T R A N S C R I P T

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Bairnsdale — 27 September 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair
Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair
Ms Melina Bath
Mr Richard Dalla-Riva
Ms Samantha Dunn
Mr Khalil Eideh
Mr Cesar Melhem
Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber
Mr Jeff Bourman
Ms Colleen Hartland
Mr James Purcell
Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

Witnesses

Ms Louise Crisp (affirmed), and
Ms Robyn Grant (affirmed), Gippsland Environment Group.

The CHAIR — I reopen the hearing on the bushfires preparedness inquiry and welcome from the Gippsland Environment Group, Louise Crisp and Robyn Grant. We will ask for a short presentation and then follow with some questions. Welcome. Can I indicate that evidence given here is protected by parliamentary privilege. What you say outside is not. Who wants to lead off?

Visual presentation.

Ms GRANT — I will. Our group has grave concerns for what is actually happening with prescribed burns on the biodiversity, due to the frequency, intensity and scale of burns. We have documented various burns in the Mitchell River National Park, Providence Ponds and Moormurng flora and fauna reserves and Blond Bay in the Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park. In Gippsland there are 59 threatened vertebrae species, including 42 species listed as threatened under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 — also many threatened plant species.

In Gippsland, 18 small mammal species have been lost, are rare or are in severe decline. With the lack of monitoring by government authorities the number could even be higher. One of the identified reasons for this decline has been inappropriate fire regimes and the intensity of burns. National parks and reserves in Victoria contribute 50 per cent of the total prescribed burn area even though they only cover 18 per cent of the state. DELWP, not Parks Victoria, is the lead land manager of prescribed burns in national parks and reserves. Inappropriate fire regimes and too frequent fire regimes are both listed as threatening processes under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act.

However, there are no ecological burn plans prepared for the majority of prescribed burns in parks and reserves. There are some in the red gum plains but very few. Prescribed burns in national parks and reserves are fuel reduction burns not ecological burns. Prescribed burns are destroying huge numbers of hollow-bearing trees. In the CSIRO publication *Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia* by Gibbons and Lindenmayer their assessment is that 303 Australian species use hollows. That is 13 per cent of all terrestrial species. It includes 27 frogs, 79 reptiles, 114 birds and 83 mammals. This number does not mention how many are dependent on hollows, as many use hollows opportunistically. The figure is too difficult to calculate as some species are flexible in hollow use. But in some environments they are dependent on hollows. That would be the ringtail possum in sub-alpine environments. Since we have been here for 30-odd years we have noticed a huge decline in the greater glider in the forests around here. That is due to clear-fell logging and also prescribed burns.

Now we get on to the photos of the Mitchell River National Park. It has a UN category II listing of national parks and protected areas. This is to be managed primarily for ecosystem conservation. The park is one of only two lowland forest communities represented in the national estate. In the past, areas of rainforest have been burnt in the park despite the Gippsland fire protection plan that rainforest and vegetation within 100 metres of rainforest should not be burnt. This has happened in other areas of East Gippsland as well. The fire history of the park is fairly damning. A lot of it has been burnt since the 1965 fires, which were particularly bad.

Ms BATH — Were they man-made, or was it a natural occurrence?

Ms GRANT — I am not sure. What do you mean — the fires within the park?

Ms BATH — Yes.

Ms GRANT — A lot of them have been prescribed burns.

Ms BATH — That one? Was it the 1965 — —

Ms GRANT — No, 1965 was not. It started near Licola, I think, somewhere, but I am not sure of the cause of that. At Bull Creek Divide, in the south-west of the park a prescribed burn in March 2015 burnt 6 kilometres of ridge line adjacent to one of the main access roads to the park. The southern boundary of this park was also burnt in 2011, so they are quite frequent. These are some of the photos taken in 2015. In this area a large number of hollow-bearing trees were destroyed — I would say hundreds after documenting that burn. There was canopy burn and scorch, and road closures during the burn and post burn impacted greatly on tourism. I am also a tourism operator. I sent people down there and they could not get to that part of the park. Just on the impact on the visual landscape within our parks, most of the landscapes are blackened. There was no pre-fire on-ground monitoring which occurred.

Horseshoe Bend was another burn in the park in April 2016. This is a very remote and isolated area in the north-east of the park. We were told that this would not burn over 22 degrees.

Ms SHING — You were told by whom, sorry?

Ms CRISP — It would not be burnt.

Ms GRANT — Sorry, it would not be burnt if it was more than 22 degrees. This was told by a member of Parks staff. It actually was 27 or 28 degrees, very windy and a very hot burn. Trees measuring 45 to 50 metres high were destroyed during this fire. The burn plan stated, 'No assets near the burn'. We must ask why this was burnt.

Ms SHING — What was the area burnt in that particular fire?

Ms CRISP — I think it was about 500 and something hectares. I am not sure, but I think it was 2013 that a large area to the south-west and west of this burn was undertaken. These are just some of the photos of that burn. The regrowth that has come up after the 2013 fire, which was adjacent to this park, shows thick wattle and various other species, and it seems to have made it more fire prone. We are finding this a lot in the foothill areas — that you get this massive wattle growth after the fires. In the current fire operations plan 2017–19 an adjacent area east of Horseshoe Bend is scheduled and an area of 3000 hectares is to be burnt to the north of the park. So we are seeing huge burns, and these are very isolated areas. These adjacent burns will compromise recolonisation of species in the park and will do very little to protect life and property.

Ms SHING — Does that wattle thin at all as the saplings grow and gain height?

Ms GRANT — They do, but it takes many years to do that.

Ms SHING — How long does it take before thinning occurs in that situation?

Ms GRANT — Looking at the Mitchell River National Park that was burnt in 1965 and had very thick black wattle regrowth, it is probably over the last 10 years that that regrowth has actually fallen and rotted to the ground. So it takes a long time; this is not an immediate thing at all, and depending on the wattle species.

Mr YOUNG — Just while you are on that, what kind of growth was there before the burn? Were those types of wattles there previously?

Ms GRANT — It was fairly open.

Ms DUNN — It is my understanding that wattles are a pioneer plant after a burn. That is one of its big functions.

Ms GRANT — That is right.

Ms BATH — Fast growing.

Ms GRANT — So they come up very, very thickly, yes. Another burn planned in the park is Bald Hills Creek, which is going to be 913 hectares. In this area the Gippsland Environment Group members have identified yellow-bellied gliders and their feed trees, and koalas, which were part of a release program by the department from French Island in 1988. Yellow-bellied gliders require — —

The CHAIR — A successful release program.

Ms GRANT — Very successful. We have seen them — —

Ms SHING — They are there and they are eating.

Ms GRANT — Yes, they are there and they are still there, which is just wonderful. Yellow-bellied gliders require 15 000 hectares of forest to support a viable population.

Ms SHING — What is a viable population in numbers?

Ms GRANT — I do not know that. It was just a quote that I found in an animals book of Australia.

The burn is adjacent to the Roaring Mag prescribed burn planned for autumn 2016, which was cancelled because of similar biodiversity values and repeated efforts by Gippsland Environment Group members to get biodiversity staff out to the site. We also wrote to many authorities and also to the minister. These are the Roaring Mag photos of some of the biodiversity values. That is a yellow-bellied glider, and there is a koala in the tree which is — —

Ms CRISP — That is the yellow-bellied glider in the tree.

Ms GRANT — Sorry. They are the yellow-bellied feed trees. There is the yellow-bellied glider. I do not know whether any on the panel have actually seen these glide, but they are quite fantastic, and there are also the greater gliders. They are their feed trees. Gippsland Environment Group actually stopped the burn with that one.

Ms SHING — What do you mean you stopped the burn?

The CHAIR — Persuaded.

Ms GRANT — We did a lot of persuading and surveying too. We were out there night after night looking for things.

Ms SHING — Was it stopped or postponed?

Ms GRANT — We hope it has been cancelled. We have that in writing.

Ms CRISP — It was halted because of the biodiversity values that Gippsland Environment Group volunteer survey people found, because we could not get DELWP staff out there to survey.

Ms GRANT — Much of this prescribed burning breaches the Mitchell River management plan, which states:

> … establish, implement and maintain fire regimes appropriate to the conservation of native flora and fauna.

And —

> Minimise the adverse effects of all fires …

Why then is prescribed burning being conducted when Parks Victoria has not developed any ecological guidelines for burns in the Mitchell River National Park?

Now we go on to Moormurng Flora and Fauna Reserve, which is not very far out of Bairnsdale. The reserve is 965 hectares. It is predominantly Gippsland plains, red gum grassy woodland and is critically endangered under the EPBC act and is a park of national significance. It was burnt on 28 April 2016. It was an intensely hot burn on sandy ridges, mainly in heathy woodland. One-hundred-year-old banksias and hollow-bearing eucalypts were burnt and destroyed. There were large areas of canopy burn. As you can see, it absolutely devastated the area.

On 5 May 2016 when the fire operations manager for Tambo district was interviewed about the burn on radio he said that there was no significant destruction of habitat and that by late winter early spring we would see significant recovery. This has not been the case. These photos were taken in July, and there has not been much since — only bracken at the moment mostly coming up.

On 27 July 2016, when community members met with the fire manager, the fire manager actually apologised for the burn. We thought that was quite startling, actually. No pre-burn on-ground survey was done, despite rare orchids in the southern area of the burn and potential habitat for white-footed dunnarts.

Now we go on to the Providence Ponds Flora and Fauna Reserve. It used to be a highly diverse heathland and heathy woodland. Now many areas are simply bracken woodland. This reserve is one of only four sites where the endangered New Holland mouse is found. In 20 years up to 2008 it had disappeared from eight known sites. It is listed as threatened under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and vulnerable under the EPBC act. Because

of the scale and intensity of burns, it could disappear altogether from Providence Ponds reserve. Any future burns need to be smaller, patch size, low intensity and a mosaic of age class.

A recent survey in autumn 2015 found numbers of New Holland mouse in long unburnt heathland. Other ground-dwelling mammals, such as bandicoots and potoroos, also require long unburnt vegetation. The survey report states that fire management of Providence Ponds is managed by DELWP, with a focus on fuel reduction burns instead of ecological burning. A focus on maintaining a mosaic of age classes should be a priority across the reserve. Further research is required to determine appropriate fire regimes for the New Holland mouse.

Other threatened species in the park include white-footed dunnart, eastern pygmy possum and many others. A burn in Providence Ponds in autumn 2015 burnt an area which included the most southern distribution of the only known surviving population in Victoria of *Isopogon prostratus*, the prostrate conebush. This southern section of the population had been studied in the 1990s by DELWP staff but not logged on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas. An adjacent burn is proposed for autumn in 2017. This is the area where one New Holland mouse was trapped in autumn 2015, a white-footed dunnart was captured on camera in June 2016 and a bush rat was first recorded by the Mammal Survey Group in this area.

There are no Parks Victoria management plans for Providence Ponds and Moormurng Flora and Fauna Reserve. Parks Victoria has not developed any guidelines for ecological burning in the reserves. Even though the reserves were established to specifically protect rare flora and fauna, they are not being managed to enhance biodiversity.

We go on to Blond Bay Wildlife Reserve. It is situated on the shores of Lake Victoria in a very fragile coastal landscape. Prescribed burns here have been too hot and too frequent, destroying large areas of feed and habitat trees. A burn in autumn 2014 burnt to the lake's edge, adding to shoreline erosion already caused by increased salt levels in the lake.

Ms SHING — How big was that burn?

Ms GRANT — I am not sure.

Ms SHING — If you can provide that to us on notice that would be useful.

Ms GRANT — These photos were taken nine months after the burn and highlight the destruction of mature banksias.

Another concern we have is the burn plans relying on inadequate biodiversity data due to no pre-burn on-ground surveys, inadequate VBA data and insufficient biodiversity staff. In 2011 there were seven staff in Bairnsdale; now only three. Orbost has three biodiversity staff and five staff involved in a baiting program for the Southern Ark Project. For the size of East Gippsland and the reserve system in it, we really need more staff. There is also the failure of staff to log community records of threatened and vulnerable species.

Funding cuts to parks handed control of fire operations to DELWP staff. There has been a communication breakdown between biodiversity staff and fire operations staff. We have had biodiversity staff say that this has happened, that there was a communication breakdown between them.

The loss of hollow-bearing trees is another point, which I have mentioned before. The Hawkeye Project study in East Gippsland of fire and hollow-bearing trees has shown that areas of mapped fire coverage in planned burns have destroyed 19 per cent of habitat trees and that 27.9 per cent of habitat trees were more likely to collapse if the base of the tree is reached by fire. With so many native species dependent on hollows — —

The CHAIR — Robyn, have you got much more to go, or are you nearly finished?

Ms GRANT — No, I have not. It is only a little bit.

The CHAIR — Okay. Keep going.

Ms GRANT — For survival, this is an unacceptable situation and a critical factor in species decline. The aim of burns is to achieve 90 per cent bark burn. As a consequence, it leads to severe canopy burn, eliminates flowering for some years and has a huge impact on nectar-eating species.

We are also concerned about the 5 per cent target. The government brought a shift to risk-based fire operations instead of the 5 per cent target. When looking at the current fire operations plan, there appears to be no real change. Remote and large areas are still being burnt, including national parks and reserves. No long-term and pre-burn monitoring is happening particularly, and the prescribed burns threaten biodiversity and ecosystems. Funding has gone to prescribed burning, not to the environmental monitoring, despite the recommendations of the royal commission. The HawkEye Project was one thing that came out of the royal commission, but that has ceased since then.

National parks and reserves are usually surrounded by clear-fell logging coupes, farmland or prescribed burns, making our parks the only refuge for species to survive. There needs to be a moratorium on burns in national parks and reserves until comprehensive surveys are initiated to prevent species loss. Prescribed burning should not occur in national parks and reserves without an ecological burn plan. The only burning that occurs must be underpinned by proven methodology, that the burn will enhance biodiversity, not destroy it. In national parks and reserves prescribed burning is threatening the very biodiversity the parks have been established to protect in the first place. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Robyn and Louise, thank you. You have presented a different viewpoint to one that we have had in this format. What I would seek to try and tease out is how we reconcile the need to protect species and biodiversity with a need to prevent catastrophic fires. It just seems to me, and this is some of the evidence that has come to us, that by doing some prescribed burning you can actually, arguably, prevent catastrophic fires.

Ms GRANT — I believe you cannot.

The CHAIR — No, this is a central point for us to understand, I think. The argument is that if you do not do that prescribed burning, the fuel load will build up and you will end up with much greater impact in an uncontrolled and broad-spread way rather than in pockets of burning. Do you dispute that?

Ms GRANT — I dispute that. In 2003 major fires went through this area. In 2006 a lot of those areas were burnt in another major fire. It did not stop those fires. In Tostaree, the fire down near Orbost, it went through prescribed burning that had been burnt 12 months before. So if you get a 40-degree or hotter day with those northerly winds, nothing stops that fire. As a tourism operator I had people from Marysville stay as part of the fire recovery plan. They said that fuel reduction around there did not stop those fires. So I do not know; it seems to me you get one of those bad days and nothing stops it.

The CHAIR — I might be unique, but I remember 2006 quite well, including the fires down in your area here. It was certainly put to me at the time that the lack of prescribed burning was a significant issue with those 2006 fires, the argument being that prescribed burning had not happened really since the early 1990s, at any scale, and what had occurred in 2003 was only a part of the overall picture. I am just interested in your — —

Ms GRANT — According to the fire maps we have got of the Mitchell River National Park, I would dispute that.

The CHAIR — All right. Well, we will ask DELWP that.

Ms CRISP — I think there is considerable evidence now being published that the greatest impact you can have on protecting your house and surroundings is actually to burn closest, so the immediate adjacent area to your home and so forth is the key place to undertake prescribed burning for protection. There are numerous references we could supply.

The CHAIR — We are happy with that.

Ms DUNN — Yes, that would be good.

Ms CRISP — Even one that was published in 2015, *Biogeographical variation in the potential effectiveness of prescribed fire in south-eastern Australia*, is saying really in the majority of regions it had no impact on catastrophic bushfire. A really key one here was actually the Aberfeldy fire in 2008, which burnt through areas that had been burnt in the 2003 fires. We mentioned that in our written submission and that DELWP were actually horrified at the speed at which that fire moved.

Now, there are two issues. There is the issue about whether prescribed burning reduces catastrophic bushfires. The other issue is that the impact on biodiversity is just not being addressed, and that is not to do with catastrophic bushfires; that is the impact of prescribed burns. Under the royal commission, recommendation 58 was to undertake pre and post monitoring and to look at the impact of that extent of prescribed burning, and that just has not happened. We can see that, with the reduction in staff numbers; staff are really preparing burn plans off the desktop. You almost have to threaten physical violence to get a DELWP staff member out to look at a really highly significant area, so it is coming down to citizen science to actually provide that evidence. I think that is a really unjust and unfair way for the public commons to actually rely on volunteers to identify species and EVCs that could be at risk from a prescribed burn, because DELWP and Parks Victoria do not have the staff or the funding to undertake that research. Not to even have an ecological management plan or a management plan per se for many of the state reserves, you know, we are just burning blind.

The CHAIR — I am going to hand over, but we are happy to have any of those studies that you think we should have in our possession.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Robyn and Louise, for your submission to the inquiry and your contribution today. Given that you have indicated that, in your view, prescribed burning does not minimise the risks to biodiversity and indeed creates, if I am summarising you correctly, a whole set of other challenges around risks to flora and fauna in areas where it takes place, what is your view in relation to Aboriginal and traditional owner treatment of the land that involves a mosaic-like approach of low-temperature, low-intensity burns, which has also been adopted, as we have heard from earlier evidence in this inquiry, by settlers burning along the tops of ridges to reduce the impact of lightning strikes, for example. We have had other evidence from a gentleman yesterday in Morwell, David Packham, who indicated that in his view fire like water should trickle over the land and that in doing that it reduces the fuel that is available over time, which then decreases the intensity and the ferocity and the spread of large-scale fire. What do you say to those sorts of comments?

Ms CRISP — I think there is one key thing. First of all, we are not saying no prescribed burning. We are saying that the intensity, extent and severity is weighed unscientifically and that definitely there is an absolute need for, in some EVCs, low-intensity mosaic burns, particularly in the grassland species. Everywhere else there needs to be just a massively greater amount of research undertaken, and that is what is missing. We have got a massive input of funds into burning, but we do not have it into research and whether it is effective or not effective, and also how it impacts on biodiversity.

Ms SHING — So how do we deal with that around the comments you made earlier with private landholdings and the advice being that to protect that asset as far as the private landholding is concerned burns should take place in the area immediately around that, when often we are talking about private landholdings that are adjacent to very large tracts of very, very dense public land in national parks.

Ms GRANT — We are very close to the state forest. We actually border the state forest. We have put extensive firefighting sprinklers around the house, the garden, so we can saturate the place in about 5 minutes by putting one tap on. Most properties are not prepared for fire. In the Mount Ray fire, which burnt just out of Bairnsdale near Glenaladale, which was not put out by DELWP and burnt for three weeks over summer and then it burnt 6000 hectares. It was at the same time as the Morwell fire — the open cut fire.

Ms SHING — Yes, we have heard evidence in relation to both of those fires.

Ms GRANT — People were saying, 'I was up on the roof with a hose'. Now, too late. Once the fire is there, it is too late to get up on a roof with a hose and try and defend your property. Water puts fire out, and I think we tend to disregard that, so I think more education needs to be carried out with property owners, making sure they have got adequate water supplies. Many had empty tanks going into summer and this type of thing.

Ms SHING — That refers to protecting private assets, so that is buildings, livestock, property et cetera and obviously life is at the very, very top of that set of priorities. What about, though — and you have referred extensively biodiversity in your presentation — the build-up of fuel on the one hand. We can talk about water being used to put out fires, but in large tracts of public land and national parks in particular — and I am just putting this to you to get your response — an extensive build-up of fuel is, according to the formulas that we have been given and according to a lot of the science we been presented with, the catalyst to fires that burn with enormous intensity and with significant updraughts that then carry embers off to other areas where they can start

other fires. Does that not have the same sort of disastrous effect on flora and fauna that you are trying to avoid in terms of asking for this further research?

Ms GRANT — It does, but most bushfires will burn not the whole area. You are going to get those fires, but what we are finding with prescribed burning when it is burning year after year after year is that quite often they are consecutive burns, so area after area next to each other or adjacent to each other. We had severe bushfires here. We had millions of acres burnt and yet they went in two years after, or three years after, that fire and burnt again. A lot of the areas that would have been a refuge for wildlife within those wildfires were actually burnt out by DELWP because they thought they might cause more fires. This was during the fire itself, or just after the fire. So I do not know. We look at fuel. It used to be called habitat in our bush.

Ms SHING — Farmers call it feed; that is the other part of it. Everyone has a different way to describe the build-up of vegetation.

Ms GRANT — Yes, but it is seen as fuel. There are a lot of things that actually compost that fuel. You have got the lyrebirds; you have got a moth larvae that actually eats the leaves. I mean, if something was not getting rid of all those leaves that are falling, we would have metres of this debris on the ground. But it is a recycling process within our forest, and if we burn it, we get rid of those things that actually recycle that leaf litter and so forth.

Ms SHING — So it sounds to me as though you are not supportive of a fuel reduction target in the form of the 5 per cent recommended by the bushfires royal commission?

Ms GRANT — No, definitely not.

Ms SHING — And that as far as your group's position is concerned, a risk-based approach would relate to monitoring and assessing the area immediately around private landholding, is that correct, until such time as further surveys and research can be undertaken in the public areas around biodiversity?

Ms GRANT — I think we still have got to be a bit careful with that, too. It is very nice to have green areas around properties and so forth. We do not want to live in a blackened environment forever, and that is what we are seeing. A lot of areas are so black, year after year. I think we need to even assess that and look at private landholders — what they are doing for their own protection. A lot of them rely on fuel reduction burning for their fire protection, and if it is not going to work on a 40 degree-plus northerly day, they are going to be in trouble, and a lot were in trouble.

Ms SHING — How well prepared do you think we are for the upcoming bushfire season in terms of bushfire preparedness?

Ms GRANT — I have no idea.

Ms SHING — You do not have a view on that? No, that is okay. It is just why we are here, so I thought I would put it to you.

Ms GRANT — No, I think as the mega-fires disappear out of people's memories and so forth they do not do anything. Some communities are prepared, but I would say that a lot are not prepared, and I think you just need more education as far as landholders go.

Ms CRISP — I would like to add to that. I think it is one thing we mentioned in our submission that a rapid response to actual bushfire would be much more economical as well as protection for biodiversity and humans. An investment, say, in — —

Ms SHING — Than prescribed burning, you mean?

Ms CRISP — Yes, that a rapid attack would be the most effective response and that requires investment in aerial firefighting equipment, because there has been a huge expenditure in massive CFA sheds all around East Gippsland. If that amount of money had actually been put into something like a few more Elvises, it might potentially be much more effective than — —

Ms SHING — We have had a lot of evidence that aircraft and firefighting through aircraft is not helpful at all. So that is the other part of it — the competing positions that we see.

Ms CRISP — Yes, except that in the Black Saturday bushfires — I think Phil Ingamells of the VNPA drew your attention to it — there was actually a fire response aircraft that put out a fire in the Dandenongs. If that had not been available, things would have been dramatically worse than they were.

Ms SHING — That is right.

Ms CRISP — That is what we are talking about here. If the Mount Ray fire had been put out effectively at the time that it was first fought rather letting it run on, it would not have had the consequences that it did.

Ms GRANT — Can I make a comment on that? Just behind us in the state forest in 2003 a friend of ours, who lived on the south side of the river, looked over, saw a fire at about 7 o'clock in the morning — a lightning strike, as there were many around — and he contacted 000. The local CFA was out there fairly quickly. We went up the bush probably about 9 o'clock to check on what was going on and DELWP still had not arrived.

Ms SHING — Two hours later or 14 hours — —

Ms GRANT — Two hours later. And then somebody in a Parks vehicle arrived without any water on the back. We said, 'Well, where's DELWP?'. The CFA were there. They were saying, 'Where are they? We need a bulldozer to get in there'. He said, 'They are waiting for someone to tell them where the fire is'. That was a disaster fire year and yet that was just one thing that happened just locally.

The CHAIR — I think we are really quite short on time here.

Ms SHING — Sorry.

Ms BATH — Thank you, Chair, and Deputy Chair, because you asked a few questions that I was interested in in relation to large catastrophic fires caused by lightning versus smaller planned burns. My question, though, relates to the Tostaree fires near Lakes Entrance. You mentioned that fuel reduction burns do nothing; I am paraphrasing but — —

Ms GRANT — No, I did not say that. I said that the fuel reduction burn did not stop the fire, okay?

Ms BATH — Okay. But I have seen evidence, in just looking up a report, from a gentleman, Rob Melville. He is a BASO officer for district 11. He said that without the burn that took place he was sure that the consequence would have been much worse. That came out of a report that the CFA put in. He said:

> The fire was slowed down significantly when the south-eastern edge ran into an area where DSE —

we now know it is DELWP, but at this time it was DSE —

> had already carried out a fuel reduction burn in 2010.

Your comment is contra to this report and experience.

Ms GRANT — Can I ask what time that fire reached that area, because I believe it was around 6 o'clock at night when things had gone a little bit benign as far as the weather went? I am not sure on that, so it would be interesting to find out what time it actually hit that.

Ms CRISP — Whether it was because of the drop in the wind and the late afternoon conditions. But there are contradictions in that because there was a Parks staff officer who did actually directly answer a question in that regard and said that no, that it had gone straight through some of the previous fuel reduction burn areas.

The CHAIR — Where was that? Who was the Parks officer?

Ms CRISP — I do not know. It was reported to me.

Ms GRANT — Peter Vaughan, who lives at Wombat Creek, has documented very well that whole fire. He lives near Dinner Creek. It went through that area that had been fuel reduction burnt, and very severely fuel reduction burnt 12 months before.

Ms SHING — Can we get further details on that?

Ms BATH — Yes. Would you like to provide some further detail from your conversations with those people?

Ms SHING — Including their details as well so we can get in touch.

Ms BATH — The other comment I make is that in the 2003 fire that killed 9000 domestic livestock, in your research have you any understanding of the nature and extent of the fauna killed in those sorts of fires? I will use the 2003 fire as an example.

Ms GRANT — No, I have not got any information on that. I do not know whether a lot of survey work was actually done.

Ms DUNN — That is right. That is why you do not know. It does not exist.

Ms GRANT — Yes. There just seem to be these big gaps in information and research and survey work. There is just not enough being done. A lot of the baseline data is not known on species. We do not which species are disappearing. We can go on a bit of anecdotal evidence and our evidence. Emus, for example, were very, very common around here. We used to have about 30 on our property when we first moved here. We do not see any on our property now at all and things have not changed all that much on our property.

Ms BATH — One quick final one. We have heard across this hearing — and I know Ms Shing brought it up before — about the traditional use of fire by Aboriginals in their everyday lives over thousands of years. Have you taken any advice about your stance from those elders where you live? Have you had communications with current Aboriginal people?

Ms GRANT — I think a lot of that knowledge in East Gippsland disappeared very quickly because of the decimation of the population here in a very short period of time. A lot of them have not got that knowledge any more of what they burnt and where they burnt and how they burnt. I am sure they would not have done very hot burns to get rid of the possums and their food sources anyway, so not on the scale we are doing them now.

Ms BATH — That is what Mr Squires was advocating for — low-temperature burns.

Ms DUNN — Thank you, ladies, for your presentation. I also want to thank you for your efforts in your citizen survey activities. It is good to know that there are people out there actually doing the work that should be done by our agencies that are charged with protecting biodiversity, so I thank you for that. It seems to me that generally speaking you would support a risk-based approach to burning if there was already baseline data around ecological values and biodiversity values in our state and if the impact on those values was part of the risk assessment for preventative burns. Is that a fair assumption, because that is the missing link?

Ms GRANT — Yes.

Ms CRISP — Yes, and that it was scientifically proven, and not just anecdotal evidence. There is the accumulating science now and there is a lot of difference, just referring back to Ms Bath's comment, that there is absolutely no comparison between the Aboriginal small-scale, low-intensity mosaic burning and what is happening with prescribed burnings in our bush as you have seen from those photos. You do not destroy your food source, you enhance it in various ways, and certainly in grassland species that is necessary. And that is what I am talking about — the research that is required. There has been this incredible segue from in effect using Aboriginal mosaic burning as the justification for firebombing the landscape and the biodiversity.

Ms GRANT — Many of the prescribed burns are actually done like coupe burns in some areas, where they burn the perimeter and then they bomb it out with fire — —

Ms SHING — Incendiaries.

Ms GRANT — Yes, incendiaries.

Ms DUNN — Yes, so it is a hot burn.

Ms GRANT — Yes. So you are getting very intense, hot burns, and you have got so many different vegetation classes within some of those areas they are burning and each one has a specific fire tolerance or whatever. A lot of the time we do not know that fire tolerance. I just do not think enough care and monitoring and research is done and we need funding to do it.

Ms DUNN — I think you mentioned earlier there were not DELWP staff available to survey, and I think that might have been in an area where there was going to be a prescribed burn but you identified some species; is that correct?

Ms CRISP — Yes. They were not available. We asked repeatedly for biodiversity staff to come out, and it was really only when the president of our group got incredibly upset with one of the staff members did we eventually get people to come out there, but they did not actually survey. We had done the survey and then we went round and showed where the feed trees, the large trees, were and enabled them to get a GPS of where we had seen yellow-bellied gliders and so forth.

Ms DUNN — Is it your view that that is simply because there are not enough personnel or resource for that work to be undertaken, or is it a bigger cultural issue within that organisation?

Ms CRISP — There is definitely not enough staff and not enough funding for biodiversity staff. It is not a priority for biodiversity staff. The priority has been for burning, not for monitoring, research and science. It is not only DELWP, but Parks Victoria do not have those staff either and there is a massive need for an injection of funds in that area. If there was the amount of funds put into biodiversity research that has been put into building CFA fire sheds, we would have new industry in East Gippsland.

Ms DUNN — We would actually know what was living out in our forests too.

Ms GRANT — We just do not know.

Ms CRISP — We would actually be protecting the biodiversity commons for future generations when at the moment we are destroying them.

Ms GRANT — I think it is very disturbing that the environment just does not have a voice very often and there is just this total imbalance of opinions.

Ms DUNN — This is my last question, Chair. It is okay.

The CHAIR — I am just informing you that we are 20 minutes over now.

Ms DUNN — You talked about the biodiversity atlas. I am just wondering what your views are in relation to its value and use in terms of being a reference point for Victoria and what is happening with biodiversity?

Ms GRANT — It should be, but it is not.

Ms DUNN — Why is it not?

Ms GRANT — Because things are not being put on it, that the staff do not have time or whether it is just slipping through the system.

Ms DUNN — It comes back to a resource issue again.

Ms CRISP — It is a resourcing issue.

Ms GRANT — Yes, resourcing I would say.

Ms CRISP — And there has been no widespread survey since the RFA agreements decades ago.

Ms DUNN — Way back. That will do me. Thank you, ladies.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you both for your contribution. We have got lots of new evidence and there are some points for the secretariat to follow up.

Ms CRISP — Thank you very much.

Ms GRANT — Thank you for giving us the time.

Witnesses withdrew.