

# **ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils**

Wycheproof — 12 October 2017

### Members

Mr Josh Bull — Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Richard Riordan

Mr Daniel Young

### Witnesses

Ms Lucy Roffey, Chief Executive Officer, and  
Cr David Pollard, Mayor, Buloke Shire Council.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee’s public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria’s rural and regional councils. I extend a welcome to members of the public and media, if present today. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by such privilege. Today’s evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof of the transcript at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee’s website.

I now invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, which as you know will be followed by questions from committee members. I ask you first to state your name and role for the record and then proceed with your opening statement.

**Ms ROFFEY** — Lucy Roffey, chief executive officer of Buloke Shire Council. I will be making the official statement.

Buloke Shire Council made a submission to this committee back in September 2016, and the issues raised in that submission are still relevant. Today, though, I would like to quantify these issues and also introduce some emerging issues that are impacting on the sustainability of Buloke shire. The submission will also provide an update on the progress of the Rural Living campaign, which was presented to the inquiry in the last submission.

One of the things we have talked about today is the decline in the population, and the recent census figures show a slowing of that decrease. So there was a 6 per cent decrease in the 2006–11 period and only a 3 per cent decrease in 2011–16. So we are hoping that we are seeing some stabilisation of our population. In fact I think you have heard in this inquiry today that there are some people moving back into the area, some younger families, and I think partly that is to do with our focus on intensive agriculture and having other diverse income streams for farmers. Also there are affordable housing opportunities for some of those younger families to move back.

However, there are still population declines, and some of the factors that impact on that are the amalgamation of farm properties, which reduce the number of farming families in the area; increased automation of farming practices, which therefore reduces employment in farming; reduction or centralisation of a range of services provided by state and federal governments, which makes it less attractive to live in rural areas, and I think you have heard a lot about that this morning; and less investment in rural areas compared to capital cities, particularly in connectivity and transportation, which makes rural businesses less competitive and again is a barrier for people to move and work here.

Government policy in recent years has been to assume a continuing decline of population in rural communities, and consequently there has been a lack of support and investment in these areas. Any further decline in our population will make many businesses, services and activities unviable. So economic diversification in our region is a focus for us to support job growth and ensure that local farmers have an alternative income source, particularly in times of drought and flood, and we will continue obviously, with climate change, to see further drought and flood events. Access to fast broadband and mobile communications enables rural businesses to reach new markets, to set up more easily from home and to expand and attract investment. Again, not having that level of connectivity is a barrier for our businesses to diversify.

Just moving on to the Rural Living campaign, this was established in May 2015 to highlight sustainability issues facing rural councils and particularly to find a list of minimum services that all Victorians are entitled to. I think you have heard here this morning that many people have said that they feel they are second-class citizens and they are not getting the same services as others. The Rural Living campaign committee comprises CEOs and mayors of eight councils, being Buloke, that led the campaign, Campaspe, Hindmarsh, Mount Alexander, South Gippsland, West Wimmera, Yarriambiack and Swan Hill Rural City Council.

Work completed in 2016 was to draft the terms of reference for an intergovernmental working group and also to develop a consultants brief, to undertake some work to identify that minimum level of service. To progress the establishment of the working group and to progress the consultants brief, that campaign has now been transferred to Rural Councils Victoria, as Rural Councils Victoria represents all rural councils, so 38 of them, and it means there will be broader engagement and involvement with all rural councils in that process going forward. Buloke, Yarriambiack and Mount Alexander will continue their involvement through the project working group.

In response to the terms of reference for this committee, local government funding and budgetary pressures: as we reported, we undertook at Buloke rationalisation of services in 2014–15 to improve the financial sustainability of this organisation. We had to discontinue a number of council-funded services, including community transport, and I think you have heard about that today — that there is a lack of access to community transport, let alone public transport. SES support we had to reduce. We reduced the road network by 500 kilometres, and they were returned to earth roads, and we reduced customer service centres. We did have customer service in each town, and now we only have customer service here in Wycheproof. That reduced staff numbers from 159 EFT to 115 EFT, and there has been a reduction in employee expenses from \$12.1 million to \$9.2 million — so a significant cut in staffing and costs in order to meet financial sustainability requirements and therefore a reduction in services.

We now have a significantly improved financial position going forward, and we have developed a sustainable four-year financial plan to support the new council plan. The investment renewal gap for our extensive road network of 5000 kilometres, however, will continue to grow. The replacement of other ageing infrastructure, such as outdoor pools, community buildings, recreational facilities and drainage will be impossible without significant financial support from state and federal governments. One of the things talked about today was looking at matching grant funding, and reducing that for small rural councils would be a good initiative.

The freezing of the financial assistance grants in 2014 reduced our income over the period by \$809 000, and it will have an ongoing impact of \$4.1 million over 10 years.

The large and dispersed population increases the cost of delivering services to our communities when we compare it to metropolitan councils. The average cost per unit of service can be up to three times greater than supplying the same service in a metropolitan area. In 2015–16 the cost per capita incurred by Buloke shire was \$3611, compared to the average cost for metro councils of \$1196.

The number of people per kilometre of road in Buloke shire is 1.12, compared with the average of other small rural shires of 9.74 per kilometre, and in metropolitan areas they have an average of 272 people per kilometre. So you can just see there in the facts and figures the cost of maintaining our roads to our shire.

Fifteen per cent of our ratepayers are entitled to the pensioner rebate. As pensioners are often asset rich and income poor, the adoption of significant rate increases does have an impact on the disposable income of a significant portion of our community. The council has hardship provisions in place, but these can impact on council's cash balances, particularly when large volumes of our ratepayers are also involved in events such as floods and drought.

Rural councils still require a number of statutory positions with particular qualifications; however, they often work on a part-time basis. This will include project managers, engineers, environmental health officers, maternal and child health staff and building surveyors. It is becoming increasingly difficult for us to attract staff to rural areas given the limited employment opportunities for other family members and the continual reduction in services at all levels of government. We have recently repeatedly advertised for manager of finance and project manager positions without success.

Building surveyors are required by council regardless of whether we issue building permits. Buloke recently went to tender for a new building surveyor contract, advertised extensively across rural and metro Victoria and had one applicant with limited capacity. There are minimal private building surveyors who will actually travel to our shire, and consequently council issues the majority of building permits. Given the limited availability of qualified staff, this is resulting in time delays to process permits and complete inspections, which impacts on economic development in the area. If we had all the money in the world, we still could not get the hours of building surveyors to come to our shire.

Buloke Shire Council is involved in a number of shared service agreements and projects with neighbouring councils to alleviate some of these resource and budget issues. A current project includes sharing with Loddon shire in procurement of an IT system. By putting that IT system in place across two shires, we are hoping that will improve sharing of resources and staff by being on the same platform, using the same software.

Moving to paragraph (b — fairness, equity and adequacy of rating systems — the current rating system is clearly not fair, equitable or adequate when the infrastructure per head of population for Buloke shire in 2016–17 was \$28 000 per capita, compared to the average for Victoria of \$13 000. While our rates are higher per

dollar in capital-improved value, our average residential rate for property was \$863, compared to \$1500 for the rest of Victoria. That is because our average housing prices are obviously a lot lower. But we have a rating effort of 0.96 per cent, compared to 0.47 per cent on average for the rest of Victoria, so we really cannot put much more pressure on the rating system.

The impact of rate capping policies: we received a variation to the rate cap in the first year to raise an additional \$60 000, but we have not applied for variations in subsequent years. Our rates are higher than average for small rural shires, and an increase in excess of CPI would further impact on the financial sustainability of our community members and their businesses. Increasing rates in excess of CPI is not a sustainable solution to the financial issues facing rural councils.

The Essential Services Commission has recently undertaken a productivity study of Victorian councils to assist with recommendations to the minister on an efficiency factor to be applied in setting the rate cap in future years. Buloke has a number of concerns in relation to this study, including the methodology, which does not account for the different levels and types of outsourcing, which impacts staff number comparisons, and the substantially higher cost of delivering services in rural communities due to factors including dispersion of population, market failure and economies of scale. Small rural councils are not delivering the same level and number of services due to these factors and are operating in most cases as efficiently as possible. Applying an efficiency factor to the rate cap for small rural councils will further add to our financial sustainability issues.

In relation to flood mitigation infrastructure, a draft flood plain management strategy for north-central has been developed and is currently advertised for community feedback. Key themes and actions arising from the plan that will involve investment from Buloke Shire Council include the coverage of high-quality flood mapping to inform planning schemes. It has been identified that we need to complete 10 local flood studies at a cost of approximately \$30 000 per study, or \$300 000. Also we are currently constructing a flood levy at Donald, which will have an annual maintenance cost of \$30 000, and there are plans underway to construct a flood levy at Charlton, with an estimated capital cost of \$10 million and an annual maintenance cost of \$250 000.

Maintenance of local roads and bridge networks: we have over 5300 kilometres of roads to maintain. To put this into context, our road network would run from here in Wycheproof to Darwin. As outlined above, the number of people per kilometre of road is 1.12, which puts a huge rate burden on the community. In 2017–18 we will spend nearly \$6 million on our roads and bridges, which is by far our largest expenditure item. We expect this to rise to over \$7 million by 2020.

We have made tough decisions in the past five years rationalising 500 kilometres of gravel road to reduce replacement and maintenance costs. The current state of roads in the shire, both local and VicRoads, you have heard today have been impacted by the floods of 2016 and also higher freight movements as a result of current works on the Murray Basin rail project. While council is eligible for funding under the natural disaster relief and recovery fund to repair roads damaged by flood, there will be no compensation for the damage to roads from the increased freight movements.

I will note, because it has been raised a couple of times here, that the reason we have not completed those flood works is that it takes at least 12 months to analyse the damage, and not all of the damage will be recognised in the first 12 months. So we have just about completed that work from 2016. We are looking at about \$10 million of works to be done, which will not be done over the harvest season, and we will continue to have concerns from farmers for the harvest season, but we will not get the funding for that until we have put in our application. Works would be expected to be completed next calendar year.

Lastly, just addressing the weed and pest animal control issues, yes, again, we have got 5300 kilometres of local roads to maintain. We receive funding of \$50 000–\$75 000 per annum to manage weeds, which is only \$14 per lineal kilometre of roadside. This is clearly not enough to manage that cost. We would estimate that to do it effectively would be more in the vicinity of \$250 000–\$350 000 per year. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. David, did you want to make any comment at this point, or are you happy to —

**Cr POLLARD** — I am happy to just support those comments that Lucy has produced, which I think gives you a fairly good overview. I am sitting down, awaiting your questions.

**The CHAIR** — Certainly, okay. Thank you very much. I will start, if I may. Before I do, I understand we have some students from St Mary's Primary School. Hi, and welcome. Thank you for being here. We hope you find this informative. If you have any questions, I think we are going to break for lunch shortly, so feel free to ask them of any of the committee members. They will be happy to have a chat with you.

I will start, if I may. I refer to the Rural Living group of councils submission in relation to Buloke. I note that you discussed the 16 per cent reduction in recurrent expenditure in the 2014–15 year: one in six staff no longer at the organisation, one customer service centre across 8000 square kilometres, no community transport — all those things that we have spoken about today. You mentioned the freeze in the federal financial assistance grants; \$4.1 million over 10 years, I think you said. Can you outline for me, what was the history that led up to this 16 per cent reduction? Was it a slow burn, if you like, or was it the considerable impact of that freeze or a combination of all these things that led Buloke to make those fairly tough decisions?

**Ms ROFFEY** — I think it is a combination of all of those things. I think over the last sort of five to ten years councils have become better at doing long-term financial planning. Some of the local government performance reporting framework financial indicators have probably highlighted more clearly some of the financial pressures and given that more visibility. Then with the financial assistance grant freeze, the rate cap policy, again I think that just further focused people on the financial position of small rural communities and they realised it was time they needed to do something significant to cut those costs.

**Cr POLLARD** — As well as that — I will just follow on from Lucy — we have just come off three natural disasters. We had a locust plague. Although the chemical was funded, the actual training and the operation of the staff cost a considerable amount of money. As well as that we had the floods in 2010 and then the major flood in 2011. In the major flood in 2011 we were probably one of the worst hit shires in Australia. Although it was mainly a lower flow and over a huge landmass, we had nearly 50 per cent of the shire impacted, and there was 96 per cent of businesses in Charlton — one community — impacted as well as 80 per cent of the housing stock. So there was a huge impact and huge clean-up, and it required a lot of support. That was just before the big huge reduction because our financial sustainability was not good.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for that. By way of supplementary, we have heard, I think, some quite creative and novel suggestions put forward this morning. I think you have been here for some of the other witnesses. If you were in our position, if you were in my position as the committee chair, what single — or you can couple give me a couple — recommendation would you be putting forward in your report to address some of these issues that we have spoken about today?

**Ms ROFFEY** — I think one of the ones that I have listed, which would be similar to what you heard today, would most certainly be topping up road funding. Our rate base is not going to ever be able to plug the gap. People were talking about it today too. That has an economic impact, clearly. With the businesses that we have and freight movements, that investment in roads is an economic investment. With cost shifting, we have picked up the cost of levies, some of the roadside maintenance, emergency management et cetera. While I would not recommend that state government take back those responsibilities, I think it often makes sense for those services to be delivered locally. But being adequately funded to deliver them would be a better solution.

The grant funding ratios we have talked about before too. So I think having a lower ratio — we often negotiate that, and on the Donald levy we did. But having to negotiate that every time and not being guaranteed can impact us in actually applying for those grants. I think the other one that has come up significantly also from a community perspective is transport. We need a transport solution. We do not have good public transport. Community transport has been partly funded by council in the past and partly by community goodwill and donations. It actually needs a proper sustainable model going forward.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Do you want to say something to that, David?

**Cr POLLARD** — We are talking about federal assistance grants. I know it is not a state issue, but that is what they are — they are assistance grants. We are giving big chunks of federal assistance grants to areas that are sustainable and that have got the capacity to pay, and the smaller rural councils are really struggling for revenue streams. We cannot set up parking meters because we would not get enough out of the parking meter to pay the inspector, and we have got no other access to revenue other than our rating system. That is a huge issue to try and get sustainable services into our communities.

As I mentioned before, we have got fantastic education facilities. I reckon we have got really good hospitals. We need businesses encouraged to come in to try and assist that side of it. As well as that we need affordable houses so that we have got places for people to live in to work in the businesses. We have got a couple of larger businesses in our council, but it is important that we try to support and get others into it to try and ease the rating burden and actually share the rating burden over a larger number of people.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I just have a couple of questions too. I have read the report. In your last paragraph, after you have gone through quite a list of issues, which I suspect might be similar to your presentation to DELWP, who are doing a similar type of inquiry into the sustainability of local government — yet we do not know where they are up to with that or what their conclusions might be — you say:

In order to address this, the campaign advocacy strategy seeks not to suggest the changes and solutions that might remedy the problem but to seek agreement to the concept that all Victorians, including the residents of small rural shires, are worthy of a specific minimum set of service levels.

That does not make our job any easier, because we are actually trying to find the solutions, and it is quite difficult to try and identify with these hearings what other people might think they should be. Tracy, in your contribution so far you have noted the FAG grants. The indexations obviously did not help rural councils. There is considerable backlog and a considerable cost because of those decisions that were made. I noticed your budget has no real provision for state government funding of local roads and bridges, which the previous government had a very successful program for, with \$160 million a year to disadvantaged councils, which seems to be at least one part of the solution that might help some of these remote councils — the reintroduction of programs specifically for local council.

You talk about housing affordability, yet I would have thought it would have been reasonably cheap to build and buy a house in Buloke shire. The issue I would have thought to get people to live in them is that you would actually need jobs, and for jobs to come to Buloke you need industry, and for industry to want to invest you have to provide a certain amount of tools to make it attractive for them to do so. Transport is one which you identified. But apart from that I am not hearing anything really loud and clear in relation to what we can do to help councils like yourselves to encourage that population shift and growth in your shire to reduce the land taxes that you charge on landholders and also provide the services you are expected to provide. History shows that state governments will continue to cost shift. Going back to the Chair's question too, what can we do in the way of recommendations to solve some of these issues?

**Mr ROFFEY** — My list of things, I suppose, was about the financial sustainability of councils to pay for what we are doing now, but what you are talking about is population growth — trying to get more population and business growth here. There are a range of things that I think some of the previous speakers raised that we could do to incentivise businesses to come here. Connectivity, both mobile and internet, is a huge problem. It is hard to get businesses to come here when we have got black spots and we do not have good NBN. Having connectivity also allows us to get a more diverse range of businesses to come here, not just ag businesses but a broader range of businesses. I think we do have occupancy, both retail and housing stock, that is available. We obviously have a fair bit of land, so we might be able to help with some rezoning land if we need more industrial land to get businesses to come here. You need all those things in place, such as connectivity et cetera, for businesses to want to come here. Incentives to get them to come here were also mentioned this morning, such as reduced taxes and maybe a waiving of planning and building permits et cetera. I think all of those things would make a nice package to attract businesses to this area.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Just one quick one, Chair, as a supplementary. The Regional Victoria Living Expo was a coalition policy commitment which was delivered, and obviously its measure of success is seen differently by the Labor government and the coalition government. You keep talking about marketing — you know, rural councils trying to provide excitement and showing the assets of the particular region to people who do not live here but might like to do so. A program like that, do you think it still has some legs or do you see another medium better utilised to showcase what you have to offer and then try to encourage people to move to live, to work and even to procreate in these regions?

**Ms ROFFEY** — The rural living expo, a lot of people thought quite highly of that. I think there was a lot of disappointment when that was discontinued. There is an online promotion now, I think, from the current state government. Both of those are good. I think it is really difficult to sell the region at the moment, again, without investment in streetscapes so that places look nice.

Again, it is the services. All the marketing in the world is fine, but how can you tell people to come and live here — and we were just talking about it — when you cannot get an X-ray anywhere in the shire? It is getting beyond our council services, but it is also other services. So if people want to move here and they cannot get access to certain levels of education for their children, they cannot access hospital services, then it is really difficult to encourage them to come here.

Jobs is probably the number one. When people want to move to an area they want to know that they have got a job and that they have got somewhere to live. I do agree that there is affordable housing here, but it is the jobs as well, so we need job opportunities and we need to have more locally based services so that it is an attractive place to live. It is physically an attractive place to live in many ways, and we have got lots of things to sell, such as participation in sport, social inclusiveness — those sorts of things — but we are missing so many fundamental services that is a really difficult sell in some cases to say to people, ‘Come and live here, but you are going to have to travel 300 kilometres to get in X-ray’.

**Mr YOUNG** — I probably do not have too much to add because it has been a fairly comprehensive little display you have put on. It has actually answered a lot of my questions already, which is great — particularly when I like to ask the question, ‘What do you want us to do now?’, which has been covered off. But just on one particular thing: you mentioned the idea about planning permits being waived for people interested in moving into the area. I just wanted to make clear: you do not mean waived, because that is obviously a cost to council — you would mean subsidised by government?

**Ms ROFFEY** — Absolutely. I know that one of our business groups, Donald 2000, we hear they often talk about waiving building and planning fees. We would need the support of state government to reimburse us for that because, yes, that would just come out of our pocket. There may be business cases — if you were doing that and you were attracting enough businesses here and it increased our rates, then perhaps we could justify it from that perspective so it might actually in the end be cost neutral or cost positive for us.

**Mr YOUNG** — Perhaps not to kick it off, though.

**Ms ROFFEY** — Yes, but to get it started and to get people interested in it we may need some help and assistance.

**Mr YOUNG** — I just wanted to ask: a lot of issues you talked about do cross other councils, but is there anything particular to Buloke that we may want to focus on that might not be recognised by any trips that we do to other parts of the state?

**Ms ROFFEY** — One of the things I have noticed — I have been in my role for about eight months — is that because of our location we are often grouped across different federal and state government service providers in different ways. It is very confusing for us. It is very confusing for our community who have to actually access those services. It is not particularly efficient. We have staff heading off to Horsham one week, Mildura the next, Bendigo the next. So there are even some of those things that really do not help this particular community, and it is different to a lot of others, I think. There may be a couple of other councils that are in a similar position, but we are particularly pulled in three directions all of the time. Particularly I suppose the state government, which is providing a lot of those services, could think about some of those boundaries and alignments and think about a more effective way of delivering those services.

I think the second thing can be — again, this will be Buloke and maybe a couple of other councils as well — that because of that too, we talking about transport. Which direction do people go? For some services they have got to go up to Mildura, which is ridiculously too far away for most of our community, and Bendigo, so then which way do you focus your public transport and the cost of travelling? So there are, again, place-based services. If we had them here and they were better coordinated, then we could save everybody a lot of money and put more services actually into our communities.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — I will certainly ask two and maybe three if time permits. I had the privilege of meeting with the Buloke council last week to understand some of their issues, so what I thought I might do in terms of some of the information that I obtained there is ask some questions about that so we can get it on the record, because I think some of those aspects were quite important from my point of view. You touched on one of them, but we will try to get into that a bit more. One of the issues that you made comment on was the fact that, in terms of the government grants that are available, because your council is so small in terms of staff you

actually have difficulties in applying for grants where you might actually get money to do things because you just do not have the resources internally to actually fill out the applications to put in for those grants. Do you think there is some sort of assistance that can come through elsewhere that might be of assistance in trying to apply for those grants in the first instance?

**Ms ROFFEY** — Yes, and with a couple of our grant applications recently RDV staff have actually helped us in an informal sense. If it was a more formal approach so that we could get assistance on more, that would be good. Again, there are inefficiencies in filling out all of those grant application forms. Every time you do it you are re-entering all the information. It would be great if the state government had just one portal where most of that stuff was prefilled and already there. That would cut down a lot of cost and effort as well. But yes, we most certainly could do with that assistance. We have been quite successful in grants because that has been a focus over the last couple of years, but we have in a lot of cases had assistance from state government to help us complete those applications.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Another one that came up was from a capital works perspective, particularly some of the larger items where at times the funding model can be a third, a third, a third between state, local and federal governments. That all sounds fairly reasonable in theory, but when you put that into practice — and you made mention of that in relation to the levy around Charlton — under that formula, how is that levy to be funded and how would your council go in terms of making your contribution to that?

**Ms ROFFEY** — The current estimate for that levy is \$10 million, so our share would be over \$3 million. We do not have that in our long-term financial plan at the moment, and I can only say that if we were to try and get that level of funding, it would come at the cost of road renewal.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — The \$3 million up-front is one thing, but then you have got \$250 000 annually in maintenance to that levy.

**Ms ROFFEY** — Yes. For \$250 000, that is sort of equivalent to knocking out probably one of our key services. It would mean not doing swimming pools anymore or not doing libraries et cetera, so it has that level of impact. For a community of our size we would just lose a whole service. Or I think \$250 000 for us would probably be a seven or 8 per cent rate rise for everybody, which we know people cannot afford.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Thank you. And just the last one I want to touch on is an issue that was raised by Mr Summerhayes from Berriwillock — I do not want to do him in even though I have just done that — about the roadside weeds and the build-up on the side of the roads. He was making the comment that local farmers are not allowed to spray it or slash it themselves because that is a council function, and then you have just told us that you do not have anywhere near the resources to service that for 5000 kilometres. What is the solution to that scenario? You cannot both be right.

**Cr POLLARD** — There are issues around that with native grasses, the federal environment act, the CFA act and everywhere else. We have been trying in the municipal fire prevention committee to get on top of this for the last two years. Because we have only got one staff member that actually helps us with our environmental issues, we are struggling to get a list of roads that we can just write a list down and say, 'You can do something with these but you cannot do something with that'. We have not got the staff numbers to actually form that list. It has been a huge issue. I am a group officer for the local CFA as well, and I am getting it from both sides of the fence. I am not sure what the answer is. I cannot go and say to people to just go and cut the grass on the side of the road, because I have not got that authority.

A letter came back from the federal environment minister that told us that when the fire is coming towards us we can do what we like on the roads, which is really handy. We are trying to limit the intensity of the fire before we actually get it to come, so there are a lot of issues in that area. It is very difficult to answer because I have not got the right answers.

**Ms ROFFEY** — Can I just add to that too that I know that a local farmer faced significant fines from the federal government for slashing the wrong piece of roadside because of native vegetation, so there are significant consequences for getting it wrong. As David said, he should not be directing people to do it in case he has got it wrong, and as he is not quite sure of what native vegetation is there he could impose hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fines on that particular farmer. So again it is about better direction at the state

government level about the interaction with that legislation, some practicalities of applying the legislation and some support in mapping roadsides.

I think the map is also really difficult to read on the state government website, so it is difficult for farmers to access information on their particular roadsides because of the mapping software that is utilised at the moment. So there are a couple of practical solutions that could be there. This is just another example of our local municipal group trying to find ways around it. It is a bigger issue than Buloke. Can the state government please just give us some straightforward advice and support for all rural communities, so that we all know what we are doing and it is clear?

**The CHAIR** — David and Lucy, thank you very much for having us in the shire and for presenting a very comprehensive submission and answering our questions. We greatly appreciate it.

**Ms ROFFEY** — Thanks for having us.

**Cr POLLARD** — I would like to thank the committee for coming up here and presenting in the shire and coming to listen to our ratepayers and us on the issues up this way. Thank you very much for coming.

**Committee adjourned.**