

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Subcommittee

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Euroa — 21 July 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Mr Daniel Young

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

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Staff

Acting secretary: Mr Richard Willis

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Witnesses

Mr Bertram Lobert (affirmed), and

Mr Sim Ayres (affirmed), Strathbogie Forest Group;

Mr Andrew Townsend (affirmed), Firefighters4Forests; and

Ms Shirley Saywell (affirmed), Euroa Environment Group.

The CHAIR — I welcome Bertram Lobert, Andrew Townsend, Shirley Saywell and Sim Ayres, who is a late addition. I also note the presence of Steph Ryan, the local member of Parliament.

We are going to try to keep a reasonable pace here so we do not get behind. We have got a number of witnesses we want to hear from. I ask you to lead off, Andrew. I think you are listed as the spokesperson.

Mr TOWNSEND — Bertram first, please.

The CHAIR — Bertram, if you would like to make a short presentation, and then others can add points that they wish, and then we will start with some questions.

Visual presentation.

Mr LOBERT — Thank you. The opening presentation is on behalf of the three community groups represented here today, so it will be a little bit longer, whereas the other two groups will give a slightly shorter presentation, if that is okay.

The Strathbogie Forest Group and the other two groups have been formed for a number of years. We all live and work in and around the Strathbogies. What I have prepared here today provides extra description on the information that we provided in the submission to the inquiry that we put in online.

Just a little bit of context: the Strathbogie Ranges is an area of about 1800 square kilometres, inside the red polygon on the bottom left-hand part of the slide. The area of state forest is indicated. You will see most of the Strathbogie Ranges has been cleared for productive agriculture, and there is a fairly small amount of native forest left, about 300 square kilometres.

On the bottom right-hand part of the slide you will see that quite a lot of the forest was turned into softwood plantation some decades ago, and that is actually a money-making and an employing industry at the moment.

The Strathbogie State Forest is surrounded by rural communities and agricultural land, so it is highly fragmented and it is quite isolated from the mountainous forests to the south and to the east. It has significant environmental and recreational values, and importantly in this context there are about 20 CFA brigades in and around the Strathbogies that are active in fire control, particularly during the fire seasons. The forest itself has a long history of planned burning, but with a scale and frequency that seem to be increasing.

Our community group, as well as being interested in the technicalities and the practicalities of forest management, is very active in the local community, so we have a very large group where we have regular forest activities and people from all walks of life join in and are supportive generally of the position we have taken with regard to state government policy and DELWP's actions in that policy. Just to point out that, even though it is an actively managed forest, there are parts of that forest that still have very long unburnt areas, and if anything joins people together from all different walks of life and political persuasions, it is big trees. So from our point of view a lot of that has to do with environmental values, but just being near a big tree that you know is many hundreds of years old is a very galvanising place to be.

Andrew will talk in a few minutes a little bit more about the volunteer Firefighters4Forests, which was something that came out of last season's struggle — our struggle, the community's struggle — with DELWP's planned burn policies. I will let Andrew talk more about that. But it is important to note that it is not just a local community issue. We did lots of media and PR. The *Weekly Times* ran some articles and it was interesting to note that the article on our struggle with planned burning in the last fire season was the highest trending article in the *Weekly Times* in the online edition, which was back in April.

What are our concerns? We have put them in writing in detail, but just to go through a couple of dot points, the large-scale planned burns — I am talking about thousands of hectares — actually erase the existing mosaic of planned burns that already exist in the forest, and that mosaic has been built up over the last couple of decades. So the bigger the burns become, the more they tend to erase the existing mosaic. Startlingly, from our perspective, we realise that even after the Black Saturday royal commission recommendations, DELWP, at least in this region and quite possibly across the state, has no systematic on-ground program to assess the impact of planned burns, whether it be on fuel loads or threatened species or virtually any other part of forest management. Once they have done a planned burn and they can see that it has covered the areas that they have predicted, whether it is 50 per cent or 75 per cent, it pretty much gets a tick and then it is hardly looked at again.

We feel that there is actually no capacity to learn from decades of planned burning in the Strathbogie Ranges because there is never any follow-up. There is no systematic approach to going back and actually looking at or measuring what the planned burn has actually achieved. Because of that, or at least partly because of that, planned burning may actually provide a false sense of safety for communities in those fire-prone landscapes. The message from the government and from DELWP is that planned burning is the best way to go. People want to do something, and DELWP is given this task of implementing the planned burns. But the message is that you will be safer as a rural community if we do all this planned burning. Yet at least in our region there is actually no evidence that is the case.

Large burns, and they are getting larger, may be cost effective but they almost certainly are having negative outcomes for forest health.

Just quickly, we do not have to worry too much about the detail, but this light brown area is all softwood plantation. The red areas are planned burns, the years are the decades where they have occurred and this is part of the Strathbogie State Forest that we are talking about. So you can see that there has been a fairly good coverage of planned burns in the area. Indeed this is probably a bit of an underestimate. There were probably planned burns out here that were done prior to going to GIS. But you can see there is pretty good coverage particularly along the southern edge. You will also see that in the 70s and the 80s and the 90s the areas being burnt were relatively small — so they were 100 hectares or maybe 200 hectares. Post Black Saturday, from 2010 to 2015, the areas started getting bigger, so these are 500 hectares in size.

So what happened in the 2016 FOP is that DELWP was planning to burn one large 3000-hectare block and another small 300-hectare block. This is when opposition to the FOP — the fire operations plan — within the community really galvanised. We just said, 'It's too big, it's too dry and probably it's too destructive'. So we decided, 'Well, if DELWP are not monitoring the impact of their planned burns, perhaps we should'. We organised a scientific survey of one of the planned burns from the 2015 season, which was deemed to be successful, and we have provided that report to you.

I will just summarise and emphasise that wherever that successful low-intensity planned burn burnt it actually killed one in four trees, and we only measured trees that were 70 centimetres in diameter or above — so sizeable trees but by no means old trees. This low-intensity successful planned burn killed one in four trees, which should be alarming at any level. More alarming is the statistic that wherever the fire burnt it actually killed 50 per cent of the old-growth trees, so 50 per cent of the trees that are 1 metre in diameter or more.

Without going into too much detail those trees play an inordinately large part in the health of those forests. We produced a report. Unbeknown to us at the same time DELWP were publishing a report on similar but much more comprehensive surveys in East Gippsland, which came up with very similar findings. It was good to hear that they came up with similar findings but a real concern to know that what is happening in our little patch of the forest could well be happening across large parts of eastern Victoria. That 500-hectare burn that we investigated was not a particularly hot burn, and this is a really important point. We are not talking about bushfires. Planned burns are often low intensity, but if they are done at the wrong time, they can have devastating effects. This was done at the end of the long hot summer in 2015. The dead leaves were still on the trees (after the burn), so it was not a blazing inferno, but the standing trees were tinder dry and the ground was tinder dry, so it not only killed a lot of trees and felled a lot of trees but it burnt every scrap of timber, pretty much, that was lying around on the ground.

Similarly there you can see that the canopy is dead but still intact. Everything on the ground is burnt up, but the amount of tree fall after these fires is significant. The emotional and also the ecological devastation occurs when we see the impact of these low-intensity burns on the big 200 to 300-year-old trees in the forest. You can see that this is a logged forest. There are not many of these big old trees left. Any number of logging rotations have avoided cutting or killing these trees. A small burn goes through, and they are gone. This was the biggest tree in the forest that we have found. It is no longer the biggest tree in the forest, but you can see the impact of the burn. It does not actually burn up the whole tree but flames crawl into the tree. There are hollows at the top so it acts like a chimney, and the rest is history.

The irony is that a lot of these forests do not carry high fuel loads when they are long unburnt. This is a long unburnt part of the forest. There is clearly fine fuels and fuel loads there, but we would argue that this sort of forest does not necessarily need to be burnt on the sort of shorter rotation times — 15 to 20 years — that

DELWP is suggesting. This is a bit fuzzy, but it is long unburnt forest, big trees with large open spaces in between.

Shirley and the Euroa Environment Group, using parallel logic I suppose, commissioned a report to assess what sort of emissions actually come out of these planned burns. Just to illustrate, that 500-hectare burn was called the Tames Road burn. Last year DELWP wanted to burn 3000 hectares — that white polygon on the previous slide — called the Barjarg Road burn. This was done by using national carbon accounting methods, by an accredited professional consultancy. That 3000-hectare burn would have liberated the equivalent of 43 000 tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere. What does that mean? That is like putting an extra 22 000 cars on the road annually. This is a big burn in the context of our small forest, in the state context it is insignificant, and yet this one little burn is putting the equivalent emissions into the atmosphere of an extra 22 000 cars.

I have got just two summary slides relating to those points. Planned burning as it is being done — and acknowledging that the government has moved away from the 5 per cent target — erases much of the existing burn mosaic, so it is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Long-unburnt forest in the ranges is often relatively open, so it may not actually need the sort of fuel reduction burns that are needed in other parts of the state, and those fires actually stimulate growth. So they reset the clock: they start the shrubby undergrowth regrowing. Some of those elevated fuel loads then last for 15 to 20 years, so we would be asking: where is the logic in that?

The forest itself is already fragmented. It is small, it is isolated and there are already examples of local faunal extinctions that have occurred. Two of those in particular, the threatened greater glider and powerful owl, are resident in those forests. Part of our disagreement with DELWP is that we feel they should not be burning by the calendar date; they should be taking into account the state of the fuel and the state of the broader health of the forest. Recent summers have been very hot and dry and yet the FOP, the fire operations plan, says we have got to burn 3000 hectares. We disagree strongly with burning at times when the forest is already stressed.

Low-intensity burns, as was illustrated, just are slowly but surely eliminating those big old trees from the forests. Emissions from the burns do not seem to be taken into account that we can gather, but they should be. They need to be, particularly given the Andrews government's approach to climate change. Possibly something that others will take up is possibly most concerning is that it creates a false sense of security within the communities that surround the forest. The rhetoric is that, 'If we burn, you'll be safe', and there is no demonstrated evidence of that in the Strathbogies, particularly in terms of the sort of fear-based approach to burning.

The last slide is 'Where do we go from here?'. Our groups are engaged in the community fire advisory committee for the Strathbogies that DELWP has initiated. It has not started sitting yet, but that will be one avenue for our groups to take community issues to policy. But broadly we see a smaller area of forest burnt annually as being a goal, where the fire operations plan, which is the guiding document at a regional level, is actually evidence and risk-based rather than targeted and rather than just trotting out worst-case scenarios, which tends to be what happens. That just becomes a message of fear and then we are all paralysed.

The burns need to be strategic — and truly strategic, not just part of a strategy. They need to address assets, whether that is human assets or landscape assets. Perhaps forest perimeter burning would be a good place to start, strategic roads that might traverse the forest and also vegetation types that are better able to cope with fire rather than just treating all of those forests as one. So many inquiries now have found that the single biggest bang for your buck in terms of protecting life and property is what you do within 50 or 150 metres of your house — so an emphasis from government, from DELWP, to encourage landholders to reduce fire risk around their homes and farms, rather than necessarily relying on planned burning in the adjacent blocks of forest. That is the end of my presentation. Thanks.

The CHAIR — Is there any further point to be made? Does anyone else want to add anything?

Ms SAYWELL — Yes. Thank you. I endorse all of what Bert has spoken of. I represent the Euroa Environment Group. We are a local community conservation group. We have been in existence for 25 years. We have developed strong connections with local landholders and with natural resource managers, and we are proud of our record in native vegetation restoration and community engagement. I will refer to the Strathbogie Sustainable Forests Group as the SSFG, if that is okay. The concerns raised by the SSFG caused us to add our

voice to the campaign, which calls for better management of our forests as we learn more about the destruction that has accompanied current logging and fuel reduction practices.

Bert has stated that we are all community members. We share a love of and respect for our local forest. Over 80 per cent, as Bert has said, has gone, so we prize the remainder. I am confident most in our community would agree that it is the single most valuable natural asset in our local landscape. For us, it is first and foremost a place for recreation, mostly passive. It is not just locals who recognise its role as a sanctuary. It is a place we go to reconnect with nature and where we reinvigorate our spirits. It all sounds very touchy-feely, but most of us like to live in streets that have trees. If we had a choice, we would choose a street that had trees, rather than a street that did not. Real estate agents love putting on the front page of their brochures a property that has trees on it.

This area is more than just a forest. Some locals call it their church. At a broader level, it fills greater roles. It is an important water catchment zone, it is an air purifier and it is a carbon sink. The report that Bert referred to I have copies of that I will distribute shortly. Critically it is a place that contains a myriad of species. It is part of a complex natural system that most of us have limited or no knowledge of, so to devastate huge chunks of it in a quest for safety is both ignorant and dangerous. We are not against planned burns, but the size and timing of the burns that were scheduled in previous years turns them into dangerous and devastating fires. The underlying sentiment from the submissions I have read appears to be that we have not achieved fire safety through current fuel reduction practices but what we have done is destroy much of what we value by simply concentrating on one tool, which is the fuel reduction tool. Scant regard has been given to local knowledge, biodiversity values and indeed all the other values embedded in the forest system.

The unsustainable fire management practices that were introduced after the 2009 fires may have been undertaken in good faith but sadly have been without analysis of the long-term effects. As a participant in the citizens survey, which Bert showed slides of, undertaken after the March 2015 fuel reduction burn in Tames Road, it quickly became obvious that DELWP's approach to fuel reduction is simplistic and heavy handed. And again, as Bert has said, there is no planning process that demands assessment, either pre or post-fire, of biodiversity values. We found the impacts — again, the loss of half the old-growth trees, the habitat loss for species dependent on hollow-bearing trees, the changed fuel loads, sometimes for the worst, the loss of stored carbon, the loss of soil carbon and the reduced ability to sequester carbon. I do not pretend to understand this report, but for those who are interested, it is worth a read. They are figures that we should take notice of.

The CHAIR — Shirley, we are — —

Ms SAYWELL — So my main points are that planned burns are about safety and asset protection but we have not determined what the real assets are, and because we have no surveys, who decides what impacts are acceptable? Who is monitoring the influence of fire regimes? cursory inspections of the 2015 planned burns by DELWP staff deemed them a success. Where is the data and scientific rigour to support these claims? There are no systems in place to reconcile objectives of competing government strategies. How can you oversee a fire plan that allows the destruction of massive swathes of forest and releases tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere while promoting a biodiversity plan that commits to stopping the decline of our native flora and fauna?

We must replace the heavy-handed approach with measured and sensitive practices in conjunction with thorough community consultation. The size and timing of planned burns is critical.

The CHAIR — Are we almost done?

Mr TOWNSEND — Almost done.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Shirley. You want to add a bit more, Andrew?

Mr TOWNSEND — Yes, I will be — —

The CHAIR — Succinct?

Mr TOWNSEND — I will be as succinct and brief as possible. You will have a handout. I will leave the central part of the document for you to read in your own time. I will just touch on the main facts. In the 2015–16 fire season the Strathbogie and adjoining CFA brigades had shown that the community consultation prescribed

burns did not have to end up like the Lancefield debacle of 2015, and that is where the Firefighters 4 Forests came from. We just did not want to see the same things happening on our own doorstep.

I will then jump to the second page, if you do not mind. What we were doing is endeavouring to show that we all do not have to be environmentalists. We are farmers, the majority of us, as well as being active volunteers. The photograph that Bert showed earlier of 600 years of experienced firefighters means a lot. Since we were formed we have had no adverse reaction. We have had nothing but positives from the community, from other CFA brigades, from other CFA regions. It has been a really interesting time.

I will jump to the conclusion — where to from here for us? It is vital that in any future controlled burn situations that community and volunteer groups have a say in the matter. My personal concern from last autumn's no-burn-at-all outcome was that we would be seen as obstructionist should a fire have broken out naturally and if we had impeded the department's fire reduction plan, which was not on at all.

On speaking with adjoining community members, they had been just as concerned as we were that the controlled burn might get away, but they did not think that there was anything they could do about it. So we must have involvement and genuine voice from the communities living adjacent or near to forests — by opening up the consultative process it can be seen that the department is at last becoming serious about whole-of-community consultation and engagement.

One of the major issues to come out of this has been that the publicising of prescribed burns offers little assistance in major or extreme conditions and that the money spent on prescribed burns could have been better spent providing more efficient firefighting appliances or methods. Observation on ground has shown that after any burns the lower storey plants regenerate faster and thicker than if left alone. This, put simply, exacerbates the problem further into the future. Also the question has been asked many times from CFA members as to why perimeter and ridge line firebreaks have not been used more widely. Another issue of concern is that prescribed burns feed the fear of people living near forests. It creates the false hope that a big burn will ensure safety for all, which is sadly unfounded.

Some years ago fuel reduction burns were carried out in the springtime and were known colloquially as 'cool burns'. This style of burning allowed wildlife to vacate the area relatively safely and also encouraged regeneration at a slower speed. With the shift to autumn burns we have seen high fuel loads, dry forests and major loss of wildlife. In many instances the seasonal autumn break rains have fallen soon after these prescribed burns — and this is important — creating polluted creeks and rivers, as there is not the ground cover to hold back eroding soils. To say that we are pleased to become involved in future fire planning is a two-edge sword. We are damned if we do and damned if we do not, but at least it will offer our rural communities the opportunity at last to have some real input into the future of the Victorian state's few remaining native forest areas and the care and safety of the communities around them.

The CHAIR — Andrew, Bertram and Shirley, thank you. I am going to try to be brief, because I am on quite a short time fuse. It seems to me there are a few issues, and tell me if I am wrong in surmising or summarising in this way: there is a question of research, and your argument is that there is insufficient research to actually tell us what mechanisms of preventative activity are best. We will test that with others. The second point I think you are saying is that by doing these preventative burns, which are hotter than might otherwise be without proper planning as described, you get bad outcomes, to which I would say perhaps that is a problem, but equally the other problem, and tell me if I am wrong, does not appear to be factored in sufficiently, and that is that we have learnt, statewide, that where we do not do sufficient preventative burning we actually end up with landscape-size uncontrolled fires and big risks not only to communities but also to wildlife and flora. Given that there is insufficient research, how do we reconcile those things? It is going to be a central point.

Mr LOBERT — Just to take up that last point first — —

The CHAIR — That is the argument that is put, I think, isn't it?

Mr LOBERT — Yes, but I would just refer to one of the expert witnesses of the Black Saturday royal commission, Professor Mike Clarke, who spent a lot of his time collating the evidence on particularly landscape-type bush wildfires. I have got it here. I can read it very quickly.

The CHAIR — You could give us a copy or we could chase that transcript.

Mr LOBERT — This is in the submission that we provided — our first submission:

The scientific literature suggests that prescribed burning has the potential to mitigate bushfire risk when fire weather conditions are low to moderate, but has limited impact, if any, in significantly mitigating ignition risk, rate of spread or area burnt under conditions of extreme fire weather, which is when high-intensity, large-scale fires occur. Its primary value is in assisting in control when conditions moderate. Wildfires on extreme weather days account for the vast majority of area burnt. A range of authors —

which are listed —

have noted that the ability of prescribed burning to aid in fire suppression efforts during such extreme conditions is negligible.

And that goes on.

The CHAIR — But the commission then came back and recommended targets — volume targets. That is what is being implemented now. Whilst that is one piece of evidence to the commission, they actually came back and recommended targets. I am putting this to you, because I think this is the case that is put to us — that in fact over a number of decades there was not sufficient burning done and that contributed to the risk of the incident about which that commission was held.

Mr LOBERT — Yes. My only comment would be that in the five years since those commission findings started to be implemented, it has generally been acknowledged that it has been a failure. To have a statewide based 5 per cent target just means that you burn remote parts of the Mallee or the north-east and you do not actually tackle the really difficult — particularly the peri-urban landscapes, whether it is the Dandenongs or Eltham or parts of the north-east even, where — —

The CHAIR — And let me put the other point that was put to us: that there is a risk that by not having a broader target as well, the agency, which is traditionally not always focused on getting the volume of stuff done, slips back into its previous ways — and I will be blunt here — and does not do enough, and then 10 years later we are back in a zone where we have got huge fuel loads.

Mr LOBERT — So the question is what is enough? And part of the context is: is the argument one of saying can we actually control bushfires? It is a very complex and sophisticated argument, so it is certainly not in my expertise to address that in detail other than to say that the current policy would appear to be trying to tackle it in a very constructive and thoughtful way where they are saying, ‘Let’s assess the risk. Where is the risk in the landscape? Then let’s look at a variety of actions to address that risk rather than saying we need to burn 100 000 hectares here or we need to burn 50 000 hectares there’.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you, everyone, for coming. We have talked about your opinion and views on fire and burning. What would be your suggestions then, otherwise, to mitigate fuel loads? What other methods have you investigated? What other methods would you advocate for?

Mr TOWNSEND — It is a very good method when used correctly and timely and also in the right places. At the moment we seem to have ad hoc burning being carried on and this was our concern with this last season. It was something that we as community members put to DELWP — ‘Why can’t we do some perimeter burning? Why just burn the whole forest out?’. Our biggest concern, though, is the communities to the east and to the south of our existing forest. That is the Ancona through to the Merton area, and there are lots of small farms in there. Why are they not doing small perimeter burns in those areas where there is population rather than one big one in the middle of an easy-to-burn-out forest?

Mr LOBERT — Could I add something to that? Part of the premise to that question is that fuel loads increase over time, and to some degree they clearly do, but in a lot of the forest types in the Strathbogies, after a few decades they actually decrease. If you actually let the forest stabilise, the trees get bigger, those big trees actually muscle out everything else that is there for water and for nutrients and for light and tend to open out the understorey. I mean, that does not happen in every part of the forest but in large areas that is actually the case, so it is a little bit of a misnomer to think that the longer you go without a fire, the more fuel loads increase. But part of the issue is — and this is where the research comes in — that we do not understand how that works in different parts of the landscape.

Lots of people have described the hectare-based target as a very blunt tool because you are kind of treating a very diverse landscape using one strategy. There are other ways of reducing fuel, and whether it is mechanical or whether it is by hand, they have got great machines that can do that sort of thing around higher priority assets.

We would be all in favour of that approach where it is deemed necessary. Just to emphasise, we are not anti planned burning, we just think it should be really targeted and we should go into it with our eyes open, and after we have done it we should look to see how it has gone so that we can learn from our activities, from our successes and from our mistakes. That is the big failing, we feel, that currently is the case for certainly the Strathbogie Ranges.

Ms SAYWELL — Could I just also add that planned burning is just one tool. I do not think there has been any enforcement of mandatory leaving, compulsory leaving, nor do I think there has been any implementation of another recommendation, which was fire bunkers. This is one tool in an array and a suite of tools that has been, I would suggest, used to the exclusion of other tools.

Mr SOMYUREK — I get what you are saying, but in your submission you talk about ‘planned burns can achieve community safety but it is all about circumstance’. You do not elaborate on what those set of circumstances are, and I know you have spoken around the subject here today, but can you please elaborate a little bit more on the notion of circumstance?

Mr LOBERT — Circumstance could be time of year, it could be the state of the forest — so whether it is a drought or not — and more and more, each year that goes by is a hotter year than the previous year and that has its impact on the forest itself. All these forests are highly stressed anyway. It is about topography. So on a map you can draw a line and say, ‘Well, we are going to burn this 300 hectares or that 1000 hectares’ and to some degree DELWP — they know what they are doing when they light a fire. They are certainly not silly. They are expert at lighting fires, but we would suggest that the larger the burn, for example, and this is the circumstance, it is cost effective because you get it all done in one hit, and with the resources that you have got. But the bigger the burn, the harder it is to actually control what happens in there, and a lot of these landscapes have steep slopes, they have got slopes facing to every part of the compass. So the circumstance is also about the landscape circumstance, hence the comment about perimeter burns.

That might be something that makes people feel very comfortable, it might make adjacent landholders consider that, ‘Okay, we are in a better place than before’, but at the moment perimeter burns are hardly even talked about, so that big polygon in the middle of the forest was like the 3000 hectares of the best quality forest that we have got left in the entire Strathbogie Ranges, and it was down for a significant burn. So the circumstance just means we are not saying it is a simple issue, and we do not have all the answers either — we are not claiming to be experts — but we can see that there are improvements that could be made that could address a lot of the boxes, a lot of the concerns that different parts of the community and government have, and we would just like to see it be much more sophisticated in the way it is done rather than, ‘Here’s a section for this year and let’s go ahead with it’. I hope that answers the question.

Mr BARBER — The big burn — what proportion of the forest would that have been if it had gone ahead in one go?

Mr LOBERT — The forest is really fragmented, but in that area, that large chunk of forest, it was probably a good quarter if not more, maybe 30 per cent — in one hit. And that was one of the big criticisms: because they were trying to catch up, because this burn had been put off — and this is actually quite an important point — it had been put off for a number of years because the conditions were not right, so this year they were hoping to catch up on their plans, I suppose, legitimately. They wanted to do their job, but a quarter or a third of that entire block of forest potentially was going to be burnt in one hit. That is not strategic. It is not taking into account all of the other issues. With due respect to the people, that was an accounting approach not a strategic forest management approach.

Mr BARBER — The pine plantations — they belong to Hancock’s?

Mr LOBERT — Yes, correct.

Mr BARBER — We had them in front of the committee yesterday in Wodonga, and they emphasised their own firefighting brigades, the number of fires that start outside their area, which they attend to sometimes, and also the fuels surrounding their plantations. Have you had any interactions with them during this process?

Mr LOBERT — Minimal. So the big engagement has been with DELWP rather than with Hancock’s. We have dealt a little bit with Hancock’s because they do conduct fuel reduction burns in native forest around the

perimeter of the plantations. Quite a few of the DELWP planned burns — I cannot show you the detail now — are in the native forest adjacent to that. It is a significant asset. It is an economic asset. The short answer is no, we have not engaged significantly with Hancock's, because they do not manage a lot of native forest, just parcels within. But it is certainly something that we want to do, because we are also of the opinion that they have a works program and so they also burn by number, if you like, or burn by the date on the calendar.

A recent example is that they burnt a number of hectares, probably 50 to 100 metres of native forest, along a roadside which is adjacent to their pine plantations. They have started harvesting those plantations and in 12 months time they could all be gone, and yet they still went ahead and burnt that native forest to reduce fire risk for the foreseeable future. So something there suggests that perhaps the left hand is not quite aware of what the right hand is doing.

Mr BARBER — Finally, I mean this popped up a little bit in your submission but to me it is the issue. On the surface of it anybody can have input to any of the fire operations plans, either for their local area or for the whole state if they want. They are published in advance; there are opportunities for submissions and all the rest of it. So the door is open in that way. But how have you actually found it in discussing these things with them during this process, from the beginning of the journey when you all first got your attention through to today? What is it like engaging in this process I guess is what I am asking?

Mr AYRES — Sorry, I just want to say that I am a member of each of these groups, a local landholder up here and a small business owner. What I have found is that they have already made up their mind before they consult us. They follow through with the consulting process, but their mind is made up. It is only when we scream really loudly that our voice gets heard.

Mr BARBER — And then what happens?

Mr AYRES — This year was the classic one really. When we came to the nitty-gritty about whether they are going to burn this or not we screamed loudly.

Mr LOBERT — We had to scream and cry. We have spoken to everybody, from the local fire planners to the deputy secretary of the department. We felt we had an informed, evidence-based logic to our argument and we could not just be summarily dismissed. We have had to engage. Yes, it has been bloody. It has been very hard. It has been emotional. And for all of us who are volunteers at some point we have felt like we have been really dragged through the fire or the mud or something. The community engagement process that DELWP have, I think, in our opinion, is really poor and it does not facilitate or encourage community people to come forward and provide input.

Mr BARBER — And when was the plan with the big burn first published?

Mr LOBERT — That big burn has been on their books for years.

Mr BARBER — Yes, published as a plan for 15–16 though, with a date on it.

Mr LOBERT — It has been on the rolling FOP for a number of years. That is part of it. The FOPs are advertised but in a little advert in the back of the local newspaper or on a website or somewhere, and if you are not really that interested or if you do not think there is an issue, you do not even know about it. We only really found out about it after what we saw as the tragedy of the Tames Road burn — that 500-hectare burn — and then we started looking at the detail. If this can happen in a 500-hectare burn, what is the plan for next year? What is the plan following that? So the more we looked into it, the more we found out and informed ourselves. Then the more concerned we got, the more active politically, I suppose, we got in terms of regional directors and ministers and deputy secretaries.

Mr BARBER — Was it always a yes/no argument or were alternative plans put on the table at any stage?

Mr TOWNSEND — At the very end.

Mr LOBERT — For good reason I think the department does not negotiate. They cannot be seen to be — well, I do not know, this is my take — playing favourites or saying, 'We will do what you say, or we will do what you say'. Our experience is that we have said our piece, and they have come back to us to say, 'The fire operations plan is as it stands but we are reviewing it'. So they internally kept reviewing, and eventually at the

end of the fire season we got to a point where we felt, 'Okay, their reviewed plan, we can live with'. It was strategic. It was more modest. It did not fill us with fear if it were to get away, for example. It was not implemented during the fire season for I do not know what reason. Maybe the rains came. Maybe they were happy not to go there. But from outside it is an incredibly frustrating process because there is no transparency. Understandably, bureaucratically within the department we do not know what is going on in there. They just play with a straight face and we are left guessing what is going to happen next.

Mr BARBER — So it is a submissions process rather than an integrated community involvement planning process.

Ms SAYWELL — The process seemed — —

Mr LOBERT — There is no process.

Ms SAYWELL — That is right. All of a sudden at the end of the season what was drafted as an enormous burn turned into what we were really happy with, which was a really little burn. It was a great outcome for the forest but why was not that on the table in the first place? Because these groups kicked and screamed, it changed. But the one thing about fire mitigation is that — and I think Bert puts it better than I can — the most influential action to mitigate fire risk for landholders is to manage vegetation within 100 metres or so of a house. There are bugger-all houses up there, and all of a sudden what we thought was a great idea, we could all agree on at the end. But it was months and months and months, and, as Bert says, we are all volunteers. It was hard slog. The outcome was great in the end, but why did we have to go through all that to get to that? And this is one site.

Mr AYRES — And it is one season as well. Do we have to do that next year too? There is only so much you can do, you know. There is only so much effort you can put into saving something that you love. And the face of the forests is really changing out there. I spend a lot of time in that forest, and the face of it is changing. These big burns are not doing it any favours at all. In some ways I wish this meeting was up there so you could actually have a look.

Mr RAMSAY — My question is probably directed to Andrew Townsend and your association with the CFA.

Mr TOWNSEND — Yes.

Mr RAMSAY — You are a CFA volunteer, as I understand it?

Mr TOWNSEND — Correct.

Mr RAMSAY — I pose a question to you in relation to where the lines are blurred in preservation of forest as against preservation of life and property. I refer maybe to the Wye River fires — Separation Creek. I live at the foot of the Otways and was involved in the fire, from DELWP activity to CFA activity. The captain of the CFA fire brigade down at Wye River was talking about the fact that there was not enough prescribed burning to protect the township of Wye River. In fact there had not been any significant burns through that part because of the reasons that you are suggesting to us — that we should be more targeting small burns that perhaps preserve the forest life more so than giving protection to communities in those forest areas.

I guess the question I pose to you given your CFA experience is: the consultation with DELWP and government in relation to CFA is more about protection of life and property as against DELWP doing large-scale burns as against groups like yourselves that have environmental concerns around preservation of forest. Also, given the just past experience with the CFA, what is your view about the morale of your local brigades in relation to what has been happening over the last couple of weeks?

Mr TOWNSEND — That one is a bit out of left field, but let us go back. Cast your mind back to the map that Bert put up earlier. There had been a lot of prescribed burns in our forest in the last few years. Our biggest concern this year was that it was such a big area that they wanted to burn in one hit. I appreciate your concerns from Wye River. We are not Wye River; we do not have the big populations, and we have also got an area which had been burnt pretty well over the last few years.

Where we came about, forming our group, was that we felt that we needed to stand up and say something. If this big 3000-hectare fire had got away, we would have been called on to help put it out. That is what we do; that is what the CFA do. We are volunteers and we have done it for many years, but we did not think this was the right year to have a big 3000-hectare fire. That was the bottom line of it. It was just too big. It was too hot, too bloody dry and it was going to be dangerous. The communities in the surrounding areas were concerned, and we felt that we had to make a stand. It was picked up and carried by the press, which surprised the heck out of me — I have never had to do anything like that before — which said to us that people really are feeling what is going on. They were all concerned. Can you just finish on that, and then I will talk on the morale in a minute.

Mr LOBERT — Yes. I suppose we did not even make it plain. Within that Strathbogie State Forest on the western edge there are couple of properties, but there are no houses, there is no population, there are no townships, there is no infrastructure, there is no human occupation in any of that forest. Around the edges there are, so it is a very different circumstance to Wye River or peri-urban parts of Melbourne. So life and property is uppermost in all of our minds, I think, but it is about the process — a transparent and informed process of how we get there. How do we juggle these— —

Ms SAYWELL — Concerns.

Mr LOBERT — Well, they are not. I do not even want to say the word. They are parallel concerns, so they are all valid concerns. How do we get the best outcome? We are saying that the current process is deeply flawed. The next process, the risk-based assessment, looks better, and we are happy to be involved in that, at least at our level. With most of our comments we are talking about what we know about, and that is the Strathbogie Ranges. We are not saying that what we are presenting here necessarily translates to other areas — —

Mr RAMSAY — No, I understand that.

Mr LOBERT — Yes, because we do not know. But the suspicion is that it may.

Mr TOWNSEND — You asked about morale within our brigades. I had a phone call from *PM* or *The World Today* the other day, and they had not told me that the minister had gone that day. They did not tell me that the board was being sacked when they interviewed me. I was straight off the tractor, basically. But we are not an urban brigade; we are a rural fire brigade where we are. We are farmers. Initially we are not deeply affected by what is happening at Spring Street at the moment. I am hoping that later on one of my colleagues will be able to give more information that I am not able to give you, but at the moment we will carry on business as usual in the event of fires. That is the bottom line. I cannot say any more at this stage.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I thank all four of you for your evidence.

Witnesses withdrew.