

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Wodonga — 20 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

Witnesses

Mr Ian Ellett (sworn), Director, Infrastructure Services, Indigo Shire Council;

Cr Ron Janas, Mayor, and

Mr Dave Barry, Chief Executive Officer, Alpine Shire Council; and

Mr Trevor Ierino, Director, Business Services, and

Mr Paul Leddy (sworn), Emergency Management Coordinator, Wodonga City Council.

The CHAIR — I welcome the new witnesses to the fire preparedness inquiry. I ask witnesses from each council to give a very short presentation. Ian, I ask you to give a short presentation relevant to the committee's terms of reference, and after that we will then come back and ask some questions.

Mr ELLETT — I will read from a prepared statement just so I can stick to the script. My comments relate to work being done collaboratively between Indigo shire and our partners in fire management, including DELWP. In my role as director I am not as close operationally as other officers, but I have an overview of municipal fire management planning. The council facilitates a municipal fire management planning committee, which uses a risk-based and coordinated approach to local fire management planning. This includes fuel reduction works on roadsides by CFA brigades as well as other fuel reduction works, and I will come to those.

I guess there are a couple of points I wanted to make. The risk-based approach is underpinned by township risk mapping that we have undertaken, and that has been done in each of the towns in Indigo shire. That helps to ensure that fuel reduction works as far as possible are targeted at higher risk areas. I also wanted to make a note that in direct reference to the terms of reference of this inquiry, the council's environmental officer is a participant in the fire management planning committee, and that helps to ensure that planned works do not pose undue environmental threats — for example, things like threatened species and high-value vegetation are being taken into account.

On to fuel reduction works: I want to make a particular note of and outline an initiative of our fire management planning committee, which takes a collaborative approach to work spanning across different land managers, and that is known in our area as land tenure-blind approaches.

The CHAIR — Land tenure — —

Mr ELLETT — Land tenure-blind — so blind to the tenure or the land managers and a collaborative approach.

So just to give a quick summary of how that works, planning is in place at the moment for a joint burn around the north-west perimeter of Yackandandah as a pilot project. So DELWP will undertake the burn program across public and private land. A stakeholder meeting has been held in which all of the impacted landowners agreed to DELWP undertaking that burn across their property. The CFA has agreed to undertake the community information role closer to the event. DELWP has endorsed the program and listed it on the 2017 burn program. They are currently developing the burn plan with a commitment to meeting with the landholders for a final sign-off closer to the date.

The program will look at two areas around Yackandandah and take a similar approach. DELWP Benalla — so north-east — are monitoring the program, and the Hume region CFA is also actively involved. It is then proposed, if this is successful, to look at a similar approach for Stanley and Beechworth. The risk planning works that have been done around the towns is guiding the brigade's burn program to be more strategic, and that is something that will continue to improve over time.

The CHAIR — Thank you. That is actually very interesting. Can I also ask Alpine to comment on its role in — —

Cr JANAS — Thank you, Chair. We have got 4000 square kilometres of land in Alpine shire, and 98 per cent of that is Crown land, so we have got a lot of bush up there, and the terrain that we have is difficult terrain. So one of our major income sources is tourism, and last year alone we have had a 25 per cent increase in the number of tourists to our area, predominantly from interstate and major regional towns and/or cities. The demographic of those tourists is also changing, and the concern we have there is that they do not have a good understanding of bushfires, what smokes means to them and where they can go.

We are a major winegrowing area, and when we have controlled burns we have to work very closely with our partner agencies that are conducting those burns to ensure that we do not get smoke taint on the crops. I am sure that if you have ever tried a sip of wine that has got a smoke taint in it, you will know it is a horrible thing to taste. If a crop gets smoke taint on it, it is gone; it is of no value to the grower and they have lost production and lost money, so we are concerned about that.

Recently there have been some hot burns that have occurred in areas that are in ridges and gullies. I have not seen the science behind any of this, but it does give us some concern where the vegetation in those gullies is totally denuded. You then have a large rain event that has caused in our area some land slippage and, as a result of that land slippage, property has been damaged. That brings us back to the point then with our planning of what we are going to be liable for if we allow someone to build a house in a certain area that might be subject to deluge or landslip.

They are things that we need to now start thinking of into the future and work with our partner agent on who is going to be responsible for that. Is local government going to be responsible for that or the people who are conducting the burn-off procedures? I think that in our shire there has been a reduction in the amount of burn-offs that CFA have been involved in. Some of that is predominantly because of the amount of paperwork that is involved in getting your permit through and the prerequisites that you need to do those burn-offs. So CFA would often do those small jobs as a part of their training exercises. Because they are all volunteers and they are time poor and there are less volunteers to do those jobs, those sorts of practices are on the decline in my opinion. But we do have a good collaborative approach with DEPI or DELWP — or whatever they call themselves this week. It is essential that we are able to talk to them to bring those concerns about tourists and our agriculture, and they try very hard, I must say, to fit their burns around those particular times of the year where they have the greatest impact.

I suppose on another issue when we are talking about vegetation, one of the things, and Mr Young will be across this, is that it has been shown that the burn-offs in the higher country areas are now driving deer down into agricultural land and there has been a large increase in the amount of deer coming down and causing damage to vineyards, to grazing areas and to private property areas. I cannot say that the number of deer are increasing, but burning off in those areas is also forcing them down, which then causes other problems for our farming communities and of course danger on our roads. We have had a number of severe accidents with deer. I know that might not necessarily correlate with this inquiry but it certainly does with another inquiry, and those areas are linked. I suppose that is my submission to this board.

Mr IERINO — If I could again repeat from earlier on, thanks for the opportunity and also for being in Wodonga today. Please accept the apologies of our mayor, Cr Anna Speedie, and Patience Harrington, our CEO, who could not be here today. I will turn over to Paul Eddy, who is far more intelligent in these matters than I am.

Mr LEDDY — I do not know about that. My role as emergency management coordinator within the City of Wodonga council involves being a participant in the municipal fire management planning committee. That committee works collaboratively with DELWP, the CFA, Parklands Albury Wodonga and also the Department of Defence. Our land within our area covers about 433 square kilometres. It is not as big as other areas like Indigo, Alpine, Wangaratta and Towong. The municipality has approximately 38 000 people living in it. There are 98 pockets of separate reserves which are deemed to be environmental lands. As a responsibility of council those environmental lands are also cared for by us and maintained to alleviate fire hazards within the municipality.

I have issued a document for you guys to peruse at your leisure, which incorporates our fire access roads and corridors and maintenance programs that the council will undertake on their land. It also incorporates information on our fire maintenance programs, which will be implemented around about August for our environmental lands. We also have programs which will be coming into place from the CFA, which have nominated planned burns which will be carried out prior to the fire danger period, which usually commences around the end of October–November.

As I have identified through your terms of reference the nature of our emergency responses — and we had to respond to one major emergency in December last year with the Barnawartha/Indigo fires — is clearly indicated in that document and also in part 8 of version 1 of the 2015 municipal emergency management plan. Our response to that initial incident was to assist Indigo shire. We both worked very well together in that response. Our set-up with cross councils in emergency response has been tested, and I am very proud to say that I think it works. At this point in time that is my submission to you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and I appreciate your detailed written submission, which we will work our way through in the next period.

There are a couple of points that are picked up here. There are some unique things, I think with Alpine, with the very large area of public land in particular. In terms of resourcing for fire prevention, fuel reduction and all of the matters surrounding the coordination of fire prevention, is council sufficiently resourced? Are there challenges? That is my first question.

Mr ELLETT — I will have a go. I think there are always challenges. I think we are always probably looking at expectations and always doing what we can with resources, but I think there is always a challenge and an expectation that we can do more. I guess we are fortunate at the moment to have a part-time position supporting us. That is probably a role that falls into the emergency management coordinator role. It is a 0.5 full-time equivalent role. It helps us very much in the planning and to be able to do some of the work that I spoke of — that is, the risk mapping that we do not otherwise have dedicated resources for, but that is some work we have been able to do in recent years.

I guess the works that we do in the field are just a balance with any of our normal maintenance works — if we can manage to do a bit of fuel reduction as part of that. But it is always a challenge. I guess that whole space of spending money on services — physical services — I suppose continues to just be the battle that we fight.

Mr LEDDY — Can I just add to that that the cross-council collaboration through Local Government Victoria is to have all councils resourced together, and part of that process is to complete the emergency management plan and complete the CERA process for risk management and mitigation throughout cross borders and council borders. We have clearly done that together over the last three years, that I am aware of.

Mr IERINO — Chair, can I add to what Paul said? Paul's role is funded with money from the state government. We get something like \$60 000, I think, a year for his role in terms of coordinating our fire response. I just want to acknowledge that money from the state government and how important it has been to date, and we have noted that that has been confirmed again for another four years. I think it is a vital contribution from the state that that keeps getting funded. Paul mentioned that Wodonga council has a lot of environmental land as well as other land we call WRENS land, which is land that we have taken responsibility for — —

The CHAIR — Is it a committee of management?

Mr IERINO — Yes. Part of our responsibility there is also the fire management of that. We try to maintain environmental values, but also I understand we work pretty closely with the local CFA to also try to lower the fire risk emanating from that site. We do, I believe, have funding available in our normal maintenance program to keep that risk down. Each year is a bit different, and we try to work with graziers and things like that for cattle, for fuel reduction and things like that through grazing and other methods. I think we have generally got it under control. I think we have generally got the resources that we need to do that — again, provided that the state government continues on with its funding for people like Paul Leddy and other councils that have that same funding, which I think is a vital contribution.

The CHAIR — Just in summary, before I hand it over to Mr Young, beyond what Paul has just told us, are there any specific lessons that you would take out of recent fire incidents here, including at Barnawartha?

Mr LEDDY — Probably some of the lessons were just with communication — the lack of some communications in different areas, and that was clearly indicated. I felt that the resources that we utilised at the time and the accurate decisions that were made by both councils at the time certainly helped the community and the municipalities.

Mr BARRY — Can I add, and it may hark back to the essence of the question, emergencies by their nature require specialisation and high degrees of knowledge, and I have some concerns that, in an agency like a council or a sector such as local government, our expertise is in diverse service delivery, and I am not sure that we are mature enough to be able to focus in a specialised way on emergency management. So along that continuum of emergency management I have some concerns that too much of it has shifted to local government, an agency that is just, inherently by our nature, not well equipped to have that level of focus in a specialised way.

Mr ELLETT — Yes; I would support that comment broadly.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you again to everyone. Firstly, I want to acknowledge your comment, Councillor, about deer populations and potential movements and things that are happening in that scene. There is in fact another inquiry going, as you said, which should achieve some very good outcomes on that front, considering that two other members of that committee are the members for Ovens Valley and Benambra. That will be very interesting.

This further question will probably relate to Alpine more so than the others. You said that a large percentage of your area is public land. Do you know what the breakdown is of the types of land within that — so the amount of national park versus state park versus state forest — that you have?

Cr JANAS — No, I would not have that information.

Mr YOUNG — I just wanted to try to establish whether you have noticed any difference in fire prevention activities between those different types of land?

Cr JANAS — No, I think it depends on the weather conditions that we have at the time as to how much fuel reduction those appropriate agencies can do. So we are really dependent on weather in those circumstances, and then on top of that, as I said before, the agencies really do try to work closely with us for specific times of festivals; we have 92 events or festivals per year in our shire. It is enormous. For one bike event alone we can have 80 000 beds taken.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. Mr Ellett, you mentioned a tenure-blind approach. We have talked about that a little bit with other people, and it seems to be the way that everyone is going. But one of the problems that has been raised with that is the addition of private land into that. Specifically to you because you mentioned it, but to anyone else who wants to weigh in, is the tenure-blind approach actually practicable, given that a lot of land is private land and the same rules, regulations and management will not apply to those on private land?

Mr ELLETT — I guess my thoughts are that the approach that we have taken is very much this risk-based approach around town. I suppose it is just really trying to remove boundaries if they are going to cause obstacles. Where that works for us, I guess it does rely very much on the cooperation of each of the land managers, landowners, that participate in that. It is hard to comment outside the current pilot that we have got in place. I guess we do seem to have good cooperation there. One or two other things are planned to follow up, should it be successful. I think there is significant opportunity, and it does seem the logical way to proceed, but it is easy to see that you are not always going to have the cooperation or the coordination that you might think first.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. Have any other councils experienced any lack of cooperation with private landholders in those kinds of activities?

Mr LEDDY — No. I think more than anything it is very cooperative.

Mr YOUNG — Great; thank you.

Mr BARBER — Just in terms of assembling that cooperation, were you seeking to have a sort of contiguous burn, or were you happy to work with those who were willing to have it on their land — sensitively, of course? Were there any issues around getting everybody's cooperation, or were there some people who did not want to cooperate, and you worked around them?

Mr ELLETT — My understanding of the pilot is that we did have cooperation. I am not sure how many landowners — I think in answer to the first part of your question did a contiguous burn rather than a piecemeal one. I think it was looking at the risk around this town and saying, 'If we could do a burn in this area, there is our highest risk. Who are the land managers that are involved? Yes, there are private and public involved in that space. Let's see if we can get cooperation' — bingo! So as a starting point I think we have been able to move through that fairly seamlessly, but I am not quite sure how complex the issues were between landowners or how many private landowners were involved in that.

The CHAIR — Can I thank all councils again for both sets of presentations — fire preparedness and the impact of rate capping — and reiterate my thanks to Wodonga for hosting this today. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.