has played a role in buffering some of those flows. My cousin who lives next door to us lives in a house that was built pre Eppalock that had never seen water through it. It was inundated.

So if we built it as a flood mitigation tool, it has not proved its point in this scenario. In the 26 other times the river has flooded prior, it probably has played a role. The frustration and the commentary around Eppalock at the moment is the simple fact that the reservoir is still full and there is no clear strategy and mandate for that piece of infrastructure to be used as a flood mitigation tool. It is there to store water for urban use, for the environment and for irrigators. That is its purpose.

Maybe there needs to be a discussion or there should be a discussion around whether it can serve as a tool to maybe moderate the flood height that would inundate Rochester, for that matter – mine would be a property that would be affected by that decision, that is granted. I am happy, and a lot of other landholders along the river I am sure would be in agreeance – if it means the town is saved from a catastrophic event, then surely something has got to be done. With the volume of water coming down the river, I believe that even if we had 20 per cent air space in that reservoir, it may not have changed a lot of things that happened. It might have changed the flood height on our property by 20 centimetres – who knows. But obviously a lot more work needs to go into that, by someone who is more qualified than me.

**Kate BURKE:** What I will add to that is again this year when that commentary was coming out and people were very concerned, I went and did my own research and talked to others that know a lot more about water movement and the risks for this year, and it was really unlikely that we would need any more free air at Eppalock. The risk of a flood occurring from Eppalock to Rochoy was very low. But obviously – and this is where the empathy and expertise things come in – we have got people that are completely traumatised, so it is very understandable that they are feeling like that. I put some posts on a couple of sites trying to explain the



rational side of things. The seminar that was put on was way too late – when there was a seminar with various authorities explaining how it all works.

**Melina BATH:** What was the seminar?

**Kate BURKE:** There was a webinar and –

**Tom ACOCKS:** There was a lot of confusion in Rochester through the month of June after a pretty significant amount of rain for the month – that we were heading for another 2022. That was just the general consensus of the community. There was no clear messaging to members of the community to say, ‘Well, ultimately the water that is sitting in that reservoir is owned by these people, and this is the mechanism we have in place to do something with it.’ I think ultimately the federal government and the environmental water holder own the biggest amount of air space in that dam, and they are probably the only ones that could change policy at short notice to take some of that stress away from the community. It took probably five weeks and a protest from stressed residents of the community for anything to happen, whereas it probably could have been dealt with five weeks earlier without that angst.

**Kate BURKE:** And on top of that there was water being let out upstream on the Murray, making room for potential needs later on, and it was not communicated why that was happening. So we had water levels rising here and then that was backflowing into the Campaspe – so you had these two levels of angst. With a bit of communication it could have been handled a lot better. I think this goes back to my iceberg comment before. This is all structural stuff around legislation and who owns what and who is allowed to say what. That is why this is a really strategically complex problem. But some of this stuff is pretty quick. It is just practical management on the run and just realising the impact this stuff has on people – not that hard, really.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Lovell. A question?

**Wendy LOVELL:** Tom, I am interested in your role with Murray Dairy, your leadership roles in the dairy industry and what effect these floods have had on the dairy industry around this area – the number of stock losses, the effects on stock of standing in water for days on end, how much additional stock we might have lost because of infections and other things and also production losses.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Let us unpack that a bit into a few different areas, I suppose. Immediately we are dealing with pretty challenging conditions for livestock to be operating in. There has been a lot of infrastructure built across this region in the last 10 years to house dairy cattle. Certainly those businesses probably fared better than those dealing with wet pastures and laneways and infrastructure that probably cannot handle that volume of rain. Right when you are in the thick of it, we are dealing with sore feet, a loss of production, obviously increased costs to the business in trying to feed cattle and extra hours of work, and then ultimately in these extreme events when we have livestock that are standing in water for a significant amount of time we get respiratory problems, sore feet, issues with salmonella and, ultimately, some stock losses. I could not tell you the stock losses that happened immediately in the event. We certainly saw cattle floating down the river, and neighbours of ours spent time trying to fish animals out – generally beef stock, not so much dairy.

After the event is when you see the longer lasting effects. We saw impacts on reproductive performance in milking herds – a severe decrease in production across the region – and it happened at a pretty critical time when we needed to conserve our winter crops for forage in order to feed back to these animals for the next 12 months. It is kind of like the triple knockout punch, where you have got sick animals, you have got increased costs and then you go and conserve feed of inferior quality, but you need to feed back for the next 12 months. We are actually still in that at the moment. That will take another probably 12 months to filter through, so we are going to see a decrease in milk production performance across a lot of herds for a significant amount of time. I think the numbers that have rolled in for the year to date were about 7 per cent down on last year’s production. That is not from farms exiting. I have not heard of specific examples of farms exiting the industry as a direct result of the floods, which is probably promising. But there has certainly been a big hit on production across the region.

At an industry level, there were major issues with infrastructure and the transport of milk products, transport of livestock, and transport of feed to these livestock during and after the event. Road closures and a lot of difficulty in finding information about road closures led to milk being left on farms, livestock not being able to

be transported and feedstuffs not being able to be brought into farms as well. That had a longer lasting effect on these businesses.

A few of the other discussions I have had recently were around critical pieces of infrastructure around the Tatura area that were inundated because there were no levees around them. That meant the substation supplying power to the milk-processing facilities was gone, along with a lot of the telecommunications networks for a period of a series of days. I think at one point in time all the milk in this region was being transported to Stanhope, the only facility that they could actually get milk into. We are talking about a big area here. The Murray dairy region stretches from Swan Hill to Corryong, and it was effectively split in half by the Campaspe River and then by the Murray River because a lot of the infrastructure that sits along those river systems was compromised. The way that our transport system works now is we use bigger trucks and heavier loads to get more efficiency. They just simply cannot use that infrastructure. It cannot be done. So they have got to add hours to their journey to get back to somewhere to process the milk, along with livestock that need to be transported and feed that needs to be brought into some of these farms well. So there were some really tough times for these businesses that operate within our region.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to have to move on.

**Wendy LOVELL:** And what about –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Ms Lovell. We are going to have to move on. Dr Ratnam, a question, please.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you so much for being here today. It has been really thoughtful and considered evidence that you have presented, and I think it will give us lots of food for thought. Given the insights and knowledge that you both have, both practically and then from working with some of the systems that you have observed could be improved, I am keen to know whether any of those insights have been funnelled formally into any processes that you have been invited to participate in, like a formal debrief or formal planning for the region if such events happen in the future – unfortunately it looks like the likelihood is that they will increase in their frequency. Have you been part of any of those processes?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. This is it. This one.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Yes. This one. This is it – so nothing before?

**Tom ACOCKS:** This is it.

**Kate BURKE:** I have had informal discussions with the leadership of Campaspe shire, but that is it.

**Samantha RATNAM:** All right. Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. Tom, you are representing a lot of farmers right now. You have not spoken too much about water management. Do you think that that was a contributing factor in the severity of the flood?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Water management in what context?

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** The water management system, so the irrigation systems and all of that. Yesterday we heard from another farmer called David Christie, and he mentioned that the carryover laws needed a thorough looking over. Do you think that that would contribute to this?

**Tom ACOCKS:** No. I am a big believer in the way that we have structured our carryover, because that actually is a risk mitigation tool for our business so that we can survive a drought, full stop. Now, if there are exceptional circumstances that can be put in place when we are faced with near 100 per cent capacity across the Murray–Darling Basin in all of our reservoirs, then yes, we should maybe have a look at the carryover circumstances in those scenarios. But as a long-term strategy I would caution against scrapping the carryover rules.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Do you think that, say, carryover for water users is something that we can consider keeping but potentially stop carryover for water traders?

**Tom ACOCKS:** We are all water traders.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** No. I mean people who, say, speculate off water – water trading – who do not actually use it to irrigate.

**Tom ACOCKS:** There is a scenario where we have a large volume of water owned by urban authorities and the federal government, okay? They carry over water that will never be used for irrigation, and they have a lot more airspace than a lot of the irrigators do. So when there is a circumstance like with the Eppalock situation, where probably 40 to 50 per cent of that airspace is not owned by an irrigator but is owned by –

**Wendy LOVELL:** Sixty per cent.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Sixty per cent – there you go. Could we have a scenario where that water could be sent down the river to open up airspace? Maybe the irrigators have got to put in their fair share as well, but there is a lot of water being held that is never going to be put onto a paddock and that is never going to be used on a farm.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. That is what I am talking about – the water that is just being traded around that is not physically being –

**Kate BURKE:** No, it is environmental water.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes, the environmental water.

**Tom ACOCKS:** They are two different things. The environment will carry their water, and they act as an irrigator the same as we do, but they just have a lot more airspace. To try and get cohesion amongst all the irrigators on this topic across all irrigation schemes would be near impossible. But maybe we look at the larger volume holders rather than individual irrigators who have spent the best part of 15 years figuring out how the system and the rules work right now. For the most part they work quite well, in the sense that we can ride out several dry years with limited allocation of water.

**Kate BURKE:** Can I just add to that, Ms Tyrrell. I might suggest that you go back and have a look at the ACCC inquiry from last year on water movement and trading. The amount of speculation that occurs is actually very minimal in the whole scheme of things. Most of the water that is traded is actually, if it is not by irrigators or moved by the entities that Tom described – you know, the retired dairy farmer moving water around is way more significant than the so-called trading speculation. That is a bit of an urban myth, to be honest.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. I do have one more question.

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** You are an agronomist. What effects have the floods had on the soil in the area?

**Kate BURKE:** That is a really good question, and I cannot answer that specifically. My expertise is in broadacre agriculture. In general soils that are inundated for a long time, basically they become anaerobic and the microorganisms and everything in those soils do not survive. Where water sits for a long time, it is really unhealthy, and it takes a while for those soils to recover. Where water has a brief period of inundation and then leaves, there are usually no ongoing problems in that case. Repairing soil comes at a cost, and that cost – it is huge. In broadacre agriculture there are winners and losers. Last year some of our neighbours and friends had – and you would have seen this, too, Tom – massive, massive losses.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Huge.

**Kate BURKE:** Then if they were lucky enough to be on ground where the water did not sit, they actually probably had their best financial year ever. They were still super stressed and suffering post-traumatic stress from rescuing other people and whatnot, but financially very, very sound.

On our little farm – we are just hobby farmers, and we share farm – it was just gut-wrenching, that anticipation from when the water was in the paddock until the harvest time, knowing what might happen – it just did your head in. Even though my logical self was saying, ‘We’re only going to lose about 10 per cent’, at one stage I had it down to 30 or 40 per cent, because I am doing the numbers all the time. And then in the end we had a very, very good result and we were very, very lucky. But it is just the winner-and-loser factor is really hard, so you have survivor guilt in flooding as well.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes, absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Berger, a question.

**John BERGER:** Thank you for your appearance today and your presentations. Tom, I am just a bit interested in the flood mitigation side of things. I think you may have said you planned for what might have happened in 2011 that might be coming in this 2022 one. Could you ever have planned for 2022? Knowing what you know now and going off of that, what is your thinking on that now?

**Tom ACOCKS:** Oh, look, within our individual business we will make the process of shifting more infrastructure to a different location and shifting livestock to a different location. That will come at a cost and it may never be needed again in my lifetime, but we do not want to run the risk of seeing what we saw last year. We will probably just have to stump up the cash and start shifting feed storage and livestock to another spot.

**John BERGER:** Another property.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Other dairy farmers in the region will understand how they have been affected twice now in 11 years and what that would mean for their business. Ultimately it just means safeguarding probably the biggest asset you have got, and that is your livestock. That will come at a cost of building feed storage well above any anticipated flood height, having the ability to put their cows somewhere for an extended period of time should this happen again, or when this happens again, and probably putting those plans in place so that the next time around it is not going to be as catastrophic, I suppose.

**John BERGER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you. Just thank you for your contribution today, you did talk a lot and you gave us a really good insight into planning and all the planning that you have done. But I guess that accurate information is what you have highlighted today, and just that in the early stages of the flood it was not very accurate. I know concerns were raised in the council submissions we had this morning about the Bureau of Meteorology having a 12-month delay on upgrading their systems to give warnings, so that is concerning. But, Tom, you did mention the impact on the industry, and you did go back to that. Was there anything else that you wanted to add?

**Tom ACOCKS:** I think from my experience, the peak industry body for our Murray dairy region, being Murray Dairy, did work quite well with AgVic. There was a period of time, however, that AgVic, Murray Dairy and the Hume region were in quite close contact with each other about what the impacts were for farmers on the eastern side of the Campaspe River. It took about a fortnight before Murray Dairy had a seat at the table with the councils and the catchment management authority on the western side of the river for that matter. There are quite a number of farmers that all make up the Murray dairy region that were severely affected that our peak industry body had very little access to. They had a lot of information around who those farms are and who is actively farming but were not able to relay that information to the CMAs on the western side of the river, whereas that was already happening on the eastern side. So we could have better communication between those industry bodies that represent farmers across the region.

Once in the day, Agriculture Victoria were essentially the peak body to represent all farmers across the region, and that was dairy as well. It has morphed into the situation now where Murray Dairy tend to be the voice for dairy in the region, and they work with Ag Vic. A lot of that local expertise has gone out of the department now, and that is back with an industry body like Murray Dairy. So again, in these situations where we have got a crisis to deal with, it is getting everyone at the table and everyone on the same page and utilising those networks that are already well established within the dairy industry across the region.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Wendy, do you want another question? You have got 4 minutes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes. Okay, thank you. I know particularly in the dairy industry the relationship with the animals and the farmers is almost like a family pet relationship, so I was just wondering if you could expand a bit on the morale and the mental health in the sector following the floods and the loss of stock et cetera.

**Tom ACOCKS:** Yes. It is a difficult and a long process. A dairy farming colleague of ours who is, you know, 20k's from the river fed his livestock on the road out the front of his dairy for two days because that was the only dry spot he had on his property – and he is not on the river. We have heard stories of people basically putting their cows on the yard at the dairy because that is the dry spot on the farm – everything went underwater. It takes its toll, you know, and as farmers, in particular dairy farmers, we like to be in control. We build infrastructure and we feed our cows in a way that we can control what is happening. When you lose control and when that is taken away from you because of an event, some people take a long time to process that, and I think a lot of people still have not processed it.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Has there been any particular help that has been given to the industry?

**Tom ACOCKS:** There is loads of support, you know. There are any number of support services out there. Ultimately, it is up to an individual as to whether they want to avail themselves of that support. At a community level people are pretty tired, and at an industry level we seem to go from one crisis to another, so people are tired. But the support is out there, and it is well documented. It is well publicised. It is just whether the individuals are ready to take it on or not and at what point in the journey they are on in that recovery. I mean, everyone is a little different.

**Kate BURKE:** Can I just add to that: I think one of the under-recognised cohorts – I guess not so much me now that I do not do a lot of direct one-to-one with farming – is the advisers in the industry, so the agronomists, the animal nutritionists. We are a cohort that gets missed in terms of offering support. People feel responsible for all their clients, and unless they have learnt strategies like I have – and I actually teach these strategies about disassociating your role, and what is your emotion to hang onto when you are stressed – it is a massive mental load for anybody who is, you know, like me an accidental leader in the community or for people for whom it is their day job to be out there in farmer land, because farmers use us like their psychologists. They will open up to us before they go and see anyone.

Back to 2011, I actually identified that I needed help. So I went to the doctor and said, 'I think I've got depression.' I went in to get the injections, and they were two farmers, the two nurses, and me being the local agronomist, all they did was download about the flood on their property as I have got my arm out. So that was in the December, and I said, 'You'll be okay, da, da, da,' and I did some maths. A month later I went back to get a second blood test – this was after the January floods – and the nurse said to me as I walked in to sit down, 'You told me it was going to be all right.' That is why I no longer practice one-to-one.

**The CHAIR:** Well, Kate and Tom, our session has come to an end. Thank you both so much for providing your evidence to us today. It has been really, really useful. If this has raised any difficult issues for you, please make sure you reach out to either Lifeline or any other appropriate mental health supports that you need. Thank you for coming.

**Witnesses withdrew.**