

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Euroa — 21 July

Members

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Mr Daniel Young

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Participating Members

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Witnesses

Mr Alex Green (affirmed), CEO, Mansfield Shire Council;

Ms Margaret Abbey (sworn), CEO, and

Mr Mark Leitinger (sworn), manager of infrastructure operations, Murrindindi Shire Council; and

Mr Peter Harriott (sworn), CEO, Greater Shepparton City Council.

The CHAIR — I am going to ask each of you to give a short presentation in relation to the fire season preparedness inquiry and the terms of reference. I might start with you, Peter. We will try to be succinct and then we will come back with some questions.

Mr HARRIOTT — Ours will be very succinct. There is one page there with a document supporting it. At Greater Shepparton City Council our fire risk is reasonably low but any fire risk we do have we treat quite seriously. We do have a good working relationship with DELWP and Parks Victoria. Largely we work to produce the fire operations plan for the Hume region and most of the issues are dealt with in that. I understand there is a discussion about controlled burns, and where we have had a hectare-based target in the past that has worked reasonably well. But we understand that we are going for a risk-reduction target method and we are comfortable with that as well.

I guess because we are lower risk than some of the other councils we have different issues. One of our issues is the schedule 13 permits that are issued for stubble burning. It may not be part of the inquiry here today so pull me up if you want to, but we believe this is a real risk and some of our neighbouring councils do as well. It has been the tradition that local government has issued the permits for stubble burning outside the peak fire period — the lead-in and the lead-out — but really we have not got the expertise to judge the climatic conditions, the fuel load and the ability of the person we are handing the permit to to actually control the fire, and we have been suggesting for the last several months that this is a CFA responsibility. We have been having discussions with the CFA and MAV and anyone else who will listen to us ever since.

It did come to a bit of a head when we put a report to council that we would no longer issue these permits because there are provisions on the CFA website for them to actually issue these permits, not that they really want to go down that path from what I understand. But we have come back from that. Last season we said, ‘Well, we’ll get to the end of the season and continue to issue these permits but prior to the season starting again’ — around about October this year — ‘we want a full discussion with the CFA to see where we can go with this’. We believe there is a liability, a risk associated with council continuing to issue these schedule 13 stubble burning permits and that issue has to be sorted out.

Ms ABBEY — Thank you, Mr Chairman. Again, council has made a submission to this committee on the inquiry into fire season preparedness and so my intention is simply to take a number of those key comments in that submission and address them with you. As from our discussion in the previous session, Murrindindi faces a number of challenges, and emergency management and fire preparedness is a critical part of the work that we do. Some 40 per cent of our shire is in public land and so a large threat to Murrindindi is bushfire that comes from public land. Also, given the nature of our settlements, and I spoke earlier about how we had five major urban settlements and a number of smaller settlements, Murrindindi has seven of the top nine highest risk townships in the state. Therefore it is an important element for us, and I am pleased to say that in terms of our working with all government agencies, and particularly with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, we have a critical role to play in working together in fire prevention programs. We have found that there is a strong willingness by DELWP to undertake maintenance works, not only just on buyback blocks that we discussed in the previous session but also in a way that collaborates with council in our fire prevention inspections and works on our own land.

We also have had very strong collaboration between DELWP and council to undertake works on the Marysville township fire break, and that works in a manner that council pays for the cost one year and DELWP the second. We have a very active fire prevention committee and a fire management planning committee and DELWP plays an important role in that. They have also shown a willingness to prioritise fuel reduction works on their land and again in conjunction with council’s planning as well.

Two examples that we would like to provide of that collaboration are, firstly, in terms of work that we have undertaken with a number of agencies around the township at Yea and the Yea wetlands area where a fire management and prevention plan has been put in place, and also the works undertaken and a controlled burn earlier this year surrounding the Eildon area. That was a cooperation between DELWP, CFA, local brigades and council. We identified that there was a need to reduce bushfire fuel levels to reduce the risk to the Eildon township and some important infrastructure at both the boat harbour and Taylor Bay residential areas.

There was extensive community involvement, both advertising and door-to-door targeting of residents, knowing that quite a large number of residences and properties there are holiday homes. We had a successful community engagement and the burn was undertaken in autumn of this year, which saw forest fuel reduction on some

527 hectares of land. So we believe that that is an example of successful community engagement between agencies, council and the community. It was led by DELWP with assistance from the CFA and council, and we believe that we will be able to continue into the future an integrated program of both planning fire prevention works and then initiating activities such as the required burns when necessary. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Mr LEITINGER — Mr Chairman, I do not have much further to add except probably on the report that was done for the eastern landscape study that DELWP undertook. It noted in that report that 64 per cent of Murrindindi Shire Council public land is below what they call the tolerable firing interval, which is, I understand, the frequency at which the landscape is subject to burns.

The CHAIR — What percentage is that?

Mr LEITINGER — Sixty-four per cent. The importance of the tolerable firing interval has a relationship to the habitat and biodiversity of the public lands. They do say in the report that whilst that is the case, there is also prioritisation of life and property and so on. Nevertheless, that is a factor in there. I suppose the emphasis really is the importance of leaving early on extreme fire danger days or having fire plans in place, because in that report, even with the planned burning, it says that immediately after the February 2009 bushfires the residual risk in the landscape at Murrindindi was around 10 per cent. They are predicting that by 2018 it will be in the vicinity of 68 per cent if the planned burns continue, or if there were no planned burns, it would be 79 per cent. So my understanding of the report is that when you understand residual risk, just prior to the February 2009 fires 100 per cent means that when the fire goes through those particular areas where the properties are all of them are burnt. So we are talking about substantial bushfire risk, even with the burnings, in that report by 2018 being 68 varying to 79. So the importance of proper bushfire planning evacuation or people taking responsibility for that is important.

I think Margaret touched on DELWP being an active participant in both our municipal fire management planning committee and our municipal emergency planning committee. They make a great input and complement what we do for bushfire mitigation in the shire.

Mr GREEN — I have been in Mansfield for 12 months in the role of CEO. When I arrived I was extremely pleased to see the maturity of the relationship between the agencies, as you have heard. It is a very similar context in Mansfield to Murrindindi. A high proportion of the shire is forested public land and it poses potentially really significant risks for communities that are either adjacent to or even more broadly throughout the Mansfield shire. So the relationship is extremely mature, and I think that is a credit to the changes in legislation and the frameworks at a state level that have occurred since the 2009–10 fire season. Those changes have been embraced and you see a very strong municipal fire planning committee and the municipal emergency planning committee and good relationships with Parks Victoria, DELWP, CFA staff and council staff.

The one thing I could add from a Mansfield perspective is that when I arrived, and I am not quite sure of the proper funding title of it, but state government money was provided for councils to share a resource to employ an officer to work on these preparedness issues. In Mansfield the lessons I think from Murrindindi had been learnt and there was a long and evolving discussion in the Mansfield community about community resilience. It started primarily off the back of fires but has evolved considerably into the broader resilience of the community themselves to respond and take responsibility for emergencies. It is at a fairly advanced stage where there are further discussions now branching out into community development. So it has come from the emergency space. The communities are taking responsibility for their own preparedness in conjunction with the authorities and they are now applying those skills to actually talk about preparedness and resilience more broadly beyond just emergency response.

So we are continuing to work with our communities and the resource we have, which is funded by the state government, shared between both the Mansfield and Strathbogie shires and we continue to work in that space with our communities.

The CHAIR — All right. There are a couple of questions. Obviously municipalities have one particular role, and that is a role where you have got some of your own land. There are obviously other public lands in your region and then there is a range of private lands as well, so you perhaps have some coordination role. In terms of your own land, what costs are incurred and what do you think can be done better to support? I note the comment about the CFA, but beyond that, what can be done better to support councils with their own land responsibilities, as it were?

Mr LEITINGER — I will start off. Our annual budget at Murrindindi is around \$130 000 a year and where that is concentrated on is mainly our fuel reduce corridors. We have 27 roads identified in our fire plan but depending on the season, if the rain comes down at the right time, we could end up having several cuts because the grass keeps growing. So it is a baseline figure of 130 000, and that complements VicRoads. The priority roads in our plan are mainly VicRoads highways, so VicRoads does similar work to us, which is generally two slashing widths, 3 metres either side of these priority roads or fuel reduce corridors.

The other thing we do is we have 51 fire access roads. Our job there is not so much to make them open for the public but to make sure that a firefighting appliance can actually travel down that road. They may not have much pavement on them but we would send a grader down or something like that to smooth it out at the end of the spring.

The CHAIR — Once a year?

Mr LEITINGER — Once a year, yes. That is it.

Ms ABBEY — If I can just add in terms of your question about further support. Likewise, Murrindindi has had a role that has been shared with Mitchell and it is now solely in Murrindindi. That has been an enormous resource for us to help us to work through our municipal recovery plans as well as our fire prevention and our broader emergency management plans. That funding will cease but we see that that is a role that will be essential, and that will be part of council's consideration — —

The CHAIR — When does that finish?

Mr LEITINGER — It is 2020.

Ms ABBEY — Yes, 2020. The other thing is, as Mark indicated, our ability to do works and particularly works on our roadsides as well as our other properties is very much dependent upon the season. If we have seasons that see a significant amount of vegetation growth, it is very difficult for council to meet its needs and community expectations with the budget that it has.

We also have a broader community issue in that, given the nature of the climate, we start our works in the northern part of the shire and the appropriate time to be doing the southern part of the shire is later on in the summer season and of course that is the area that experienced a major impact of the fires not only in 2009 but in 2006 as well. So we receive considerable community feedback as to when council ought to be doing its roadside works. That is another challenge that we face.

The CHAIR — And people think it should be earlier, do they?

Ms ABBEY — Yes. And if we do it earlier, we probably have to come back and, as Mark said, do a second cut, which has an impact upon our capacity to actually fund that.

Mr LEITINGER — Mr Chair, also you mentioned how government can help. One of the issues that emerged after February 09 was some of the rare, endangered species started popping up right on road reserves and road verges. So a lot of the 27 roads that we have identified for fire works — there are some sections of road that were unaffected by the fires, but it is even affecting road maintenance activities as well, where you get a rare plant like the round-leaf pomaderris shooting up on the shoulder of a road. It is a very tricky legislative thing because it is federal and state, but that is one area that needs to probably be looked at — —

The CHAIR — Clarified.

Mr LEITINGER — Clarified, yes.

Mr GREEN — The circumstances in Mansfield are probably not as complex as in Murrindindi. There is greater separation between the public land and private land. There are interface issues. We do not have anywhere near the number of roads or complexity, I think. We do have some fire trails that are our responsibility. We have an annual budget of around \$35 000 a year for fire preparedness that is the direct responsibility of council. What I would say is that I think the increased funding and continued increased funding for the land management authorities is critical in Mansfield, and they have been doing a fantastic job.

I think the transfer, as was mentioned earlier, to a risk-reduction target rather than necessarily an area-based target does better align with council's approach, and I think that will see some benefits going forward as well from a policy perspective.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks again to everyone. In Shepparton you have mentioned issuing permits for backburning on stubble.

Mr HARRIOTT — Yes, schedule 13 burns.

Mr YOUNG — I do not see a problem with that being part of the terms of reference because it is certainly an issue to do with fire danger and obviously there are preparation mechanisms around issuing those permits. I just want to explore it a little bit. Are you aware of any incidents that have happened, or the frequency or severity of any incidents that have happened as a result of planned stubble burning?

Mr HARRIOTT — Specifically I have not got examples of that and I do not know that there have been too many in the Greater Shepparton area. But we have had a number of major fires and royal commissions have looked into this sort of thing and the focus is right upon us to ensure that we are as prepared and professional in our approach to fire management as possible. I guess that is part of the reason you are having the inquiry. So in that context we have had a review and just believe that the system that is in place for issuing these schedule 13 permits is something that is historic and just needs to be improved upon basically.

Mr YOUNG — This might not be something you can answer now, but can you give us an indication of some of the criteria that are used to sign off on one of those permits?

Mr HARRIOTT — Yes.

Mr YOUNG — I am happy for you to take that away.

Mr HARRIOTT — Yes, I will take that on notice, but that is one of our concerns. We do not believe it is either rigorous enough, or if it is rigorous, that we have the expertise in council to make that assessment. We believe all that expertise is with the fire authorities.

Mr YOUNG — So you believe it is outdated? Is there a plan to review that at all, that is already in place?

Mr HARRIOTT — We are working with the CFA at the moment to try to come up with a better system for the next fire season.

Mr YOUNG — Just as a general question to everyone, in terms of departmental works in bushfire preparedness, have you noticed any differences in certain areas? I know a lot of these councils would have a lot of public lands in them. Is there a difference in the bushfire preventative measures taken within different tenures — so national parks versus state parks and state forests versus other types of public land?

Ms ABBEY — I do not think that we have noticed any difference, no.

Mr GREEN — No, it appears to be extremely well integrated, as it should be, across land tenures, yes.

Mr YOUNG — That is something that has been talked about quite a bit — the tenure-blind approach. It seems to have a focus on encompassing private land into that. Everyone has spoken about the really good relationship they have with DELWP and the departments and managing public lands. What is the relationship like with private landholders and engaging them in management for fire prevention?

Mr HARRIOTT — Well, I guess that is the issue in part in stubble burning. That is the main area that we have communication. I guess we also have communication in establishing the firebreak network throughout our areas and then undertaking the firebreak work. Sometimes it is in partnership with adjoining landowners. They are the main areas that we have communication with landowners, and generally it is a good relationship.

Ms ABBEY — We likewise have, I suppose, a high degree of awareness amongst our community members, and our staff spend a considerable amount of time in the lead-up to the fire season coordinating our activities with our fire prevention notices to property owners. We find that if there is an issue and a notice is issued, then there is a fairly quick response.

Mr GREEN — If I could share with you — prior to moving to local government my background is I actually used to be in land management. I used to be a fire management officer in New South Wales, and I used to do whole-of-landscape fire management planning. I did notice when I moved to Victoria over 10 years ago a different approach in Victoria where there did appear to be some divisions between private and public lands. I am not sure if that is still there; I have not been in the game for quite a while. But there are examples in New South Wales where there was some planning done in the 90s and an approach done in the 90s where it was a fully integrated, cross-tenure, tenure-blind, whole-of-landscape approach to fire planning which I could give you some context for if you are interested in following up that example.

Mr YOUNG — No worries. Thanks very much.

Mr SOMYUREK — To Murrindindi Shire Council, in your submission you noted in particular the collaboration between DELWP and the shire in undertaking works on the Marysville township firebreak. Can you please expand on that?

Mr LEITINGER — Yes, there is a strip of land that pretty well sort of buffers between the township and the public forest on the strip. I think it is about a 100 to 200-metre strip of land that is treated every year, and it basically circles the whole township. In one year council pays for it and in the other year DELWP does it, but that is by agreement. We do a similar thing at Granton as well — Granton township, which is between Marysville and Narbethong.

Ms ABBEY — So effectively we share responsibility for undertaking works, and it is done year about by each agency.

Mr SOMYUREK — And what about community involvement in that process?

Mr LEITINGER — The community is aware of those activities. I think they appreciate those, but one of the things that has come up through our fire management planning committee is the problem of trying to — because they have gone through such a traumatic event — get them re-engaged and actively participating. So ahead of the emergency management changes proposed, we have already actually — I think it closes this week or next week — gone out to the community across the shire seeking community representatives to come along to the emergency management planning committee just to try to get that buy-in and so on, because they are a very important part of emergency planning. So we hope that is a successful move. But we saw the good work that DELWP has done on that east — I cannot remember the exact name of that plan. It is the east and central landscape bushfire risk management plan. It is a useful tool to go to the communities that have particularly been affected by the fires and maybe use it as a tool to generate greater interest and participation.

Mr RAMSAY — I have a couple of questions. One to Peter. I was interested in the stubble burns myself, because I have not heard it raised by local government before. My understanding is that there is a significant criteria attached to providing that permit where there is a requirement for a firebreak, a requirement for certain personnel on site, a requirement for the time of day, a requirement for appliances to be on the fireground. There is a reporting mechanism to the CFA and also to regional headquarters, so there are quite stringent criteria for those who want to burn stubble. The compliance issue is probably the one you are focusing on about shifting the responsibility of compliance from local government onto the CFA. It will be interesting to see if we get further submissions that are seeking that sort of shift of responsibility away from local government. That was a comment, I am sorry, Chair. The question I have — —

Mr HARRIOTT — Can I just follow up on that one?

Mr RAMSAY — Yes, all right.

Mr HARRIOTT — Also DELWP has put out a councils and emergency discussion paper, and one of the things in it is what current functions would councils prefer to cease. This issue is in there:

Council to stop issuing permits to burn/fire hazard inspections, fire prevention permits, notices —
et cetera —

and return this role to CFA. Council staff do not have the expertise to carry out this function.

So it is a discussion that is going on.

The CHAIR — We might borrow that document from you if that would be all right. It would be helpful.

Mr HARRIOTT — Yes, sure.

Mr RAMSAY — The question I wanted to ask you all is in relation to private land and the responsibilities of private owners in relation to reducing fuel loads. The current native vegetation guidelines and the act itself stop many from being able to reduce fuel load because of the removal of debris and what have you. Has that been an issue that has been brought to your attention in relation to landholders wanting to carry out their own fuel reduction works? Secondly, the morale of the CFA, who now does a lot of the roadside burning — has that been impacted by the UFU-CFA dispute in that volunteers are now expected to go out and man trucks to help with burning off roadsides et cetera? I would be interested to know, given the recent events, whether that has had an impact on volunteerism — doing the sort of works that have been carried out before by CFA volunteers.

Mr HARRIOTT — No doubt the volunteers are concerned. We had a candidates forum for the federal election, and there would have been about 200 CFA personnel in their gear out the front of that venue trying to raise the issue and protest about the current changes. That is just an example of where there is concern. Is it impacting on the delivery of service? I think we are seeing varying examples of that, where some brigades are saying they are going to pull out altogether or take legal action or whatever and other brigades saying, no, they are still committed to providing the community service they always do. That is just what I have observed. We all would have observed that over the television coverage in our own particular areas. I think we still have got very well committed volunteers wanting to do their job, but they just have that concern about the changes.

Mr RAMSAY — Can you just comment on the native vegetation, particularly in relation to cutting of roadsides in the removal of fuel loads?

Mr HARRIOTT — Yes. It has not been an issue in the Greater Shepparton area that I am aware of. We do have roads mapped out that have been identified as significant vegetation. I think only 1 or 1.5 per cent of the original vegetation coverage remains in our Goulburn Valley area just because of history and agriculture and what have you, so it is important that the remaining 1 per cent and the significant vegetation component of that is maintained, and a lot of that is in road reserves. So it is an issue, but from a fire prevention perspective it has not been a large issue in our area.

We talked about private property. There are the fire permits that we issue every season for private property to be cleaned up, and they do not always lead to property being cut and slashed and maintained. So there is a process of going back and issuing a second notice, and if they do not comply with the second notice we go in and rectify the problem and put the charge on the property. So there are systems in place for overcoming that private property issue if there are any issues there.

Ms ABBEY — Dealing with the CFA question first, as you would be aware the CFA and their local brigades are integral parts of rural community, not just in fire prevention but in emergency management more generally. It certainly has been a topic of discussion amongst the community everywhere from quilt shows to truck, ute and rod events and broader community discussion, but there is nothing that would indicate that that has then been translated into volunteerism and action being undertaken by CFA brigades at this point in time.

In relation to native vegetation, it certainly has not been a major issue for council, particularly in terms of fire prevention works within private property because we have been able to work through with the property owners both their need to ensure that their properties are safe and to protect native vegetation if that has been required. Certainly, as Peter indicated, we also have significant mapping in terms of our roadside vegetation, and we are able to do works within that context.

Mr GREEN — So again, the impact on the CFA of volunteerism. So I know the local brigades, particularly in Mansfield and the line brigades, have made it clear that they did not intend the dispute to affect the service they provide. It is probably too early to work out whether it has affected membership or not, so no impact there. There has not been a great issue with native vegetation legislation either, either on private property or on roadside. So there can be issues. There is ability on roadside for vegetation removal under current legislation to remove problem trees. There are always individuals who believe — I had a discussion only in the last month — all trees should be removed on all roads. I do not believe that it is a good balance, and no-one is suggesting that. But on balance it seems to work fine. We have not received any feedback or come across the issue on private land. There appear to be mechanisms in place for people to maintain their private land.

The CHAIR — I want to thank all four councils for the very useful input on both rate capping and bushfire preparedness. We may have some further discussions with you through the secretariat as we go forward. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.