T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair
Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair
Dr Matthew Bach
Ms Melina Bath
Dr Catherine Cumming
Mr Stuart Grimley
Mr Andy Meddick
Mr Cesar Melhem
Dr Samantha Ratnam
Ms Nina Taylor

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Ms Georgie Crozier
Mr David Davis
Dr Tien Kieu
Mrs Beverley McArthur
Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Chris Commins, Projects Officer, Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us are gathered on today and I 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 or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I would like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast as well.

At this time I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra; I am the chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Joining us via Zoom are Ms Nina Taylor, Mr Stuart Grimley, Dr Matthew Bach. Back in the room we have Mr Andy Meddick, Ms Melina Bath and Mrs Bev McArthur.

All evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the 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. If I could just get you for the Hansard record to please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr COMMINS: My name is Chris Commins. I am a representative from the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. And with that, I will ask you to give your presentation, and if you could please keep your opening remarks to 5 or 10 minutes, that would be much appreciated, and I will give you a 2-minute warning when we get to the end of the time. Okay. Over to you.

Mr COMMINS: Well, thanks for the opportunity to present today. Mountain cattlemen have always stated that the single biggest threat to biodiversity in the Victorian High Country and state forests in general is the devastating effects of wildfire caused by excessive fuel loads. The immediate destruction of flora and fauna by intense wildfire is usually followed by a rain event that causes massive soil erosion and nutrient loss. The sediment clogs our catchment systems and makes our waterways toxic to aquatic life. Mountain cattlemen have long warned that the vast forest system and all that live in it are headed towards destruction and if we continue down our current path of management we will turn the High Country into an alpine desert. These destructive, disastrous fires are fuelled by excessive fuel loads 100 years in the making, compounded 40 years ago when public land management was hijacked by urban-based theoretical environmentalists. It is a 'lock it up and leave it' philosophy, a philosophy that will ultimately destroy what they are trying to protect.

For 186 years mountain cattlemen have worked alongside First People, learning firsthand their methods of burning the right way. Their knowledge, learned through intergenerational experience, is referred to as traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge refers to not just Indigenous people but others with intimate knowledge and experience of the land, such as bushmen with intergenerational European heritage. Unfortunately the traditional ecological knowledge and experience of mountain cattlemen has been arrogantly dismissed by urban-based environmentalists. Our culture, our heritage and our knowledge have been denigrated, denied and trashed, an attitude not dissimilar to the experience of Indigenous people in this country. It began when the newly formed Forests Commission in 1919 banned the burning of the bush. The fire on Mount Baw Baw in 1932 was blamed on bushmen burning off. A headline in the *Herald* dated Saturday, 13 February 1932, citing the science of the day, was, and I quote:

> 'Uncontrolled burning-off is disastrous, and is condemned in every country in the world where forests are regarded as valuable assets to the community', says the Forests Commission …

It has been proved beyond doubt, not only in Australia, that nothing less than absolute fire exclusion will promote real progress towards a fully productive forest property. Just as the law can be perverted, so can science.

At the 1939 royal commission, mountain cattlemen like Harry Treasure, Hedley Stoney and others gave evidence that lightning was the major cause of fire. This was dismissed by Judge Stretton. The only time Stretton mentioned lightning was in one sentence—the real but rare occurrence of lightning. Today it would be acknowledged by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning that most forest fires are started by lightning.

Five years ago I had the good fortune to spend a week in North Queensland with Australia's best-known Indigenous fire practitioner, Victor Steffensen, burning the bush. This was at a national Indigenous fire workshop at Melsonby, 6 hours north of Cairns. Because of the many similarities between the way the mountain cattlemen burnt the bush and the way Aborigines burnt the bush I wanted to know more about Aboriginal cultural burning, as I was keen to reintroduce firestick management to south-eastern Australia and to give it some momentum. To that end I invited Victor down to my country on Nunyong plateau. I knew Victor did not know the immense scale of the catastrophe that had befallen Victoria's High Country with the 2003 fires. I took Victor to the top of Mount Nunyong where you could see Mount Kosciuszko in the north, the Bogongs in the west and the Snowy River valley in the east. As far as the eye could see was the ghostly grey mass of burnt trees. Victor was badly shaken. He dropped to his knees and exclaimed, 'What have they done? This is sick country'. Victor aptly described the scene as 'upside-down country'—all the roots are up in the air and the vegetation is down below.

The travesty is that 18 years on, this scene now has six times the fuel loads as prior to the fire of 2003, a time bomb waiting to explode. It is the same with the Bogongs and around Falls Creek and elsewhere. When the firebomb goes off—and it will—it will have the energy of a thermonuclear bomb. What hope do all the critters have? Urgent action is needed to reduce fuel levels everywhere. That means using every tool in the management toolbox, starting with widespread mild fire. Grazing is also one of the most efficient and cost-effective means of reducing biomass and thus reducing the intensity of wildfire. No amount of grazing could emulate the destruction of this landscape and this ecosystem brought about by flawed land management policies promulgated by the Green movement—policies that have allowed fire levels to reach dangerous and destructive levels. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that presentation. Now we will open up to questions. I was going to throw to Dr Bach if he is there.

Dr BACH: Yes, I certainly am, Chair. Thank you so much for the evidence that you have presented to the inquiry. When it has come to the evidence of some earlier witnesses I have learned a lot, in particular about invasive species—not an area, to tell you the truth, that before this inquiry I knew a huge amount about. We have heard from you of course about fuel loads and we have heard evidence from some other witnesses about fuel loads and climate change when it comes to fires. I wonder if I could ask you to expand a little bit upon the evidence you have presented to us regarding the threat from invasive species, especially in the part of the state that you in particular care about and where there is a cohort that you represent.

Mr COMMINS: There are a number of species of introduced weeds that have compounded, namely blackberries and English broom. As far as vermin, it is just overrun with deer and overrun with wild dogs, cats and pigs. There are a lot of different species that have manifested.

Dr BACH: Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you. Thank you, Mr Commins. I happen to have also been up to Melsonby six or five years ago—time flies—and I became a devotee of Victor Steffensen at that time and met you up there, Chris. But I guess what I would like you to do is drill down more around, say, the comparison—they are different, but they are similar—with the mountain cattlemen's way of doing cool burns. So unpack some of the similarities and differences with Victor and the way he and his team do it.

Mr COMMINS: I think there are many similarities because the mountain cattlemen were good bushmen and they survived in that environment because they observed what was going on around them—namely, the way the Aborigines used to burn the country, and lightning of course ran its race. We have always known that the canopy is sacred; you do not scorch the canopy in any sort of fire if you can help it. And the other thing is the key message from Victor Steffensen and Indigenous cultural burning is frequent, low intensity, mild fire. And the mountain cattlemen practised that until we were banned from doing it, and unfortunately a lot of that knowledge has been lost. I have been a strong advocate for the return of the firestick to better manage this landscape. It is not the silver bullet, but everything helps.

Now, the fuel loads are such that—and you would have even heard that if you have read the Victorian cultural heritage fire strategy—some of the elders there will tell you that they have to reduce the fuel loads before they can actually apply cultural burning because the problem is so vast. But basically we have a lot of reasons for the cultural burning that mountain cattlemen do, and the Aborigines have many more reasons that they burn, one of them being spiritual and obviously for edible plants and medicinal plants as well. But the key message, as Victor would tell you, is that fire should be like water, trickling around on the ground, not up in the trees.

Ms BATH: Thank you. And a follow-up, thanks, Chair. You were right in the thick of it. You live in Ensay or around Ensay, don't you, and you were in the absolute thick of it during the 2019–20 fires. I am sorry if it brings you distress if I mention it to you. I would like you to give us a perspective on what you see. If you had the magic wand for fuel load management, if you had the keys to the DELWP office, in a sensible way what would you do to stop those fires that came past your property and then went all the way through into Snowy River National Park and burnt out 50 per cent of that national park? What are some of the things that you would do?

Mr COMMINS: It was devastating. We were severely impacted by the fires. I have a property at Wingan, which is not far from Mallacoota. We lost 60 per cent of our pastures, and I managed to get up there three days after the event because things went pear-shaped at Ensay as well so it was fairly hectic and anxious. It was just devastating, you know. Fortunately I knew this was going to happen because there had not been any fuel management since 1983 in the vicinity. On my property I have about 100 acres of bush. I fortunately burnt that in the preceding winter, and it is like an oasis now. Even though we lost 60 per cent of our pastures, we had 800 head of cattle there and we lost no cattle because the grass height was not high—fuel loads were not there—and we had no crown scorch in any of our bush, but the entire surrounding area is like a nuclear bomb has hit it. I knocked up knocking animals on the head that had been severely scorched, that had been blinded. There was one goanna there—I have never seen a place like it for goannas—that we named Bruce after my brother, who is 6 foot 5. This goanna was over 8 foot long. I have got a photograph of him over two pallets. Now, he was a casualty; we have not seen him since. There was a sea eagle's nest between the highway and our boundary fence. That was cooked. God knows how many sea eagles' nests were destroyed, never mind all the other critters and animals—and the eerie silence about it. Well, I do not know why.

We say it is not rocket science: reduce the fuel loads, reduce the intensity, reduce the severity of fire. It seems to have been made very, very unnecessarily complicated, the management of fuel loads. I know I could go out and burn the interface between my property and state forest without any crown scorch because I know how to burn, when to burn and where to burn. Unfortunately a lot of that knowledge is lacking within the department. They pay lip-service to heeding local knowledge, and that is about as far as it goes. It still reverts back to Melbourne because they have to sign off through smoke models and every other thing. And when I say local, it has got to be seriously local. It is no good enforcing a total fire ban day—for example, south of Corryong a few years ago the department was very keen to do a fuel reduction burn there. They were hamstrung because at Wangaratta they had deemed that in the whole province it was a total fire ban day, but it was perfect weather south of Corryong to do a burn, and that did not happen of course. And it rained, and as the department usually says, 'We missed this window of opportunity'. And then they blame global warming or climate change, which is really a cop-out for mismanagement. It is a distraction. The overriding problem is excessive fuel loads, and the only factor we can influence is fuel loads.

Ms BATH: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Commins, for your presentation and your submission. I have to admit, having read through it and listening to what you are saying, I am somewhat confused. I hope you will forgive me for that. Because you mention the relationship you have with Victor Steffensen and with others

and the respect that you have for cultural burning and those sorts of things, and I appreciate that. And certainly I had known of it myself but had not actually ever seen it in practice until we went up to Shepparton, where we had that demonstration, and I was highly appreciative of that. But the reason for my confusion is that Mr Steffensen and several other First Nations people that were there to talk to us specifically said that cattle grazing in those countries was wrong and it was a contributor to the problem and a major contributor to the problem. So I am confused about that—and perhaps you can clear that up for me—but secondly, you also mentioned introduced species as being a problem, and you mentioned deer and pigs and others et cetera as degrading the environment in the High Country. But you did not mention either cattle or, for instance, horses, which are also a really contentious issue at the moment—

Mr COMMINS: For sure.

Mr MEDDICK: about whether they should be there or should not be there. But they are also cloven-footed animals, which are also introduced species, not native species, to those areas. So why are some okay to get rid of and some not? Is that what you are proposing, or did you just forget to mention them?

Mr COMMINS: No. Maybe I have not made myself clear enough, but horses are a problem. Every species needs management. If you take the 'man' out of management, what have you got? Now, cattle at least were managed when they were there—or we are still there in the Victorian state forest. The environmentalists would like to get rid of us there too. But in what remaining areas we still have, they provide the only protection in summer. A lot of the mountain ash forest resource that is there is protected by the grazing animals. If you are talking about the confusion with Victor Steffensen, I am sure he would be alluding to when we were up in Cape York, where people would burn willy-nilly and the fires were too hot. They did not appreciate burning the right way, which is low-intensity mild burning.

Mr MEDDICK: No. He did explain that, and other elders from local First Nations, such as Yorta Yorta, also explained that. So I am quite clear on cool burning and the difference between burning at the right time and in the right places. They were very, very clear about places where you burn at a certain time and then the next and the next and the next, as it follows on, and it is like a mosaic. Right, so I am quite aware of that one. I was not before, but I was happy to learn. I am just specifically meaning about them mentioning that cattle grazing was a contributor to the problem. So that is where my confusion is.

Mr COMMINS: How did Steff think it was contributing to the problem?

Mr MEDDICK: Well, they have said those animals do not belong there and that they are grazing in the wrong periods.

Mr COMMINS: Who belongs there? Really, who belongs there?

Mr MEDDICK: Well, their contention was native animals belong there—

Mr COMMINS: Well, perhaps.

Mr MEDDICK: and that the grazing was contributing to the decline of the native species.

Mr COMMINS: Well, I beg to differ, because things have evolved and changed now. Where lightning once ran its course it is now put out. A lot of that High Country will not be dry enough to burn until January–February, and the only protection that can be offered is grazing. Now, I am not sure in that submission if you saw the photograph there of a plot at Nunniong. That is the most heavily grazed area at Nunniong. It is good basalt country. That plot that is locked up from grazing, if you look at the fuel loads there, they are 2 foot high. That photograph was taken in November. If you extrapolated that scene inside the plot to outside the plot through that entire landscape, you would have a crown fire. Now, the reality is that it is very difficult to burn in January-February, and the only other alternative is grazing. So it offers that protection.

Mr MEDDICK: I do not dispute the fuel load problem; I completely agree with that. I think that what was being spoken about by First Nations people in that visit—the methods of making sure that that happens at the right time—were differing to your particular point of view.

Mr COMMINS: And with due respect to Victor, who is probably not aware of the altitude and the difference in weather. The principles are the same whether you go from here to North Queensland, the United States or Portugal. It is no good me going over to Merrijig to Charlie Lovick and saying, 'This is how we

should burn it here'. He has got the local knowledge. He understands the local weather patterns, the terrain. And likewise it is no good him coming over to home, even though the principle is the same. Leave it to the local knowledge. With the Indigenous community you will hear the same thing too—every mob has their fire man.

The CHAIR: Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Chris, for your submission. I have just got one question. It is in relation to your submission where you stated that you should leave protected areas of public land such as national parks locked up, and that is the worst possible outcome for the landscape. Are you able to just expand upon that point to the inquiry, please?

Mr COMMINS: It has been my observation. After the royal commission in 2009 they recommended that 5 per cent of the landscape be burnt, raising it to 8 per cent. Ideally it needs to be 12 per cent-plus to provide a healthy and safe landscape. But that seems to have been put in the too-hard basket and they have gone back to strategic burning. I have not seen any remote area high altitude burning, certainly up north of where my country is. Bogong has not been burnt since 2003. That is what I mean. Why? I do not know. Why do they do this?

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks, Chris. Thanks, Chair.

Mr MEDDICK: Is that 2003 that you said?

Mr COMMINS: Yes.

The CHAIR: I might have a question. Perhaps just reflecting back to your exchange with Mr Meddick on horses, I think there was a line of conversation there around horses. I think you acknowledge that it is a contentious issue at the moment. Just in terms of hard-hooved animals, obviously there is tension between some people saying that you should not have hooved animals in the high country and some people wanting to talk about the heritage aspects of brumbies. So do you think there is a possibility for those tensions to be resolved somehow and have some level of those animals in those areas? Because there seems to be some evidence here that those animals being in those areas do degrade the landscape and they do pose a threat to some threatened species like grasses or skinks, for example—small lizards. What would you say? Is there a potential for those things to coexist in that way or is it too difficult?

Mr COMMINS: There is no doubt that livestock can coexist with the flora and fauna that is around them. I will use an example of this rare orchid diuris ochroma, which was used as a pretext to abandon the grazing trial in Wonnangatta in 2014, I think it was. Just recently the chief scientist for the botanical gardens did a survey up there. They only know of three spots where this particular orchid is growing. One is in the Wonnangatta Valley. Another is on Catherine station, just over the range, which is private property. Another one is in Kosciuszko. With the survey that was done about six, eight weeks ago, they found about 100 of these plants in Wonnangatta. They went on to private property and literally—she states here, thousands, wherever the cattle had been grazing. They have not been able to locate the one in Kosciusko. It has probably been swamped out by an overgrown mass of senescent snow grass; that is probably why.

The same with moss beds, you know, in a drought year. Grazing, if you kept the vegetation—moss beds dry out in a drought, and they run the risk of being burned. Then all that soot that is trapped in those moss beds gets washed down the catchment. Grazing is the only agency short of mild fire that will protect those moss beds from the ravaging effects of wildfire. It is overstated that the hard-hooved, cloven-footed animals—at least cattle are managed, but they do break down the leaf litter, the stick litter, and that in itself is able to decompose back into the ground. But I think it is certainly compatible—at least they manage.

The CHAIR: So why do you say you think that? Are you saying the problem is overstated? And why do you say it is? On what basis?

Mr COMMINS: I think there is a different agenda, perhaps—I do not know. I think it is largely fuelled by ignorance. They will pick on—I will give you another example of flawed trials. At Cowombat Flat they have horse exclusion zones. There have fenced off these—

The CHAIR: When you say 'they', who is 'they'?

Mr COMMINS: Well, I assume it would be environmental groups that have fenced off these plots on the headwaters of the Murray River where you can stand on New South Wales and Victoria—it is not very wide—and then it goes into a bit of a bog. They have set up these plots to show the damage that the horses do, and the plots are only 10 metres apart so what it does in effect is channel the horses between the plots. Of course you are going to have a more significant impact visible where they have trampled the bog, but each side you can hardly notice it. But again the only safe zone there is Cowombat Flat because the fuel loads are like that; it is grazed down. Now, horses are no different to anything else: they need to be managed. There are too many horses, but they are at least keeping it open in places.

The CHAIR: And just a final question from me: for this committee, what do you say should be our top three priorities for this inquiry? What do you think we should do in terms of recommendations—your top three?

Mr COMMINS: Well, at the very top of the list is fuel reduction on a broad scale. It is without a doubt the only factor that we can seriously impact if we are serious about protecting biodiversity and our ecosystem—not only all the critters out there but people as well. What else would there be?

The CHAIR: That might be your top one.

Mr COMMINS: Top one.

The CHAIR: If you do not have any others, that is fine.

Mr COMMINS: I do, yes, and that is to heed local knowledge and the experience of bushmen like the mountain cattlemen. Do not denigrate them. Accept their knowledge. Listen to them, at least.

The CHAIR: Anything else?

Mr COMMINS: I think they are probably the top two.

The CHAIR: Okay, fantastic. Thank you for that. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thanks for your contribution today. I was just wondering, because of particular concern for rural and regional areas and the impacts of bushfires and harsher temperatures: what would you say is the impact of climate change for you? How does that make your life harder in the bush?

Mr COMMINS: Mountain cattlemen have been managing climate change for 180 years. There is nothing new about it. I think unfortunately it is used as a cop-out for mismanagement. Look, in 2009 Victoria dodged a bullet in that—I say 'only' reservedly—only 200 lives were lost. It could easily have had another zero on the end of it. If it had got into Nunawading, into the Dandenongs, God help us—how many? And unfortunately it is a real dilemma. It will happen; it is going to happen. The ex-fire chiefs, like Greg Mullins, and his fellow emergency service leaders that signed that petition about climate change have distracted from the real issue. They are activists. They want to build their empire. They want more bulldozers, more aeroplanes—grow it, grow it. In the United States they have over 1000 aircraft to put fires out. That is not working. It is good window-dressing for the public, and that is about as far as it goes. But it does not matter whether you believe in it or do not believe in, if you believe in it that is all the more reason to be burning more frequently. There is a lot more urgency to it.

Ms TAYLOR: Do you believe in it?

Mr COMMINS: I am a sceptic, but also I do know that it is changing. It has always been changing. It is always changing. We have just been through four years of drought. It is raining at the moment, which is good, but in the last 100 years if you look at the records it seems to be about every 20 years in my region we have a serious drought, a serious dry time. So I think it is unfortunately being used as a cop-out for mismanagement—'Oh, we missed that window of opportunity to burn because it was too wet, too hot, too cold, too something'. And really, they need to adapt, because the fuel loads are such that they need to know when to burn. A lot of that experience in the department has been lost because there is no longer a forest service. There are no longer any forestry schools, and the old-timers that did learn about burning are no longer around. I see it all the time. They are so risk averse, and they do not get the protection if it does go pear-shaped—and it will go pear-shaped from time to time—but they have got to learn when to burn and how to burn.

Ms TAYLOR: All right. My final question: do you think humans contribute to climate change at all?

Mr COMMINS: I am sure that there is an element there, but it is only a small element.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thanks very much, Chair. And thank you, Chris, for coming in today and for your presentation and for the work you do to protect the environment and to advocate the case. I was struck in the recent fires with the problem that you had in your area where you lost pasture and also you lost water because of the pollution of the water. So that meant stock—even if we could bring hay into the area, they could not get water. Now, we were in a situation in western Victoria where we had rampant fuel growth, especially on roadsides. We had councils ready to take stock on roadside grazing—and we have got plenty of long paddocks in western Victoria—but they were totally stopped really by the bureaucrats in charge of this. Now, many of the councils wanted to do that not only to help out saving livestock in an area such as your own but also to reduce the fuel loads in their area. They knew, because we had already had a serious fire in 2018 caused by roadside vegetation and energy infrastructure, that this was going to be a win-win for everybody. We were going to save livestock and we were going to save ourselves from a fire. But we were stopped. So this idea that you cannot graze land because it is going to damage the environment is somehow foreign to me and also foreign to the Aboriginals that I know in my area. At Budj Bim, for example, they demonstrate the cold burning of their area historically so that the grass became shorter and the native animals grazed on it. And the native grasses flourish from grazing and cold burning. Now, the threat to many native species of grasses and flora is in introduced species, and in our areas it is phalaris, for example, and blackberries that are rampant, and ferns.

We have had umpteen so-called experts come in here and tell us that the solution to all this will be more money for various government departments to save us from ourselves, but you have demonstrated that actually it is a skill set missing——

The CHAIR: Is there a question there?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. So how do you think we are going to overcome this sort of mantra that money is going to save us when you are demonstrating that it is actually local knowledge and experience?

Mr COMMINS: It is very, very difficult. I have been beating my head against a brick wall for it seems like most of my life, and I know there are people a lot older than me who have been doing the same. You are dead right about roadways: they are corridors of death in a fire. As with anywhere else, the fuel loads need to be managed, and the most practical way to do that is by grazing. It is a mindset. I think there are too many people urban based who are so removed from the realities of life in the bush that they do not understand the practical elements of practical management by use of livestock to manage it. I do not know how you get the message through, I am sorry.

Mrs McARTHUR: Could you also just explain to us about that area of land that I think was grazed in a property—either yours or your brother's perhaps—in the High Country which became an oasis not only for your own livestock or other people's livestock but for the native animals? They all assembled there because there was the green pick and they were safe from fire. How did that occur?

Mr COMMINS: They are not as dumb as people think, animals; they will seek refuge wherever they can. Certainly if you have got low fuel, you are not going to have the intensity fire and it is not going to panic them. It is staggering just what does come into the property when there is a major fire. Likewise, post fire when the vegetation comes back—because the canopy has been stripped, the light is let in and all the species known to man grow, so it compounds the problem. You have this massive bank of fine fuels, medium fuels, heavy fuels and it is setting it up for the next time bomb. Once you have scorched a canopy, you have changed that landscape almost revocably. To bring it back is going to take an enormous amount of work. Now, a lot of that is unsuitable. Where it might have held a kangaroo, no longer can the kangaroo graze there. So they come in onto private property, and the wild dogs come in, chasing the kangaroos onto private property. And then they see something a little bit easier and more entertaining, like sheep. I have even seen them pull down weaner calves, packs of dogs working on weaner calves. You see fairly devastating scenes like merino sheep, for example. They are a bit of a paradox. There is no animal on the planet as tough as a merino sheep, but there is no animal that can think of more ways of dying. When you see where dogs have attacked a mob of sheep, you will see one poor old wether—a canine will be traipsing along behind the mob—with its oesophagus pulled out, they have missed the jugular or another one that has had its hamstring pulled out. That is the problem with wild dogs and these massive fires and that regrowth that becomes impenetrable. Nothing can get through. It is lifeless; it is just terrible.

Mrs McARTHUR: So have the dogs survived fires?

Mr COMMINS: I am sure a lot get cooked, but the food source—they keep chasing the kangaroos into private property.

The CHAIR: I might ask another question, if I can. You were talking about invasive species before. I am just interested in what sort of things you do on your property to manage invasive weeds, for example. How do you manage them?

Mr COMMINS: Well, we probably use chemicals to control them.

The CHAIR: Yes. So how do you do it? Do you have a plan? Like, do you do it every couple of months? Do you want to unpack how you do it?

Mr COMMINS: Yes, yes. Generally blackberries—when they start flowering in November, December, that is the time to spray blackberries depending on the location, and we will just use quick-spray units. If there happens to be a big patch, you might use a helicopter—very effective. That is how we manage it. Depending on where you are in the High Country, there are lots of blackberries, lots of English broom, and there seems to be a lack of interest. There is always the cry, 'We don't have the resources', but one of those big DC-10s that sit down at Avalon during the fire season, which cost about $10 million, would buy an awful lot of fuel reduction and a lot of spraying of weeds and be more effective.

The CHAIR: So when you talk about spraying, do you do an assessment at the time perhaps if there was rain or run-off into creeks? How do you make an assessment?

Mr COMMINS: No, it is rain fast—very quickly it is absorbed into the plant. It is quite specific.

The CHAIR: Okay. If I can perhaps go to other committee members now for a second round. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: And we have got about 4 minutes.

Ms BATH: Mr Commins, I would be surprised if you or some of your family were not or had not been involved in Landcare. We have heard from Landcare today and the importance of volunteering and the importance of restoration, whether it be riparian land—so river frontages—or indeed in other programs. You are from Ensay way, up there in the good country: what sort of good programs do Landcare do, and what do we need to hear as this committee to support Landcare doing work in restoration and habitat renewal or protection?

Mr COMMINS: Look, so long as the local Landcare groups are listened to, I think it is admirable the work that is done by Landcare. I would be concerned if we got environmental activists involved. That might change the direction of Landcare and might upset people that are not listened to.

Ms BATH: It is interesting you raise that, because there is a discussion that has come to my ears that the far east Gippsland Landcare group have actually been using grant money to do environmental activism. Now, that is as a rumour has it. We had very good discussion earlier on with the CEO of Landcare, and I think he was quite specific about the need for programs that restore habitat and improve biodiversity and improve threatened species' likelihood of survival et cetera. I do not think he certainly mentioned activism or environmental activism or, 'Let's stop logging' or something in that space.

Mr COMMINS: Certainly, I hope. We have seen it happen. As my submission mentions, public land management was hijacked 50 years ago or 40 years ago, and it would be disappointing to see local Landcare groups hijacked by it too. We have seen, speaking of grazing roadways, where in shires now there has been a huge change in demographics where there are a lot of people from Melbourne now living in the bush. A lot of those people have become members of council and have banned grazing of the roads—never mind the locals. It is unfortunately the society we live in today.

Ms BATH: I guess, Mr Commins, it is also about the use of public money for the whole public good in terms of biodiversity and habitat restoration.

Mr COMMINS: For sure, yes.

The CHAIR: All right. I will just see if any other committee members have any other questions. With that, I think it is time that our session comes to a close. So with that, Mr Commins, thank you very much for your presentation and your evidence today.

Witness withdrew.