

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Mooroopna—Wednesday, 12 February 2020

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

Dr Rowan O'Hagan, Member, North East Regional Sustainability Alliance.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing. I just want to 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 you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside of the hearing, even if you are restating what you have said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your 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 our final report. Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. Could you please state your name and title before beginning your presentation.

Dr O'HAGAN: My name is Rowan O'Hagan. I am a member of the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance and also the Wangaratta Sustainability Network. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the Inquiry today. I did put in a personal submission—a written submission—to the Inquiry, and I am going to be mainly picking up points from that submission today.

What I talked about in my submission were the actions that are happening locally from communities, local government and industry in our region, so I am talking predominantly the north-east region up into the High Country. The things that I wanted to emphasise really are the shift to community renewable energy, and a great example of that is what is happening with Totally Renewable Yackandandah and also Indigo Power, which I believe you will be visiting tomorrow. But right across the region there is a network of community energy groups known as NECEN—North East Community Energy Network. There are about 13 groups in that network in small towns and large towns across our region, with all those community groups absolutely committed to reducing carbon emissions and also the transition to renewable energy. They are doing that in lots of innovative ways and in ways that they intend to ensure that there is energy justice and equity in that transition so that that transition is available to everybody, including the most vulnerable in our communities.

Secondly, I would like to emphasise the work that is going on in terms of enhancing the resilience of the landscape and our environment, including our farming practices. Right across the region we have very active Landcare groups, we have farming practice groups, we have the VFF and we have other environmentally focused groups. All of those are working very actively to ensure that as the climate warms and we have more extreme weather events, the landscape that we live in is actually in the best possible shape that it can be to respond, I guess, to those extreme weather events as well as the ongoing warming and heating and cooling, because the other thing that we have of course in the north east is we also are having more extreme frosts. So the overall global warming is impacting us both in increased heat—record heat in the summertime—but also changes in the way our frost and our cooler weather is also manifesting.

So a lot of that work is very much in collaboration with government agencies and local government, things like revegetation, restoring waterways, the reintroduction of native fish and the removal of feral fish and other activities around—

Will finds that amusing.

Mr FOWLES: No, I am amused because rainbow trout are an introduced species that we actively propagate, so I was actually just interested to know if you consider them to be a feral fish or not.

Dr O'HAGAN: It depends a little bit on the context in which they are in the environment. If they are competing with our native and endangered fish, then that is something that has got to be handled fairly sensitively.

That is the sort of thing that is happening around the direct environment. And then we have lots of activity around promoting individual and household responsibility for climate action. So we have our waste management groups, we have our housing sustainability activities, our Boomerang Bags and our repair cafes, which I think you will possibly hear quite a bit more about tomorrow. All of those are activities where people

feel that they can make a difference in their own lives. They might not be running the country or they might not be on the local council, but they actually have an opportunity where they can reduce their environmental footprint, and there is a lot of community support for that type of activity.

Just moving on then to how the Government can best support communities in our efforts, which is part of the terms of reference, the first thing at a practical level is the importance of the policy framework that we are working under. We have had peaks and troughs in the state in terms of the types of policies that have been conducive to action on climate change. At the moment we have, fortunately, the *Climate Change Act*, and it is important from our point of view that that provides a framework for climate action in Victoria and that the provisions of the Act are followed through. I will speak a little bit more about that in a moment. Within that policy framework, I spoke about renewable energy and how there is opportunity perhaps for some regulatory reform in the energy sector, which may enable communities to take more control around their energy production, understanding that of course all of that has got to be within a framework that is about consumer protection and also safety and the long-term sustainability of the distribution sector. But, nevertheless, there are some opportunities, I think, for regulatory reform, and again you might hear a bit more about that tomorrow.

The second thing that I think that government can assist with is funding and resources which can be leveraged by local communities. So I mentioned before that we work very closely with the government agencies, and the expertise and the collaboration with them is really well appreciated by all the groups, because they have got access to knowledge, resources and information that is really useful to community groups. On the flip side the community groups have really got a lot to offer the agencies as well in terms of understanding what is happening on the ground, what is realistic and what community sentiment is. So it is really important that those resources are out there in the region and they can be utilised by communities. Also small grants or large grants—whatever comes our way—can really be leveraged very highly by small community groups. They have volunteers who are very active. They have knowledge of what works on the ground and what works in communities. Even small amounts of funding or resources can really have a huge impact, so the benefit-cost of those sorts of grants and funding is really high.

Moving from that sort of practical level on to perhaps a broader or perhaps you might say political level, the other thing that communities really need in support of their efforts is non-partisan leadership and a commitment to climate literacy and evidence-based practice from the government and also from government agencies. So it is really important that there is clear messaging from all our representatives and that they are ensuring and promoting what the Victorian Government is doing in relation to climate action, and that is not always the case in our regional areas. It is not necessarily direct misinformation, but often it is not clear messaging or there is very low visibility of what actions can be taken and what the Government is actually doing in that space.

My last point really is about inclusiveness and cohesion in the transition to a low-carbon economy, which is what our community groups are working towards. Research clearly shows that gender and cultural stereotypes really can inhibit the behaviour change in the innovation that we need to make a just and equitable transition, and also just in order to adapt to the climate change and the impacts we know are already locked in from 1 to 1.5 degrees of warming, which is where we are now.

So some of those stereotypes and those behaviours really impact vulnerable people and some sectors of our community more disproportionately, including Aboriginal Australians. So I guess the plea there is that there is a gender lens and also a cultural lens when we are looking at adaptation. Some segments of our community are more vulnerable to impact. They are less able to adapt due to the financial and other community circumstances that they are in, so it is really important that those types of vulnerabilities are taken into account in any action that is taken.

So I guess if there is any lesson that we might take from the summer that we are still in, it is that really our community is paramount and that it is important that we all work together on this so that we can find common ground and work towards the changes that we need to make and to protect the things that we love, because we all love the same things, which are our environment, our families, our small towns, our large towns, our culture and our way of life. And really those are the things that are under threat from unmitigated climate change and if we do not adapt to the climate change that is already locked in. That is all I wanted to say. I am very happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That was a very detailed presentation. Colleagues, who wants to open the batting?

Mr HAMER: I was just wondering whether your alliance includes any members of the farming community and what sort of learnings and other information they have shared in terms of their adaptation. The second part of the question is probably premised on the first.

Dr O'HAGAN: Several of the groups have actually evolved from Landcare groups. In Wangaratta the Urban Landcare group and the Wangaratta Sustainability Network have just merged, so that is an urban Landcare group. But all the Landcare groups are part of the Ovens Landcare Network or, if they are not in that part of the region, they are parts of other networks. So there is actually quite a large input from the farming community via those types of pathways.

Also a concrete example in Wangaratta is the work we are doing on the waterways, along the Ovens River in particular, and also with farm dams, so there are lots of landholders and farmers along the river and also in the surrounding district who all have contributed to carp removal, for example, and the reintroduction of native fish and revegetation. So there is a lot of crossover between the sustainability groups with what farmers are doing locally as well.

The CHAIR: It occurs to me through your submission that the return on investment that the government gets in terms of responding to climate change is pretty good when it is delivered via the types of groups that are part of your network or alliance because, obviously, of that large amount of volunteer input. How might government best support groups like yours around the state because the return is so high because of that volunteer labour that is effectively given? What is the best way a government can support groups like yours in responding to climate change?

Dr O'HAGAN: I guess the dilemma with the amount of volunteer contribution is that people do get burnt out and they have other roles and responsibilities. But I think the Landcare model is a good one, where you might have a coordinator for a network of Landcare groups, so a lot of the work in terms of organisation and grant applications and bringing in expertise—all those sorts of things that the Landcare coordinators do—and that sort of resource for the community sustainability groups and the renewable energy groups would be useful. Grant funding, those small grants, are important amounts of money to be leveraged on those groups. We know that the Landcare model works and works quite well when it is well supported and that it has also got very broad appeal for the community. Does that answer your question, or do you want to—

The CHAIR: No, it certainly does. I will need to reflect a bit further before I ask any other questions.

Mr FOWLES: I am just interested to know what interactions you have with catchment management authorities? Presumably you cross more than one—probably mainly Goulburn Broken—but you must—

Dr O'HAGAN: North East Catchment Management.

Mr FOWLES: So what interactions have you had with them, and how would you characterise their efficacy in assisting with sustainability initiatives?

Dr O'HAGAN: Well, someone from the catchment management attends our bimonthly meetings, and we also have a very large mailing list for the minutes that go out from those meetings. They also directly work with on-ground works with a lot of the groups as well—the Landcare groups and the sustainability groups. So it is very close collaboration. In terms of effectiveness, that can vary a little bit, depending on the resources that they have, but they certainly have areas of expertise which we tap into regularly. In Wangaratta, the Ovens River restoration project that we have there is actually funded by the catchment management authority. It is a management agreement between the sustainability group and the catchment management authority. It is a management contract actually—they have worked out what needs to be done there, what scientific management is required, and the sustainability group is delivering that.

Ms GREEN: In your submission, Rowan, you referred to emergency management. Given your submission was done prior to the horrific bushfires we have had up here, I just wonder whether you want to have an opportunity to expand on that and how the network has responded and whether you would have any views on whether they would impact on preparedness—those types of things.

Dr O'HAGAN: Generally emergency management is a local government responsibility, and we do work closely with local government. We get hosted by Indigo council to hold our meetings there, and we have representatives from other councils attend our meetings. In terms of how we might respond to an emergency situation, I guess philosophically we would say what we actually need to do is to be prepared and actually try and ameliorate the situation where those emergencies arise. Obviously we cannot control those, and we do have to respond, but my argument would be that in fact it is preparedness and mitigation that is our focus to a large extent. I did talk about having landscapes that are more resilient to fire, flood and periods of dryness, so that is an important focus, that the landscape is resilient, but also that the communities are resilient. Part of building an alliance of communities is having everyone on the same page, I guess, and that goes back a little bit to my messaging about climate action and what needs to be done, that it is important that that social cohesion is there as well.

And that comes from everybody working together and understanding in the first place what are the risks that we are actually facing, because unless you have accepted and understood what the risks are you cannot then respond to those and manage them appropriately.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time. We very much appreciate it.

Dr O'HAGAN: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.