

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Euroa — 21 July 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Mr Daniel Young

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr Adem Somyurek

Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Acting secretary: Mr Richard Willis

Research assistant: Ms Annemarie Burt

Witness

Mr Steve Wilson (affirmed), Land And Biodiversity Program Manager, Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority.

The CHAIR — Thank you for appearing, Steve, and I wonder if you might just begin with a short presentation. We have obviously got your covering material, but you may want to add to that, and then we will follow with some questions.

Mr WILSON — Yes, sure. Thank you very much. My name is Steve Wilson and I am the land and biodiversity program manager at the CMA. Part of my role, obviously working along with the CEO and the CMA board, is to oversee community activity across the catchment, so when we got the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry we obviously did a lot of legwork in terms of talking to the broader community about their concerns in fire preparedness. So really I suppose from a CMA perspective one of the key things we wanted to convey to you guys is that we think the Safer Together program is really good. It is a really good education and awareness program. Clearly when communities are informed about when there is going to be fire preparedness activity, at the moment obviously there is a fair amount of advertising that goes on — it is in papers, local networks and all that — and certainly from a CMA perspective we felt that, wherever appropriate and possible, some form of human face should be put to that.

For example, if there is going to be some control work in a certain area, pre that fire activity time people could actually come along to a community forum or workshop of some form — or some sort of forum — where they could actually hear about what is being proposed, the reasons why it happens and all those sorts of typical community concerns. So this is really not about complaining about what is not being done; it is really adding value to a suggestion of what could be useful to you guys in terms of letting the community know what is happening regarding fire management. That is pretty much it in a nutshell, really, if it helps.

The CHAIR — Do you have any points you would like to make in terms of the preparatory burning and how the CMA should fit into that particular — —

Mr WILSON — Probably we think our biggest strength is actually our community networks, so as a way of helping assist in promoting what is going on, we certainly sit on the alpine and north-east risk landscape committee, so we have skin in the game there. But certainly we are always interested to know ahead of time what is going on so we can promote actively and support DELWP and the fire authorities on what is happening.

The CHAIR — Just as a question, were the board members changed recently?

Mr WILSON — Half the board has changed, yes. Every two years we get another four board members.

The CHAIR — The other point I was interested in is Indigenous input into the CMA's work.

Mr WILSON — Yes. We have what is called an Indigenous participation group. It has representatives of the two registered Aboriginal parties, Yorta Yorta and Taungurung. So that is the group that gets together four to six times a year, and it is also very valuable because other external partners find that participation group useful for actually passing on their concerns through to their registered Aboriginal parties. So that is our main conduit, because obviously we have a range of projects and things with various Indigenous peoples across the catchment, but that is the main way. For example, if we were going to pass on some fire information, that is how we would do it — through that group.

Mr YOUNG — The Safer Together program: could you just explain some of the content in that and some of the things that it brings to the community?

Mr WILSON — It is just good basic information. It is that sort of front-end information that we get from you guys, so that actually the community can sort of say, 'This is what it's about'. It is about being prepared and having a fire plan and being aware and being prepared and all those sorts of things. So we think that is really good. Anecdotally we are hearing good things from the community about that program, so it is a really good thing. That is why we thought, in putting in our submission, also having a human face to that as well is really useful so people can ask beyond that particular program's information. So what is the real nuts and bolts of why we are actually doing this fire work? People obviously know that you are trying to reduce fuel loads and reduce the fire impact, but obviously the community has different concerns.

Ultimately what you want is that on a really hot, steamy summer day, when there is a big cloud of smoke, they will go, 'Okay, that is all right. We know they're doing a controlled burn there. It's not an uncontrolled fire because we're well aware of what is going on and the reason it is happening'. Does that sort of make sense?

Mr YOUNG — Does it have specific information as far as when controlled burns are being done, or is it more of a general ‘This is what we’re doing, and this is why we’re doing controlled burns’?

Mr WILSON — That is exactly right, yes.

Mr YOUNG — And the community is liking that information? Is it specific enough for them?

Mr WILSON — Very much so, yes. I think so.

Mr YOUNG — How many people are engaged in it?

Mr WILSON — Good question. I would be winging it if I was — quite a few.

Mr YOUNG — All right. No worries.

Mr SOMYUREK — You talk about the pre-fire season roadshow.

Mr WILSON — That is exactly right. So you have got a plan of action to do controlled burns before it gets too hot, that you do some sort of — for example, you are going to do some burning in the Strathbogie Ranges; you consult the community here well in advance to say we are doing burns here, letting them know well in advance of what is happening and the reasons why. We know you are reducing fuel load, but you need to explain that.

Mr SOMYUREK — The term ‘roadshow’ has connotations. You just mean communicating with the locals?

Mr WILSON — A community workshop or some sort of event.

The CHAIR — Two-way, sort of thing?

Mr WILSON — Yes, that is right. When I say ‘roadshow’, you know what I mean — travelling around to wherever you are going to do your controlled burns. That is right.

Mr SOMYUREK — That is all right. It is colourful language.

Mr BARBER — Does the CMA have any formal role in the development of the fire operations plan, or would you just make a submission like any other citizen would?

Mr WILSON — Mostly in submissions, that is right. Certainly because we are on the committee we contribute, so while we are not claiming to be experts, we would certainly contribute from our catchment authority role — —

Mr BARBER — But the CMA has a large and legislated responsibility for preparing their own plans for the catchment protection and biodiversity —

Mr WILSON — Exactly. That is right.

Mr BARBER — and then a very small amount of money with which to do it. How would you say those plans and responsibilities interact with these fire operation plans?

Mr WILSON — Because the CMA is very much a partnership organisation, I think it is about sharing that information between the different jurisdictions and different areas that you are working, so that is the strength of where we are coming from, I think.

Mr BARBER — That is the process, but I am saying the actual fire operations plan exists put up your various plans —

Mr WILSON — Yes, we would see our role is spreading that information.

Mr BARBER — how well do they work together in terms of the objectives they are trying to achieve?

Mr WILSON — Yes, good question. I think certainly from an awareness point of view they work really well. Probably we could do a bit more work in really working through the nuts and bolts of that, yes.

Mr BARBER — Awareness in a sense of it flags the issues, do you think?

Mr WILSON — Exactly. Yes, I think so.

Mr BARBER — But does their plan deliver on your objectives?

Mr WILSON — Very much so.

Mr BARBER — In what way?

Mr WILSON — Well, we are talking human lives. We are more in the environmental space so obviously we want to make sure that the burns are environmentally sound. They are obviously reducing fuel loads, but obviously we do not want to see areas torched that are going to impact on biodiversity to any extent, so that is sort of the interface where we would be working. We do appreciate that the fire authorities understand that sort of work. I think that again our goals are slightly different but we do appreciate the fact that fuel reduction burns have a role to protect human life and property and all that sort of work. But certainly we do not want to see the landscape heavily burnt and impacting negatively on the environment, knowing that our forests do require a certain amount of burning naturally, so that is sort of the space we are working. Does that make sense?

Mr BARBER — Yes, that is good.

Mr RAMSAY — Just a quick one. We heard evidence from Mr Hamilton about his frustration with multi-agencies in relation to maybe doing some simple roadside burning. He identified three water authorities, two statutory authorities, a local water authority and then a number of state government departments as well. Have you come across any particular problems associated with getting a consensus amongst all those authorities to allow just basic roadside burning or CFA burning for fire preparedness?

Mr WILSON — No, not really. I think we have really improved in that area in terms of sharing information on what is going on. Roadsides are always contentious because in some parts of the catchment they are only the only places where native vegetation lives, so there are perceptions of roadsides being wicks in a fire situation. Again, this is where you have retaining your roadside vegetation because it is the only vegetation around and there is biodiversity using that area, but I think we have improved a lot in that area in terms of knowing what is going on and working with local government in particular, because they are often responsible for managing roadsides, so I think there has been an improvement in that area. It is not perfect, but I think it has improved.

Mr RAMSAY — I am just thinking if I was in Mr Hamilton's position, trying to get a permit to burn and I was dealing with seven agencies that were all buck-passing around the decision-making process — —

Mr WILSON — Yes, I think that is an issue.

Mr RAMSAY — Who has the final decision or oversight of the decision? You have Parks Victoria, DELWP, council, catchments, statutory water authority, local water authority.

Mr WILSON — Yes. Certainly where we would see the tension is when you have an adjacent land holder to that area who has concerns. Say it is very woody or weedy, that is considered a fire threat. Usually I would suggest that local government would be the first port of call, depending on who is getting passed around. I cannot really give you a definitive answer on that to be honest.

Mr RAMSAY — So where does it end up, though, after it has been buck-passed around to seven different agencies?

Mr WILSON — Yes, good question. I am not quite sure to be honest.

Mr RAMSAY — I will ask the question again.

Mr WILSON — I would rather not spin you any bullshit. I would rather tell you that if I do not know, I do not know. But that is an issue occasionally, yes, definitely.

The CHAIR — Just one further point: your role as CMA is focusing on, among other things, biodiversity —

Mr WILSON — Correct.

The CHAIR — and protecting that in the longer term. How do you reconcile this point that we are getting information on competing sides as we move around, some saying, including earlier today, that you have to do these very small, targeted burns, but others being concerned about larger areas where you have got dense growth and it can become a fierce fire that actually will — —

Mr WILSON — Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR — Do you have any light to shed on what I think is an important balance for us to understand?

Mr WILSON — I mean, it is a compromise. It is like national parks, Crown land, waterway frontage and all that all have the CMAs under the Catchment Land Protection Act where we have got to work to try to protect those natural assets wherever we can. Probably a lot more of our focus is on private land — that landscape adjacent to those areas. Statutory components of the CMA certainly look after waterways and adjacent areas. Certainly in my program, which is land and biodiversity, it is very much in that sort of private land interface, so really it is being aware — —

The CHAIR — But biodiversity might not be helped by a fierce fire that destroys the area.

Mr WILSON — I mean, what do you say? That is an act of God, whether it is man-made or it is a lightning strike. Camp fire is a natural part of our ecology. We are trying to maintain the balance, aren't we? That is what we are really trying to do.

The CHAIR — In an area that had not burnt since 1923. It was so dense that Ned Kelly could hide there.

Mr WILSON — That is right.

The CHAIR — It seems to me that that is a risk.

Mr WILSON — Very much so. And of course the risk is: what do you do about it? Do you actually try to get a fire in there when — I did fire ecology at uni. I know what fire does in terms of the litter cycle and how the density of the debris on the ground is going to give you the intensity of the fire, all that sort of work. So, yes, that is the risk.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We really appreciate your work.

Mr WILSON — You are welcome. Thanks very much. Cheers.

Witness withdrew.