

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

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Witnesses

Ms Ruth Ryan (affirmed), Corporate Fire Manager, and

Mr Richard Mailer (affirmed), Northern Risk Manager, Hancock Victorian Plantations.

The CHAIR — I indicate that we are resuming the inquiry into fire preparedness. I welcome Ruth Ryan and Richard Mailer from Hancock Victorian Plantations to the table. We have series of four witnesses, and then we will have an open mike/comments from the floor session after 5 o'clock.

I welcome Hancock Victorian Plantations to the table and ask you to make a brief presentation, and then we will follow with some questions.

Ms RYAN — Hancock Victorian Plantations Proprietary Limited — if you bear with me, I will probably refer to us as HVP or HVP Plantations if that is okay. HVP manage around 245 000 hectares of land within Victoria, which includes about 180 000 hectares of plantations. The remaining land is what we call custodial land. There is probably about 50 000 hectares of native forest which we call the custodial land, and then there are also the various roads, infrastructure, tracks, airstrips and things that make up the rest of our land.

HVP formed the first forest industry brigades in Victoria in 1998. That is when what was formerly the Victorian Plantations Corporation was sold to an investment company and the land essentially had private property-type rights over it and became part of the rural area of Victoria, which was then under CFA management. Under the forest industry brigades we have got significant resources. We have seven brigades across the state, which includes 20 tankers, 34 slip-ons and access to around about 240 firefighters across the state.

Fire is a significant risk to our plantations. In the Black Saturday fires we lost over 16 000 hectares of plantation, mainly on the day of 7th February, and the subsequent replanting of those plantations was valued at around about \$55 million. That is just the replanting, so a significant loss for the company and significant implications for the cash flow of the company.

Today we would like to present our thoughts on the preparedness for fires in Victoria, and we see that there are essentially three major challenges within fire. One is global warming. Our fire seasons are becoming increasingly hot, of higher intensity and of longer duration. Along with that we have got population growth in the rural/urban interface. We have got an increasing population with very little experience in fire and so a higher number of vulnerable people within the areas in rural Victoria. Combined with that we have got a declining and ageing volunteer force and rural workforce.

The third major challenge that we see is fuel. There are three major factors that affect fire: weather, topography and fuel. We really cannot change the weather that comes in, we cannot change the topography, but we do believe we can change the fuel. We believe that that is a key point to fire management in Victoria. We believe there is a need to adequately resource fire management as opposed to increasing fire suppression capacity. So what we are saying is we need to fix the problem rather than the symptoms. Once the fires start, it is really trying to put the bandaid over it. What we are advocating is that we really do need to manage that fuel before the fires start.

Fire is a natural part of the Victorian environment. It plays a very important role in the maintenance of our ecosystems; however, uncontrolled fires threaten lives, properties and forest values. History has shown us that it can move rapidly through our environment. I do not think we really need to be reminded that the Black Saturday fires and numerous other fires of 2003 and 2006 have made significant impact on our environment here in Victoria.

The next point is that we believe that fire does not respect administrative boundaries. Therefore we believe that the focus of this inquiry should be on a tenure-blind basis. Fires burn through both private and public land. Therefore when considering fire in the environment, we need to consider the whole-of-government approach. So it is not only things like the suppression forces and the management forces but it is also planning — good planning — so that we are not putting vulnerable people into fire situations where they do not have any idea of what is going on. We believe that Victorians as a whole need to be better prepared to live with bushfires.

The fundamental principle that we work on is less fuel, less intense fires. We believe it has been very much proven through a lot of research and also our experience with firefighting that the less fuel there is, the greater chance we have of controlling major bushfires. Spotting is a very significant effect in Victorian fire spread. The eucalypt bark is a major source of embers, and these can travel short and long distances. There have been examples from Black Saturday where spots have started new fires over 30 kilometres away from the fire front. Spotting was also significant in the burning of the Wye River township. If you read the report there, a lot of the houses were actually burnt through spot fires rather than from the main fire front. We need to break down the

castle wall mentality that we can do fire breaks and things just around local communities. Yes, they do have some effect, but we also need to do further works, further fire management and fuel management deeper into the forest to prevent those fires from starting and also to prevent them building up into major conflagrations.

We also believe that the DELWP bushfire risk landscape modelling project has become a very significant tool that can develop strategic burning units, and sometimes these are quite remote from actual communities or have more effect than areas that are quite adjacent to communities. Therefore we are very supportive of the bushfire risk landscape modelling project and believe that there should be more resources put into that.

The final point that we want to make at the moment is that there is no such thing as safe burning. We are working with the natural environment where the conditions are dynamic and conditions change rapidly. There will always be a risk when introducing fire into the natural environment. It is about how we manage that risk, and it is also about managing community expectations around that risk. I think the most important thing is that if things do go wrong, that we look at it on a no-blame basis, that we look to create a mature learning culture so that people do not get sacrificed for a decision that is made within a very dynamic environment. I think that is really important.

The CHAIR — A good-faith decision.

Ms RYAN — A good-faith decision — yes, correct. On that, we do need very skilled practitioners, and so therefore the only way to build the confidence and maintain that integrity of those professionals is to maintain their support and give them that backing and also to analyse every fire event, whether it is a burn or whether it is a fire event, for lessons learnt — good and bad — out of every fire event. I think I will pause there and allow you to ask questions.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for your submission — your organisation, HVP — which is in two parts, but both are highly professional and add a lot to our work. I am going to leave the tenure-blind matters to others, but that is actually an important addition that you made there.

I want to pick up your section 9, ‘The coordination of such planning and preparation with other departments and agencies’. I am going to quote from here and then follow on with some questions:

HVP has land that abuts both CFA land (country area of Victoria) and DELWP land ... Since fire respects no boundary it is important that a very high level of interoperability exists between these two agencies.

It goes on:

Any means to support and strengthen the existing interoperability must be encouraged so that the management of fire is as effective as possible.

It says:

Fire management planning still largely occurs in silos.

I just wonder if you would expand on that. I will also ask about your section 11, ‘The relevant administrative and organisational structures in place within the department and with other relevant government departments and agencies’:

The Victorian government departments seem to be in a state of continual flux. Frequent name changes and reorganisations creates great difficulty in maintaining good relationships ...

And it goes on:

For an outsider, it is difficult to figure out who we need to talk to within DELWP.

And it goes on. But I am interested in those coordination aspects.

Ms RYAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Sorry to hand you a hot potato.

Ms RYAN — That is okay. The first one was to elaborate further on ‘fire management planning still largely occurs in silos’. Speaking from my experience, I have been involved in the fire management planning within

Victoria within the municipal phase since the recommendations came out of 2003 for more integrated fire management planning. So I have been involved in the regional committee for the Grampians region, and I have also been involved in municipal integrated fire management planning in the shires of Hepburn, the City of Ballarat and Moorabool shire as well. So that is my background within the integrated fire management planning. Also, with our connections within DELWP, we are watching and working with DELWP on their bushfire landscape risk management planning.

We see the bushfire landscape risk management planning as a very important tool to develop the overall risk assessment of where potentially bushfires may occur and the impact that they may have and what can influence them. With the integrated fire management planning, it is very much still based on the old municipal-type fire plans. They have involved DELWP within, but there is no real connection of what DELWP is doing on the public land and their bushfire landscape planning with the municipal planning.

The CHAIR — State government public land?

Ms RYAN — That is right, yes. They have been trying to bring together the two plans, but it is still two separate plans. They are still largely working — the public land and the private land have not integrated as far as the planning. Really, when you look at the bushfire risk, unless we start doing more work on the private land, you can only reduce the risk to a certain level by doing fuel management on public land. So there is a significant risk out there still on private land that is not being addressed at the moment.

The CHAIR — And you are just picking up the administrative organisation? There is also a call for increased resources for ‘the CFA brigades to better equip them with the vehicles, equipment and the skills to tackle forest and plantation fires’.

Ms RYAN — Yes. The second part of your question about the administration — it is very frustrating working with a government department that continually reorganises itself and has numerous name changes.

The CHAIR — DNRE, DSE — you know, it was a — —

Ms RYAN — I have worked through the whole lot of them. A lot of fire management, especially when you get out there on the pointy end, when you are out there trying to suppress fires, it is about those relationships — knowing who to call, knowing who is there, who you can trust, who is making the decisions. So it is very much being able to have known faces and people that you know.

The CHAIR — Stability and predictability?

Ms RYAN — That is correct, yes. With the number of reorganisations that DELWP has gone through, almost with every iteration of government recently, they seem to be in constant flux. You get a person in a position for a very short time, they get a very limited amount of experience, and then they are off, so you have got to build up those relationships yet again. I do not think it is creating a stability for professional people to make a real career that develops up those skills in fire.

Mr SOMYUREK — Just by the way, name changes in departments are difficult to keep track of for insiders as well as outsiders, just to give you that. Your recommendation 2 is pretty cryptic. It advises that the government avoid laying blame in the aftermath of fires. Can you be a little bit more specific — about a particular instance and what effect that instance had?

Ms RYAN — Yes. Look, I think the Lancefield burn that got out of control — when was it, 12 months ago or 6 months ago?; anyway, the recent Lancefield burn — is a very good example. There are a number of DELWP staff that have now been sidelined and, I believe, unfairly blamed or taken the brunt of the political outfall in that circumstance. I think it should go right to the top of the government that when we are talking about fire, we do accept that fire is a risky business and is difficult even under normal circumstances to manage perfectly. We are working in very much a dynamic environment and a chaotic environment out there, and so therefore I think we really should be concentrating on what went wrong, what are the systems that went wrong to allow that to go wrong, and not try to lay the blame onto one or two people

Ms RYAN — That is correct, yes, and then being able to say, ‘Oh, well, we have dealt with the problem because we have dealt with those individuals’. That is not the way. What that does is also create very poor confidence in the rest of the staff — ‘If I do something and it gets away from me — I’m not going to do that.

I'm not going to take that risk'. So therefore the whole staff become very much risk averse, and therefore your expectations and your confidence will be much lower.

Mr BARBER — Just on your statistics on the fires that you responded to — you said an average of about 53 but up to 127, two-thirds of them outside your own land — what are the sources of those ignitions?

Ms RYAN — They vary, and it varies on the districts. A significant number of them, especially in our Gippsland and our western region, are arson. That is two forms of arson: one is a deliberate light — so somebody actually lighting the bush; and the second form of arson is stolen cars being dumped. So we basically classify them. In our areas, in Gippsland and especially around Ballarat, they are significant sources. In north-east Victoria I think the most significant cause is from lightning, and in Gippsland and south-west Victoria that is probably our next most significant cause.

Mr BARBER — When the ignitions are on your land, what are the main sources there? Is it trespassers, farm machinery?

Ms RYAN — It is mostly, again, either lightning or some form of arson. We have had a program since 1993 where we have restrictions on forest operations that are over and above the standard total fire ban days. We actually close down operations in the bush, depending on what we see as — well, based on the — the fire danger level for each area of bush. So often when it may not be a total fire ban day, we might still have a total forest operations ban on in our bush. That has actually prevented a significant number of fires, we believe. We still do have an occasional machine fire, but since 1983 I think the largest fire that has resulted from any machinery or equipment in our plantations has been 4 or 5 hectares at the most.

Mr BARBER — And the second question: how do you assess the fuel levels amongst your own plantations on your own land?

Ms RYAN — For our native forests we basically apply the same assessment-type protocols that DELWP use with their fuel. So it looks at bark hazard and the strata of fuels. For our plantation, what we are actually working on at the moment is trying to develop a system of mapping it. At the moment if you look at the runs that they do through the Phoenix RapidFire, the plantations are all classified as one fuel. So what we are trying to do is develop a better way of describing the plantation and describing the fuel type and so building that into the Phoenix models as well.

Mr BARBER — Is that like tonnes per hectare — ground versus elevated?

Ms RYAN — Yes. Eventually it does get back to like a tonnes per hectare type, but it is about what fire behaviour that creates rather than tonnes per hectare, because it depends on how it is arranged within the forest.

Mr YOUNG — A couple of the questions I wanted to ask have been addressed by Mr Barber in regard to the plantations and how you assess them for fire risk. I was going to ask you about the density of the plantations and things like that, but I think you have covered that off. What I do not really have an understanding of is how susceptible to fire your plantations are versus, say, other types of wild bush and other types of areas.

Ms RYAN — Yes. Our plantations — the majority of it is radiata pine, and we do mostly in Gippsland have I think about 10 000 to 20 000 hectares of eucalypt plantation as well. The radiata pine is quite susceptible to fire in that fire burning through radiata pine will actually kill the trees. It depends a little bit on the heat of the fire, so if we get a fire that is a low-intensity fire, then the trees may survive, but if it is a higher intensity fire, then the trees will die. Therefore it then gets back to what age the trees are when they are burnt as to whether we can actually salvage any product out of them or not. If they are generally aged below about 12 years old, we will not get any return on that at all. Greater than 12 years old we can get potentially some return just depending on what markets we can find.

Sawmillers do not like black wood or wood with charred bark. It is not so much that the wood inside is affected by fire but because products that go out of the sawmill in waste often go into paper, and when they cannot sell their waste product that affects their viability — and you cannot bleach charcoal out of paper.

Mr YOUNG — As far as your assets go it is obviously not just your assets that are a risk to your business. The land around you would also be a risk to your assets in various ways. You addressed it before when you were talking about your involvement with integrated fire management planning, but do you feel like you are

involved in those processes enough and you have enough input into what goes on with fire management around your assets?

Ms RYAN — Probably the most significant area where we can influence is with DELWP and their fire operations plan. So we generally have a pretty good relationship with the local DELWP office. They come and consult us each year on where they are planning to burn, and we also do joint exercises with them. What we as a company are planning to do over the next couple of years is to try to work with DELWP further on this bushfire risk landscape planning so that we both get a better knowledge of what they are doing outside of our plantation and we also give them increased knowledge about how they are able to map the fuels and things through our plantations and therefore get their fire modelling to a better degree of accuracy. Through that project we are trying to develop a risk profile to better target our programs; we currently do some fuel management burning on our land, but we might discover that we are actually better off spending that time and effort helping DELWP achieve something outside of our land which will be far greater protection for us than actually doing the little bit that we can do on our land.

We have boundaries with DELWP significantly, but on the other side of things we also have significant boundaries with private land, and sometimes it would be very nice to have some sort of fuel management through that area. For instance last year in the Scotsburn fire that occurred near Ballarat the initial fire just took off about 7 hectares of our plantation, then it came on another run in the middle of the night at 4 o'clock in the morning. The significant thing that really threw it into the plantation was a lot of old small stands of native trees on the adjacent farmland that threw spots into the plantation. By the time it got to that stage and by the time it got to that boundary the firefighters could not control the spots, there were so many spots. But if there had been some fuel management in that country beforehand, we probably would not have had significant spotting, and we may have been able to suppress the fire within the plantation.

Mr YOUNG — Have you reached out to any private landholders or attempted any of that kind of management, or are you aware of anything that DELWP is doing in that space?

Ms RYAN — Yes, look, we have had discussions mainly with DELWP to try to coordinate some management on private land. They have been frustrated in some areas, and it needs a joint effort with DELWP, the CFA and ourselves. In some cases DELWP have been frustrated in the CFA not coming on board, but I think that is evolving. The CFA in a number of areas have started doing quite a lot of burning, even around local places like Creswick and those areas. The CFA are starting to build up their skills. They are starting to run burn camps, which are really good. We assist them with a burn camp in Shelley every year and also another one in Creswick. Fuel management really does need to be tenure blind.

Mr MAILER — If I could just add that also, even just around here, Yackandandah is an example where the Indigo municipal fire prevention committee is working. You have got the shire, the CFA and DELWP all working with the township to do some burns around private land around that township. There are some really good examples there of all those guys working together, those different agencies working together, and I think that is something that, moving forward, has got to happen in a lot of shires to a much greater degree to be able to get across that tenure-type boundary.

Mr YOUNG — No worries. Thank you.

The CHAIR — I only have one more question. Just going back to the start of your submission, HVP has skills in forest fighting and fire management and seven forest industry brigades registered under the Country Fire Authority Act, so the act allows the registration. Are you impacted in a sense by the current industrial disputes and so forth? Are your firefighters paid, or are they volunteers or both, or separate again?

Ms RYAN — That is right. Our firefighters are separate to the unionised professional firefighters within the CFA. They are not under the same union. They are paid, however. We do pay them. We employ them for firefighting and other silvicultural works. In the main, as far as their employment terms and conditions, it is under the silvicultural award that they are employed, and there are specific causes within that relating to firefighting operations. As far as a direct impact of the current EBA negotiations with what we are doing, there is very little impact, and there is no sort of cross-fertilisation between the union negotiations within the EBA and our firefighters. It is quite a separate award that they are working under.

The CHAIR — So you are not caught, in a sense, by needing certain types of firefighters to attend before things can occur and all of those sorts of matters? I am looking at this coordination issue.

Ms RYAN — That is right. Yes, we have seen the impact. As you see, my address is Wendouree, Ballarat, and so I have seen the impact on our local brigades. Potentially because the Ballarat station is one of the manned stations, there is quite an unease between the volunteers and the professionals — the career staff — there. I suppose they are caught in a difficult position, because they actually do not want to antagonise the guys that they work with and the women that they work with.

The CHAIR — They just want to get on with their job.

Ms RYAN — They want to get on with their job, but this is creating a lot of tension in there. Our major fire operations are, of course, over the summer. We close down pretty much over the winter. As forest industry brigades we only attend, especially over the winter, fires that are on our land and grass and scrub fires. We do not attend the road accidents or the bin fire that occurs in Wodonga or whatnot, but we are seeing that that tension is there, and I suppose we have not had direct impact because we actually have not been attending fires where there are career staff.

The CHAIR — At this point.

Ms RYAN — But certainly last summer probably for 20 per cent of the fires around our Ballarat area career staff have attended those as well as volunteers.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I appreciate that very much. We may end up talking further, because I think some of your points about the interaction between public and private land are very important.

Ms RYAN — I thank the committee for allowing us to speak today. I think it is very important that we look at these issues. Thanks for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.