

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities**

Bendigo—Thursday, 19 September 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

**WITNESS**

Mr Gil Hopkins, Acting Executive Officer, Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities. All evidence taken today will be recorded and is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript of today's evidence at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the Committee's website. It is customary that we allow 5 to 15 minutes for a presentation and then the Committee may ask a number of questions. Could you please state your full name and title before beginning your presentation.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Full name, Gilbert William Hopkins, but Gil, please. I am Acting Executive Officer for the Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance, one of about 10 alliances across Victoria. I think every part of the state except for Glenelg down along the coast is covered by greenhouse alliances now. It makes me a bit jealous about what you can do around Bendigo and some of the towns like that with a lot of people and a lot of capital and initiative, and it makes it much more difficult further out.

I have not prepared anything extra, except I have put a table on the back that shows population numbers and income over the last few years. One of the main points I want to stress is that a low population, especially in some of the shires, makes it very difficult for the councils to participate in a lot of the activities that are there, including grant activities, and now with staff members in councils restricted—you have to restrict the number of staff you have; they tend to grow. But with grants available to councils, they usually put on more staff. So that is always a tendency. So if you do not have the staff, you cannot get the job done basically.

The Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance was set up with government funding, as a lot of the greenhouse alliances were. I think it was during the Brumby Government time, and we operated with a paid sustainability officer for quite a while. Mostly what happened then was that all the auditing of all the councils was done, all of their strategies were prepared, but that is pretty much when a change of government occurred. So not so much was done about activities and things that could be done, but one of the major programs that was done was the Lighting the Regions program. Some of that started down in the Glenelg area and then the Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance picked it up, but it became very important for lots of people. So our people went to Bendigo and a whole team worked together across nearly half of Victoria to get LED lights on all the streetlights. Now that program is being extended through the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance.

Another project that we started on was the Beaufort bioenergy program and we started that for the Wimmera area, but again with a change of government and funding and so on—I do not really know the reasons—there was a change in who was directing what programs, and it ended up at Beaufort in a much smaller structure than what we thought it was going to be, but it shows the possibilities. A lot of the businesses, including farming businesses, have done everything they can to reduce their energy bills, and a lot of our problem is structure—what is available. All of the wind and solar farm output is taken up already in our area. The power systems just cannot take anymore.

We have put in submissions to AEMO and others about improving all of that, but it is going to take too much time. So I think one of the things that needs to happen is to act locally—instead of trying to do great big structures and great big programs, to do a lot of smaller programs.

With the Bendigo group that was just talking, they are doing a lot of local solar that is used locally, and I think that is the way to go. We supported the Natimuk Community Energy group to do a study to see if they could make Natimuk entirely energy self-sufficient; they have got a program where there are going to produce a solar farm—a small one—to try and power Natimuk. They have put a lot of solar panels on roofs and so on, but the power system will not take much more than what is there already. In fact in our areas a lot of people who want to put solar on their roofs cannot because Powercor will not let them put it back into the grid. If they are using batteries, fine, but otherwise, no.

Our main problem is lack of staff. When we started off we had the CEOs of all the councils involved. They are the ones who set up the whole business, but once everything was operating the CEOs handed it over to staff members, pretty much, and to council members. Council staff tell me that councillors do not actually have much effect on programs that operate in councils; they might make decisions and so on, but it is the CEO who runs the council. The CEO and the staff are the ones that do the work, so we need some of the higher level staff on board for most of the activities that councils are going to do.

Our group, you can see in the list there, also includes the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Sustainability Victoria and the Grampians Central West Waste and Resource Recovery Group. Those groups are all-important to us at the moment for providing information that we can use about grants and about activities that can be supported by all the councils, so the group is worth keeping.

As well as volunteering for the sustainability alliance and lots of other environmental and community groups I have also been, for years, in Landcare. Our Landcare group organises the Landcare facilitator for the Horsham Rural City Council area. Just that small amount of money from the Government for the Landcare facilitator means that she has set up—encouraged—four more groups in the Horsham Rural City Council area, including the Horsham Urban Landcare Group. And those sort of groups do lots of the things that the Bendigo Sustainability Group was talking about. We do not do food, but we also have the Christian Emergency Food Centre that does that. So different groups do different things.

The Landcare group, having a facilitator, can help set things up, can organise main events, can help people with all the structures and the grant applications and the management of doing things and get them going on stuff like that. What really impresses me about those facilitators is they find the need in the community, like the Landcare group. In our Landcare group, with the funding we get, we do what is needed. We only ask for the funds that we know are needed for that year for weeds, rabbits and revegetation. Just about all our creeks in our area in the Laharum-Wartook area, on the edge of the Grampians, are treed and revegetated.

We have got a lot of Indigenous revegetation that is protected. We have got a lot of the landholders involved in Landcare. It is that bottom-up approach that I think is really important for the whole community for sustainability. I have been to conferences in Melbourne where people make presentations. I went to a conference on climate change that universities were presenting. People got up and presented about climate change and about what is going to happen to us all. In the end I had to stand up and say, ‘You have to take this personally’. It was presented as something that is going to happen and not something that actually affects us. I live in the country. I work in the community. I noticed when I came to Melbourne and I was travelling on the tram and the train, nobody talks to each other. They are all on some gadget—maybe on a paper, but not many people are reading papers.

**Ms GREEN:** Not enough room. The trams are too packed.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Yes, but they are not looking at where they are and what is affecting them. I think a lot of people just do not understand what is happening with the environment. We live in the bush. The changes that are happening are incredible, but people just do not know. I was just saying before, in the last 10 years just about all of the Grampians, almost all every part of it, has been burnt. The point I am making is: for activity on climate change to be effective the people need to be involved in doing it, basically. So the bottom-up approach is really important for getting people involved. That is why people want to put solar on. They want to be involved. Anyway, you wanted to ask me some questions about the facilitator.

**The CHAIR:** We certainly do, and I think Danielle might have a—

**Ms GREEN:** I was going to suggest you throw to David first, but if you want me to—

**Mr MORRIS:** Feel free.

**Ms GREEN:** Thanks. Thank you so much for how far you have come and for what you are doing in an area of sparse population. In your written presentation you say, ‘I’m sorry that I can’t help that much’. I do not think you should be sorry at all. You have helped us and obviously helped the community that you are involved in a lot. I think you have really punched above your weight in terms of when you look at where—I kind of wanted to just congratulate you and say how you should not be hiding your light under a bushel. That is what my

grandmother would have said. But I was really interested in that Landcare facilitation. You were here listening to the previous presenters when they talked about the network of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds. I am really, really attracted that.

**Mr HOPKINS:** I could not hear a lot of what they were saying.

**Ms GREEN:** Well, they were suggesting that Foodshare and other sustainability actions could be—

**Mr HOPKINS:** Yes, that can be done.

**Ms GREEN:** They have got existing networks. How frequently does the group meet, because you have got all these—

**Mr HOPKINS:** It is only four times a year now. It was six. It was monthly, and then it got to six times a year.

**Ms GREEN:** Yes, keeping in mind what you have said about rural community groups running on the smell of an oily rag—and rural councils. But there has just been an allocation of funding from the State Government for the small councils, so it might be really worthwhile re-engaging with them again.

**Mr HOPKINS:** No, we are engaging with them all the time.

**Ms GREEN:** No, I meant in terms of it sounded like you felt that the level of support just in terms of staff time and things like that had diminished.

**Mr HOPKINS:** It is also the staff that are able to go to meetings are considered lower level staff, and they are not listened to anyway. That is part of the problem. That is our problem really; it is not your problem. But having—

**Ms GREEN:** I think we can take up the cudgels for you.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Well, part of our problem too is—it is not a problem; it is there: Wimmera Development Association. The councils are all paying into Wimmera Development Association. The other councils do not usually have that. They have the greenhouse alliance and they pay into that to stimulate that. As I have said, the councils do not want to pay another \$8000-odd to support someone to do this work for them basically, but I have not really asked them. I am just putting there that that is part of the problem. Councils get very tied up in all the things they want to do, and especially as the bigger ones they see development as the thing to do. Population is growing all the time. We need people; there are lots of jobs that need to be done. But as far as energy and climate change, I would work on the small towns first and get them self-sufficient. I know you have to do a lot here for Melbourne, but we need a power system that will cope, and it will not.

**Ms GREEN:** I think that is the low-hanging fruit, and the further you are from generation of power probably that is where beginnings should be made. Have you had any engagement with Andrew Lang, who is in Western Victoria?

**Mr HOPKINS:** Yes. I have been involved in all of that, yes.

**Ms GREEN:** Yes, who is the vice-president of world biofuels.

**Mr HOPKINS:** I get all of the bioenergy information.

**Ms GREEN:** Yes. One of the things he said to me was that the stubble project in the Pyrenees shire—

**Mr HOPKINS:** About 20 years ago there was a project on burning stubble for the Hopetoun area as one of the things that produced enough energy to support a town like Hopetoun. Those studies were done years ago, and nothing happened.

**Ms GREEN:** But sometimes the timing might not be right—and to actually re-engage now, especially with more climate change with fires getting away and the contribution of burning the stubble at the end of the season—

**Mr HOPKINS:** Crop sizes are decreasing, and the food is needed in other states—the straw and so on.

**Ms GREEN:** Thanks, Gil.

**The CHAIR:** I just have a couple of questions, Gil. There have been for a number of decades really a whole series of different types of demonstration farms demonstrating a whole raft of different good practices in terms of farming. There are demonstration farms that might introduce agroforestry. There are demonstration farms that might have different types of grasses for pasture. But it does occur to me that there are probably not a lot of demonstration farms that are dealing with energy and climate change and bringing all of these types of things together. Energy seems to be in some ways, I think, from a farming perspective often forgotten, or there are not investments or consideration about how to best do it. What are your thoughts around that? It occurs to me that the Wimmera is a dry climate and it is going to get drier as a consequence of climate change, and depending on the type of farming enterprise it is potentially quite energy intensive or less carbon intensive, so there are some opportunities, I think, in terms of responding to that. I am just wondering what your thoughts are.

**Mr HOPKINS:** There are a number of demonstration farms already, and they are pig and cattle farms that are running on gas from the dung and so on and feedlots that are doing some of the same things. A lot of farmers have got solar systems now. I know that in some of the irrigation areas they are not allowed to put the solar panels anymore, so it is about time that happened. Farms and solar go together well, and with wind, even better. We have got big farms up there that are having big installations of wind towers between Warracknabeal and Horsham. There is a big system going in at the moment. I think it is all there. It is easy to see. The farmers know about it, so I do not see that that is a major problem.

Luv-a-Duck is a big duck producer up at Nhill. When we first started the Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance we investigated and helped them investigate a bioenergy plant with all their dung and so on up there to run their system, but the dung was too variable; their waste is too variable. The systems cannot cope at the moment, as far as I know. So I think it is all there. There is a lot of overseas stuff that people know about that we do not. It is on the way, yes, but it does need some demonstration of some of those big things. Like if Luv-a-Duck was a demonstration site, that would be great, but I do not know how many other feedlots would then do it. It would be great.

**Mr MORRIS:** Gil, just listening to your comment earlier about local government and how that is working or not working, and then just reading through in terms of what you have done, there was quite a bit there for local government to potentially implement.

**Mr HOPKINS:** The Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance is mostly local government, yes.

**Mr MORRIS:** Just looking at the list of member councils, I know Northern Grampians—

**Mr HOPKINS:** They have not been involved for a while. They are on their own at the moment.

**Mr MORRIS:** They are aggressively pursuing another large project.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Yes, they have got big projects going on.

**Mr MORRIS:** Recognising the financial circumstances of councils like Buloke and Hindmarsh—

**Mr HOPKINS:** Buloke is up against it, yes.

**Mr MORRIS:** you know, the challenges that they have got, are they able to actively play a part?

**Mr HOPKINS:** Yes. Well, Buloke and Ararat are both now involved with Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance, and they were originally—in fact our first chairman for Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance came from the Buloke council. But they were also in the CVGA, and they concentrated on that. They should not be paying two groups to do the same thing anyway. But also the sustainability staff need to meet, and they

saw that as a chance to meet. The staff wanted to be involved whether the councils did or not, so there was that too. There was a bit of a conflict there between what the council wants and what the staff need, and the staff need to get together so they can share their experiences with each other so they can all end up doing similar things.

**Mr MORRIS:** Because in most cases they are a fair way apart.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Especially all their auditing and accounting and all of that sort of thing.

**Mr MORRIS:** The other question I had on the local government aspect was Mildura—are they involved?

**Mr HOPKINS:** Well, Mildura are part of CVGA now, but they were involved in the lighting program, and from that I understand they have joined CVGA, which is good. They were pretty much on their own. Mildura tends to be pretty much on its own. But it is a big council, a big area.

**Mr MORRIS:** A very big area.

**The CHAIR:** It is very remote.

**Mr HOPKINS:** Not when you go there.

**Mr MORRIS:** It is a nice town when you get there; it is just a long way to get there.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Gil. I think we have pretty much exhausted all the questions. We very much appreciate you coming in and presenting to us.

**Mr HOPKINS:** I thank the Government too for all the climate policies and programs that are operating now. That is great. You know, there has been such a lack for so long. I guess the only other thing to say is that, when it comes down to it, people will do the cheapest thing, so it does not matter. In our areas there are a lot of people who say they do not believe in climate change, including councils—not so many anymore—maybe politicians too.

**Ms GREEN:** I do not think they are sitting at this table.

**Mr HOPKINS:** It comes down to what is cheapest. Where the energy is cheapest they will do it, so whether it is solar or wind, if it is cheaper, then they will do it.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Gil. Appreciate it.

**Witness withdrew.**