

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

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

Traralgon—Wednesday, 23 October 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 Dave Bateman, Executive General Manager, Bass Coast Landcare Network.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Traralgon public hearing for the Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities. This is of course one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee is conducting around Victoria to inform itself about the issues relevant to the Inquiry. I will just run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means no legal action can be taken against you in relation to the evidence you give. However, this protection will not apply to any comments you make outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you have said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in the final report. May I ask you to introduce yourself to the Committee?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Hi everyone. My name is Dave Bateman. I am the Executive General Manager for Bass Coast Landcare Network and I am glad to be here.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Over to you.

**Mr BATEMAN:** I am here to represent Landcare across Gippsland today and talk to you guys a bit about what climate change action we are currently doing and what we could do in the future if funding was available and more programs were available. I do not know how much you guys know about Landcare, but Landcare is a nationwide organisation and also an international organisation that does environmental work on mainly private land. In Gippsland we do a hell of a lot of Landcare work. I think Landcare is actually also in about 15 different countries as well and it is all grown from Victoria. Joan Kirner started it up back in the 80s with a lady called Heather Mitchell. It is a grassroots movement where people wanted to take action, not just on climate change but to improve their farms' production and also to get trees back into the landscape.

In our area down in Gippsland we have 72 different Landcare groups with over 2000 members. In Bass Coast Landcare, the Landcare network that I look after, we have 10 Landcare groups with 800 members. Speaking for my region, we have about 40 per cent of the farmers on board in the Bass Coast Landcare region so we have got a really strong reach into the farming community. So we have got an excellent opportunity to educate our farmers on any climate change action.

One of the big things we do, and I think one of the most important things we do and one of the most basic things we do, is plant a hell of a lot of trees and shrubs. In the Gippsland region in the last financial year we planted 355 hectares of new revegetation, which equates to about 700 000 individual plants going in the ground. We are very much punching above our weight in the Gippsland region compared to the rest of the country, and the reason why we are doing so well down here is because we have got a really strong community that are interested in getting trees back into the landscape. That is one of the things we do—we are planting all the trees—and we do that all with community volunteer labour. Nearly every one of those trees is planted by the community, and that is how we keep our costs down. We get funding from Government, corporates and partners like the shires and whatnot—Bass Coast Shire Council have been absolutely fantastic for Bass Coast Landcare and they support a lot of the works we do—but nearly every single plant that we plant is planted by a volunteer, so it makes a big difference.

Planting trees is not the only thing we do. We do a lot of remnant vegetation protection. You guys are hopefully across protecting the remnant vegetation, and what we have got left is just as important or more important than planting new trees because we have done such a good job of clearing Gippsland that there is only roughly 15 per cent of remnant vegetation left. So what is left that is out there—it is really important that we stick a fence around it and stop cattle from clearing it, basically. So if trees are left in paddocks in the Gippsland area without a fence around them, with stock access to them, they basically get rubbed on and then they eventually end up being a cleared paddock. It is the legal way of clearing your land. So we strongly encourage our members to be involved in fencing their remnant vegetation first before they start planting trees.

We are also involved in helping our farmers with regenerative agricultural practices. So we get guest speakers down like Charles Massey—really good, well-informed guest speakers to talk to our members about how they can improve their soil carbon and how they can improve their soil health to improve production on their land using minimal inputs. We think one of the big things into the future will be a soil carbon market and being able to harness the farmers of Gippsland with their farms to sequester a lot of carbon through soil as well as through trees.

That is something really big and emerging that we are working on. This part of the world, down in Victoria and Gippsland, but particularly south-west Gippsland, has been identified as a hotspot for the ability of our farmers to sequester soil carbon—just because it is high rainfall, the soil is of high quality and there is a lot of opportunity to sequester carbon in our soils down here. Bass Coast Landcare in particular is working to develop whole-of-farm carbon plans, and we are looking for support to get that started.

Have you guys had a look at this submission at all? Have you got any questions that you might want to fire?

**The CHAIR:** I have just a few questions for you. While you were presenting, I was reflecting on some of the opportunities and challenges. Have you got active coast care groups in this part of the state?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes, we do. Coast care is vaguely part of Landcare, but we do have coast care groups in my region on Phillip Island, Inverloch and those areas there. They are trying to do soil erosion work and whatnot. A lot of that stuff is getting more and more difficult. I do not know if the last group talked about the erosion at Inverloch and those sorts of things. But yes, they are still active. They work on public land, whereas Landcare is more working on farmers' private land to fence off creeks and gullies and wetlands and that sort of thing.

**The CHAIR:** Has your Landcare group started to look at the opportunities around agroforestry and what levels of support potentially might be brought to the table—what the economic opportunities are around agroforestry?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes. I reckon that is a massive opportunity. We have recently run what is called a master tree growers course, which has been set up by a guy called Rowan Reid, who is the internationally known guru on agroforestry. It is something we are actively promoting to our Landcare members. Agroforestry has huge opportunities, especially in our region because trees grow so fast here and if you pick the right species and you manage it correctly, you can graze underneath them and whatnot and make a profit down the track. There are also obviously carbon opportunities there. You are growing the trees and hopefully high-value timber is what we would be aiming for, so it ends up going into—

**The CHAIR:** Furniture.

**Mr BATEMAN:** furniture and whatnot, so you do not lose the carbon. It is definitely something we are really actively promoting, and I think the Gippsland Agroforestry Network, which is in this region, they have got another master tree growers course coming up, funded through the Victorian Landcare grants. It is definitely something we should be doing more of, and I know at our Landcare network we actively promote the agroforestry, as well as doing the Indigenous biodiversity plantings, so you can mix both in together and get a really good result.

**The CHAIR:** In terms of the model, obviously it is a well-developed model. In fact it has grown out of Victoria—it has gone international, which is fantastic. Is there an opportunity to expand Landcare into urban environments so we have the concept of urban Landcare, because we have often in many urban settings degraded watercourses and those sorts of things? Is that model something that could be taken into urban communities as an opportunity to respond to the challenges of climate change?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes, definitely. There are a number of urban Landcare groups already up and going. We have got Wonthaggi Urban Landcare Group and Phillip Island Urban as well, so we actually have an officer that works with those urban Landcare group members to help them with sustainable gardening and that sort of thing. So encouraging Indigenous plants in their gardens and whatnot, then also looking at the natural reserves within those towns or within the areas and working on those natural reserves. So it is sort of like the 'friends of

group but it is a way of broadening out the friends of group model to include not just one reserve, like a whole-town approach. So, yes, we are definitely in that space.

One thing I have forgotten to mention is the fact that with our changing climate we are starting to look at bringing more northern species of plants into our planting mixes. Because the rainfall has dropped off in the last 30 or 40 years, we are starting to bring some more northern species into the plantings, and they seem to be doing well.

**Mr FOWLES:** Are you guys growing your own seedlings? Do you use local growers or—

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes. We have our own volunteer-led community nursery that grows a lot of the plants that go into Bass Coast Landcare planting. So they grow about 40 000 plants. We currently plant about 250 000 plants per year in our little area in the Bass Coast, but we utilise five other Indigenous nurseries in the area. We try to spread whatever funding we have got around to those local nurseries, so we are keeping those guys in business.

They all have to collect the seed from local sources—so we have local provenance plans—but we are actually encouraging them to go a little bit further north now when they are getting their seed so we can have more climate-resilient plants, because we are finding that some of the areas where we were planting things like blue gums and whatnot 10 years ago they are not quite as suitable anymore because it is drying out. So we have had to plant things that are more from further north, so go to the mountain grey gums rather than the blue gums and whatnot.

It is a really changing environment. One other thing I should have mentioned is our planting season is becoming more compressed. Gippsland—particularly my side, where I am dealing with it—is one of the best places to plant trees in Australia, but we used to be able to plant from, say, May to October. Now we are more pushing towards the middle of July to the middle of September, because when we plant our plants—they are Indigenous plants—you put them in the ground, you walk away. You do not water them or anything like that; they have got to survive, so if the season is getting shorter, there is less opportunity. You have to compress your planting season into that shorter period, and that is because of the rainfall, the extreme weather patterns and whatnot too.

**The CHAIR:** Can I ask: are there any barriers to stopping your Landcare group doing more?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Is it just financial?

**Mr BATEMAN:** You are probably sick of hearing this, but it is financial. Currently I have over 60 farmers on my books willing to plant 250 000 plants, which I do not have any funding for. What I do every year is apply for a heap of grants, then I get my top priority projects—on the waterways, the biggest projects, your threatened species and whatnot. When they get up, they go up to funders—the West Gippsland CMA, straight to the State Government through DELWP and to the Federal Government, and we will get a portion of them funded and then there is a whole heap left sitting on there waiting for something to happen.

**The CHAIR:** If I turned up with a cheque and gave it to you today from the Government, you would be able to plant 250 000 trees during next year?

**Mr BATEMAN:** That is just in my region in Bass Coast.

**The CHAIR:** Yeah, wow.

**Mr BATEMAN:** I am sure there are a lot more across the region. I am always getting people ringing up and wanting to do more.

**Mr FOWLES:** Sorry, but finance is the only constraint? Do you have enough volunteers to be able to deploy that scale of planting?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yeah, it is a combination of volunteers. We are a very innovative group and we get corporates involved. One Monday I had a local surveying organisation, Beveridge Williams—they decided to sponsor Bass Coast Landcare. They paid us some funds towards a sponsorship, and I got their team out and we had a big team-building day. We planted 3000 plants. We had 11 of them out and I worked them really bloody hard and we got 3000 plants in. So we have a multitude of sources of volunteers. Whether it is from corporates—

**Mr FOWLES:** So that is 250-odd plants—

**Mr BATEMAN:** They did that in 2 hours.

**Mr FOWLES:** That is two a minute.

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes. So we had five of them out in front digging holes and the rest of them walking behind carrying these buckets of plants, and they work like a swarm across a creek line. We got the 3000 in in 2 hours.

**Mr FOWLES:** That is some seriously fast deployment.

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yeah, it is. It is all about being well-organised and whatnot, and having the plants out in front and just being a real well-organised unit. The landowner was really happy; they put on a great barbecue lunch. Beveridge Williams were happy; they got a certificate saying that they support Landcare. Then when they are going for their next tender for a job they can use that credential that they are supporter of Landcare. The team had a great day; it is a really good team-building day. It is a real win-win.

**Mr FOWLES:** Is there any money available from the carbon credit or carbon abatement schemes like Green Fleet or whatever? The people who are in the market for trees for carbon abatement reasons, is there funding available from them for any of this?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yeah, so Green Fleet sort of run their own show. They will actually go and sometimes purchase land, and they have also got their own project officers similar to me.

**Mr FOWLES:** So they would purchase land just to put trees on it?

**Mr BATEMAN:** They have.

**Mr FOWLES:** Why wouldn't they just buy more trees and put them on public land or farmland?

**Mr BATEMAN:** I am not 100 per cent sure. Green Fleet go out and talk to farmers and recruit farmers too, like Landcare. They will put a deal to the farmer saying that Green Fleet owns the carbon, the farmer will get the trees planted free and a fence will be put up for them and whatnot and maintained. The cost to the farmer is minimal, but then Green Fleet uses that carbon to sell to obviously a buyer. Landcare is looking at getting into a similar space to what Green Fleet are doing. We are just in the early stages of working out how we do our contracts and all that sort of thing, but it is definitely an opportunity. Landcare would be the most well-positioned organisation to expand that program because we have already got 40 per cent of the farmers on board and it is just a matter of working out how many buyers are out there of carbon. Whether that is a council like Bass Coast Shire Council—they want their council to be carbon neutral by 2030. They are probably not going to be able to do that on their own public land because they are saying across the whole shire. So they will be looking to organisations like Landcare, and like us, to go out and find places where they can offset the carbon.

Soil carbon may be the best opportunity, because with a lot of the soil carbon works there is a whole heap of additional benefits to the farmer as far as production goes. A lot of the soil carbon things we have been looking at and we are being educated on by experts like pasture cropping and minimal tillage stuff to grow more grass, grow deeper roots further down and they die off and it puts more carbon in the soil. The farmer gets more production because they are growing more stuff up top and there is more stuff happening down below. It is just a matter of getting all the auditing and everything in place to make sure that you capture what is happening before you start going down that track and being legitimate.

**The CHAIR:** Could I ask: is there a potential role for the State Government, the State Parliament, to legislate some form of the market where some regulation is put in place? So maybe template agreements between those that want to buy trees to have planted on other people's properties. Should there be some form of a voluntary market created? Would that be a useful bit of public policy consideration from the Parliament?

**Mr BATEMAN:** Sorry, I just do not quite understand. A voluntary market for—

**The CHAIR:** So I am a large corporate and I want to do the right thing by my business and those that I sell my product to, and I have decided as part of that I want to have my company go carbon neutral but I need to offset. I want to go to a market, I want to go and buy an offset and that offset might ultimately be traded to your Landcare group and you go and plant trees.

**Mr BATEMAN:** Sounds like a great idea. It is a really good idea and currently something like Virgin Airlines or Qantas or whatever, you get the option to offset your flight. That offset could be going to the Philippines. It could be going to anywhere in the world, whereas if the Government actually legislated that if someone is going to offset their business in Australia or Victoria, that they actually offset their carbon in the actual area—not necessarily the area, but in at least in the same country or the same state—then there would be a huge pool of funding out there available for us to go out and do what actually has an effect on climate change which is the most obvious thing in the world, which is plant trees. It is just such an obvious solution, and I know a lot of other countries are doing more than what we are. We have got so many spots to do it where we are actually taking out areas that are risks to the farmers, like areas where their cattle are going to break their legs in these ridiculously steep gullies. They are not going to lose any production by taking out a creek line that is potentially where their calves could drown. And then you are improving the water quality, you are reducing the amount of sediment going into the waterways—it is such an obvious solution, but that carbon idea is a great idea of getting funds in.

**The CHAIR:** Why I ask is I am just thinking it through. It could be done just from an environmental perspective but it could also be done from an economic perspective where the farmer agrees, takes the offset, the land gets planted, and then in 30 years time harvests that timber as a cash crop effectively and then they could buy another carbon offset and go around again.

**Mr BATEMAN:** Yes, it is a potential extra income for the farmer. It is a superannuation package for the farmer as well.

**The CHAIR:** And it builds on the principles of Landcare.

**Mr BATEMAN:** It builds on the principles of Landcare. It is creating more habitat for animals as well or for fauna. It makes a hell of a lot of sense. I know that what I have been taught by the timber guys like Rowan Reid is there is going to be a big timber shortage, and one of the solutions is that model that you are talking about. So yes, it is a great idea.

**Mr FOWLES:** Good.

**The CHAIR:** I am done too. Thank you, fantastic.

**Mr BATEMAN:** Thank you for the opportunity, guys.

**Witness withdrew.**