

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Judith Clements,

Alastair Chessells, and

Bart van Ruiswyk, Undera Flood Group.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

For witnesses giving evidence today, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, you may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I will take the opportunity now to introduce myself, and committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra, and I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee.

Melina BATH: Hello. Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Hello, I am Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Samantha RATNAM: Afternoon, everyone. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: With that, I will now invite you to present your opening remarks. Could you just keep your remarks to 10 minutes. It is up to you who speaks, but it will be 10 minutes. I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time, and could you please state your name and your organisation in terms of who you are representing, just for the Hansard record. Over to you.

Alastair CHESSELLS: Thank you. My name is Alastair Chessells. I am a farmer in Undera. You will have to excuse me. I am a bit nervous.

The CHAIR: That is okay.

Alastair CHESSELLS: I am a farmer in Undera. I am a fourth-generation farmer in Undera. My great-grandparents were selectors in the area, so I have a great knowledge of Undera, North Undera, Coomboona and St Germain's. That is our area that we were looking after. So I do have quite a knowledge of the flooding, and I have seen previous floods. My involvement was working with Bart, who is on the other end there, and another farmer Jake Wiltshire, and we pretty much coordinated all our area and all the people in our area. We organised

a response for everybody and helped advise people, because we have been through floods before. We helped advise people what to expect if this scenario played out – and that was if the water came over the top of the levee bank. We were not worried about a washout in the bank, because we were quite convinced we could fix those, but if the water was so large that it came over the top, we could not do anything. We cannot stop that. So we had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

My other involvements in the district: I have been president of the Undera Primary School council; I have been president of the Undera Football Netball Club – I'm a life member there; and I have been on the fire brigade and the school council. So I have been involved in quite a number of things in my district and feel very proud of our little district.

Bart van RUISWYK: My name is Bart van Ruiswyk. I have been in the Undera area for about 40 years. I used to have a dairy farm on 490 Neal Road, Undera, but these days I am sort of retired from that. I still have a smaller property in Undera on higher and drier ground. My involvement, as Alistair said, has been coordination. We started 2½^o weeks before the floods with meetings in the pub to make people aware, because some people do not believe you and that is the hardest part. So we evacuated people, cows, sheep, hay, whatever, already well before the flood event happened. I also was involved with overseeing the fixing of the levee banks. Because I am sort of a bit retired, I had a bit more time, so I supervised the works on the levee banks. The hardest thing I found is to go around people and ask for money when they do not have money. That is not an easy thing, but somebody has got to do it. I will leave it at that.

Judith CLEMENTS: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Judith Clements. I am a fifth-generation farmer, both up in the Goulburn Valley, for the last 40 years, and also a couple of hours south of here. I have had involvement, as we all have here, with the previous floods in 1993 and 2011 and also experience with the Black Saturday bushfires at the farming property in the south. I am still involved with the community resilience and community recovery committees as a result of that and spent 11 years as a member of the land management committee for the Victorian Farmers Federation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Is there anything else any of you would like to add – any opening remarks? Go right ahead.

Judith CLEMENTS: Yes. Thank you very much. On behalf of the Undera flood group, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present our comments and submission to the inquiry panel, and I hope that we can contribute in some meaningful way to a positive and constructive outcome to the 2022 flood disaster and to the future. Our comments are based on our direct experience with last year's floods and their impact on our immediate local area and the broader area from Undera to McCoys Bridge, to our west in the areas downstream of Shepparton on the lower Goulburn River system. We also draw on previous flood experience in the Goulburn Valley, as mentioned.

Whilst some 500,000 hectares of Victorian farmland were impacted by the flood, our area of impact was 6500 hectares approximately but in many ways would reflect the bigger picture of inundation and impact on livestock, farm structures, fencing and fodder on farms that are also the homes of local people. The irony of the season was that the conditions in the lead-up meant prolific crops and pastures only weeks from harvest were then inundated and lost for all time. It was also these conditions that we knew from past experience that could likely lead to flooding, as it did. It was that knowledge that led to those with previous experience being well prepared for what was to come, and they were able to support those new to flooding. The limited capacity of the Eildon, the saturated conditions and the ongoing rain could mean only one thing. Access to sandbags was a challenge, and the community raised some \$8000 and purchased 3500 bags from Melbourne, plus loads of sand. We know how important they are in flood management, yet it always seems to be difficult to access such basic needs when they are so necessary. Surely this could be simple and streamlined and accessible.

During the flood, more than 180,000 megalitres of water passed through Shepparton, but only 80,000 megalitres can pass through McCoys Bridge downstream at the Murray Valley Highway. This means 100,000 megalitres of floodwater has to go somewhere to the north and south of the Goulburn River. Of course, this means enormous pressure on structures public and private, on levees and property and the community. As the first line of defence, levee banks were attended to, sandbagging low points, often areas of wear and tear along public road access points into Crown land under the management of government authorities. The management of infrastructure on the river system has significant impact on our district. The aged infrastructure of Loch Garry is dependent on the manual removal of bars across its 48 bays, a challenge in time of flood.

When the bars are not removed in time, the result is the levee banks are breached and flooding of surrounding land both to the north and south is exacerbated.

The flood had a significant impact on levee banks, which play a major role in flood management. These levees have existed since the 1890s and were built under a government unemployment work scheme. There has been a precedent set for the repair of these levees through government funding following previous flood events, with the last occasion being in 1993 when repairs were required. Across our stretch of 30 kilometres, we counted 18 breaches totalling some 500 metres that ranged from less to quite massive damage. These levee banks are a critical part of the infrastructure, and the integrity of these structures is paramount. Without them, the community cannot return to normal. They have lived and worked with the knowledge of their significance. Properties have been bought and sold, business investment and farming enterprises have been developed and communities and families have lived with conditions and knowledge of the protection afforded by these banks.

We have made approaches to all levels of government and authority seeking the restoration of the levee banks following the floods. To our astonishment and alarm, we discovered that there was no intention by government to fund the restoration of these banks as we had experienced in the past. Section 17 of the *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy* of 2016 refers to levee banks providing ‘private benefits by protecting agricultural production’ and a further reference to the role in protecting human life and safety, yet also declaring the flood mitigation infrastructure is no longer considered best practice for rural communities. Any rural community could be well justified in feeling that their wellbeing was not valued the same as an urban community, and it is equally insulting to suggest that only farmers are the beneficiaries. Surely the local roads, the facilities, the communities and the economy are all the beneficiaries of a productive agricultural district. As we were unable to acquire funding to repair the breaches, the community have privately funded the works. So for members of the community, who had just experienced the ravages of the flood – its impact on family, on home, business, farm and ongoing financial loss, apart from the physical and mental stress of emergency and disaster – then to self-fund significant works to structures to provide them with some confidence to resume living and working in their communities is a very big ask. It came at a cost of over \$200,000 on top of the individual losses experienced.

The CHAIR: Your time has expired, but I will give you 2 more minutes to wrap up.

Judith CLEMENTS: Thank you. An expectation of some government support would have been welcome, but there was no offer.

We cannot let this go by without mentioning the significance of local knowledge. In time of disaster local rural people and their knowledge and experience, are one of our most valuable assets yet are significantly overlooked and undervalued. The role played by the Undera community is a good example. A location which has previously been established as an official site for emergency response was largely overlooked at local government level yet provided a local base, which we can explain more about.

We hear much of the word ‘resilience’ today in regard to emergency management and natural disaster, but farmers by nature are a pretty resilient lot. On this occasion they have been proactive and well prepared. However, we believe there is scope to improve circumstances beyond, during and after the emergency to result in a better outcome for all. We propose a vision or plan to address floodwaters south of Shepparton, a review of funding for maintenance of levee banks, a coordinated system for the supply of sandbags, a method to capture and recognise local knowledge and experience pertaining to flood and emergency management and systems developed within Goulburn–Murray Water and other authorities to ensure knowledge is captured and recorded to inform and educate future staff and policy. We thank you very much for this opportunity.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much for that. Ms Bath with a question.

Melina BATH: Thank you. There is lots in there, and I appreciate your dedicated service to your community over a long time in communities. I just want to go to the funding. You, Bart, said it was really hard to knock on doors and ask for funding, so you are going to share with the committee what that funding was for. You have said \$8000 for sand and sandbags, I think it was, and then you spoke about \$200,000. Could you just speak to that? You can share it around if you like.

Bart van RUISWYK: Yes. Initially we needed sandbags for lower points and everything else. I still had 500 sandbags in the cherry barrel, and then we got 3500 or 3000 from Melbourne. We had to buy them. Then

we could not get any more straightaway from the shire, so we ended up getting some from Dhurringile Prison, as we have people in Undera who work at Dhurringile Prison. So a lot of it was our own effort to try to get sandbags, but sandbags will only go so far. Then what we did after 10 days – after the water came out at 10 days we put the ring banks up around the breaks, because if we had not done that the water would have run through the breaks for six weeks.

Melina BATH: Could you just explain that a little bit further?

Bart van RUISWYK: A ring bank? A ring bank is you just get two excavators in while the water is still running through the breaks, probably about three-quarters of a metre deep, and you are trying to get the bank to hold the water into the flood plain area behind the levee bank, to try to recede the floodwaters quicker. So we did that, and that was an initial cost of about \$35,000. Then, because we could not get any money to do a proper fix, we went around and asked people for money, and I think we went around 30 people to ask for money and there was one person who did not give any money. I mean, we can only ask them. You cannot get blood out of a stone. We were happy the community was forward thinking, and we got some big entities in the Undera area. They had to pick up the balance. One was the Moxey dairy. There was Faraday Valley and GV Creamery. They are significant businesses.

Melina BATH: And these people are quite stressed at the same time, aren't they? They are worried about their livelihoods, their homes, their businesses.

Bart van RUISWYK: Yes. We can only go and ask them whether they can do it, and they pledged it. They pledged all the money. In the end we could only get X amount of money, so then we divided the overrun between the three big ones, but we got some late extras come up.

Melina BATH: You are seeking to make recommendations to us to put into a report for government. Does it strike you as odd that Undera has had to fundraise their own survival campaign?

Alastair CHESSELLS: Extremely.

Judith CLEMENTS: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: And if you think that – not leading the witness – what is your recommendation to us? What would you like to see done differently next time around? Was there a lack of communication between emergency response and you? Was there a lack of something? Why were you not told, 'We're just going to dump a whole lot of sand and bags for you to do it?'

Alastair CHESSELLS: I would like to say, as Bart said, prior to the flood happening, we were proactive in sourcing those bags and getting ourselves prepared. We had the big rain event. I myself spoke to Shane Sali, Greater Shepparton city Mayor, and asked him if he had any other information that he could pass on to us on the water that was coming and sort of how quick it was coming. Authorities know a lot more than us individuals, and they only pass on what they want to sometimes. Shane had my number as a contact at Undera. We had no contact whatsoever from the City of Greater Shepparton from that time until –

Bart van RUISWYK: Saturday.

Alastair CHESSELLS: a week after. There was no help, apart from me ringing the City of Greater Shepparton, Shane Sali, and asking – pleading – for some empty sandbags. We eventually got 2000 from the City of Greater Shepparton. That is the only little bit of help that we had from the City of Greater Shepparton. When I asked them for more sandbags, there were none coming. Also, we had a big working bee at Undera. We had maybe 100-odd people there filling sandbags. I asked if we could get some food and water for them –

Melina BATH: The question is also probably: there is the shire, there is the council and then there is a state government response and a federal government response. You were seeking from the council, who were inundated themselves. What was coming from the state and/or federal? I guess that is the next question.

Bart van RUISWYK: We were getting nothing.

Alastair CHESSELLS: Nothing.

Bart van RUISWYK: I tried to ring the SES after the water came over the levee bank, because it went that quick. You have a borrow pit near a levee bank. In the morning at 6 o'clock it hit the bottom, and by lunchtime it came over, and that was probably a 3-metre, 3.5-metre rise. I tried to ring the SES, and they told me I had the wrong section. I thought I would just give them information that the floodwater had come over in Undera so they were aware of it. Then I thought – I did not go any further because I did not have any time to make more phone calls.

Alastair CHESSELLS: There was never any mention on the emergency app that there was flooding in Undera. I rang the ABC and spoke to the presenter at the ABC. While I was talking to her, she said she had looked up Undera, and she said there was nothing there to say anything about Undera.

Melina BATH: You are not flooding.

Alastair CHESSELLS: Basically, we were not flooding; yes, exactly.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. I will stop.

Judith CLEMENTS: With regard to the issue of the funding for the repair of the levee banks, it completely took us by surprise that this restoration was not going to occur. Our experience had been that it had been undertaken in the past. We were not aware until that time when we sat with one of the senior bureaucrats, who spoke about the flood plain management document from 2016. That is when the problem occurred with regard to that decision. There is about 90 pages in that document, and it is referred to in there that it was based on community consultation. The group of farmers in our groups that met with various authorities were astonished to discover that this was now the case. So somehow in the process we had missed out in that discussion about the restoration of levee banks. Had we been aware of that earlier, then we would have been contributing to that process of discussion. That is why we were astonished that there was no funding there.

The CHAIR: We are going to have to move on, because there are plenty of questions here from us. Ms Broad, question?

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. Just on that levee bank issue, I guess you are seeing the challenge there, where that section puts it on people. You have spoken to agriculture and I guess the benefit that has more broadly, but what change would you like to see as far as the responsibility for restoration of levee banks goes?

Bart van RUISWYK: We would like, for starters, maintenance on the levee bank system, because nothing got done. I think they did a survey years ago. I mean, after the 1993 floods we had inquiries and surveys, and they came up with a scheme, but nobody has the intestinal fortitude to push for a solution, because they are all too scared they will step on somebody's toes. I feel in the end you have to learn from that, and somebody has to make a decision to find a solution for this so we have some form of security.

Gaëlle BROAD: So leadership by one authority.

Bart van RUISWYK: By one authority – not have political input from one member or whatever. Flood plain management is about the whole flood plain. It is not within the levee bank system; it is across the whole flood plain. That is what they –

Gaëlle BROAD: So currently is the levee still just being repaired by locals?

Bart van RUISWYK: We have finished the repair works, yes.

Gaëlle BROAD: Okay, but that has not been checked by any sort of authority, if you like, or any other input?

Alastair CHESSELLS: We did meet with the catchment management authority, one of their staff, and we were made aware that for anything on Crown land we needed a permit but anything on private property we could fix as long as it went back into the same footprint and was no higher than originally. So pretty much I could say probably 95 per cent of our work was on private property. The one little bit that was not we were told by that officer from the catchment management authority that he would get us to do the relevant work and get us that permit. Our work is completed. We have never heard from that gentleman since and we still have not seen the permit, but that work has been done. We have not even had a phone call from him to find out how we

are going. So, you know, the catchment management authority is a toothless tiger as far as I am concerned who just sit there like puppets. They talk the talk, but they do not walk the walk.

The CHAIR: Okay. I might just ask a question. Judith, you mentioned Loch Garry. I am not sure whether you are aware, but there was a reference committee set up in January of this year, I believe. Are you familiar with the work of that committee – how that is operating, what is coming out of that for you? Do you know what is happening there?

Judith CLEMENTS: Well, I have some knowledge, probably limited, and others might be able to contribute. If I could just say in regard to Loch Garry, and I mentioned before about the significance of local knowledge, I do not think the role of local knowledge should ever be underestimated in the ability of people to contribute in such a valuable way to the process. If we take this situation of Loch Garry, there are people with extraordinary knowledge over generations of the role of Loch Garry – how the whole situation has evolved and how it is problematic.

The CHAIR: You are probably answering my next question, which is: how should it operate? You are probably going there now, so feel free to talk about that. How should it operate in your opinion?

Bart van RUISWYK: Common sense.

The CHAIR: What does that look like? It is your chance to tell us what that looks like.

Alastair CHESSELLS: It should be opened.

The CHAIR: So please explain.

Judith CLEMENTS: For a start, the information that is held by local people needs to be respected. It needs to be heard. There are local people that in the days leading up to the flood were trying to desperately contact by phone Goulburn–Murray Water and did not ever achieve that outcome. I find that extraordinary. That could have been such a valuable process. We are told that there is an Act that underpins the responsibilities in regard to that. We understand that. We think and hope that this review that has taken place has been the opportunity for some realistic review processes to apply and some meaningful outcomes. But in regard to the 10.36-metre trigger point within Shepparton, I am presuming that that has been based on prior knowledge. It was interesting listening this morning. The words ‘planning’ and ‘residential developments’ were mentioned on a number of occasions, with the emphasis seeming to be on how we raise the levels or how we build on high ground. It seemed to me that there was a really valid point that was missing in that discussion, and surely that is to say where once upon a time that land was open paddocks, the absorption rate is entirely different to the run-off rate of built form, and I just wonder to what extent. The local people from Loch Garry will talk significantly about the speed and the practicalities of a 24-hour time between one trigger point and another. I think probably for local people they could see that the whole process was way too little, too late, and that was the consequence. So from a planning perspective it needs to be addressed. How have the factors changed? How will they continue to change in the further development around Shepparton, which will affect a potentially increased run-off that is then experienced further along the system?

The CHAIR: So Bart and Alastair, feel free to supplement how it should operate.

Bart van RUISWYK: We knew what was coming. From the level in Seymour, from farmers in Nagambie, from farmers in Murchison, we knew what was coming. Goulburn–Murray Water operates Loch Garry. Why can't they make a commonsense decision to approach the Loch Garry landholders to pull the loch early? They hide behind the constitution, which is that 10.36 metres in Shepparton. There is absolutely no common sense involved in that.

The CHAIR: Are you saying the decision should have been made earlier?

Bart van RUISWYK: Yes. And then, okay, it might still not have saved the banks, but because of what happened we had excessive damage to all the banks. I should not say this, but we were lucky on our side. They had a massive breach on the other side, because who knows where the water in Undera would have been. That is why something has to be done about proper flood planning.

The CHAIR: I am going to have to move on because I know that we have only got a little bit left – 10 more minutes. So Dr Ratnam, I will go to you.

Samantha RATNAM: Thanks so much for being here today. It is really valuable for us to hear directly from you, and I also want to acknowledge the loss and upheaval that you have all experienced. Thank you for talking us through it so we can be more informed. I was interested to go back to what you all started talking about in terms of the response and the gaps in the response. Could you talk us through – you got contacted a week after, and that was by council. What happened in the weeks after that? Was there any central agency involvement too? Was it CFA or SES? Did anybody make contact after that week or two?

Bart van RUISWYK: On the Saturday Peter Harriott came out.

Samantha RATNAM: That is council, yes.

Bart van RUISWYK: We were actually drinking longnecks because one of the fellows was 60 that day. I have not had a longneck for 40 years probably. I saw them come in and I knew who Peter Harriott was, so I took them around the district a little bit to show them where it was. The next day we had Gary Randhawa, I think. He came around. During the week, three days after the floods, I rang Geoff Dobson and asked him whether they could send one person to Undera to acknowledge the people we pulled up at the Undera rec reserve. It did not really happen.

Samantha RATNAM: After that, have there been many efforts to sit down with you all and debrief and take stock of what happened so that we can be more prepared for next time?

Alastair CHESSELLS: Those contacts were only made by us –

Samantha RATNAM: You all did it proactively, yes.

Bart van RUISWYK: to the authorities, or council generally. We requested to have meetings with them. There have never been any approaches by them. As recently as a month ago we had a community meeting, which was organised by the City of Greater Shepparton, just to brief the community on where everything is at this time and our projection of where things are in the catchment at this stage, with the reservoir being very full, rainfall and stuff like that. That is the only time. But it was only approaches made by us to council to have things done in our district. We are part of the City of Greater Shepparton. As I have mentioned to them many times, the City of Greater Shepparton is the City of Greater Shepparton, it is not just Shepparton.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. I appreciate that. I am happy to come back later. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks. We have heard a lot about levee banks today. We have heard from Peter Harriott that perhaps they are not the best way to manage floods. We heard some mixed news from the Murray Darling Association. Judy, I think you said that someone had reported back to your group that they were not the appropriate way to manage floods going forwards. Yes. Is there an alternative, or are levee banks the right answer?

Alastair CHESSELLS: Well, I say there is an alternative. The levee banks play an important part, but they are only going to save us to a certain point. As we mentioned earlier, there are 180,000 megalitres coming through Shepparton, and 80,000 can get through at McCoys Bridge. So there is 100,000 megalitres of water that has to go somewhere. We all have to share this burden, this water. But as I have been saying for a long time, we are stupid to continue to do the same thing as we have been doing for many, many decades and blowing our levee banks to pieces. We have no control over this water whatsoever then on either side of the river. I believe that we should come up with a plan that has some spillways in the river, in the levee bank system, to allow this water to escape. It may only be coming on to us for just a few days – coming over those spillways – once that initial burst has passed, and once that has dropped down below the spillways, well, then, the water on the outside is not going to continue to come on to us for weeks. On the north side they had it for six weeks. We put in the extra effort and put in the ring banks that Bart was talking about to stop the water from continually coming out so that people could salvage something from some of their crops and be able to get back to their homes.

I believe – I totally believe – that we can make it workable. We are going to get wet, but we can do better than what we are doing and have done for the last hundred-odd years. But levee banks do play a very important part for all of our communities, on the south side of the river and the north side. But currently, whilst we have ours fixed on the south side, there are only some fixed on the north side, which is Loch Garry, and just within a few hundred metres of Loch Garry there are breaches still open. Those banks are not fixed. Who is going to fix them? I do not know. We have done our work; we have had to do our hard yards on our side. But I feel for the people on the other side. I think we can manage this better than it is.

We are all going to have to get some water. Some water is probably going to have to be got out before it even gets to Shepparton. All the water is trying to be forced through this Shepparton corridor, and it was never made to look like that. The flood plain – water could get out, previously, before Shepparton, but it cannot these days. So those points should be looked at also, to let some water out. Everyone is on the flood plain here, and everyone has got to share a little bit of pain for the general benefit of the whole area. That is my point.

Wendy LOVELL: The north side had water for a lot more than six weeks. There was still water over Sandilands Road in February – March actually.

Bart van RUISWYK: They had active flows going through till the river dropped below a certain level.

Wendy LOVELL: That is right.

The CHAIR: All right. We have to move on. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Judith and Bart, do you have anything else that you might contribute towards the potential management of the waterways that could prevent such a large flood in the future? Because we have just heard from Alastair, so I thought I would give you an opportunity.

Bart van RUISWYK: In 1993 I had only just bought the farm, in July, and got flooded in October, so we did a plan. We did surveys to come up with a plan, and the plan got stalled – I think it was political reasons. Then we get drought again and everybody forgets about it, and nothing happens until we deal with the issue again. If we have a plan, we have got to solve it; we cannot let it go on and on and on. It is hard on community members. What is your future? If you do not want us there, then do not have levee banks anywhere. Above Shepparton, below Shepparton – let everybody have a bit and make sure across the flood plain there are no high banks or anything so water can continue on its merry way. But some people reckon that is too hard, and nobody is prepared to make hard decisions. They love to make easy decisions.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Judith?

Judith CLEMENTS: Probably not a lot to add – I agree with what has been said. I think that it really does need a very visionary approach. I think it is high time. We cannot keep repeating the same scenarios. We know by the very nature of where we are that these things are going to happen. It is a matter of how we manage it and get the best possible outcome, and I think it is a case of sharing those consequences across a broader area.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Does anyone else have any other questions? We have got about 5 more minutes. Sheena?

Sheena WATT: Yes, I do actually. Thank you for your patience, for your contributions and for all that you have done, truly. I have a question about your final recommendation in the report. You recommended the development of a disaster management plan through local structures. What role would you like to see community organisations and groups such as you and others play in the development of any future flood management plans? Have you thought to that level yet?

Judith CLEMENTS: I think for any nation the greatest asset can be its people and the knowledge that a community can hold. In communities such as through these areas, and particularly rural communities, there is a tremendous knowledge bank, and I do not think we take advantage of it. Looking from a slightly negative perspective first, just reflecting on my experience with Black Saturday, 2009, it is only recently that we have managed to achieve approval for a network concept and a plan that we have put together from the original community recovery group, which is now the resilience group. You hear a lot about resilience and the importance of it, and all the documents refer to the role that local people and people can play, but it means that

someone has to open the door to bureaucracy and government to let that local knowledge in. Without it and without it being given some authority, it cannot work, seeing this from direct experience. It was interesting to hear the comment made through Murray Dairy this morning about roadblocks and milk tankers. It was the identical experience that we had in 2009 with consequences after Black Saturday – something as simple as a change of the shift on a road and how it caused enormous consequences. So it has taken a long time to start to get anywhere and make some inroads, and it is only in our own local experience in the Whittlesea community that we feel like we are starting to make some inroads. So it needs a change of mindset from authorities and from governments to say, ‘We need this local knowledge, and the best outcomes can come from working collectively with these people.’ Give them that opportunity, you know, give them a role. Create structures that are locally based, with local knowledge, with people who are reliable, who are maybe community leaders, not in some official capacity but within their own community, who are respected and hold knowledge and can support a community as Alastair and Bart have done in rolling out the best possible approach. For example, with something like sandbags, we are told that the defence forces are probably not supposed to be playing a role or are not going to be playing a role in emergency response – but why not? We have got Puckapunyal fairly centrally located. Wouldn’t that be the obvious location to have a store of something like hessian bags so that then when there is a need – to me this is really basic stuff –

Melina BATH: Common sense.

Judith CLEMENTS: Common sense, absolutely – they already link through to that pre-existing structure of some kind of local network process that they know that they can rely on those people to give reliable information. The way it was – I know when I made my phone call from the farm to ask about sandbags, I was told we could have 20. The significance of 20 in an urban setting is one thing; the significance of 20 when you are dealing with what we were doing in trying to deal with damage to a Crown land levee bank, where cars had been accessing through Parks Victoria land and we were trying to save a small stretch to result in a much bigger outcome with the area that was going to benefit from that – so the thinking is chalk and cheese. But if you are dealing with some kind of local network structure, the opportunity to be much more grounded is there in my opinion.

Bart van RUISWYK: And that was the disappointing part. I went two weeks before the floods to the McIntosh Centre in Shepparton, and I asked who was responsible for the overpasses of the public roads going in the Lower Goulburn National Park, because they all wear out. In 1994, when we repaired them, we all made them a bit higher. Nobody answered the question because they were all scared of legal implications. And we were not asking much, you know. We were only asking maybe for a contribution towards that. And it was the same when we fixed the banks now. We fixed some of those overpasses up. I asked them again, and we did not get any answer. Nobody wants to step up.

The CHAIR: All right. Our time for this session has expired, so thank you all very much for coming and giving your evidence to us today. It has been very insightful. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.