

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria**

Shepparton—28 April 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Ms Wendy Radford, Secretary

Mr Stuart Fraser, Member, Bendigo and District Environment Council

**The CHAIR:** All right. I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. 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 Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathered here 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 would also like to welcome any members of the public who are watching the proceedings with us today in the room, as well. So, welcome. So, at this point, I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the deputy chair. Joining us via Zoom is Dr Samantha Ratnam. Back in the room we have Ms Melina Bath. And just coming in now we have Dr Matthew Bach. He will be joining us in a second.

So, all evidence that it is taken is protected by parliamentary privileges provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council Standing Orders. Therefore, the information that 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence, or misleading of the committee may be 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 get you both, just for the Hansard record, if you could please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

**MS RADFORD:** Wendy Radford, and appearing on behalf of Bendigo and District Environment Council.

**The CHAIR:** Great.

**MS RADFORD:** And Wellsford Conservation Alliance and Bendigo Australian Conservation Foundation and the Friends of Crusoe Reservoir and No.7 in Bendigo.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you.

**MR FRASER:** Stuart Fraser. I am a member of the Bendigo and District Environment Council.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. And with that, we will get underway, and invite you to make your opening comments. And then after that, so about five, 10 minutes, and then there will be plenty of questions from the committee, as well. So, over to you.

**MS RADFORD:** Thank you. Firstly, we would like to also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Yorta Yorta people, and pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. I am Wendy Radford, secretary of Bendigo and District Environment Council and the Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance, and a member of the Australian Conservation Foundation Campaigns committee in Bendigo. I have been working with the community to gain protection for the Wellsford Forrest on the doorstep of Bendigo for decades, as has Stuart Fraser, my co-presenter.

Stuart has an incredible knowledge of the Box-ironbark Forest of Central Victoria in the Goldfields region. But, also the forests of the Central Highlands, the north-east and the Mallee, because he has earned his living as a bee keeper in these forest, protective ideas. He has been made a lifetime member of Bendigo and District Environment Council as he was a convener for about 16 years, relentlessly working for the biodiversity preservation in and around Bendigo, and we were very instrumental and successful in getting the Bendigo National Park Regional Parks declared in 2001.

So, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you this morning, on behalf of the 365 members of the Bendigo and District Environment Council and the Australian Conservation Foundation, and the other groups mentioned, 19 of whom wrote our combined submission. We know you would have got a lot of information from scientists, so we are going to concentrate on trying to tell you what the local people of Central Victoria are feeling and thinking about the environmental decline and extinction that we are witnessing in our lifetimes.

In essence, these people and many others in the community that we talk to, are angry and distressed about the continuing ecosystem decline and the consequent extinction crisis. They grieve the loss of landscape, habit and the creatures living therein. They realise their physical, mental and spiritual health is intimately connected with the health of the ecosystems upon which we all depend. They worry about the future for their children and grandchildren, because they realise that biodiversity decline heralds our species decline.

They are frustrated about the inaction and compromise from governments of all persuasions, and lack of leadership to put in place decent laws that actually protect habitat. And I am suspecting, in talking about the feelings of the people we know and we talk to, you would recognise a few of those feelings personally, because in your personal lives you probably do what you can, like most people do. With that leadership we need to confront this terrible crisis. They are also perplexed. And these are some of the questions we hear again and again.

Why will not this government put in place the recommendations of the Central West Investigation final report June 2018. And to that effect, just yesterday was an open letter, and I will give this to you, put in many regional papers. This is the Bendigo Advertiser. And it is actually talking about the values that the parks that are jested in this report, commissioned by the government, and put out in June 2019 that they have not responded to at all, the value of that. And in there are seven of Bendigo groups, the Castlemaine groups, from all over the Central Vic. So, I could not give that in advance because it only came in the paper yesterday.

But, there is a providor for you. And you can have a look at it. It will be signed more people, too, in the coming days. So, another burning question in people's minds is, why not protect the water security and safety of Central Victoria? It is an area designated for population growth in a warming climate, and which is dependent upon imported water from the three rivers that rise in the Wombat, the Campaspe, the Coliban, the Loddon.

They rise in the Wombat Forest. And water from the Goulburn. Bendigo is a town of roughly 120,000 people without a river. Without a water source. And the people there understand that the forests must be protected as the sponges they are, to safeguard our water supply. We see it coming in, along the channel. We see it rise and fall. We know what has happening in our dams. And during the millennium drought, we were worried we were going to run out of water. Why are not these Wombat Forests being protected, with the extraction industries out of them, which were a fraction the value of the water they produce.

Another thing we get is why other people in power immune to the impact of insect demise and extinction. This is something we see a lot. Stuart will tell you how the bogong moth has completely disappeared from areas in which he works. You ask him. And the dire consequences of this for pollination across the region. Another frequent question is, what laws can be relied upon to actually protect habitat and vegetation? Another issue is that the forests that we have already existing in Bendigo, why is this government allowing the illegal cutting of trees in the area, in the Wellsford, designated in this report for regional and national park.

Why does it tolerate the flouting of its own laws in this way? When you go into the forests you see notices everywhere. And I will quote from those notices, 'Only collect fallen or felled trees. Only collect firewood from within designated domestic firewood collection areas'. What a joke. It does not happen like that. Do you want to know more about that, ask us. Bendigo DELWP is chronically underfunded. We have no foresters in Bendigo whatsoever. There is no monitoring of the biodiversity or of the cutting.

For instance, only last week seven beautiful mature ironbark trees at around, I am not expert, but about 50 to 80 years old, were cut down and removed in their entirety by some unknown person. Of course, we do not have the permit system anymore, so how would we know who this person is? And removed outside an area that had been cut for firewood, for DELWP. We know this because one our members is a local resident, and she confronted DELWP with this problem and she has done over several months, and the response was, 'That's no good'. And that is a quote.

Well, we all agree, 'That's not good'. But the government could prevent this immediately by declaring the designated parks and removing extracted industries altogether. And if they are not going to do this, we want to know why. Is it because Fosterville Mine has been doing some gold mining tests there? We know that if it is a national park they can mine underground. But, why would they therefore object to the national park? Is it because they think maybe it is cheaper to mine on the surface? If that is what is going on, let the people know.

Let us see what Bendigo people say about surfacing mining in the Wellsford, because I reckon we can predict what they will say. They will be pretty jolly mad, and even our council, the last council, not this current one, they voted unanimously to support this campaign, to get Wellsford into parks. It is not going to be accepted if we find that it is not going to be declared for these currently nefarious reasons we do not know why. Another one is, we cannot understand why do we give away publicly owned carbon stored and in the process destroy the likelihood of farmers being able to compete from plantations on their land.

It is a lose/lose situation, and all the Northern United Farmers Group years ago attempted to get plantation forestry started north of Bendigo. But, how can they compete with the resources given away to people with massive trucks that come in with huge rigs, and Stuart will tell you more about it than me, and take away incredible amounts of wood, and we can only assume, sell it elsewhere. But nobody knows. Unregulated. Now, ACF and BDAC have been running a little survey campaign locally, and because we know that you will think what we are saying is just our membership, even though we have fairly large memberships and council on side.

So, we are just passers-by, at stalls where we at the Marketplace in Bendigo, the actual Sunday market, the various festivals. And we ask them why they wanted the government to create new park refuges in the Central West Forest. That was the actual question. The vast majority of them were wanting that to happen. So, I will leave you with several of the 300 passionate pro-park responses we got and the people's words themselves. Not our members. The members of the public. A Fletcher from Spring Gully says, 'More green space to be climate ready'.

People know what is going on. S Holden from White Hills said, 'We need to protect our flora and fauna. Too much habitat has been lost and it's time we reversed the destruction of our country. We must be pro-active and regenerate'. L Talbot from Pyramid Hill, out of town, rural area says, 'We only have one chance, and so does our wildlife. Once we lose it, it's gone forever. This is not a dress rehearsal'.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to add anything, Stuart?

**MR FRASER:** It is just that I spent 55 years working in forests. That is what I have done. My father before me. My great uncle before that, running 2,000 hives over two states. And since my retirement, I have been helping out a couple of young fellas who took most of my leases, and they are running four and a half to 5,000 hives, mainly in the pollination. I started working in the Central Highlands in 1962 with my father. And from what I have seen with the clear felling of ash and of mixed species, I have never seen anything quite like it. And I think we should all be deeply ashamed.

It is almost as though someone said, 'Just take it'. And VicForest is not like the old foresters, who actually cared about the forest. It just seems to have walked in, in mass. So, I would just like to say that Bendigo – one of the attractions of Bendigo is the fact that it lives within a big forest. Those forests exist because after the Goldfields they decided that when the gold had finished, that they would need timber resources for the cities and the gold still being extracted. So, you will notice through Central Victoria there are towns with little forests around them.

Box-ironbark Forest. And enormous gaps between these forests. So, even though it looks a reasonable size around Bendigo, it is small compared with what was there originally. After all, the Box-ironbark Forest was really from Seymour to the Flinders Ranges. And now it is little patches. And it is under enormous pressure, not only just from people living there, but from climate change. We have seen temperature change and species unable to shift. So, in my lifetime I have basically lived in the middle of what I consider to be a catastrophe, and it is why I have taken an interest in it.

And it is not just honey production, or anything like that, or pollination. It is because you can either shrug your shoulders and say, 'Well, that's the way it's going to be', or you can try and do something about it. But, to actually remember the stories from 1880 of what it was like, from my great uncle and my father, of what it was actually like, they would tell the stories that if you camped in the forest, the noise at night would keep you awake, with the different birds and animals. And today, you can camp in these forests and they are silent.

And the main reason why this happens, it is looked upon as a resource. That is all it is. People will say, 'Yes, we should do something about it, so long as it doesn't affect me'. And that is natural. It is what it is to be human. But, it is time we stopped, because what we are going to hand on is very, very little.

**The CHAIR:** All right.

**MR FRASER:** Is that enough?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you.

**MR FRASER:** I have worked on the hay plains with hay on Patterson's curse and I have seen the bogong moth hatching out of the ground. Bogong moth would move into the Mallee around about 1 September and then as the Mallee heated up, they moved further south, and they would be coming through Bendigo, and these districts right through to Horsham and in the mountains, around about the first week in October they have been driven out by the heat and moving south. I have seen between St Arnaud and Horsham the moths coming across the road like a snow storm.

They could be picked up on the radar at Mildura and they take all nectar in the area, even capeweed. Because that is their natural pollination. It is what they actually do. And remember, a yellow gum tree in the spring will be producing two to three ton per tree. People do not realise what eucalypts do. Red gum was measured at Balmoral at four ton per tree. Now, about 80 per cent of the time we would be lose – and we learnt to work around it. About 20 per cent of the time you could produce crops from yellow gum and whatever.

Well, over the last 10 or 15 years every year has been less. And over the last four years there has been none. None. And I personally put it down to the modern insecticides, and the fact that places like the Mallee you have industrial farming that runs from, say, Piangil to the border. And every year there is not a crop of paddock that has not been cropped. That is very different to when I was young. So, whatever the reason, we are seeing what is basically a loss of one of the major pollinators. One of the major food sources for our mammals and birds.

And I look at it and I think, I doubt very much that they would ever come back. And I am talking out of the fact that it cost me a lot of money, a loss. But I still think they are a – that tells you that in the system, insects are actually in really severe trouble. I mean, at home you would watch the geckos on the windows beside the forest, eating insects. I think this year we would not have seen more than 10 moths against our window.

This is actually very serious. And so what are we going to leave our kids? Very, very little. And we can make money out it. We can just use it up, if we like, like they are doing with the forests in the Central Highlands. Just take it. Be damned with what happens in the future. But I do not agree with that.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Well, thank you. Sorry, I have got to watch the time, and I know committee members will have lots of questions for you, as well.

**MR FRASER:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** So, we might move to questions, if that is all right? Dr Ratnam, would you like to have first question?

**DR RATNAM:** Certainly. Thank you so much Stuart for, firstly, all the years of work you have done for our environment, and all the people groups you are representing here today. You are indebted to your incredible work, and I do not think you can quantify just how much value you have brought to our environment over the years. Thank you for making a submission, and presenting here today. We have certainly heard so far doing with this inquiry that there are some very significant (indistinct) of biodiversity loss, through climate change, habitat loss and (indistinct) of species.

You talked in your submission, and you talked here today about needing to protect habitat. Create habitat, as well. And your impression of the National Park is about habitat preservation, so that biodiversity can flourish. I wanted to ask you particularly about something you just mentioned and it has been quite topical in the years and the last hours, as well, which is the recommendations of the Act, and that you put in your report, is the Central West Investigation to create new national parks and reserves, and (indistinct) of the west.

Can you talk to us a little bit about the process, because it sounds like you have all been involved in some of this process, for some of the advocacies, as well. So, I would like to know a little bit more of that background. But, also, can you expand a little bit more on why you think it is so important that this recommendation is acted upon to create these new national parks. And what do you think the risks are of delaying this decision even longer, which is the subject of some media attention today, as well.

**MS RADFORD:** Do you want to talk about the last bit, and I will say the bit?

**MR FRASER:** All right.

**MS RADFORD:** The process – thanks for that question. We think the process has been very good. Once we got the BDAC investigation I guess in a sense we thought we were home and hosed, because there is – there are so many good reasons why those parks should be declared. And the investigations were very thorough. They did a massive amount of consultation across the region. I was the community rep on the reference committee coming to Melbourne for regular updates which I then took back to our community and sent around newsletters and got people's ideas.

On that committee it was really interesting. I sat next to the Victorian four-wheel drive fellow, and I thought, 'I'll have some clashes here, the way I'm going to go.' He was absolutely 100 per cent in favour of the final report. Now, it is still – I think it is too much compromise, but it is one reason it should go through without a problem. He – he said, 'No'. Because I said, 'I'm surprised. I thought you wouldn't say that'. And he said, 'Of course. We want to educate our members to stay on tracks, to use the bush properly. We – we know that if it's ruined we'll have nothing to go out there and spend our weekends and to look at'.

So, there were – there were very many people around that table. I think there were 18 of us. And I think there is only about two or three who objected to this final report. I think the mining person did, and somebody else. I cannot quite remember. But the process was extensive. It is, well, we think, too much of a compromise. But I think for that reason we should have (indistinct words) support. What was the second part of your question?

**DR RATNAM:** About the risks of the delay.

**MS RADFORD:** Yes.

**DR RATNAM:** So, obviously it has been delayed, and what do you think the risks are with this continued delay?

**MS RADFORD:** Well, if I just might say what I said to you about the illegal cutting in the forests.

**DR RATNAM:** The real risk.

**MS RADFORD:** That is crazy. City of Greater Bendigo is spending \$2 million this year on a program called Greening Greater Bendigo, where they are putting plants and trees back into the urban and peri-urban area. Great. Meanwhile, on the doorstep of Bendigo, not a kilometre away from the industrial centre of Bendigo, people going out and willy nilly just chopping down established trees that may never grow to that size again with climate change. I mean, it is crazy. This – this – if this report had come into being within the six months that the government is supposed to have to declare it, that would not be happening now.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Is that the firewood argument?

**MS RADFORD:** That is for firewood, or whatever. We do not know. But, a tree this size, I have got pictures on my phone, is cut down and that is quite big, is it not, Stuart, for an iron bark.

**MR FRASER:** Yes.

**MS RADFORD:** They could – they take it away in its entirety. They cut it down themselves. They do not know who is doing it and well, it could be used for anything.

**The CHAIR:** Perhaps I might just ask a question and then we will throw to—

**MS RADFORD:** Sorry, Stuart.

**The CHAIR:** No, no, no. It is all very – because this is why we need to hear from you, so we can get all this on, and it is part of the inquiry on the record. I just want to ask a question around the Victorian government did a – released their biodiversity 2037 strategy document, and I just wanted to hear from both of you as to what you think about that document. Whether you think it is a good document. Some people have said to us they feel it is quite revolutionary and ambitious. So, I do not know. I would like to hear from you as to what you think about it.

**MR FRASER:** Well, could I just talk in general terms?

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**MR FRASER:** We are not getting too specific. The problem with all changes are that we try to reach compromise. It is what the law does. It is why the law fails, because we want to keep our production and we want to preserve the environment. We want both things. The problem with that is that in the compromise when the natural world compromises, it basically dies. So a little bit more goes. And that does not really matter because it is only a little bit. But, over here, the same thing happens. So, if you really want to view the laws correctly, you should say to yourself, does it actually say no? It is in clear terms, thou shall not.

It never does that. And the best example of that is offsets. All offsets fail, because the environment is made up of function and structure. Remove the structure, you lose the function. A single tree and a paddock. It has a function. It perhaps retains the original fungi of the area. There are bats there. It is a link. So, what the offsets say, is, well, you can have – we will put the structure over here and we will have this. But, the structure to reach maturity is probably 50 to 100 years. Do they expect the function to hang around? So, in a sense, all offsets fail, because there is simply a way for politicians, basically, and the people who want to use it, to get around it. It all sounds great. 'Look, we are putting it over there.' But they are not putting over there the function.

**The CHAIR:** No.

**MR FRASER:** It is not functional. You cannot shift that function. So, we should think very carefully about what we do this – and those laws should be stating, 'Thou shall not do this.' But it never does.

**The CHAIR:** Wendy, I just wanted to follow up with you. You raised the point around, there was some firewood and what you say was logging, and you had raised this with DEWLP. So, can you just go back to that? So, I just want to understand whether you are saying that you feel that when there is a problem with either logging or firewood collection, that it is not being addressed. Or is it a resourcing issue?

And what is the government agency response to that, and how do you think that could be improved? There is also the conservation regulator. I know they have a different function. They actually look at whether VicForests is logging in coups, and if they are not, they are also – so, are you familiar with that process, as well, or not? So, there are some—

**MS RADFORD:** No.

**The CHAIR:** All right.

**MS RADFORD:** Probably not that one.

**The CHAIR:** All right. So, look, maybe just go back to the information you gave us about your interaction around the logging. What you sort of had conversations with DEWLP about.

**MS RADFORD:** Well, we have had many conversations, have we not, Stuart—

**MR FRASER:** Yes.

**MS RADFORD:** —over the decades. And logging as such, what you would call logging in the wet forests, does not go on in the Wellsford anymore.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is right.

**MS RADFORD:** But cutting is largely for firewood or whatever else, they cut for, as I say. But, as I said, (indistinct) is under-resourced. There are no foresters in the Bendigo region. They send in subcontractors to cut the forest for firewood. And people that live near there in Junortoun, ring us up all the time and say, 'You should see the mess they've made. They've cut 50 per cent of this coup'. Where in the law does it say you can do that for firewood? We are always fighting. There are – there are nine, what we call, the big trees in the part of the Wellsford that is laid down for national park.

They are pre-European trees. They are the last pre-European trees in Bendigo on public land. VicForests always put them – puts those into coups. Every year we have to object, or every time the – the trucks come out, we have to object. We have to over and over again, to – to preserve those areas so that the forest floor around those trees will not be disturbed and they will not be destroyed by the vehicles going in, or whatever. But we do talk to DELWP. But I must say, we have got a bit tired of doing that.

**The CHAIR:** You were not aware of the conservation regulator that kind of helps with that?

**MS RADFORD:** No. But we also did not have VicForests west of the Hume until quite recently.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Yes.

**MS RADFORD:** And we do not think it should be west of the Hume, because it is the most depleted area in Victoria, and we are the most cleared state in Australia. What in the hell is the VicForests doing cutting down trees in our neck of the woods?

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**MS RADFORD:** It is something we do not understand.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Great. Thank you. Ms Bath.

**MS BATH:** Thank you. I am interested in bees and the CSIRO report in 2019 said the largest threat, the greatest threat to Australian wide species, but it can certainly be that they are encompassing Victoria is wildfire, bushfires and also pests and weeds. And you have mentioned Paterson's cure, as well. I am interested, you know, we saw the fires 16 months ago wipe out five million hectares of our forest and land in the eastern part of the State. Much of that also in national parks.

I am interested in your comments in relation to what that has done to bee populations, the importance of them as pollinators, and also, I will put a contention that all conservation needs to be active. And I am concerned, I would like your opinion on this, on many of our parks, national parks, there are not sufficient active conservation efforts. That there can be – passive is fine, but is that actually protecting and enhancing species?

**MR FRASER:** Well, I will start with that first. What is actually happening is, those who look after it and are going to deal with it on the government and the public's behalf are basically underfunded. What is the best way to control the department? You under fund it. So, you are looking at a department that one of the most remarkable women who has simply quit and left over the last 10 years, she could not even afford a car to drive out to the bush and have a look at the particular action. That is how underfunded they are. They have not got personnel, because it is low priority.

**MS BATH:** Can I ask, Stuart, is it personnel or personnel on the ground?

**MR FRASER:** Personnel on the ground, which is the same in a department. I mean, these people are out looking at things, recommendations. Saying yes or no, this can happen. And so, if you really want things to happen, you reduce the funding, and you do it over time. As for bees, there are two types of beekeeping. There are commercial and they do almost 95, 98 per cent of all the work in pollination. And then there is an awful lot of sideliners who just keep a few hives in the backyard. Even about 100 hives.

**MS BATH:** And you were commercial?

**MR FRASER:** I was commercial. Around 2,000. For example, in a commercial operation the Taylors have been working the ash. They get along where the parks are. That is where the ash is left. There is basically no other ash. And they want, in April, they want those bees to be two boxes of bees, otherwise they do not get paid

an allowance. And they have just brought their bees back to Bendigo and on 1 August they will go to put, for \$120 a hive they will put four and a half thousand hives in there for three weeks.

**MS RADFORD:** And the almonds.

**MR FRASER:** And the almonds. And then they will come back and they will do pollination of seed canola. But, the loss of bees in northern New South Wales is just about being overcome by the commercial men, which are back in operation. Most eucalypts will recover very quickly. That mess made. But what they do not like is continuous fires. A fire and then a fire, and then a fire. In Gippsland there are very few – bees can deal with this. They can populate an area very quickly if there is a resource there. If there is nectar and pollen. If there is no resource there, they just will not go there.

**MS BATH:** But you need flowers for nectar and pollen.

**MR FRASER:** That is what I am saying.

**MS BATH:** So when they are really crucially burnt, that we saw in Gippsland and eastern—

**MR FRASER:** Well, Gippsland, nothing. It does not matter for bees. You are talking commercial or sideliners?

**MS BATH:** I am just talking bee populations.

**MR FRASER:** Bee populations will re-habit in the areas that are not burnt. They will go back into there once there is a resource. But, the areas in New South Wales, it is actually west of the Divide where most of the nectar comes from. If you go from Seymour to the middle of Queensland, you had the original Box-ironbark, about 300 kilometres wide. It is based on White Box Woodland. There is only 400 hectares of White Box Woodland left. We cleared the lot. If you go from Seymour to the Flinders Ranges, it is basically a yellow gum forest with other trees through it.

And the trees that produce nectar here are about five, six species. Messmate I saw over last fires at Marysville. They, within five years, had even shed the burnt bark, and they said bring on the next fire. Peppermint, 70 per cent was killed, and of course, the ash died in mass and has fully regenerated. But this is not happening where they are clear felling. They are having enormous trouble to get it to regenerate. And there are some areas where they were ordered by the department to use tubestock. Fence it off and put tubestock in it.

**MS BATH:** Can you share that? Can you provide that information to the committee?

**MR FRASER:** Yes.

**MS BATH:** And where they are?

**MR FRASER:** Yes. If you go to the (indistinct) at Talangi they have been put down for a good – there has been resistance. And what would you like? A map?

**MS BATH:** Yes. Well, just your statement is that the regeneration through the timber, VicForests, et cetera, was not working.

**MR FRASER:** Not always. Many do.

**MS BATH:** Right.

**MR FRASER:** Many do not.

**MS BATH:** So, I just would like to know where – what region you are stating that exists.

**MR FRASER:** Yes. Well at Falls Creek Road, that would be a good space, start with mixed forest. And the department – ask the department where they fenced it and used tubestock. They will tell you where it is, because they demanded that it be done.

**MS RADFORD:** Could I just add one more thing? In our submission, we do ask for increased funding to maintain and protect national parks to 1 per cent of the State budget, which would be a huge increase, and would do something. One small per cent of State budget.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Others have asked for that, too. Yes, a lot of stuff has been said about the laws and I would just like you to maybe elaborate a bit more on this. Is it the laws are not ambitious enough to achieve the objectives, or are they – is it a problem with enforcement and funding? Or can you speak to both of those issues, if you would.

**MS RADFORD:** Well, I think it is both.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes.

**MS RADFORD:** And also, the law allows so much wriggle room. If you look at the offset process, the very first thing is avoid. Now, they do not avoid, because avoid does not have teeth. So, if we had taken avoid seriously, both urban, peri-urban, rural areas, we would not have cut down a lot of the vegetation that then they want you to do offsets for.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** So, you say avoid provides too much word—

**MS RADFORD:** Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** —and (indistinct) discretionary types.

**MS RADFORD:** Well, it does. What does it mean? Does it mean – because the developer says, 'Well, actually, I bought that land 10 years ago with the intention of putting a suburb of 10,000 people out there. So, I can't avoid cutting down the land'. 'All right. No, it seems like you cannot'. And so, there is no 'no-go zones', or they are very few. I mean, green wedges in Melbourne and that type of thing. But I cannot say it any more clearly than that, that avoid is vague. And it gets jumped over. I mean, you know yourself from your own councils that council – and then when you go to VCAT, and we have been to VCAT on many occasions, VCAT does not find for you because law is not specific enough, and it does not actually say what 'avoid' means.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I have seen this in so many planning (indistinct).

**MS RADFORD:** Yes. So, there is that. And then there is the whole thing Stuart was talking about, of where you go from there, which is the offsets, which have been shown not to work. But, I mean, they are supposed to bolster Victoria's habitat. Well, they have not. Clearly, they are still not (indistinct) and of course we are, because they have cut something down and you call this something over here the equivalent, that is not. So, I think the law is wishy washy and non-specific. And as they are written now, they cannot possibly be upheld. This has seen, as we have sort of said, is – I have seen it.

We moved to Wangaratta in 1983. We had a fantastic man there by the name of Davidson. He was, what was the old DSC. He knew those box forests from the Divide like the back of his hand. But, they would not give them money. They would not support him. He resigned. And he is just emblematic of what that government department has lost. It just loses people hand over fist all the time. My daughter in law is the – Julie Withheld her name is. She is the expert on native orchids for western Vic. She used to work for the department. She worked for the department for 10 years to try and achieve things.

No support. No money. She resigned. She has got her own business now. She lives very well and she is propagating and putting out native orchids all over the shop for (indistinct). So, a good way to demoralise the people who are working to protect our environment in government departments is just strip them of funding support, cued off advancement, all those things. And then we have the fire departments end up burgeoning and we have not even got on to fire, because fire is a massive thing to, yes, include for the destroying understorey and habitat.

**MR FRASER:** Do you know much about the box-ironbark, as a forest system? The box-ironbark tree, if you cut it down, they all copussed. That is what they are used throughout the world for firewood. So, clearing the firewood, you think you are clearing and opening it up. You are not. That is why foresters spend 100 years trying to thin it out again. It is a very difficult thing to do, to slowing weed out. So, when they cut it down, cut

50 per cent of it down, come back in 10 or 15 years and it is all copussed and it is a bigger mess than what it was before.

The trouble with fire is, when you talk about fire in the mountains, and you talk about fire in the box-ironbark, they are totally different forests. If you really want to, the North Central CMA did a brilliant piece of work that is all about fire. And if you go to their website, you can download their opinion. And there is only six species in these forests that actually require fire to regenerate. They actually have always had a very low fire regime. Their gullies were burnt. Probably Aboriginal did that and the northern plains they burnt.

But, the actual box-ironbark, I have my doubts if they were actually burnt. So, when you burn them over a period that is too short, you begin to end up with an understorey that is actually flammable, because they are the ones that recover quickly. And the other ones like that perhaps have a 30, 40 years before they should be burnt again, they just drift out of the system. So, the fire people want to stop fires. Fair enough.

A good example is the Wellsford. In the last 100 years it has had a five hectare fire, which started off on private land and went out on its own. The same in the (indistinct). They have been – had a few fires in the Canna River Mallee area, but they have hardly ever had a fire in the Bendigo Forest. And yet, they are burning it as though Bendigo is going to be destroyed by it.

**The CHAIR:** No, I am sorry. I am going to have pull out—

**MR FRASER:** That is all right.

**The CHAIR:** —here because we are out of time.

**MS RADFORD:** I just want to say, on Black Saturday we had one fire in Bendigo, and in the last terrible fire season we did not have any. We got away in Bendigo. The box-ironbark is not fire prone. I had a CFA captain tell me that our forest cannot support a crown fire, unless you have got that day of 44, after five after days of 44. And yet, it is safe to burn. They think this is good to burn. They have to actually light the fire on the ground with accelerant.

**MR FRASER:** They use diesel to keep it going.

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry. We are out of time.

**MR FRASER:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I am very sorry. So, what we will do, I know Dr Bach did not get a question, but if we have any other questions, we can submit—

**DR BACH:** Look, I will put a question to you on notice.

**The CHAIR:** —questions on notice. So, we will organise that to come through the secretary. Thank you so much.

**MR FRASER:** Sorry. I am becoming my father who talked—

**The CHAIR:** No. Not at all.

**MR FRASER:** —and I could read the paper. I knew exactly where (indistinct).

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for your presentation. Thank you.

**MR FRASER:** Thank you.

**MS RADFORD:** Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR:** I am so sorry.

**WITNESSES WITHDREW.**