

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne — 19 July 2016

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Mr Gregory Esnouf (affirmed), Manager Predictive Services, Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council.

The CHAIR — I welcome the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council to the table, and I ask Greg Esnouf to give a short presentation, and then we will follow with some questions relating to our fire preparedness inquiry.

Mr ESNOUF — Thank you. Chair and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Greg Esnouf, and I am engaged by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council — which I will refer to as AFAC, for obvious reasons, from now on — as the manager of the National Burning Project and also executive officer of two of AFAC’s national collaborative groups, these being the Rural and Land Management Group and the newly formed Predictive Services Group.

I would firstly like to tender an apology from the AFAC CEO, Mr Stuart Ellis, who is unable to attend today as he is convening a national meeting of all commissioners and chief officers of Australasian fire and emergency service authorities. As outlined in section 2 of our submission, AFAC is the national council for fire, land management and emergency service authorities in Australia and New Zealand, and represents 33 member organisations comprising permanent and part-time personnel and volunteers, totalling 288 000 firefighters and emergency workers. In Victoria the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning — DELWP — Parks Victoria, the Country Fire Authority, the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board, and the State Emergency Service are all full members of AFAC, while Emergency Management Victoria and Melbourne Water are affiliate members.

AFAC acts as a collaborative policy development forum for the fire and emergency services sector across Australasia to assist in providing a consistent doctrine and framework for use by the sector, but it is up to each individual member and jurisdiction as to what extent it adopts each piece of doctrine. As indicated in our written submission, we ask the environment and planning committee to note that the submission and information provided today should not be taken as a position of any single AFAC member. Also some of our members will be contributing to the inquiry through jurisdictional submissions, and nothing in our response should be taken as implying that our members do not fully support their jurisdictional submissions, where made.

I will briefly discuss some key themes from the AFAC submission and look forward to questions from members of the committee. Please understand that there may be areas you may wish to explore that I may not have sufficient knowledge to be able to answer in depth. If this is the case, I am happy to take those questions on notice and provide a more comprehensive response from AFAC on these matters if that is of interest to the committee.

AFAC notes that the terms of reference for the inquiry are predominantly focused on examining the preparation and planning for the fire season by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and other agencies including Parks Victoria, and in particular preventive or prescribed burning and emergency response. Consequently most of the AFAC submission addresses the terms of reference by describing how the current activities being undertaken by the National Burning Project support the objective of reducing the bushfire risk by supporting knowledge and capability-building within agencies to undertake prescribed burning.

The National Burning Project is bringing together interrelated aspects of prescribed burning across Australasia to design guiding frameworks and principles for a more holistic and consistent approach to prescribed burning practices. The project will deliver a suite of products that informs all levels of prescribed burning management. Key elements of the project when it is completed will be a national position on prescribed burning, which will outline key principles, strategic and operational planning guidelines, risk frameworks and training resources. These will be supported by a toolbox of relevant materials, the resource-sharing process that supports capability sharing between jurisdictions and a performance measurement framework.

Another key component is the development of a national bushfire fuel classification to provide a nationally consistent classification system to improve communication and cross-border operability, and to facilitate the development and use of bushfire management support tools, especially fire behaviour predictive tools. I do not propose to describe each project in any more detail today as I am hopeful that the written submission achieves its purpose, but in summary I believe that it is a comprehensive suite of projects to build planning and operational capability across Australasia for prescribed burning and demonstrate the value of collaborative national effort.

Another key element of the AFAC submission is the development of doctrine which describes how agencies and personnel are organised particularly for emergency response, in particular the Australasian Inter-service

Incident Management System, or AIIMS, which provides a consistent approach to incident management. AIIMS has been progressively developed and used in Australasian fire and emergency services since the mid-to-late 1980s, has greatly facilitated interoperability across agencies and jurisdictions and has been instrumental in supporting an all-hazards, all-agencies approach to emergency management.

In undertaking its deliberations on agency preparedness and planning, AFAC requests the committee to consider the preparedness and planning issues that present to individual agencies within the broader, more holistic approach to risk reduction described by the Australian national strategy for disaster reduction. The strategy, released in February 2011, acknowledges the increasing severity and regularity of natural disasters in Australia and the collective responsibility of all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals to work together to enhance Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters. This concept of risk reduction through shared responsibility in action is also reflected in the AFAC *Strategic Directions for Fire and Emergency Services in Australia and New Zealand 2014–2016*, which was published by AFAC in 2013 and lists supporting resilient communities through risk reduction as one of five strategic directions.

These strategies and policies highlight the collective responsibilities of governments, business, community and individuals to identify risk, undertake risk assessments, provide advice, education and information regarding the risk, and undertake activities to mitigate these risks. Therefore, though very important, the contributions of fire agencies cannot be considered in isolation. The steps that individuals, communities and business take to prepare for bushfires are also crucial to the protection of life and property.

A critical component of implementing these more holistic strategies in relation to the terms of reference for this inquiry is the development of a tenure-blind approach to risk management across the landscape. This approach is a key principle of the draft national position on prescribed burning and in Victoria underpins the *Safer Together* approach to reducing the risk of bushfire.

In closing I would like to thank the committee for the invitation for AFAC to present today, and I hope the information provided is useful in your deliberations.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for your very comprehensive submission and the background materials that you have provided. They provide, I think, a very useful national and indeed international context for a whole series of areas of our terms of reference. I really had, I guess, two key areas of questioning. You say that you are putting together a document, and I want to get the precise title — I was writing it down. There were two documents: you talked about the Australian Inter-service Incident Management System and interoperability arrangements. Is there some documentation that you can provide us further on that?

Mr ESNOUF — Certainly on the AIIMS, there is a wealth of documentation we could provide you with. An overview document first off might be useful. That describes how people aggregate and manage an incident, so the principles of incident control, the span of control, management by objectives and the like. We can certainly provide a document that provides the overview of AIIMS to you, and what was the other document?

The CHAIR — The other point I was just trying to understand is the *National Burning Project*, which you have given us as an attachment — summary of deliverables. You indicate that that was adopted in February 2011 by your organisation. What is the status of that document for our agencies and our bodies here in Victoria?

Mr ESNOUF — I am sorry, Chair, which document was that?

The CHAIR — This is the *National Burning Project 2011*. I think you refer to a strategy associated with that. I note you have given us a summary of deliverables attachment here on that, so I am just trying to understand. That document is adopted by your organisation, and what is the relationship to our organisations here?

Mr ESNOUF — Sorry; I am still struggling with which document you are referring to.

The CHAIR — You refer to establishing the National Burning Project 2011, and you refer to a strategy associated with that.

Mr ESNOUF — Would that be the forest fire management strategy?

The CHAIR — That is what I am trying to get to.

Mr ESNOUF — If I can find the page, it might help me.

The CHAIR — I made the point at 3.4, which is on page 3 in our document here, but in 3.4 in your submission you refer to the National Burning Project. We also have an attachment, the *National Burning Project*, attachment 2, summary of deliverables. I am just trying to understand exactly what that is.

Mr ESNOUF — That would be the project plan, I think. That is not actually a document. There is a project plan that supports the project. The project was established before my time, but my understanding of it was that the AFAC agencies established it, there was a bit of federal funding that came in through it, the AFAC agencies continued to support it financially, and then there was some national funding provided through the National Bushfire Mitigation funding, which is delivering major components of it.

The standing for Victorian agencies is that Victorian agencies contribute to it, Victorian agencies are on the steering committee — in fact Alan Goodwin, the former chief fire officer of DELWP, is the chair of the steering committee — but the various products are developed by the National Burning Project. Then it falls to each jurisdiction and agency as to how they wish to implement those themselves. So the thread of AFAC's submission is that AFAC does not impose direction, it provides overarching policy, guidance and documentation to support agencies, but how the agencies determine to implement those is up to each agency. But certainly Victorian agencies have contributed substantially to all of the developments on the way through and will adopt various parts of it.

The CHAIR — I also wanted to ask you, you indicate that the Australian fire and emergency council has members that include different member organisations comprising permanent and part-time personnel and volunteers totalling 288 000 firefighters and emergency workers. We have obviously had a significant stand-off that has occurred in the recent period between the CFA and some aspects of government policy that impact on the CFA, and I am wondering how your organisation sees the relationship between volunteer firefighters, and obviously the significant surge response that is available there, and professional firefighters, paid firefighters.

Mr ESNOUF — To quote the words of the CEO, who wrote an internal piece on this a little while ago, AFAC is agnostic to these matters. In fact AFA council, which is the overarching body of all the member agencies, took a stand quite some time ago that it was not the role of AFAC to be involved in industrial negotiations between an employee and an employer but that it would ensure that it promoted the welfare, safety and relationships of all the firefighters. So it is very conscious of ensuring respect and honour and that people value each other across the spectrum of firefighters but does not involve itself in those specific areas.

But in saying that, the way that played out over the last few months was certainly something AFAC noted and is concerned with because it goes to a couple of things. It goes to the loss of morale within fire services — so what efforts can be made to maintain morale and respect within the agencies are important — but it also erodes the public confidence in fire services. To provide a trusted response, the community needs to respect the agencies. AFAC believes that that could have had some effect over the past few months.

The CHAIR — In terms of that whole-of-community response, my dealings over many years with the CFA show that they have got very deep connections in local communities, and that seems to me to be a very important leadership role that is provided at a local level. Can I ask you perhaps to make some commentary on the importance of volunteers within a community and the leadership that they can provide to a whole community?

Ms SHING — Do you mean as opposed to professional firefighters?

The CHAIR — You can ask a question in a minute.

Ms SHING — It is asked and answered, I would say, Chair.

Mr ESNOUF — I think the sheer weight of numbers means that volunteers obviously play a part, particularly in areas where there are only volunteer fire brigades. But to pick up the Deputy Chair's point, if I may, all firefighters are respected and need to develop that trust and work together. So the CFA model is one of career firefighters supporting volunteers, and that happens in other volunteer-integrated organisations as well. But there are strong connections between people, whether they be volunteer or career — at, say, places like

Warrnambool in Victoria, where there is an integrated brigade — into their community, so they will see that all of the time. They all live in the community, and they all to some extent represent the community. So the volunteer part of CFA is very important because it provides, like other volunteer organisations in Victoria and around Australia, a massive capability in areas that it would be difficult to deliver through any other mechanism. So it is a very important part of the fire structure in most states in Australia.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Mr Esnouf, for your initial evidence, the really comprehensive presentation that you have provided and the answers that you have given already to the questions of the Chair. What I would like to do is talk about the way in which fire services can and should be delivered with that blind-tenure approach in relation to some of our really remote and rural areas to bring the community along, on the one hand, whilst also having a good regulatory framework at the other end of things to make sure that resourcing occurs in a safe, consistent and accessible way to meet not only the challenges that exist now but the challenges that will emerge, for example, as population growth changes and as we get growth corridors pushing out to beyond the peri-urban areas and into regional corridors more broadly. How does that affect resilience; how does that affect making sure that we have good exchange and provision of information; and how do we actually complement that with, in your view, the importance of the research that you have referred to and the strategies that you have referred to in your submission? There is a fair bit in that.

Mr ESNOUF — There is, and if I miss bits of it, I apologise up-front.

Ms SHING — No, not at all.

Mr ESNOUF — The tenure-blind approach is evolving over time. Victoria and some other jurisdictions are starting to develop it into a more mature way, but I would have to say that probably if you ranked it between mature and just starting, it is a little way along the way; it is fairly immature. There are a whole lot of issues that work within it.

The underpinning critical thing of tenure-blind risk management is that by its very nature it requires everyone to understand the risk. If people can understand the risk and why things potentially need to happen or what things they may need to do to support that reduction in risk, it is much more achievable than pointing a finger over the fence and saying, 'Well, that risk is there; that needs to be addressed'. So it has got add-on values in that not only does it address the risk that may come from private or public land — so the risk may present on either or both equally, or in different ways — and not only does it address the underpinning risk to bushfire from the various fuel and vegetation elements that may be there, but it allows people to understand the risk environment that they are living in and become more resilient to it. It actually then goes to simple things like: do they have a fire plan? Because if they understand the risk and they understand why they need to contribute to managing the risk across tenures, they also will get a better understanding of the need to do some action themselves that might be closer to home. The challenge for most fire agencies has been getting effective penetration of the messages of community safety and the need to do fire planning.

There are many surveys — and I do not have the information in front of me, but many surveys — that talk about people knowing they have got to do a fire plan but not actually having one, or having one but not actually rehearsing it. The knock-on result of tenure-blind management is not only that it addresses the risk across different tenures — because the risk does not stop at the fence line — but it actually empowers people by giving them more understanding of what the risks are and what actions they can take to address those risks.

Ms SHING — Thank you; that is very helpful. Further to the discussion that you have had with us this morning around risk and risk management, you have sought support for the development of a training capability and resource sharing initiative with the National Burning Project and National Resource Sharing Centre, to the extent that they would operate within a Victorian context. The National Burning Project is something which would obviously interrelate with the work of various departments and agencies. How are the AFAC member agencies working within that context to centralise or to share information in a way that actually gets a better awareness of risk and a better risk management framework on the ground?

Mr ESNOUF — As I indicated earlier, the CFA and DELWP in particular are very active members of the National Burning Project and are active contributors to it. In fact I opened a workshop this morning before I came down here, and DELWP were there representing Victorian agencies in terms of that particular item that was being discussed. So they have been active contributors, they have openly shared their materials with us in the development of the various guidelines and training materials, and they will continue to do that as time goes

by. How they adopt the various elements, as I said, is really up to them, but the training materials in particular should be fairly easily adoptable by all agencies.

Ms SHING — And then translate to better on-the-ground risk management?

Mr ESNOUF — It should translate to better capability building. I mean, I would have to say I think — without looking at each of the agency's materials — the Victorian agencies have had very good materials for quite a long time, and so they will form quite a major bit of this. But it goes to interoperability across other jurisdictions. One of the thrusts of the National Burning Project that you alluded to in your earlier question was the resource sharing capability, and if we can get consistent training and understanding of terminology and practices nationally, it assists with resource sharing.

In a time when resources may be limited because there is a small window of time to do certain things, whether it is what I will call basic resources or whether it is specialist resources that can be shared across jurisdictions and equipment that can be shared across jurisdictions, they would be quite important to delivering on objectives — so consistent training. And we have learnt that through the AIIMS process with incident management. The very first time Victorian agencies went interstate I think was 1994 when they went to Sydney. I was part of that contingent at that stage, and you were talking a different language with a whole lot of things. Yet you fast-forward — doing the maths quickly — 20 years and it is just bread and butter; everyone is talking the same language. So it is quite important.

Ms SHING — Thank you very much. That is very helpful.

Mr BARBER — You have raised the issue about land tenure. In your submission you say:

At a landscape scale, breaking large, high-intensity and high-impact fire cycles requires incorporation of private lands to develop effective management strategies.

If you look at the 50 most at risk towns in Victoria, that list that we all focused on immediately after Black Saturday and getting ready for the following summer, they have now been extensively fuel reduced in a radius around those towns as regards public land. So if it is about private land, as a result of these many studies that you are doing, who is it that is proposed to talk about fuel reduction on private land anywhere in Australia, and what steps would need to be taken if that was going to go forward?

Mr ESNOUF — Well, Victoria is doing it through its Safer Victoria process and DELWP and CFA engaging in trying to do cooperative burns. I am aware of some examples. One is down in the East Gippsland area — just north of Bairnsdale; I have lost the name of it — where the brigades are actively involved in the planning and implementation of burns that are across tenure. It is a complex area, and it involves agreement with private landowners. It not only needs CFA and DELWP to be on side but it requires good community support for it to happen. Other jurisdictions: Tasmania is active in this space as well and have got a program where they seek support and approval from private landowners to do that burning, and over about the last two to three years they have done that.

But it is a question that will take a little while to work through, getting agreement from all landowners. There are some legislative changes that could be made, but I am not really across what they might be. I think it is more getting commitment and understanding of the landowners to do that. I am not actually sure I am answering your question. Sorry.

Mr BARBER — You have flagged the issue in your report. Maybe there is other material you can source from your members about how it has been done in Tasmania, at what level and what scale.

Mr ESNOUF — We could certainly ask Tasmania if they have got some material that we could share, and I would be quite happy to share that with you. The Victorian stuff is probably pretty leading edge as it is, in terms of trying to step up to the plate and address this issue. Where burning was 20 years ago, public land was where the burning was done. Now there is general recognition that it needs to be done across all tenures. The risk is being measured across all tenures, so that is a very good start. Then you try to do the mitigation as appropriate across all tenures. Victoria is pretty well situated in that area already, but I could certainly look at the Tasmanian stuff and see if there is something there that we could provide to the committee, if they are interested.

Mr BARBER — Or anything you can give us on Victoria too — anecdotal or statistical — would be great.

Mr YOUNG — Just quickly, because some of my questions have already been answered, when you talk about across all tenures and the approach needing to be consistent across all tenures, how do you feel that is going to actually go? Are there certain tenures which are going to cause more problems than others in being able to do these kinds of burning procedures?

Mr ESNOUF — I would not say that certain tenures would cause more issues. It is more management objectives, and this could apply to public land as well as private land. There will be some areas that have got specific management objectives on public land that may be higher conservation areas and the like, so they need to be taken into account in the analysis of the different objectives that may apply and getting the best overall mix of risk reduction and meeting all the other objectives. One of the projects that we have got is that analysis of all the different objectives and trying to work out how you get the best overall result. That could equally apply to private land, where I may have purchased a bit of private land because I want it for a particular reason, whether that is conservation or just because I like the look of it or I like some other attribute of it. It goes to how the individuals might perceive it and what objectives they have for management of land.

I think the issue is more about differing objectives and getting the best overall objectives when you do tenure-blind management, rather than the issues necessarily being about one particular land type versus another. So I think it is an objectives-based thing you would need to consider.

Mr YOUNG — That would obviously be very different, depending on which department or organisation manages those lands, rather than the actual land itself?

Mr ESNOUF — It will certainly be different depending on what the objectives for that parcel of land are. I would not say it is necessarily based on department lines.

Ms BATH — Mine is probably a specific question in relation to fire lookout towers. You have a great deal of knowledge over a wide ranging umbrella of departments and bodies, and I noted before that you were saying that you provide policy guidance. Have you got any policy guidance that you could share with us in relation to and the operation of fire towers during peak fire seasons?

Mr ESNOUF — Not that I am aware of, but I could probably make some comments. Each jurisdiction and each area will have a different approach to fire detection based on the geography, population and a whole lot of different reasons. So you would not have fire towers, for instance, in central Australia and other locations — low risk, not many hills anyway to put them on —

Ms BATH — Low hills.

Mr ESNOUF — and you will use aerial detection. But even in places in Victoria aerial detection is a primary means, like the Mallee and the Wimmera, so in large areas of the Big Desert Sunraysia country there are no fire towers and aerial detection, and these days remote sensing from satellites becomes the areas for detection.

But in the higher risk areas of Victoria and other jurisdictions, fire towers are still a very effective and efficient way of getting early detection of fires, and for firefighting early detection is the critical thing. If you fail on starting a fire — and with about a third of fires on public land being started by lightning, it is fairly hard to stop that starting anyway. But if you fail on the ignition, you then have to get early detection and then rapid response. So the early detection by fire lookouts is really important.

In some heavily-populated areas — and I use as an example the west face of the Dandenongs — you will get about 200 000 calls to 000 as well as the fire towers, so community detection is also effective, but fire towers have been an effective part of Victoria for many, many years, and I have not seen any evidence of any emerging technology that is going to change that in the short term.

Ms BATH — And I guess within that the quality of the spotter is also important, so the understanding of distance et cetera is important. So the person in the tower needs to have capacity to understand fires.

Mr ESNOUF — Yes, and the general area; that is right.

Ms BATH — That is all.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that evidence. It has been very helpful. We may well come back to your organisation for further follow-up material.

Mr ESNOUF — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.