

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Wodonga — 20 July 2016

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Ms Ant Packer (sworn), Head Ranger, Parklands Albury Wodonga.

The CHAIR — If you can just give us a brief introduction and a brief submission, we will ask some questions.

Ms PACKER — My name is Ant Packer, and I am here as a representative of Parklands Albury Wodonga. Hancock Plantations talked about managing over 230 000 hectares. We manage maybe 1 per cent of that — 2300 hectares of Victorian Crown land. But I guess the difference and the benefit perhaps for giving our presentation is that our focus is on the peri-urban areas around Wodonga in particular, so I think that is probably where perhaps some contribution might be of value.

We are a community organisation and we are one of the largest what we call community committees of management in Victoria, with 2300 hectares of Crown land. So this is regional park, but it comes under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act, not the National Parks Act and the acts that Parks Victoria manages under. What that means for park users is you can have walking the dogs, horses and lots of other things that do not happen in national parks, but it also means that in terms of fire we come under the CFA act. We do not necessarily need to be included in the DELWP fire operations plan, but there is a fair bit of crossover between them.

We work across about six local government areas, and to earn an income for them we can manage that Crown land, the Victorian land; we are not funded for that, so about half of our income is non-government, from business and community. Even though we have only got about six and a half staff, our impact is quite significant. Each year we do about a million dollars worth of work on the ground across the region by working with over 100 business, community and government partners, so it is about getting people involved. I guess that is what our message is when you are looking at peri-urban areas: education and involvement, getting people to have access to the parks, learning to care for them and understanding about fire and how they can prepare for it themselves.

A big thing about what we do is that the parks are not just there to be managed for environmental purposes; we see them as a tool to address a whole heap of social issues as well. We have got really high youth unemployment in this region — the highest in Victoria — and particularly within the Aboriginal community. So we have worked a lot with them over the last 20 years with doing a lot of work on the land, and more recently we have been talking to them about trying to set up a small environmental burn scheme, with an Aboriginal elder and have young people moving through that to do a lot of these mosaic smaller burns and preventative work outside the fire season.

It is something we have been talking about with Parks Victoria and DELWP and other organisations as something that could be a resource for tackling the peri-urban areas around Yackandandah, Wodonga, Wangaratta, Chiltern — places where it is just too risky to light up in the middle of summer but you can do some really important stuff about connecting young Aboriginal people to their culture and create a bit of economic participation in land management as well.

I guess one example of a partnership is what we do with Wodonga council. They have got over 2 000 hectares of hills and environmental lands which are quite high fire risk around Wodonga. So we have combined together and developed a bushfire management strategy for 4500 hectares around this local government area so we can work together and be really consistent with what we do. That was trying to address that impact of land tenure, so we tend to work across them.

On the amount and nature of prevention burning undertaken, I have been with Parklands for just on 14 years, and during that time Parks Victoria and DELWP in their fire operations plan have been doing small mosaic burns out at Bonegilla grasslands, which is a really high threatened species area. We have had them doing a bit of candling of stringybarks in some of our higher conservation areas, which is a really big issue in Wodonga. Most of our hills have stringybarks and the ember from that is a really significant concern for the CFA and safety, so we are thinking that is a really smart way to reduce the risks longer term.

Also the CFA do burns on this railway corridor that we are responsible for, probably every three to four years. That is a significant time and money contribution from the local community. Because of the proximity to the Murray Valley Highway and Hume Highway, there are traffic management issues as well, so they tend to find money to do those sorts of things. We have noticed over time during the wet years you get a lot of fog grass and exotic grasses and by doing a burn every three or four years you can clean them out and get a bit more kangaroo grass and those summer growing natives which tend to not be as fire prone.

The CFA have done a bit of burning around the hills as well — environmental burns — and along roadsides. I know the Wodonga council have three former fire brigade or Parks Victoria fire team members on their staff, so they have done some small mosaic burns. But I guess our thing is that we would be really keen to see DELWP have a quite cost-effective small Aboriginal team that actually work all around the region within a lot of the peri-urban parks doing preventative things.

On the measures in place to ensure preventative burning is undertaken safely, from our involvement with the fire operations plan, we have put information into there about doing work on two of the big hills that we are responsible for, which is over 600 hectares. I mean, it is a really good process, but there is a very small window of time when it is actually safe to burn, and being close to town, compared to other places, it just becomes too hard. So we are just thinking of another way that would be smarter.

Their communication with the public is really good. The CFA FireReady app is really fantastic. It is a great tool, and I know our staff use it all summer, because we are out with lots of people and we need to be safe.

I guess the big challenge, though, is keeping people out of the parks when there are fires. Like, back in December 2014 there was a fire in West Wodonga. We taped off all the access gates and put signs up everywhere because the fire was only about 4 kilometres away, and people were still in there on their mountain bikes doing their thing. But you can only do what you can do. I guess that is just another risk when you are in a bigger city.

On the effectiveness of preventative burns, we are kind of saying that we think DELWP could work smarter rather than harder. You know, you can do these really big areas of burns, but I guess the question is: are we actually reducing the fire risk in the long term? In the peri-urban area we think if there are small-scale, really small burns of different patches each year outside the fire season, it is much lower risk — it is something that is practised in traditional Aboriginal practices — and doing some candling of the stringybarks across all of our hills, then we are going to be really reducing a lot of the risk without taking a whole heap of people to do a really big burn and having all those risks. Over the last 14 years it has just been too dangerous to do anything around Wodonga. Rather than doing nothing, I think doing some really clever things would be better.

A really important one is education, being in a peri-urban area. Up until the bushfires in 2009 we managed about 400 hectares of fringe around Baranduda, and the amount of rubbish people had in their backyards and up against the fence in the bush was just — you would say, ‘What are they thinking?’. And since then because of the really great campaigns by DELWP and the CFA people have been cleaning up and preparing for the fire season, so there is much more awareness.

Last summer we the Wodonga 3rd and Baranduda Venturers did a fire awareness project, so we picked all the high fire risk hills around Wodonga and then made up a flyer about what you can do in your own backyard and did a letterbox drop. It was about a month before we had the big fires over the next valley, Indigo Valley, so that was quite timely. I think if people know what to do and they can be prepared, then you reduce a lot of that anxiety, which is a big issue.

On the impact of preventative burns on threatened species, we do quite a bit of work with the Office of Environment and Heritage on rare orchids in New South Wales and a bit with DELWP in Victoria. Small-scale fires are much more effective than burning whole areas. Most of our hills around Wodonga are home to what we call the greater glider, which is more reliant on eucalypt leaves than it is on the nectar, so if you have really big burns, then you are going to lose a lot of that habitat for what is now on the national threatened species register. We just think things like candling of stringybarks is probably a bit more of a clever way to go.

Another big issue is the hollow-bearing trees on roadsides. It is a bit of a risk, so I guess we are just thinking when the fires are planned, they are very few and far between in this region, so having plans to make sure that they are protected is really important.

On the impact on climate change, there are lots of threatening processes, so it is really hard to say whether fire is one that is increasing, but we do have far more extreme droughts, floods and fires than ever on record. I think the focus is on really building a resilient community because we need to adapt and change. It is about that awareness and education probably more so than what we do to do the environmental burns. Targeting of preventative measures statewide — I guess we would discourage the goal of hectares and be a bit more strategic

about what is done where. Around places like this, if the resources go into candling of stringybarks rather than burning big areas, hectares, that would give us five years of sort of greater safety.

Resources available to ensure adequate preparation — we are not really that involved with that part of things. It is a really good process with DELWP. I guess our concern is that we work quite closely with DELWP in Wodonga, Tallangatta and Corryong, and apart from the fire team, the biodiversity team and the public land services team get called in to do a lot of work and a lot of monitoring, yet the resources that those sections of DELWP have is getting less and less. I guess that is a big concern for us that they just are at a stage where they are not able to really do their jobs in a way that you would like them to.

Coordination of planning and preparation across the agencies — we are involved with the municipal fire planning committee, which is really more at a local level, and we have fed information into the fire operations plan for the state preventative burning, but there has never been a suitable period to do any of those burns locally. We have to look at a different, smarter way of doing things, I think, rather than just hoping that we will get a year.

The nature and level of response — Wodonga has been really lucky. The change of winds — in 2003 and 2009 — saved Wodonga from bushfire. Now I think we have got some fantastic skilled CFA groups around, so after any fires out Beechworth or Stanley way, or even Indigo Valley, it is that mopping up by volunteers over the months, sometimes two months afterwards that has really saved Wodonga, I would have to say. When there were fires in West Wodonga in 2014 we were a little bit involved there, and we just thought it worked really well the way that DELWP and the CFA and the different emergency response people all clicked into their specific roles. So it is a really good system.

Finally, I guess, the relevant and organisational structures — it is just the level of resourcing, not just the fire department. We really need to know whether the burning is reducing fire risk — and the biodiversity team having the time and the resources to do that. I just know that the public land services team is so swamped with work and they just keep losing staff. Sometimes I think when there is a fire everyone from DELWP, they basically just leave their desks and they are on fire duty, but there are no additional fire resources in the off fire season to help the Biodiversity and Public Land Service teams catch up on that backlog of work that does have an impact on other people. I think that was all, really. I hope that was of use.

The CHAIR — Ant, can I thank you for that submission, and can I indicate that whilst you have been talking I have also been looking on my iPad here at your website, and the achievements of your organisation are remarkable. Some of your strategic planning I think is very impressive. I want to put that on record and thank you for your general contribution now.

I have two questions, which to some extent go to some pointy things that our inquiry will grapple with. One of them relates to your peri-urban role, which is not the same, I think, as some other areas deeper into parts of the state. You have basically said larger burns, no — more of these mosaic, narrower, smaller, targeted burns. So my first question is: is it perhaps the case that that is appropriate with your smaller areas close to the city but may not be the same case when you move out to a big park area or elsewhere?

Ms PACKER — Absolutely. If we are talking about fire prevention, you do need to do bigger areas, but I think around the towns it is probably smarter to do something that is out of the fire season, so then there is far less risk, because DELWP will look at it and will say, ‘Yes, we know we need to get to West Wodonga and do some burning. We know we have to get to Baranduda, but it’s all too hard because of all the houses’. The city is one of the fastest growing in Victoria, so it is just going to get more complicated. We need to come up with a different way of reducing those risks or doing something I guess. Fire is really valuable as an environmental tool as well, but — —

The CHAIR — And for regeneration.

Ms PACKER — Yes, but not major scale — I think just if it is small and it is outside the season. I guess we just want to see at the same time it is an Aboriginal-run thing. It is a team that is trained through DELWP —

The CHAIR — I will come to that in a minute.

Ms PACKER — and they do that sort of work.

The CHAIR — So that is my first question. My second question, then, relates to the concern that some have, and it has certainly been put to me, that if we do not do the significant burning — noting sometimes near the edge of the city and otherwise there are certain inherent risks with burning — but if you do not do those, you may end up with a larger, hotter, more damaging fire in the long run, and perhaps you have got to balance those two. It is not an easy balancing, but in a sense I am putting to you that if you go with this very small-scale approach, you may not get enough preventative work done, and then you come back and you get a very bad, catastrophic outcome.

Ms PACKER — Look, that is a hard one. That is why we are saying, ‘Be targeted’. Stringybarks are probably the biggest issue. While there is a fire up in Baranduda range, the biggest issue with that is the spotting that will happen across Leneva because of a lot of those bigger trees.

The CHAIR — No, this is what we will end up having to grapple with.

Ms PACKER — I think you need to have different strategies, because I know there are big issues around Dandenong, and people say we need to do something, but I am saying that rather than having a big burn with a big risk and all of these things that can go wrong, do some work quietly in the colder seasons and so over time you are reducing those risks by doing a bit of burning. That is how Australia used to be managed back 200 years ago — it was lots of small mosaic burns. There were not big landscape-scale ones that happened. I think just in the peri-urban areas. I do not have the expertise on the bigger scale —

The CHAIR — And in the broader scale.

Ms PACKER — ones in the bush, but my observations are, just in areas where — and around Melbourne it is a really big issue — it is just doing a little bit of stuff every year but not in the same places, and giving places time to recover is really important.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you, Ant, for coming in. It is pretty interesting to see this kind of work done on a small scale by a small organisation. My first couple of questions are about how you actually do your preventative activities. Being such a small organisation, do you actually perform some of those burns yourselves, or is that coordinated through a department and you get them to do it under your sort of guide or management?

Ms PACKER — Yes. Look, we do not burn. We do slashing. There is quite a significant kangaroo population in Wodonga, which is another issue, which is probably reducing a bit of the fire risk in the bigger hills. That has been a bit of a bone of contention. The CFA does some, but it becomes too hard. Whilst we could try to set up our own Aboriginal team, we think wouldn't it be awesome to have a resource that supports all of the different smaller peri-urban towns around the region? So it is really high risk, the north-east. We have got lots of public land, so, yes, we do not burn ourselves.

Mr YOUNG — You have touched on it already, but have you looked into other types of five preventative management, like thinning? I know you talked about candling, but are there other types of management that you have investigated?

Ms PACKER — Yes. We graze areas and we slash areas, and we have done a fair bit of thinning of some trees up in the hills — smaller saplings — just to reduce a bit of the risk. But I think fire is a good part of the mix, yes.

Mr YOUNG — Okay.

Mr BARBER — So there are other towns, aren't there? Bendigo is surrounded by forest and Ballarat is surrounded by forest on some sides. Have you been able to compare? You are unique in terms of structure and tenure, but it is all bush. Have you compared how it has been done in other areas by other land managers?

Ms PACKER — It has been interesting. A lot of it is Crown land that there is no committee of management for. It might be a local council. I think in Bendigo they just handed over to an Aboriginal TOLMA agreement. I do think we perhaps need to have two approaches, so you have your large-scale preventative burns but around towns you do something that is a bit more out of the fire season so you do not have all that anxiety but you are doing something constructive.

Mr BARBER — How does the community perceive it — from your actual neighbours, abutting neighbours through to other people around the town, these different activities? You still have got people ringing up saying, ‘Burn it all’ and other people saying, ‘I don’t want that; it’s too close to my house’.

Ms PACKER — I do not know. I cannot speak for the community. I think a really important part of that tool as fire prevention and fire safety is getting people to be aware of fire and what they can do, and really what to do if there is a fire is to basically pack up and to get out. I think there has been a lot of education on that, which is probably a good thing. But that does not really help. But I think a really important part of any fire preparedness is getting people to understand that fire is a good thing but there are times when they should not be in places where they do go.

Mr BARBER — And you guys have been doing it here for a while under this model, so I am just wondering if you have ever got any feedback from the community about how they understand what it is that you are doing.

Ms PACKER — Up until the bad fires in 2009, apart from within the CFA community, I do not think there was a great understanding of bushfires. I think until it is on your doorstep sometimes people do not understand. But then when there were fires in West Wodonga, I know there was someone right in the centre of town on his roof with a hose, hosing it down. So you do need to work on people’s perceptions and understanding as part of anything really.

But it is hard. I know whenever we do a bit of pile burning — you know, piles in the park — there are always people who ring up local government and the fire brigade to complain about the smoke and asthma and things. So I think because it is peri-urban you need to just have a very different approach to what you would do up in Shelley and Koetong.

Mr SOMYUREK — I am just interested in your interaction or your partnership perhaps with government in managing our parklands and in terms of fire preparedness and prevention.

Ms PACKER — When you say that — —

Mr SOMYUREK — Well, working with government. What type of support does government give — how you interact with government on these things?

Ms PACKER — Basically we have been given committee of management, as in responsibility to manage the land, and then we just need to take responsibility for making it happen. So we do not really have a lot to do with government. In terms of burning off, we do not have the skills or the equipment to do it so we feed into the fire operations plan at the DELWP level, and the local CFA groups have been absolutely fantastic in helping with some of the preventative burning. But it is more in places on roadsides where that is just an appropriate skill, but I do not think you want to have the CFA working in places which are remote and steep. That is a different type of thing.

The CHAIR — Ant, thank you very much. That was a very interesting presentation and a magnificent model.

Ms PACKER — Yes. So will we have our environmental Aboriginal team, or maybe two?

The CHAIR — We have certainly been talking about that at other hearings.

Ms PACKER — A winter one, so it is low risk. That would be really good. All right. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.