

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Bairnsdale—Thursday, 24 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

Jenny Robertson, East Gippsland Landcare Network.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing. 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 that 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 in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. Could you please state your name for the record.

Ms ROBERTSON: Jenny Robertson.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thanks, Jenny. Over to you.

Mr FOWLES: Jenny, I should point out these microphones are just recording, they are not amplifying, so if you could lift your volume a little bit for the benefit of the others in the room.

Ms ROBERTSON: Okay. I am representing the East Gippsland Landcare Network. I am also on Landcare Victoria's board and I am also on the steering committee for the Regional Agricultural Landcare Facilitator program as well as being on the national Landcare farming steering committee. I come from a background in agriculture, and my husband and I have a 1000-hectare property about 25 kilometres from here very close to the Gippsland Lakes. We have been there for over 30 years—more like 60 or 70—so we have gone through a big transition.

As you know, Landcare is very much a grassroots organisation. It has got over 100 000 people in Victoria. It is all about building social, economic and environmental resilience across our landscapes through the programs Landcare runs here. We have had programs that indirectly address climate change through revegetation, shelter belts, fencing off remnants, fencing off waterways and creating new reveg sites, both urban and farming.

As you probably are very aware, 82 per cent of private land in Victoria belongs to private landowners, so they can make a huge difference to what happens environmentally—to the landscape. One of the programs that we have run here locally is called TopSoils, and that is about farmers understanding what makes healthy soil and understanding that it has three major components. It is not just a physical component or chemical; we have got to understand the biological component and how that works and employ people (presenters) who have an understanding of how those things work together, how we can use that in an agricultural sense and how we can do it better. Because it has been designed so that it is driven by the farmers and what they are interested in doing, there has been quite a good uptake of it. They design how the Topsoils program develops in their area with their facilitator from the initial introductory stage, so it can accommodate all sorts of different skill levels and knowledge bases.

Mr FOWLES: Can I just chip in there, Jenny? Thank you for your submission. The lay understanding of Landcare, I think, is lovely people who plant trees, probably.

Ms ROBERTSON: Yes.

Mr FOWLES: We have taken some evidence both yesterday and now today that soil science and the propagation of new scientific methods and new understandings is a big part of the program. To what extent does that reflect an actual strategy on the part of Landcare, and to what extent is it resourced internally? Because that strikes me as being very valuable work, although I am not sure it is very widely understood. I am not sure whether Landcare has arrived at that by default or whether it has actually been a strategic imperative.

Ms ROBERTSON: I do not think it has been a strategic imperative, but Landcare has always been about healthy landscapes. So we have got to understand what is a healthy landscape. And I think for a long time all the funding has been focused on revegetation and not across the whole landscape. So now we are seeing within our local area that the biggest benefit we can bring to our farming landscapes is by asking: how do we do that better? Where is the money that will enable us to do that? Is it through Landcare or is it through Ag Vic? But I think the thing we have found through Landcare is that we have not been restricted to only doing things the traditional way—that we can look outside the box and go and look at other areas and what is working really well, where innovation is happening and how it is being done.

Mr FOWLES: If I can just step up the chain a little bit, where is that information coming from? Is that university research, or is it just knowledge sharing across regions? We heard from Bass Coast Landcare yesterday about all the work they are doing on soil. I am interested in where the science originates.

Ms ROBERTSON: I think a lot of it is coming from farmers themselves. They are investigating and researching themselves, sometimes working with universities. I think the complexity of farming is misunderstood often, and also the risk. You have got to have all components looked at. You have got to look at the people and how you manage them. If you have got a really productive farm but the husband is stressed to the max and the wife is about to leave because she never sees him, and they are pushing the farming system a bit too far—they are pushing the landscape too hard—that is when some really stressful things can happen. So it is trying to get that in balance and working out how you make really good decisions around your livestock, your pastures and your people. But you have also got to have profit in there. If you have not got profit, well, we do not survive.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask: Landcare is obviously a concept that grew out of Victoria in the mid-80s. It is a very strong model. It is very innovative and flexible. How can Government help support that model in terms of assisting farming communities to recognise the challenges of climate change and the on-farm practices that might change to ensure that those farms continue to remain profitable and viable? How can Government help support Landcare in that? Just to put it out there.

Ms ROBERTSON: Put it out there. In a lot of circles it is recognised that increasing our carbon in our soils is a really good benefit to the environment. It is a really good benefit to farmers because it means that they can have better water-holding capacity within their soils, they can build their productive base—so having a mechanism somewhere that enables people to do that. Is that funding? It is also education. But it is thinking about: is it a carbon price? We are in a project for a carbon farming project, but it is going to cost us about \$7000 to do all the baseline testing, so that is a cost at the moment we probably cannot do and then we have got to be able to prove that we can build our soils in a time of drought. That is really, really difficult.

Mr FOWLES: If you were us for a moment or if you were the Government more particularly, what do you think would deliver the best yield in terms of that carbonisation, if that is the word, of the soils? Is it education? Is it a particular grants program? Is it a particular product or a process?

Ms ROBERTSON: I think it is a bit of everything. You have got to have the enabling within change, so that can be financial. That is also social, so a lot of this change is very difficult socially. We have people who do not talk to us about what we do, because they think we are weird and different, but actually we have managed to reduce our risk enormously on our farm. This year is pretty crap but we will still make a profit at the end of it. Last year we probably did not, but it is that fine balancing act all the time. How can you do that? Well, it is programs and funding that enable people to change. You know, is it the carrot or the stick? You have got to have a bit of both probably.

Mr FOWLES: Maybe if I can drill down, what has been the most successful thing you have done on your farm to improve the amount of carbon in the soil?

Ms ROBERTSON: It is looking at things in more of a whole sense and mobbing up and having more paddocks, so you are doing small, sharp grazes and then you are moving on—

Mr FOWLES: So it is almost like strip grazing.

Ms ROBERTSON: It is a bit like strip grazing, but it is a planned grazing system. But you have to understand how the grasses recover and put that into your system. If you go in too early, you burn out all your

perennials and that is a big issue that we have. We are doing it through cover cropping. We had a soil-testing thing at our place a couple of weeks ago that tested soil down to a metre and with our cover crops we were amazed to see the roots went down 750 millimetres. We just could not believe it. We are on sand dunes basically. That has a huge biodiversity of species. We have always gone for monocultures but with biodiversity we are getting these incredible symbiotic relationships that we do not understand and that normal science does not support, because they want a reductionist system. It is easier to measure.

Mr FOWLES: We have heard some evidence about over-sowing winter crops—for example, peas and unusual vegetables, basically, for dairy cattle purposes. Do you see an opportunity there to assist not just the carbon outcome but the productive ability of farmers in this region?

Ms ROBERTSON: Absolutely, yes. Totally.

Mr FOWLES: And is Landcare doing anything in that space?

Ms ROBERTSON: We have been, yes. Probably more through the regional agricultural Landcare facilitator. It is just education; it is not funding. Farmers have paid for their own seed and all the costs that are associated with sowing something. It is only an educational thing that we are being funded for at the moment, which is really probably not enough.

Ms GREEN: Jenny, I identified with that comment when you said that other people thought you were just a bit weird or strange and would not talk to you. My uncle was one of the early people. He is a farmer in the Western District; he was in the Otways and he is now just north of Warrnambool. He was actually at the launch with Joan Kirner and he said before he started doing all these things all his neighbours called him Red Bill. He said, 'I wasn't Red Bill. I'm Green Bill'. He has had a lot of good results and good work I think over all that time because of the Landcare practices.

When we were in Bendigo we actually heard some evidence there which suggested that there could be a great future collaboration, an ongoing one in a sense, between Landcare and neighbourhood houses and that maybe that could be a possibility to have a broader Landcare sustainability network that really supported communities, whether it is the environmental or the social. What do you think about that? Would it work? Should governments resource it?

Ms ROBERTSON: Wow, that is one that I have not even imagined. I think one of the big issues within agriculture is the lack of ability to employ people, and so that is probably an opportunity if you can somehow work it. But it needs to be managed. When you have extra people come onto your property you have got lots of issues to manage and that is difficult, because you are going flat out trying to just manage the farm, and managing people is a whole new aspect. We have a very simple business these days, so contractors make it easier.

Ms GREEN: But even for, say, farmers and people involved in Landcare to be able to use that network that neighbourhood houses have got. I just looked it up and saw how many of them are in really quite remote areas of the shire and I just thought, given that is a network that is pretty similar, actually—neighbourhood houses and Landcare probably both run on the smell of an oily rag—

But I notice there are 12 neighbourhood houses in Gippsland shire in a lot of places, even in places like Bendoc. So just having a base, I suppose, which is a network but having an actual base where community members could go and get advice, whether it is about neighbourhood house stuff but also about Landcare and Landcare principles and merging the two.

Ms ROBERTSON: Yes, look it is very out of my box, that one, so that is challenging me. But I think Landcare is about working with others in partnership and collaboration with lots of different organisations and that is one of the things that they have done pretty well.

Mr HAMER: My question sort of leads on from that and it is about the size of the shire and the accessibility. Obviously even the diversity of the climate would mean that there would be not so much different farming practices but different crops, different ground conditions and different parts of the shire. I am just wondering how as an organisation you are tackling that in terms of actually reaching some of the farms that

might be sort of in the mountains or in far East Gippsland to learn about some of the work that you are doing and what they could implement.

Ms ROBERTSON: Look, we have Landcare groups all across the catchment. How active they are is variable, and with whatever programs are put out there it is really difficult to draw in those people that do not want to go. They are not open to it, and that is a huge problem. We have neighbours that never go to anything. You almost need someone with a personal invitation to drag those people along, and that takes a lot of time and energy, and not all of us have that much time. It is about developing those relationships that are really integral to change, basically, and for people to feel comfortable to go and do something that is out of their comfort zone, because they might be challenged by what they do not know and that is always really tricky.

Mr HAMER: What options do you think there would be to actually try? I mean, I know it is more of a cultural change, but how could we encourage more local champions even in a more broad geographic area? You might have a local champion out in Orbost or Cann River or up in Omeo or—

Ms ROBERTSON: I know what you are saying—local champions. I think farmers are very, very reluctant to be called local champions because it sets them apart. You want to bring the norm down, not have it up there. So you could have them, but I do not feel that comfortable with it.

Ms GREEN: A question just in terms of disaster recovery. The 2009 Victorian bushfires found a connection with the natural environment was important for people's recovery, and East Gippsland shire had more than its fair share of fires at that time—you know, often. Do you have any examples of how the Landcare network has supported disaster-affected communities? And how could they be better assisted?

Ms ROBERTSON: It happens within the communities themselves, and it depends how strong those communities are. Within the Meerlieu-Bengworden area after the millennium drought we had a program—I cannot exactly remember—a community development program that was run with a lot of the local women. That was really powerful because I reckon a lot of the strength of our local community goes back to that program, because it actually got people organised to talk together about what they valued in their community. I think sometimes we all work in our own little silos and we forget to talk about what we value together and then make goals about what is really good in the community, like the local hall needs fixing up—'Let's fix up the local hall and then we'll have more events there'. That has really happened. Particularly as some of the other things fall by the wayside—I mean, one of our big issues is volunteers. We are all volunteered out a bit. You have got the same people in the CFA and Landcare and the cricket club and God knows what else, and they are all getting a bit old. So how do we get a new, energetic generation in and get them involved? But I think it has to come from communities and getting together. We had a drought recovery party where we invited all the local polities. It blew like mad, it was the most disgusting day, and that was good because we got together and we talked about things and had a change of focus.

The CHAIR: I do not have any other questions. Do any of my colleagues? No? Thank you.

Ms ROBERTSON: I would just like to say I think it is really important that we value and enable agriculture to be part of the solution to climate change.

The CHAIR: We do have a couple of minutes, so if you would like to make any closing comments, you are welcome to do so.

Ms ROBERTSON: Well, also we need water security. A lot of farmers in this area have run out of water. We have no water in our dams. Luckily we have got good bore water, so we can water our stock, but a thing like inappropriate development in food bowls is really very, very scary, particularly if it might impact on our aquifers. So a thing like the mine is a big, big issue for farmers locally, because they are very, very worried about their water security.

Ms GREEN: What is the mine?

Ms ROBERTSON: The sand mine that is proposed at Glenaladale. We are on a Ramsar-listed wetland area—waterways—so that is a huge risk and concern to the local people.

Mr FOWLES: What is the fear about the sand mine and how that might impact the watertable?

Ms ROBERTSON: Well, it is only 350 metres from prime horticultural land and the Mitchell River. The Mitchell River feeds into the Gippsland Lakes. You know, if you have got that contaminated because it is an open sand mine, and you have a huge wind day—which we have had lately—you get all these contaminants over the veggie crops, into the river, into the aquifer.

Ms GREEN: Silting.

Ms ROBERTSON: That is a huge, huge worry.

The CHAIR: So having strong land use policies, certainly at a municipal level, would certainly be something you would encourage—

Ms ROBERTSON: Totally.

The CHAIR: to protect our food bowl?

Ms ROBERTSON: Absolutely. It is imperative. If we are going to have a strong agricultural area, we have to have that valued, and that has to be valued by what is appropriate development in what areas.

Another thing I think that is really, really important is that we need to find independent research—independent from chemical and fertiliser companies—because they have a vested interest to look at various viewpoints. For us as farmers to be profitable, we need to manage our costs, and to manage our costs sometimes means that maybe you can use these alternative-type solutions to fertilising.

The CHAIR: And carbon-based fertilisers?

Ms ROBERTSON: They could be carbon-based; they could be how you manage your farming system. So there are lots of different ways of skinning a cat, and I think there is a lot of innovation out there.

Ms GREEN: A role for agronomists.

Ms ROBERTSON: Yes, but agronomists that understand biology as well, the whole system, not just very narrowly focused.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jenny.

Witness withdrew.