

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Wodonga — 20 July 2016

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Ms Anne Stelling (sworn), Facilitator, Wodonga Urban Landcare Network.

The CHAIR — If we can reconvene now and welcome Anne Stelling from the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network. Anne, can I ask you to give us a short presentation and then we will come in with some questions.

Ms STELLING — Yes, certainly. I am the facilitator of the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network, which consists of about 15 local groups, some of which are quite small and working in the urban parks within the Wodonga municipality, some of which are larger and more conventional Landcare groups, all within the Wodonga municipality.

Our groups are concerned with, firstly, what is in their backyard. A lot of people are just concerned with the park or reserve closest to where they live and they do their volunteering work there. I suppose by the nature of the thing that we are all involved in, the same people are concerned with the environment in general and the ecology of the state and are concerned about our threatened species et cetera, and also on a broader level they are concerned about sustainability and climate change and the prevention of climate change if we possibly can. So they are the people that have given me feedback to bring to this inquiry.

What I have done is just gone through the terms of reference and made some notes on each point. Your first point is on the amount and nature of burning. Certainly from our experience there seems to be burning going on all the time outside of Wodonga. There are certainly local examples of planned burns getting out of control quite regularly and also of wildfire burns, so we have everything in our experience.

Point (b): the safety measures — our members would say they seem adequate. The CFA is certainly well prepared. The agencies seem to work very well together and the responses are very quick.

The effectiveness of the burns — we would question the burning in remote areas within Victoria in relation to community safety, and we would prefer to see a more targeted and local approach to community safety, so actually protecting communities with planned burning rather than just burning for burning's sake.

In terms of threatened species, our members are concerned, particularly in this area, with the glider population. The gliders are particularly threatened by fire preparedness actions which might destroy their habitat. They need hollows and hollows are very easily burnt in prescribed burns and very easily targeted by enthusiastic people wishing to remove what they see as risks.

Point (e) ecological vegetation classes — easy to change by burning especially if burns are too hot. Therefore we see prescribed burns as increasing the possibilities of changing EVCs. Of course wildfires do too, so there is a balance to be found there.

Impact on climate — we presume all burns increase pollution and have some impact on climate. Therefore we should target our burns deliberately to minimise the amount of burning that needs to be done while also minimising the amount of wildfire.

Statewide targeting — the prescribed area targets seem to be possibly a promotional tool for government rather than an actual useful way of deciding what needs to be burnt and how much. We think burning should be targeted to improve asset protection and that assets should definitely include threatened species and ecological assets.

The resources seem to have been poured into the burning but not necessarily into education for the general public. We find that DELWP staff can no longer interact with the community in extension roles. The staff have gone and the research roles have gone. They could both clarify many of the issues that people see with burning and could do a lot towards deciding what needs to be burnt. Again, there are no staff for the protection of ecological assets — not no staff but less staff — and it just seems once again that there has not been a balance in that and that these positions need to be re-resourced as well.

The coordination — as I said earlier, this certainly seems adequate, the coordination between agencies. It is the same for the emergency response.

The structures — again the structures of government and emergency response and fire management are focused on the fire but not so much on biodiversity, community and research. These all need to be adequately staffed. We would like to see that the structures are open to change. For example, some of our groups have been working with Indigenous people on Indigenous fire management and land management using fire, and we

would really like to see ways in which that could become legitimised and mainstream. We would really like to see these Indigenous land management teams. I believe that is all the feedback I had for you.

The CHAIR — There is quite a lot there and I am going to, as with the last witness, zero in on a couple of central questions that we have got with our inquiry. Preventative burning, the regime for that and how that is set out I think is quite an important task — and the focus and how it is recorded. There is of course a balance to be struck between careful preventative burning and ensuring that you do not have a large amount of fuel build-up in a large landscape. I would just be interested in the risks as you see them to wildlife and endangered species in particular with small preventative burns, but the risk equally, if not enough preparation and preventative burning is done, of a large and very hot catastrophic fire and the impact that has on endangered species.

Ms STELLING — I think for a start we would like to see a lot more research done into that, because I am not a scientist and I cannot tell you exactly but I also know that every situation is quite different — —

The CHAIR — Distinct.

Ms STELLING — Distinct, yes. Even when we go around Wodonga we can look at the different aspects of a hill and it will have different ecological vegetation classes. So many things make a difference. It is the same with a fire and planning for a fire. So the people who are carrying out those burns need to be trained to respond to the very different situations. I am getting off the track there; you are talking about threatened species.

The CHAIR — I am just interested in this balance. There is obviously some risk with preparatory or prevention burns —

Ms STELLING — Yes.

The CHAIR — but it seems to me there is equally a risk of not doing them and having a large, catastrophic and very hot fire that does enormous damage. So how do you balance those risks?

Ms STELLING — I guess that is why I started on the research. Obviously a large and catastrophic fire is catastrophic and that is a terrible risk, but can we stop it by reducing fuel loads? How much fuel do we have to burn to stop a catastrophic fire? I do not know that there is — —

The CHAIR — Some more research.

Ms STELLING — Yes, I think more research needs to be done on that, because there is definitely a risk with prescribed burns as well unless they are really well targeted and really well carried out. Threatened species usually need timber, dead timber, and timber with hollows burns very easily.

Mr YOUNG — You have talked about moving towards a more targeted process rather than larger burns in the middle of nowhere. What method do you suggest would be used for defining where those targeted areas are?

Ms STELLING — I think we need to decide what the assets are. Surely it would be fairly obvious that towns and townships are assets and everything that are considered assets at the moment are assets but I would like to see threatened species habitats added to those assets, I guess, and the different ecological communities — special ecological communities and examples of all ecological communities — preserved. If we treat them as assets, then we can also be burning around them in the same way.

Mr YOUNG — You have talked about the lack of research in whether large burns can actually reduce fire impact and have put forth a view that smaller, targeted burns would be better. What research have you looked at to come to that conclusion?

Ms STELLING — I cannot quote it, just general reading, I would say. That has also been feedback from groups that I asked in order to come here today.

Mr YOUNG — And in terms of other groups what involvement you have with other groups in the area such as the previous witness — Parklands Albury Wodonga. Are there other groups that you interact with, and what is your relationship like with them as well as the departments?

Ms STELLING — We interact with the council, the department, the CMA, the adjoining Landcare networks, which is the Kiewa catchment. Some of our members crossover with the Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups. Our members have taken a keen interest in their fire management projects that they have had going. Some of them have actually been in Wodonga municipality with Baranduda Landcare. We interact a bit with the New South Wales side — Albury, Holbrook. We have just been up there yesterday to do a workshop on fuel hazard assessment, and interestingly they use the Victorian standards. They would be the main organisations we interact with.

Mr YOUNG — Do you have any views on other fuel reduction methods, such as selective thinning and things like that?

Ms STELLING — Certainly around here there are a lot of stringybarks, which are an issue, and the candling of stringybarks has been something that the Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups have been looking at. That seems to work well, so I would say that is something. I would like to see more attention paid to how fire can be influenced by not having exotic annual species which are on the urban interface. Where the urban areas are moving out into the old farmland, we have got all these pasture grasses like phalaris in particular, which is a shocker for burning, and so that is a problem. I would like to see more that our approach would be to replace that phalaris if possible with summer green species like microlaena, which would certainly present less fuel. On the outskirts of town that is pretty important for fast-moving grassfire. So that would certainly be something that I would like to see.

Mr YOUNG — No worries. Thanks.

Mr BARBER — It is just a simple one, I think. You talked about the resources that have been drawn away from research and planning into firefighting and running burns, but also the burning program itself has become a very large part of the fairly limited land management budget, so from the point of view of your Landcare network, simply where do you think there are priorities that are being missed?

Ms STELLING — In those extension roles with Landcare. We have great difficulty getting technical information, basically. Any research on those things that I was just talking about — how does it come to us? There does not seem to be anybody there anymore who can come out and talk to the community or run a workshop. They are very busy doing all the other things they have to do.

Mr BARBER — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Anne, can I thank you. That was a very interesting presentation, and no doubt we will be having some further contact.

Witness withdrew.