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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

TUESDAY, 8 JULY 2003

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Tuesday, 8 July 2003

Members: Mr Nairn (*Chair*), Mr Adams, Mr Bartlett, Mr Causley, Ms Ellis, Mrs Gash, Mr Gibbons, Mr Hawker, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mrs Gash, Mr McArthur, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Nairn, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

The Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires seeks to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment with specific regard to the following:

- (a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
- (b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;
- (c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;
- (d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;
- (e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;
- (f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;
- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;
- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;
- (i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;
- (j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

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Committee met at 9.04 a.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the first one for this inquiry. It is part of the committee's program of hearings in and visits to different parts of Australia. The hearings and visits will allow us to pursue some of the issues raised in the 440 written submissions to the inquiry. The committee will be visiting rural areas to see first-hand and to hear about some of the issues raised by the serious fires that have occurred in recent years. The committee will be holding public hearings in Katoomba and Richmond tomorrow and in Cooma on Thursday. Before I call witnesses, I ask the local federal member and member of this committee, Joanna Gash, to introduce the mayor and make a few remarks.

Mrs GASH—Thank you, Chair, and I also thank my colleagues for being here in the Shoalhaven. I would like to introduce the mayor of the city, Greg Watson. Thank you for coming here and making us feel welcome.

[9.05 a.m.]

WATSON, Mayor Gregory Herbert, Mayor, Shoalhaven City Council

Mayor Watson—It is my very great honour and privilege today to have the opportunity to welcome the House of Representatives committee to the Shoalhaven. I particularly thank Joanna Gash for ensuring that the committee came to the Shoalhaven. I know that Joanna was pushing very hard to have you appear in this area. The Shoalhaven is one of the areas most highly exposed to wildfire of any in the state. We control something like a 130-kilometre narrow strip, with very heavy bushland to the west, which comprises national parks and forest land, as well as private holdings. So our worst fears were realised in 2000 when we had the horrific bushfires around Jervis Bay.

I thank you for visiting the Shoalhaven so that you can hear from council, residents and others first-hand in the atmosphere of this formal inquiry by the House of Representatives. We do not believe that our residents were given a fair go by the last inquiry that was held. They were grilled by solicitors and put at a great disadvantage. They were not at ease and were not able to properly put their case. In fact, individuals were rubbished and destroyed by legal technicalities, so I certainly welcome this inquiry. I congratulate you, Mr Chairman, on the broad representation on the committee, encompassing most of the political parties represented in the House of Representatives. It is very good to see that you have that wide representation. I wish you well with your inquiry today. It is certainly our great honour and privilege to have the opportunity of hosting you in our council chambers.

CHAIR—Thank you, and we thank the council for allowing the chambers to be used today for this hearing of the committee. Before we start, I will let people in the public gallery know today's format. The committee will be hearing from a number of witnesses, people and organisations that have made submissions to the inquiry, but at around 2 p.m. there will be an opportunity for members of the public to make comments or statements that they would like to have on the record as part of the inquiry. We will certainly endeavour to accommodate as many people as possible. One aspect of this inquiry is that it is all encompassing across the nation and also we are trying to get the broadest possible input of evidence so that, when the committee finalises its report and puts together recommendations, we will feel that we have gathered as much information as possible for those recommendations.

[9.09 a.m.]

RUSSELL, Mr Barry Gordon, Divisional Manager, City Services Division, Shoalhaven City Council

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Would you like to make an opening statement or remarks before we come to questions?

Mr Russell—Thank you. We have put together a detailed submission, which we have made available to the committee. We also have a PowerPoint presentation. I will quickly run through that to cover the key issues.

CHAIR—Before you start that, is it the wish of the committee that the submission from Shoalhaven City Council be received as evidence and authorised for publication? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

A PowerPoint presentation was then given—

Mr Russell—The fire history in the Shoalhaven has been extensive over the last 18-month to two-year period. We had a major fire event, called the Hylands fire, which ran from December 2001 into January 2002, burning 100,000 hectares. The key issue was that this fire actually hit the Shoalhaven over the very busy Christmas-New Year period when our population rises from about 90,000 people to 350,000 people. On Christmas Day the city was put under great stress when the fire made its initial run. This slide shows the fire on day 1, when it ran from its point of origin to the coast at Huskisson and impacted on the coastal villages. The day 29 boundary is shown by a red line. The fire progressively grew—it went down to Bendalong in the south and up to West Nowra in the north.

The next fire was the Touga fire, which we had in November-December 2002. Again, under a section 44 declaration, as for the Hylands fire, there was a magnificent effort by all agencies to combat the fire. We had no serious civilian or combat injuries, which is a tribute to the organisation. The day 1 fire boundary is shown on this slide, starting out to the extreme west of Nowra near the Shoalhaven River gorge. Again, over the 43-day period that progressively grew. Towards the end, the fire actually impacted on HMAS *Albatross*. It went north to the Shoalhaven River and down south of Sassafras. These were both very significant events.

As the mayor said, bushfire is a major threat in the Shoalhaven. We have a reputation as excellent emergency management organisers. I suppose it is our experience that has built that scenario for us. There is a deep commitment by all agencies, including the volunteers, to work together to build on our reputation of excellence in the Shoalhaven. My presentation will touch on a number of key issues, and the theme is very much that we are looking forward to better emergency management, even though we pride ourselves on it already. We are suggesting a

greater presence in country New South Wales for the Rural Fire Service. We believe there is a strong need for regional incident management training. We would like to explore further the greater use of defence forces. I will touch briefly on buffer zones on urban areas, look at modern management techniques and close with a number of other support issues.

We believe that there is a better opportunity for a regional model for the Rural Fire Service in New South Wales. We see that there is an opportunity to develop regionally based incident management teams and that they should cover areas which are generally similar in terms of geography and fire threat. We would see the Shoalhaven being part of a region which would run to the west, rather than run down to the Eurobodalla, which is the current thinking in some quarters.

The concept is that, within the regions, there would be trained and focused incident management teams which could then mentor other people within both the volunteer and the professional ranks and which would grow in their geographical understanding of an area. We believe they would be highly transferable to other regions and other parts of the state, if not other parts of Australia; they could be available and up to speed on short notice; and they would be able to have an existing close working relationship with each other and use common technology and management systems, which we will touch on further. They would also be able to integrate local government expertise and the expertise of other land management agencies into a very tight network of emergency management personnel.

Council took this issue up quite strongly because of its experience. In January 1994 we had to a fire at Bendalong. For the first time, we introduced data scanning of the fire of an evening to see through the smoke, so that we could actually get a plot of the fire at Bendalong. From that we could see that there were opportunities available to look at this regional model and at technology. That January 1994 event was really the catalyst which has prompted us to go down this path. We have had a number of discussions with local software system operators. We have approached the Rural Fire Service to share our vision and we have had offers of volunteer specialists to look at models for modernising and upgrading the operation and management of fire events.

However, we have seen some reluctance in that approach. We have been disappointed that there is a concern from the local people we have spoken to that their intellectual property is potentially vulnerable if they put a lot of volunteer effort into this process. I think that, over the years, we have seen a significant increase in the corporate overheads that we are paying for the Rural Fire Service in New South Wales. Whilst the fire headquarters in Sydney is very much a state-of-the-art centre, there is a growing concern at a local level that the increased cost of our contribution to corporate overheads for the Rural Fire Service is in fact impacting on the amount of on-ground funding that is available. Therefore, we can see the progression to saying that, if you cannot adequately provide operational expenditure, there is a likely increased cost to the Commonwealth in terms of ongoing emergency management events—that is, the events get larger and go further; therefore, more cost is transferred.

Looking at the regional incident management team training, we have put quite a bit of effort into that and this concept of the centre of excellence. We really see the need for training for both paid professional staff and volunteers for these regional centres of excellence. The advantage of those is that they provide greater access to volunteers; they provide administration, planning and

skill upgrading in terms of operations and logistics planning; and those skills can be very readily transferred through to the volunteers. It would build local communities and, through the volunteer ranks, it would increase skills in emergency management within the community.

We do acknowledge that the Rural Fire Service has an objective of putting more volunteers into the incident management teams and they are suggesting about a third of incident management teams should be volunteers. However, we do see opportunities there. There would be an outcome of upskilling our community leaders and their understanding of emergency management. It would eliminate the practice of using emergency events for training Rural Fire Service staff and other agency fire management staff in real-life situations. We have seen that that does in fact build some frustration with the local volunteers. They see visitors rolling through the area who do not really know and understand the Shoalhaven. We believe that, in terms of a progression, it would be a significant advantage.

The next key issue is the suggestion that Defence could play a great role. I should say that Defence support for both the Touga and the Hylands fires was exceptional. We do see, however, that there is an enhanced role for Defence, as they do have expertise in those key areas that are mentioned. They really have the incident management skills that you do need. We have looked upon the recent history of Defence and we see that there has been some change. Realistically, the issues that I have addressed are very much incident management exercises, using those skills that bushfire and other local emergency management events require. We see that there is a nationwide opportunity for greater use of the defence forces in emergency management.

We cited an article in *Australian Aviation* from March 2002 where it was advocating a potential role for Navy and Army helicopters as firefighting resources. It indicated that Sikorsky have a Firehawk, which is a sister to the Seahawk and the Black Hawk. We understand that has got a carrying capacity of 3,800 litres. We also see that the RAN Sea King has got an ability to carry water, about six to eight tonnes, and in the past in the Shoalhaven we have used the Sea King on occasions for firefighter transport. However, we do recognise and acknowledge that the Skycrane is really the best there is in terms of this capacity. The advantages of using the Defence Force are that it provides further training for military personnel; it develops their expertise and keeps the expertise in the country. We also believe their funding could be returned to the local economy.

The next key issue is buffer zones around urban areas. Shoalhaven is somewhat unique, with 49 towns and villages. Most villages have an urban interface and the Hylands fire impacted upon those villages, which I have mentioned, and the Touga fire impacted on those rural residential areas, including HMAS *Albatross*, as I have indicated. There is a greater need for buffer zones around our village areas. There is still major community concern; it is an issue of amenity versus safety. However, in the Shoalhaven land management agencies have been implementing asset protection zones at this interface and I believe that some advocacy by Shoalhaven City Council has assisted in having the government rise to this challenge. However, there is an ongoing concern that not enough is being done and in some cases we see that program maintenance is being ignored and in fact is actually being done as part of incidents, so there is a cost transfer in that. That is obviously a concern that we have tabled.

The asset protection zones, which are now in place and being extended, need to be supported by fuel reduced areas to make them more effective. There is a need for ongoing monitoring of

those asset protection zones and that urban interface. There is even a need for greater community education. In some cases the residents see that the asset protection zone—15 to 20 metres wide—would be adequate to save their properties but there are a number of things that local residents need to do too, so that is basically an issue for community education.

Moving into the issue of modern management that I spoke about before, council has worked with the Defence corporate sector in the Shoalhaven. We have explored capabilities and we see an enormous potential for technology in fire management, not only to record events but we see there are also opportunities for technology to predict what is happening at events where fires are likely to go. If we could more successfully record fire activity, we could do a lot more about preparing predictive models for future fire behaviour. We have seen that there is Defence technology which is an ideal training tool for both bushland firefighting and at urban interface. The use of modern simulation would be an outstanding training tool, particularly when a fire hits that urban interface. If you could simulate what happens in those types of events it would really make brigades a lot more aware of the potentials and the risks that they face.

We made serious representations to the Rural Fire Service from 1999 through to 2001. A local company involved in aerospace technology put effort into doing a package on a volunteer basis. We saw the application at the incident management team level. We saw the potential for training modules that could transfer directly through to the brigades and to have them step through those. The model that we tabled was ideal for recording fire behaviour and therefore would be of greater use for predictive firefighting. We are aware of some overseas initiatives that have been undertaken; however, our observation at recent events is that sometimes the information coming back to the fire control centre is either too slow and late in arriving or, alternatively, it has to be handled manually. We see this total technology package as being able to very quickly transfer data from, for example, aircraft doing observations back to the incident control centre and downloading data instantaneously.

This is an overview of the model which we put forward based upon a fire which we had in the Shoalhaven in about 1999, in the Currumbene Creek area just to the west and north of Huskisson. You can see that we have identified where the fires are. We have plotted the environmental constraints. We have put in there some strategies, but we have also been able to allocate the resources through some drop-down menus. We see this as the future of the technology. It is a very simple application, which we have been advocating for some time should be applicable to fire management in Australia. We advocate that this should be a universal standard.

On other issues, there has been quite a bit of discussion in New South Wales about the funding source for the Rural Fire Service. About 75 per cent of that comes from an insurance levy on private property and commercial properties. There are cases where some properties are underinsured, and there are other properties that are benefiting from the Rural Fire Service that are not insured at all and essentially are not making any contribution. That raises a question that is probably not a very pleasant question and I will not try to answer it: how do you limit compensation going to those non-insured properties? However, I think there is a need for a better funding model for fire management in New South Wales other than strictly going on insurance of property.

Another issue is whether there is a better model for firefighting. I think we have acknowledged the Commonwealth government's intention to do more research in this area, and obviously we would appreciate that. However, we again ask the question: if we could have had access to greater Defence resources in the early days of the Hylands fire and the Touga fire, would that have made an overall impact on the fire event? I would like really to have access to research that looked at that in detail and reached some valid conclusions, because at this stage we cannot do that.

Obviously the costs of these major fire events, and the areas that have been impacted upon in the Touga fire and the Hylands fire, have been quite enormous not only in dollar costs but in the environmental and the social impact, and therefore we advocate here for greater work in 'what if' scenarios. Obviously, in doing that, we would see a greater role to be played by Emergency Management Australia and the CSIRO.

Another issue of concern is that of volunteers giving up their time for these major fire campaigns. There needs to be some relief for people who are self-employed and for employers who are releasing their staff as volunteers and paying them. There are also volunteers who give up their incomes for long periods of time for community service. There is a growing concern that we are putting a lot of money into training volunteers and, if the lack of funding and income is a reason for volunteers to walk away, we will lose some significant investment in the volunteer ranks.

The conclusion is, we believe, that there is a better way but that it will require more extensive research into both training and modern technology. Obviously we are advocating the use of defence contractors and greater use of CSIRO, Emergency Management Australia and defence resources. We believe there is a need for a national standard for emergency management, which would be applicable to all emergency events, and for one emergency management system across Australia. There is a need for a national and state volunteer firefighting emergency management training academy, where the standards can be set and where training can be delivered using modern technology and simulation to make our volunteers and emergency management personnel more professional in what they do.

We see that technology being transferable to volunteers in our community and, through that, being able to build better communities. We see in the future that the new volunteer in the Shoalhaven particularly, and I think across Australia, will be younger, will have computer skills and will be able to address the technological age of the future. We see that training as being essential for emergency management as a whole, not just for bushfires. We see that the technology, once developed, would be transferable across Australia and into South-East Asia, and we see an opportunity to build new jobs and new technologies and to build better citizens and community leaders in local government and throughout the regional areas of Australia. I conclude with a sign from Tomerong, following the Hylands fire.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Russell. The overwhelming part of your presentation deals with fire management. Do you think that the council and other levels of government and agencies could be doing a lot more about fire prevention and fire suppression?

Mr Russell—That is an interesting question, and it is one that I would really like to be able to answer. I have a strong gut feeling that more could be done. However, our submission is that we

need to explore that. We need to have the capability to do ‘what if’ scenarios. I do not think there is really the depth of knowledge or the depth of study that enables us to draw a firm conclusion on that issue. I have a strong feeling that more can be done in terms of prevention than we are currently doing.

CHAIR—I would like to follow up with respect to the Shoalhaven City Council’s position. I do not know whether you have seen a submission by the Narrawallee Residents and Ratepayers Association, but in that submission the comment is made that your fire mitigation officer stated at a public meeting that she believed the main part of her job should be bushland management as opposed to fire mitigation. I wonder whether the emphasis within the council, and the positions within council, are correct.

Mr Russell—In the Shoalhaven we are guided very much by state government legislation. Obviously we see that there is a strong need to protect and preserve the environment. I have not seen the Narrawallee presentation; however, we are working in such a way to provide the standards and terms of these asset protection zones on the edges of our public reserve and bushland areas. But we are doing that in a way that also recognises the environmental values of those lands. So we are constantly working through this area. The community has an expectation that perhaps the buffer zones should be 300 or 400 metres wide. However we are saying that, in reality, you cannot provide that, you cannot sustain that, that you cannot do that and match your environmental obligations. So it is a balancing act, and we are guided very much by documents like ‘Planning for bushfire protection in New South Wales’, which is a joint publication by the planning department in New South Wales and the fire service. It provides guidance on these asset protection zones, which we are in the process of delivering across the city, as are other land management agencies.

Mrs GASH—Mr Russell, in your report you stated that you would have liked to have seen more use of facilities and personnel of the Defence Force. I understand that the state government actually has to request the service of the Commonwealth before it can be given. In your opinion was this done and, if so, was it early enough?

Mr Russell—I am aware of the protocol which we need to go through to gain access to defence personnel. Again, I have an observation—that is, I think that that is sometimes convoluted. I would like to see that pathway really streamlined. I would also like to see that system amended so that Defence can play a greater role and an earlier role in these issues. That comes back to that issue of further research and analysis. If you could research what would be the impact of actually hitting some of these fires earlier, using those defence forces that I have indicated, instead of waiting for the deployment of equipment—say, helicopters—out of Sydney, I think that would have a significant benefit. Again, I cannot quantify that.

Mrs GASH—As a follow-up question, would you, as the local controller, like to be able to make that decision, instead of it coming from headquarters in Sydney, which has not perhaps been on the local scene of the fire?

Mr Russell—My first point is that I am not the local controller. I do believe that there could be streamlined activity: if the defence forces were to play a greater role, then the local controller should have quicker and earlier access to work directly with the local base to turn that support on.

Mr BARTLETT—Back to the issue of buffer zones and hazard reduction in those buffer zones, you said, quite rightly, that it is a balancing act—balancing the environmental needs with the safety needs of residents' assets. I have just a couple of questions on that. Is it your view that the National Parks and Wildlife Service are sensitive enough to the needs of local residents in that regard? Is it your view that they allocate enough resources to allow appropriate management of their assets? As you mentioned in your submission, they have an increasing number of national park assets. And, if there is a conflict in that balancing process, who do you think should be making the final decision?

Mr Russell—There are a number of questions there. My view is that there should be more work done where national parks and other bushland come up to the urban interface, to those residential villages. As we have said in our submission, the work in developing asset protection zones needs to be linked to further fuel management beyond those asset protection zones and put into a regular hazard reduction program to effectively reduce that fuel level for, say, another 300 or 400 metres out from those asset protection zones because, in reality, the asset protection zones in some cases are only 10, 15, or 20 metres wide. So they play a role, but further fuel reduction further out from those would be beneficial. There is quite a bit of concern in the Shoalhaven that National Parks, for example, should be doing more in balancing the environment with their obligation to protect the local community.

Mr BARTLETT—Could you perhaps also outline for us the Shoalhaven council's attitude towards private residents doing their own hazard reduction on their own land. Some submissions have indicated that, rather than buffer zones or hazard reduction broadly, the focus of the responsibility should be on individual residents. Yet different councils have different approaches to what residents can do in terms of removing vegetation and trees from their own land. What is the Shoalhaven council's approach to that?

Mr Russell—The Shoalhaven council, following the Hylands fire, established a councillor working party, working with our senior council staff. One of the key issues is the consideration that our tree preservation orders were too tight and too prohibitive, and that the community should be given a greater opportunity to remove vegetation from their own properties. Council is now about three weeks away from adopting a policy which would free up the ability of the local community to remove vegetation from around their properties. Once that policy is adopted, it is the council's intention to put that on public exhibition. We would see a significant reduction in council intervention in approving vegetation removal from private properties through that new policy.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Russell, congratulations on your council's submission. I found it very wide ranging, very informative and very helpful. I just have two quick questions. You talked about setting up centres of excellence. Who would you see as taking up this initiative? Would it be local, state or federal government, or would it be through the TAFEs or the universities? I am just wondering what your vision is there. With respect to my second question, you also mentioned some reluctance in taking up some of these new technologies. Obviously your council has shown a lot of interest in technological management of the bushfires. Where was that reluctance coming from?

Mr Russell—In relation to the first issue, I believe the Rural Fire Service would be the group to set up these regional training centres and these centres of excellence, primarily on the basis

that they are the designated combat authority for bushfire in New South Wales. The model after that, though, would grow to look at greater research, enhanced emergency management per se and its application to other types of emergencies. I would advocate a role for Emergency Management Australia, I would advocate a role for the Rural Fire Service, and I would obviously see that local government could be involved in that. The training academy and the research academy that I mentioned would probably, desirably, be established under the Commonwealth government through Emergency Management Australia, bringing together the resources to achieve that. We did make those presentations to the Rural Fire Service. Those presentations were face-to-face with the commissioner.

Mr ORGAN—That was where some of the reluctance was coming from, was it?

Mr Russell—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—Mr Russell, like my parliamentary colleague Michael Organ I would like to compliment the Shoalhaven council for the professional way they have put this submission together. One of the things that I have learnt in the brief time that I have been here is the obvious rapport between all the different agencies in a firefighting situation, which is in stark contrast to many other areas of the state of New South Wales. The suggestion that you put forward with regard to regional fire service groups—six of them across the state—is to be commended. My own personal view is that that is the way we need to go to get more flexibility and more realistic approaches to fire in local areas.

How do you envisage that coming to fruition in an environment where, since 1996, various coronial inquiries and recommendations by different coroners have canvassed those sorts of issues with the New South Wales government—and certainly with the Rural Fire Service—and nothing has happened? How are you go to sell that concept? In practical terms, it is a very sensible way of going about ensuring the professional approach that the suppression of fires in the early stages is the only way to go.

Mr Russell—Thank you for that question. I think the mayor made a couple of comments in his welcoming address regarding a couple of those issues, so I will not go further with those. However, I do see that it is strongly an issue for the Rural Fire Service. I would be optimistic that the leadership that the Commonwealth can give in terms of this inquiry could be used as a mechanism to work with the states, perhaps through some of the natural disaster relief funding, to impose some more discipline into some of these areas. But I would really have to leave it to the committee to make those sorts of observations.

Mr SCHULTZ—Yes. I think I can say, without any sense of being out of line, that part of the problem that we as a committee are having at the moment on this issue of a national bushfire inquiry is the cooperation of all agencies right across the country. It is very frustrating if it does not occur. It is evident in terms of government agencies not wanting to speak to this inquiry about the matters the committee would like to raise with them at a local level. What do you think are the reasons for that? Do you think it is a situation where, because of the way in which the administrative roles have been built up in organisations such as the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, there is a reluctance to allow people to interfere in a process that is driven by an attitude of ‘we know best’?

Mr Russell—I think you should really refer that question to the Rural Fire Service. However, I am prepared to indicate that over recent years I have seen a withdrawal from the involvement of local government within activities of the Rural Fire Service and I see that that has caused quite a bit of concern across the state. Previously, councils did act as the employer of fire control officers and fire control staff. I think that enabled very strong community input to be made in terms of the way the Rural Fire Service operated at a local level. I saw that in the Shoalhaven's case—and I have had 25 years of experience—that was probably part of the reason why that atmosphere of cooperation has been so successful. We have done that through the local emergency management committee and the bushfire management committee. I see it as a natural progression for the state to go further and to establish a more independent Rural Fire Service, but I think there is a genuine concern amongst volunteers that the volunteer role is being somewhat lost in terms of this transition.

Mr SCHULTZ—I have a brief question in regard to ADF resources. I note in your submission that the water-carrying capacity of some of these helicopters that you are talking about is around 2,800 litres, which is about 800 litres more than an Air Tractor 802 and a Dromader. Should we take it as a very serious consideration, given the proximity of the Defence Force bases to your particular shire and the impact that they would have on the early suppression of bushfires in the area?

Mr Russell—Most definitely. The research that I indicated was that the Firehawk is a sister to the Black Hawk and the Seahawk that the Navy has. There was a strong consideration given to the fact that we do have the expertise in country to service, maintain and fly that aircraft. Also, there was a logic to say that as an extension to the helicopter fleet that Army and Navy have, the Firehawk, with 3,800 litres, is very much an opportunity where we could use defence personnel, servicing, pilots et cetera to enhance skills and actually have that aircraft being used more extensively in Australia.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Russell, in your submission you spoke about hazard reduction in the Shoalhaven and there is a comment about inadequate hazard reduction. Are you aware of any particular program that the department of national parks has with regards to hazard reduction in the Shoalhaven?

Mr Russell—Yes; in New South Wales there is a coordinating committee for bushfire fighting, and all key government agencies are represented on that coordinating committee. Under that committee is the Shoalhaven Bushfire Management Committee where government agencies, the Rural Fire Service, Shoalhaven City Council and major landowners come together to prepare operational bushfire plans. Part of that role is to look at coordinating hazard reduction across the city. The work that is being done within the Shoalhaven is reasonably well coordinated and is being delivered. However, I still see that there is an opportunity for more to be done in that area.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I can appreciate that there is adequate coordination—you fellows up in this neck of the woods seem to work quite well together—but with regard to a specific plan covering particular geographic areas, is there a specific plan for hazard reduction and has that been followed?

Mr Russell—There is an annual plan brought before the Shoalhaven Bushfire Management Committee. It is adopted and then it is left to individual land agencies to go and implement the

plan for their own parcels of land. That can include hazard action work in fuel management, the slashing of fire breaks and the upgrading of fire tracks and trails throughout their areas. However, the geographical nature of and the climate within the Shoalhaven area sometimes preclude some of the work which is planned being physically delivered. There is obviously no point in doing hazard reduction if the weather pattern is not quite right and there is a fear of a hazard reduction burn getting away and turning into a major fire.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I appreciate that.

Mr Russell—So there are a number of constraints there, and in reality they are the circumstances in which we live. But I still think that there needs to be a stronger focus on achieving those hazard reduction plans on an annual basis.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I really appreciate an explanation of the process. However, what I am really after is a rough estimate to tell me that there was a plan to hazard reduce in X number of hectares over the last one to five years and, out of that proposed X area, only so much was done or a greater amount was done. Can you give me that summary?

Mr Russell—I would have access to that information—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Could you provide that to the committee?

Mr Russell—It would require us doing some research on the issue, working with other government agencies. But I am sure that, by working through the various reports which are being put to the bushfire management committee, we could look at reporting to you with another submission as to what was the target and what was actually achieved on a year-by-year basis.

CHAIR—That would be appreciated.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like to raise three issues. The first concerns the buffer zone matter that was raised. At our inspection yesterday it appeared that some of the buffer zones were very close to domestic dwellings and industrial estates. Are you advocating better access, along with obviously a reduction in the amount of material around dwellings? It just seemed to me that the domestic dwellings were very close to national parks and bushland.

The second issue concerns the way in which section 44 operates. Do you think it is operating in a fair and equitable manner or is there a tendency to wait until the fire becomes a national emergency, where section 44 then kicks in and the Commonwealth will contribute? The last issue concerns the morale of volunteers in the rural fire service. Again it was suggested in informal conversation yesterday that in terms of some of the funding arrangements for volunteers there was not a lot of money flowing and they were very dependent on the efforts of fundraising at the local brigade level—so much so it was suggested that even the petrol for the trucks was in jeopardy on occasions. Could you comment on those three issues?

Mr Russell—Certainly. My information is that the asset protection zones—the areas which you would have seen yesterday—on average are 20 metres wide. They obviously have a role to play. I think that they will be a significant contributor in protecting residential properties from fires coming out of bushland. That can either be out of crown land, national parks, state forests

or council reserve land, so there are a number of land management agencies with that obligation. What I am saying, though, is that—beyond those going further back into the bush—there needs to be a regular program of hazard reduction work done to progressively remove that fuel on perhaps a three-, five- or eight-year cycle. Doing low intensity burns to reduce the fuel further to the west would add greater support.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the access to the buffer zones? It seemed to me that it was very hard to actually get to some of the buffer zones at the rear of some of the domestic dwellings—almost impossible.

Mr Russell—Yes, in some cases that would be the case. When we were designing them for our property we considered how you would get access to them. In some cases, it may just be a matter of tankers parking in the road and running hoses to the back and using them for that purpose. In some cases, I acknowledge, the terrain is such that you cannot actually drive up through those asset protection zones. They are really there as a fire mitigation measure—that is the primary purpose. But in cases where you can allow vehicular access we would obviously advocate that that should occur.

In terms of section 44, yes, our submission does make the comment that we have seen examples of where not enough work has been done as standard operational procedure once section 44 actually came into play. But there is a lot of work being carried out on upgrading tracks and trails under the section 44 banner. I think that is an area that needs to be looked at further.

The final point to make about volunteers is that I believe that the volunteers do do a lot but they are also asked to do a lot. One of the strong things that Shoalhaven City Council does is to work closely with the volunteers within the Rural Fire Service and the SES. Where it possibly can it has, in some cases, provided its own funding to close that gap. We have done some excellent work in providing reasonable fire station accommodation for SES personnel and each of our volunteer fire brigades. We have 31 of those in the city of Shoalhaven. We are using council funding together with RFS funding to build a new integrated emergency management centre in the Shoalhaven. I think that indicates that the council is doing a lot to assist.

Mr McARTHUR—Will you continue to fund the Rural Fire Service?

Mr Russell—We will continue to provide our statutory obligations in terms of the funding equation.

Mr McARTHUR—You will not be tempted to shift that across to the state government?

Mr Russell—No. The legislation places an obligation on council to make a contribution, and we will continue with that contribution. There is no intention to stop doing that. I think council sees that the volunteers of the Rural Fire Service are very much a part of us building a safer city in the Shoalhaven, which is part of our core vision for the city.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Russell, I was interested in your comments on the use of the defence forces in these sorts of situations. It seems to me that the effectiveness of that involvement depends on a couple of things: the timing of the invitation to participate in fighting

the fires and, of course, the types of assets that the defence department have in bringing their expertise to bear. I am interested in your comments on the defence equipment and the sorts of equipment that could be purchased. Does it go beyond what you have already mentioned today? I note in your submission the extensive use of defence contractors in the Shoalhaven area. I am interested in how you see that private expertise, if you like, being brought to bear within existing structures and situations in a disaster. I have another question, but can you just tease that one out for me.

Mr Russell—The defence forces, with their aircraft fleet in the Shoalhaven, at times play an important role and I think there is an enhanced role that they could play. There are synergies in having them available for bushfire events. In saying that, there is obviously a need for them to be trained in emergency management. I do not necessarily see defence forces as being on-ground firefighters. I see their role as being part of that incident management team; using the technology and equipment that they have to assist in a management rather than a physical on-the-ground firefighting role. For the philosophy that I am expounding those examples are apt. The defence role as I see it has changed somewhat in the last 20 years in Australia. When I was growing up it was more the case of there being a war on and the Army and Navy going off to fight the war.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—We are still fighting them, aren't we?

Mr Russell—Yes, we are. But I think there is a different role being played by defence forces in Australia now. We believe there is a natural progression in changing that role to involve working with the local community in times of severe emergency. If you look at it they are very good at it. They have the skills for providing logistics for operations and planning and managing campaigns. These are the core issues which emergency management is really about—having a plan in place, bringing the resources together, implementing the plan and producing an outcome. That is what I see the Defence Force as being really good at. A transition from there to emergency management at a civil level would provide benefits for this country.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I think that from a community perspective it would be beneficial to debate what the primary role of the defence forces is. It needs to be considered whether they are here to defend the nation—and they have certain ways of their own for doing that—or to assist in these sorts of emergencies. It is obvious they do have a role and I am interested in not only that interface and what clearly defined role the defence forces could have but—as you mentioned in your submission—the whole range of contractors and expertise that exists at the local level here in the Shoalhaven that services the defence establishment. That expertise is private, I imagine. It would have the capacity for their skills to be brought to bear in these situations also. You seem to be intimating that side of it rather than the up-front big defence involvement in these situations.

Mr Russell—I must stress that I am not being critical of the defence forces. The support they gave at that Hylands fire at Christmastime 2001 was magnificent. In fact they set up an evacuation centre, so residents were taken onto the Defence Force base and fed for a couple of days—and that was a rolling program—and firefighters from outside the area were being housed on HMAS *Albatross*. The support was there; what we asked for was given. For example, they provided open access to the airbase and they assisted with fuelling for both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. That support was magnificent. But I see there is potential for a further extension, and we are trying to advocate that as an issue that this committee should think about

in terms of their future role. In terms of the defence contractors—and appreciating some of the work they do is confidential—we have seen and had access to some of the software packages and there is potential for application there.

During the Canberra fires I saw a defence contractor, who we know, deploy some helicopters to do plotting of where the fire boundary was. Again, that was technology which I had had access to 2½ years ago. That company has an operation in the Shoalhaven. So we are saying that we can see that there are resources and tools that those defence contractors have and that they are willing to grow their business. I think they would really like an opportunity to put that technology to use in some of these events, and I think in doing that there would be a significant improvement in the outcome.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—You are obviously a great believer in the application of advanced technologies, and I think this is an area which the committee will certainly examine in great depth. In your submission you said:

This meant that the electronic data had to be recast into the traditional forms of output to be understood at the operational level. What a time to find out that the advanced systems were not practical.

I think we have to be very careful in these situations about seeing the existence of these technologies as being the panacea. Yes, we can develop very technologically advanced systems, but my concern is that at the operational level there is the very problem which you identify: we fall over and then have to revert back to the traditional methods. How do you see us bridging that gulf between the operational level and the advanced technology that obviously other communities, like the Canadians and the Americans, have?

Mr Russell—The example we have mentioned specifically in our submission is of helicopters plotting fire boundaries. They were landing, bringing that information to a location and then that information was downloaded to a computer and imposed on a map base. That was then brought to the fire control centre and overlaid onto the operational map. I saw all of that occurring. The technology is out there. That information could quite easily be encapsulated within a personal computer in the helicopter, put into a data file and then downloaded to a computer in the fire control centre. So five minutes after the helicopter had finished its flight that information could be available. That is a small example of the technology I am referring to.

I agree with that. I think it comes back to setting a national standard—a national platform of event management—having Emergency Management Australia, CSIRO and fire authorities saying, ‘This is the agreed response mechanism for across Australia. We now have that in place. We are going to train all our staff, both professional staff and volunteer staff, to be familiar with that. We will have specialised groups within regions, within New South Wales and within Australia who can work that technology.’ Those groups would be the first response groups who would go into these areas. They would travel with a package of knowledge, expertise, skills and software to take control of a fire. Once they had started to take control then the local resources would be brought into play and the incident management team expanded—but everybody would be basically singing the same song and playing the same tune.

CHAIR—I have a couple of extra questions to ask. I would like to come back to the one-year hazard reduction plan that Sophie Panopoulos raised before. How long does it take to get one of those plans approved?

Mr Russell—The bushfire management committee meets quarterly. They do have a subcommittee in place. What we have tried to do at that management committee level is to approve a suite of plans for the coming year. However, in terms of doing the research, the investigation and the environmental assessments and preparing a prescription for the hazard reduction work, some of that work can in fact actually take three to six months to achieve and to have formalised proposals actually put before the committee for adoption.

CHAIR—Isn't it true that once upon a time these plans used to be five-year plans?

Mr Russell—Yes. The bushfire management committee does have a strategic longer-term plan but just then I was looking at those annual programs on a year-by-year basis.

CHAIR—Wasn't it the case that, when there was more or less a five-year plan, far better planning could be done with respect to environmental aspects as to what and when fauna needed to be protected and what flora also needed to be protected, so that you could have a much better management plan of hazard reduction over a longer period than redoing these things on an annual basis?

Mr Russell—I would agree with that comment. I think you need to be longer term; you need to be strategic. However, one of the issues is that with planning which has perhaps been done for three or five years out we are learning more about our environment. Even though you have those broader length plans in place, there is a need to go back and review them on a year-by-year basis, just to make sure that they are still compatible with our obligations.

CHAIR—You mentioned before that within a few weeks you would have new hazard reduction regulations for Shoalhaven council.

Mr Russell—They are in an amendment to council's tree preservation order.

CHAIR—Would it be possible to get a copy of those when they are available?

Mr Russell—Yes.

Mrs GASH—Mr Russell, going back to my original question, I would like to clarify things in my mind so that we can put forward recommendations if required. No matter how good our defence facilities are or how many personnel actually want to assist on the ground, is it not a fact that we have to be asked by the states before we can deliver those services?

Mr Russell—Yes, it is.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Russell, for your time this morning and for your submission. We will look forward to receiving the additional information that you will send to the committee.

[10.13 a.m.]

REEVES, Mr Ross Ian (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Reeves. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear here today?

Mr Reeves—I am from Kioloa, which is south of Ulladulla. I have been in the Rural Fire Service as a volunteer for 45 years but I am not allowed to be here today as a representative of the Rural Fire Service; I am here as a person.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Reeves. I think you were here earlier when I mentioned the aspects of these hearings as being formal proceedings of the parliament and I just remind you of those cautions that I gave earlier. We have received your submission. I notice that it was on the Kioloa Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade letterhead but I acknowledge your comment that, presumably, you have been directed that you are here as an individual, not as a representative of the RFS. Would you make a brief statement in relation to your submission before we go to questions.

Mr Reeves—As Barry Russell said in regard to the buffer zones—I do not want to tread on toes here—I really think that National Parks and Forestry need to upgrade themselves on hazard reduction. In the township I live in, Kioloa—and I have been there since 1973—we are pretty good, but down at Depot Beach and the North Durras area there has not been hazard reduction done in that area in that time. The bush and the litter on the ground down there are absolutely astronomical. I think we were a bit lucky last year. I really thought last year that if a fire were to start in that area, quite honestly you would never put it out until it hit the coast.

The other thing I would like to bring up is forestry permits to go into the forest and get firewood. I think it would be a good idea if National Parks also took up this practice, not in regard to just going ahead and cutting trees down and things like that. In the Kioloa area over Christmas and through to Easter we have approximately 6,000 to 8,000 people coming there for holidays. If people were allowed to go in there and pick up firewood that is on the ground—after all, that is where the fire starts, on the ground—and remove the litter, you would have it reasonably under control.

Originally, I came from the country. What used to happen in country areas was that landholders were given permits to allow stock to graze at a certain time of year in forest areas and that again removed some of the litter. I do not know whether you fellows can remember, but years ago there did not seem to be big fires like the ones we have today. I really think we have to get back in a small way to what they used to do years ago—put stock in there for a certain period and the powers that be would tell them how many stock they are allowed to put in and so forth.

What Barry Russell brought up about the expertise of HMAS *Albatross* is one of the things I was going to bring up, but he has done that good a job of it that I will leave that alone. Yes, that is a very good idea. In the 2001 fires, I think if they had had a chopper out from *Albatross* earlier, it probably would have been a much smaller fire. That is all I would like to say.

CHAIR—Thank you. Would you like to comment on the aspect I raised with Mr Russell at the end of his evidence about these plans? As somebody who has very much been on the ground, do you want to comment on this aspect of annual plans, as opposed to five-year plans for hazard reduction?

Mr Reeves—I was always under the impression that it was a five-year plan. I did not know anything at all about a one-year plan.

CHAIR—Let us deal with the five-year plan. From your experience, can you talk about the advantages of having that longer period of time?

Mr Reeves—The advantage of having a five-year plan is that you burnt an area here this year and you know that next year another one is going to be burnt—that sort of thing. Over a five-year period, you eventually come back. In the Kioloa area, we have 12 different areas. Over a given period of time you burn this area and then five or six years later you will burn it again. It keeps the area around the township reasonably safe from bushfires.

CHAIR—And over that period of time do you experience a pattern with respect to animals and things like that?

Mr Reeves—Yes. The whole idea is to do your hazard reduction at this time of the year. The idea is that it only burns slowly. It is a low intensity fire: it only gets to about one metre high. In my experience animals, especially kangaroos, have plenty of time to get out of the area while you are burning. You have to burn it slowly.

Mrs GASH—Thank you, Mr Reeves. I know you are a bit uptight but don't be, we are all very friendly. I am going to acknowledge you as the Captain of the Kioloa Fire Brigade because that is how I know you, regardless of whether you can speak in that capacity or not. I would like to say thank you for your 40 years of experience and giving to this community. The question I want to ask is: are you completing more or less fire hazard reduction than five years ago?

Mr Reeves—In the Kioloa area it is probably the same as it was five years ago. But what I was saying is that I am speaking more or less for the Depot Beach area and North Durras as well. North Durras is actually in the Eurobodalla shire. If a fire starts down there, we are there because we are the next cab off the rank because we are just north of there. They really need to do something. It will burn it to the ground.

Mrs GASH—What about the other brigades throughout the Shoalhaven—can you speak for them? Are they in the same sort of situation? Are they doing the same amount of fire hazard reduction now or are they doing less?

Mr Reeves—Yes. I cannot really talk about the northern areas but down in the southern areas around Tabourie and Ulladulla, a fair bit of hazard reduction work goes on.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you, Mr Reeves, for being here. You make me feel at home; I feel as if I am back in north-east Victoria where there are terrific volunteer firefighters like yourself who have given many decades of service, so thank you. In your written submission you referred to situations where fire trails were closed or inadequately maintained and how, in a

number of instances, that led to the situation of the fire spreading, with the implication being that, had access been available to particular fire trails, the fire could have been stopped at an earlier time. Briefly, could you describe one of these particular instances that you were involved in?

Mr Reeves—No, I cannot really because three people formulated this submission and one of them was talking about that particular fire—I know it was down towards the Depot Beach area—and I was not at the fire. I heard about it. I can understand that you cannot keep every trail open to cater for people doing 100 kilometres an hour along it because there is an enormous number of trails. Again, I do not want to tread on toes but it is in a national park, I am afraid. National Parks needs to watch the main trail roads and keep them in a condition such that you can get any truck along them at any time.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In your opinion have those main trails been maintained?

Mr Reeves—No, not really.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You said that you were directed not to speak to the committee in an official capacity.

Mr Reeves—That is right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you able to tell us who gave you that direction?

Mr Reeves—No, because they might cut my pay back.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I understand.

CHAIR—They might reduce your pay?

Mr Reeves—Yes, reduce my pay.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you feel angry that you have been given such a direction?

Mr Reeves—No, not really. I said that I still wanted to come along here and put my point of view. Over the last few years the fires seem to be getting worse and worse, bigger and bigger. We have to get back to what they used to do, as I just said—put stock in the bush, allow people to go and get wood. It is not the overall answer, but it is a start. As I said in the submission: if you remove the fuel, you cut down the fire.

Mr McARTHUR—From a volunteer's point of view, how do you see the paperwork to go about preparing for a fire reduction burn? Do you see that as a problem?

Mr Reeves—No, not at all. We submit paperwork to fire control and it then goes to the committee. It is reasonably good.

Mr McARTHUR—What about individual land-holders? Are they quite happy that they can carry out a bit of a fire reduction burn on their properties?

Mr Reeves—Yes. I would not know this for positive, but during the winter time, after permit season, I do not think anybody can stop you. From, say, the end of March through to 1 September, if you are a land-holder I do not think anybody can stop you from doing a hazard reduction burn, as long as you keep it within your boundary.

Mr McARTHUR—What if it gets outside your boundary? What happens then?

Mr Reeves—You are in trouble. You are in big trouble. That is something that I will bring up while I am here. I originally came from the western area, and you had to have firebreaks there. Down here I do not think they have heard of them. This is the problem. A person burns an area of ground on his property—and that is all right; down here there is more bush, even privately owned bush—but they never accede to do a firebreak. Of course it gets out. There is nothing there to stop it. That is another point.

Mr McARTHUR—How do you see the morale of the volunteers in the RFS relative to the professionally paid officers?

Mr Reeves—We get along quite well. As you know, sometimes you get a bit sick of them, but most times it is pretty good.

Mr McARTHUR—You are an individual representing the fire brigade. You are not here in an official capacity.

Mr Reeves—No.

Mr McARTHUR—Was that an official instruction?

Mr Reeves—More or less, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—But you wanted to put a point of view to the committee as a long-term firefighter?

Mr Reeves—Yes, that is it.

Mr McARTHUR—Was that frowned upon by the authorities or not?

Mr Reeves—No, I do not think so.

Mr McARTHUR—But they would not give you official sanction to come here?

Mr Reeves—That is right.

Mr McARTHUR—Why would that be?

Mr Reeves—I do not know. I did not go down that track. I thought I would leave that one alone. I had enough to think about today.

Mrs GASH—There were too many hazards on the track!

Mr ORGAN—You have mentioned in your presentation the big fires we have today and the fact that it seems that the fires we are having now are getting hotter. You talk about wildfire. This is based on your 45 years of experience. You are saying, ‘We have problems now where the fires are getting really hot. How do we deal with them?’ You seem to be saying here and in the submission that the fuel load is the core issue. Do you think there are other reasons that our fires seem to be getting hotter or do you basically put it down to the fuel loads? I am just wondering if it is the weather conditions. This committee has been told about changes in the weather and things like that.

Mr Reeves—I admit that with the 2001-02 fires you could not have struck a worse time to light a fire. The wind came up enormously strongly, and away it went. You have to get back to the fuel loading on the ground. After all, that is where it starts. Then it just gets bigger, gets into the tops of the trees, and away it goes.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you.

Mr SCHULTZ—First of all, Mr Reeves, I would like to pay the compliment to you that your local member has also paid you. Thank you for the magnificent contribution you have made as a volunteer over 45 years in rural firefighting. The comment that you made initially with regard to being here as a volunteer and as an individual rather than as a member of the Rural Fire Service indicated to me that there is a reluctance by you to speak as an official member or captain of the brigade, because of possible punitive action against you, which you alluded to in terms of your pay. I also suggest to you that you cannot be critical of any operational matter related to the Rural Fire Service. Are my suggestions on those two points pretty well on lineball with your position?

Mr Reeves—Well, I suppose you are right. But I can honestly say that I cannot be critical about the Rural Fire Service, because I think it is going along extremely well. When I first started 40 years ago it was a case of, ‘Pick the boys up out of the pub and away we go to a fire,’ and that was it.

Mr SCHULTZ—It worked though, didn’t it?

Mr Reeves—Yes, it worked. I am a second generation captain. My father was a captain as well. But now we have a situation where we are more trained. We are highly trained and we know what we are doing. Nine times out of 10 we can stop a fire before it gets big. It is just that occasionally we cannot. But, as I said, over the last few years every now and again fires seem to get a lot bigger than what they used to be years ago.

Mr SCHULTZ—It is not like me to be controversial, but I will ask you a question with regard to your position as a paid volunteer. I presume you are a paid volunteer.

Mr Reeves—No.

Mr SCHULTZ—You’re not? Have you signed any documentation with the Rural Fire Service?

Mr Reeves—There is no such thing as a paid volunteer. How do you mean?

Mr SCHULTZ—Have you signed any documentation which restricts you from making any comment?

Mr Reeves—No.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you, Mr Reeves, for your submission and your time here and, again, thank you for your great effort over so many years. On page 1 of your submission you say:

... lack of hazard reduction has been a major contributor to the disastrous fires of recent years.

Why has there been a reduction in the frequency of hazard reduction? Why is it not happening?

Mr Reeves—Because—

Mrs GASH—Come on, Ross. Tell us.

Mr BARTLETT—You have been very strong in your comments. You said:

It is blatantly obvious that low hazard reduction or would it be more correct to say that lack of hazard reduction has been a major contributor to the disastrous fires of recent years.

Mr Reeves—I am going to say it. Because most of the areas that I am talking about—in fact, all of the areas I am talking about—are entirely within the National Parks areas.

Mr BARTLETT—And they are presumably reluctant to allow—

Mr Reeves—They seem to be reluctant to do hazard reduction work. Although at Kioloa this year we have a hazard reduction program that will take in about 80 or 90 acres. But it has taken a couple of years to do it. They did one at Kioloa last year that was about half a mile long and about 400 yards wide. They may as well not have bothered.

Mr BARTLETT—So when you say they are reluctant, does it appear that they reject applications for hazard reduction or that they are too slow in approving—

Mr Reeves—They just take a long time to approve them.

Mr BARTLETT—You suggest in your submission that the responsibility for hazard reduction should be with the local brigade.

Mr Reeves—Yes, with the local brigade through the local fire control office.

Mr BARTLETT—And you think the local fire control office should have the final say?

Mr Reeves—Yes.

Mr BARTLETT—You do not think there should be any need to be accountable to, say, RFS headquarters, National Parks or local council?

Mr Reeves—I can see a point there. I put something down earlier—it was an afterthought—and that is I think the Rural Fire Service should have full control within a kilometre of villages and towns and have the authority to do hazard reduction within that kilometre.

Mr BARTLETT—Would you suggest that that would maybe need to be done in conjunction with approval from local council?

Mr Reeves—Yes, probably.

Mr BARTLETT—But it is your view that the centralisation of the approval process through National Parks and RFS headquarters has delayed and obstructed some of the hazard reduction that should have occurred.

Mr Reeves—Yes.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Reeves, congratulations for coming along today—that is a big effort. Coming from a rural area myself and growing up in environments in the western district of Victoria where fires were a matter of course, I can understand the experience that you have. With forty years in the game, you are not intimidated by any directive by any person. You are here to speak your mind as an individual, and you have done that and that is good. I want to ask you about banging the fires when they start and the use of aerial assets. You seemed to suggest in your opening comment that, if those resources were available, some of these fires that have occurred down here could have been contained.

Mr Reeves—Yes. If the aerial choppers could have got in earlier, it probably would have changed the course of things—especially when we have them here at the back door. I did not know this, but apparently someone said that you have to get state government approval before you can get the choppers in the air. That should be out—it should be finished here today, or tomorrow or whenever you like. As far as I am concerned, the matter should go from the fire control office through to HMAS *Albatross*, and they are in the air. You cannot muck around with red tape in a situation like that because, I tell you what, a fire does not stop just because you are talking to someone on the blower.

Mr SCHULTZ—I have a supplementary question. Like my parliamentary colleagues here, I also grew up in rural and regional Australia in grass and forest fire areas. Over the years I have noticed that there seems to be a focus in terminology on the management of fires rather than the early and quick suppression of fires. Do you think that is a mind-set that is creating problems for us, where people talk about managing fires rather than putting them out as quickly as they can with all available resources?

Mr Reeves—I have never been in that situation. We always go out there to get rid of them, to put them out.

Mr SCHULTZ—I am not so much talking about the volunteer side of it; I am talking about the administrative side of things.

Mr Reeves—Right. I have never been in that neck of the woods.

CHAIR—Thank you for your time here today and for your submission.

Mr Reeves—Thank you all very much for allowing me to be here. It has not been as bad as I thought it would be.

Proceedings suspended from 10.40 a.m. to 11.04 a.m.

HAWKINS, Mr Brian Philip, President-Secretary, Narrawallee Residents and Ratepayers Association**MELVILLE, Mr David Desmond, Secretary, Manyana District Citizens Association**

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. We have received your submissions, but would either of you like to make a brief statement in relation to those before we move to questions?

Mr Melville—My reason for putting in a submission is that our local area was affected by fire in 2001-02. I saw the advertisement in the media for submissions and I took the opportunity, even though it was late, to try to formulate a submission that would be acceptable. In so doing I endeavoured to encompass all the aspects of the advertisement; however, I failed in a couple.

My submission deals with a brief history of the area that I could glean from publications. From what I understand, we live in one of the most bushfire prone areas on this planet. The meteorological studies support the fact that fires with the potential to wreak the most havoc in our area come from the north and the north-west to west. However, this does not preclude severe fires in our area coming from the south and the north-east.

Contained in our village are five hamlets: North Bendalong, Bendalong, Manyana, Berringer, and Cunjurong Point. I also take into consideration in my submission the adjacent villages to the north and to the south of us. These villages include, to the north, Sussex Inlet and, to the south, Lake Conjola. We have one common denominator in that we have single access egress roads with greenery right up to the edge of the bitumen. This promotes a serious problem in times of fire in that people are unable to get in and out when fire threat is at its highest.

The fire had a serious impact on our area, but that was nothing in relation to that which was suffered to the north of us at Sussex Inlet. We in the Manyana-Bendalong area were locked in for several days and, in that period, it was necessary to import foodstuffs by way of water. The people who suffered the most monetary loss were the local shopkeepers and the caravan park. As soon as there was a break a lot of the holidaymakers left the area, and this had an impact. So these people also lost out. The loss of power also caused a loss for people in the area. They lost foodstuffs in their freezers, because power was at one stage cut for 10 hours and the temperature was very high.

Contributing factors included the complete failure by the green-influenced National Parks and Wildlife Service to carry out hazard reduction and fire prevention maintenance. Local government failed to carry out hazard reduction on Crown reserves under their jurisdiction. They also failed to place on owners of lots held for future development a requirement to carry out hazard reduction. If that had been performed there would not have been a threat to a lot of residences in the area. I looked at remedial action. It requires one body to be the overriding body. I feel that the Rural Fire Service should be the overall enforcing body.

The government statutory bodies, local government, local land-holders and power supply companies should comply with any directives from the RFS. A continuing program of hazard reduction of forest fuels should be maintained. Adequate buffer zones should be created, particularly where bush adjoins residential areas, and corridors should be created along access/egress roads and powerlines so that they are negotiable in most eventualities.

I want to talk about the causes and risk factors. The green lobby groups' influence in the national parks, and their preservation policies, have in my mind contributed to the neglect of hazard reduction. I feel that National Parks have a preservation policy rather than a reduction policy. Their preservation policy is biased, I feel. They should have a conservation policy, and my definition of it would be 'harmony between man and land'. I support what I think Wilson Tuckey said at one stage—that the government would withdraw federal grants to National Parks should they continue with their current policy.

Another item that gets up my nostrils is insurance. To my mind, this is something that needs a complete overview, with so many property owners or mortgagees failing to have adequate or in fact any insurance cover on either house or contents. Too many seem to adopt the attitude, 'It will not happen to me, and even if it does I will be helped by my fellow citizens and government grants.'

CHAIR—I think you are now just going through the rest of your submission, which we have and which is on the public record as authorised for publication. If there is anything additional that you want to put forward at the moment, we can then flesh out some of this through questions as well. I would appreciate that, because our time is not huge.

Mr Melville—On the question of hazard reduction, earlier this year Mr Debus of the state parliament put out a press release saying that he had a you-beaut tree mower and shredder that was going to clear passageways into areas and open up fire trails. From what I understand, it has not been seen in the Shoalhaven. On the question of powerlines, I recall that in Victoria some years ago the State Electricity Commission was found at fault in causing bushfires. My view is that National Parks are leaving themselves open in this day and age to a class action against them for allowing the growth of hazardous fuels to build up and they could be looking at a sizeable damages claim. After listening to the other speakers and questions, I do support that the federal government take a step with a national impetus. This is not just a state matter, to my way of thinking. It now encompasses the whole of Australia, because we are seeing firefighting units coming from the west to the east and venturing backwards and forwards across all states. With the bickering that goes on, it needs an overriding body to oversee the whole operation. If we had that, we might have an Elvis on our books. That is about all I have to say.

CHAIR—Thanks. I guess we would say that we are having a federal inquiry partly for that very reason. Mr Hawkins, do you have something you would like to add or highlight in some opening remarks?

Mr Hawkins—Yes. Our submission was submitted on behalf of our community, even though we were not involved in a fire. But it concerns us, and I would like to reiterate our concerns on that. Firstly, I would like to thank the persons who ensured that this inquiry came about, because there is a fear within the community that, because of our three levels of government and the many bureaucracies within each level, by the time any policies or decisions filter down through

the system they will be ineffective. A concern of our community and possibly of many other communities is the ongoing neglect and failure of local and state governments to provide a safe environment and carry out their duty of care to the community. Instead, they have shown an eagerness to shuffle the problem between departments in the hope that it will go away.

We have had meetings with Shoalhaven City Council—or the communities of Tabourie, Burrill, Kings Point, Narrawallee, Lake Conjola, Manyana and Bendalong—to discuss some of these problems. These meetings go back months. We have not had any reply. We have phoned and the phone calls have brought negative results. Shoalhaven City Council bestows on some community groups the title of ‘principal consultative body’. This is supposed to mean that these communities are to liaise with council on community issues. We have found that, whenever we have tried to do this, we have been rejected. However, they do have what they call bush care groups, which are funded and set up by local council. These groups override the local community in bush care matters and in regeneration and vegetation.

Shoalhaven City Council and its bush care department promote the non-removal of any dead or living vegetation from the reserves under their control. One of the reasons that council has stated for this is that, the more the bush and the undergrowth spreads, the less grass they have to mow, and this is a major cost-cutting exercise. What they do, as the undergrowth and trees spread, is move the bollards or the fences containing this growth out into the grassed areas. This action is repeated until eventually you end up with one big island instead of numerous islands.

The other problem that we have is with state government employees, with their employment benefits and penalty rates, working beside volunteers who give up their time, move away from their families and work up to 18-hour shifts. There is a difficulty there in maintaining a friendly attitude towards one another. This is something the committee needs to address. Some of these volunteers provide their own private vehicles and their own petrol with no remuneration at all.

Many communities in the Shoalhaven are concerned at the neglect and lack of preventative measures undertaken by local government and state government departments leading up to the bushfire season. Shoalhaven City Council’s fire mitigation department should have done an assessment of our area in May. It is still ongoing and I believe it will not be completed until September. It will probably be too late to do any hazard reduction before the next season.

Our community is only small and it has not experienced the ravages of a bushfire. However, we have experienced the isolation of no electricity, no phones, no petrol, a concern that the main fire front is only a few kilometres away, the risk of putting boats to sea at night to supply provisions to neighbouring villages, and the possibility of evacuating residents. We have experienced the five-hour detour to get home instead of 30 minutes, because the only road—the Princes Highway—is closed and no-one can tell you when it will be open. These concerns are minor compared to some of those experienced in the major fires but, without them being aired, local and state governments hide under the umbrella of the environment and do nothing. Our concern is that, it does not matter how many times you go to these people, you get referred to another department or another person in that department and then another department, and so it goes on for months at a time. We have letters in our files going back six to 12 months with no reply from council.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. Both of you might like to comment: what has been your experience of the process when there is a threat of fire and somebody makes a decision about evacuation? What is the experience of residents in some of the smaller areas? Is it done in consultation with people? It would seem that a lot of it depends upon how well prepared a particular community is as to whether they ought to evacuate. We have seen examples in many parts of the country where it could be argued that evacuation meant that houses were lost and, where people had stayed to protect houses, they were actually saved. From a resident's point of view, do you have some comments on that process?

Mr Melville—In 2001-02 we had two orders to evacuate. The orders were only delivered through a radio announcement and a vehicle driving around with a loudspeaker. No-one had an evacuation program ready and people were concerned about what to take and what to leave. One of the things that most of them seemed concerned about was getting the car out, but you could not have taken the car anywhere; you just had to take it down to the beach. The evacuation is a bit traumatic when you first experience it. The second time around, when we had a secondary burn, it was not so traumatic, but the first one was frightening.

Mr Hawkins—Our community has not been evacuated, thankfully. In the last fire we were the next in line to be evacuated, but there was no announcement and no forewarning. We believe the RFS tankers were standing by at the top of the hill and just waiting to see which way the wind blew.

CHAIR—Have both of you lived in your communities for a reasonable period of time?

Mr Hawkins—I have been visiting the Shoalhaven for almost 30 years and have lived in Manyana and built a home there. I have only been permanently in the southern area, in Narrawallee near Ulladulla, for about four years. But for over 30 years I have been visiting the Shoalhaven.

Mr Melville—I am coming up for four years.

CHAIR—Your experiences are just of the last four years?

Mr Melville—Yes. I am an expatriate Victorian.

CHAIR—Maybe Mr Hawkins would be the best one to comment on this question as he has visited over a long period of time: have you seen a change over that period in the amount of hazard reduction being done by various agencies in a particular region, or has it been pretty much the same over the period?

Mr Hawkins—Until recent years I have not been particularly involved in that field or had the need to keep tabs on it. Going back probably 15 years ago I was involved in fighting a fire at Manyana. This was a fire that started on a Saturday when both the local brigades, Bendalong and Cunjurong Point, just happened to be in Ulladulla for training or some reason and were some 30 kilometres away. A private property somehow managed to catch fire, and it almost burnt out the whole village. It travelled from Berringer Lake right through to the beachfront. They were not volunteers; they were just residents fighting the fire and they ended up on the beach, which was

as far as they could go. There would appear to have been a build-up of fuel on the ground in local reserves or reserves that council manage on behalf of state government.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Melville, could I just ask you a couple of things about your submission? You refer here to the fact that you do not think enough has been done in educating residents about what they need to do. Could you expand on that? Do you have a view?

Mr Melville—I have spoken to the local fire brigade. We put out a quarterly newsletter. Our next newsletter will have an article on this type of thing and what the fire brigade promote for fire prevention, particularly when fire threatens property. The things I highlighted in my submission were no leaf mulch—that type of thing becomes a fire problem—water in your gutters and cleaning of gutters. It is amazing when you drive around our burgh to see the number with herbage growing out of the guttering. The dry comes and it is fuel.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Is it a matter of making people aware or of monitoring what is actually done? You make some very interesting comments about insurance as well. One would assume that there is a responsibility, as there is on National Parks and local government, on individual landowners to prepare their properties if they are deemed to be living in a fire zone. Your comment here seems to indicate that in this area perhaps the awareness is not there, or, if the awareness is there, people are not doing what they ought to be doing in preparing their properties.

Mr Melville—I would say you are correct there. This particular area that we are talking about is an area where about 50 per cent of the people occupy premises and the rest of the properties are held by greater Sydney and greater Wollongong people. They are holiday homes. They come down for a weekend—and this is one of the follies of living in a village like this—and the only thing they see is the surf is up and they go down to the surf. The neglect of property has to be brought to attention. I think that the local fire brigade is well versed in being able to bring that to attention. We propose advertising it in our newsletter, which has a distribution of 650 in the village.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—That is obviously a good initiative to get that message out. I refer you to ‘Bushfire causes—the contributing factor’ in your submission. You refer to the fact that:

It was the burn on one of these lots that promoted the greatest threat to homes in our area.

Was that a residential lot or was that the hazard reduction on crown land?

Mr Melville—No, it was a development lot. It is an interesting lot. It is approximately 200 acres. It is held by one developer and it abuts round about 30 houses. All of these houses were threatened during the course of the fire because it came right up to their back doors. It was fortunate that there were some 15-plus fire tenders locked in and these were able to spread themselves and put fire prevention foam out to prevent the burn. That 200-acre lot is a bone of contention in the area in that it has been neglected by the holder.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Is there a requirement by local government that the owner prepare the property in some way?

Mr Melville—I have seen individually owned blocks where they have sent the slasher in to clear the grass. With this particular block there was nothing; so much so that motorbikes use it for a track and only the last holiday weekend the police announced that the motorbikes were off in the holiday weekend and anyone encroaching would be prosecuted. That was announced on the radio on the Saturday morning. That had an impact.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you for your submission. On that theme of individual responsibility for their own property, I have two questions. The first regards an individual's ability or right to clear hazard on their own land. The council's general manager said that council is reviewing its tree preservation orders to give residents more flexibility on their own land. Are you aware of any instances where the existing tree preservation order has prevented adequate hazard reduction on private property?

Mr Melville—Not personally.

Mr Hawkins—No, but it was interesting that in Mr Russell's submission he went back almost 10 years to some of the previous fires, and nothing seems to have changed in the 10 years.

Mr BARTLETT—Could you elaborate on that? In what regard has nothing changed?

Mr Hawkins—They say that they are implementing plans and strategies to combat bushfires, going back to the fires of 1994, yet we still have this problem—it does not seem to have changed. The frequency is getting greater and the fires are getting worse. If they have been looking at implementing strategies and plans to manage fires since 1994, why are fires and the intensity of fires increasing?

Mr BARTLETT—What is your brief response to the question you have just asked?

Mr Hawkins—I am not certain, but I believe that National Parks used to have dams in the national parks but I believe that they are no longer there. I do not know the reason for that. When the fires were on, the feeling in some sections of the community was, 'Gee, National Parks are getting it easy by getting everyone in to give them a hand to clear their land.' This view is held in some parts of the community.

Mr BARTLETT—You mentioned that your view was that there ought to be compulsory insurance for homes. How would that work?

Mr Melville—Similar to the motor car third party insurance—that was the sort of compulsion I had in mind. Particularly in bushfire-prone areas, if a person elects to live there then he has to be prepared to accept the added consequence of living there.

Mr BARTLETT—Who would administer and enforce that? Would it be council?

Mr Melville—It could be on the rates. It could be encompassed therein.

Mr Hawkins—I believe that Queensland has some system like this whereby you are levied for the equivalent of the Rural Fire Service here; you pay a percentage on top of your insurance. That is only paid by property owners who insure their property—it is not paid by property

owners who do not insure their property. This percentage is a component of the local government rates in Queensland.

Mr BARTLETT—Is that for support of the RFS activities or for insurance of their own property?

Mr Hawkins—No, this is to fund the RFS—

Mr BARTLETT—Their firefighting capacity.

Mr Hawkins—rather than insurance.

Mr BARTLETT—Are you then advocating, Mr Melville, to have some sort of a surcharge on rates to apply to those residents who do not have insurance on their own property?

Mr Melville—Yes. Looking at the statistics that came out of the Canberra fire, I see in the media that 47 per cent of properties were either not insured or underinsured. This creates a problem for government and John Citizen.

Mr BARTLETT—The difficulty of enforcing it could be quite complicated, particularly ascertaining the issue of underinsurance.

Mr Melville—Yes, I can see that. But if you were required to complete a statutory declaration as to your contents and your property value, there may be a different story.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like to raise two issues, Mr Melville. I notice you are a Victorian expat—that gives you a quality rating to start with. You raise the matter of neglect in fuel reduction burning in national parks emanating from the green lobby. What real evidence have you got for that suggestion?

Mr Melville—In my working career I was a Commonwealth public servant and I happened to be involved with the national fauna squad. I saw a lot that went on in national parks—you were not allowed to do this and you were not allowed to do that. I look at the qualifications of what used to be a ranger in the national parks, and now a person practically has to have a tertiary qualification just to be a ranger. A ranger when I was out in the field was a law enforcement officer. Today, rangers are people who take guided tours. The people that are getting behind national parks—and I have seen the instance in our own area where we have a green lobby that are supporting non-hazard reduction, non-removal of trees in national parks. So I see it from two aspects.

Mr McARTHUR—That leads me to the next question. You made a comment in your opening remarks that National Parks could suffer a class action. Again, what evidence have you got of that? Would you also care to make a comment in regard to the coronial inquiry that the mayor referred to, that some of the witnesses were intimidated in a legal sense about reduction burning and other matters related to national parks?

Mr Melville—Would you repeat the question again.

Mr McARTHUR—You suggested that a class action could be taken against National Parks because of a lack of fuel reduction burning. If fires emerged out of national parks and destroyed local communities they then, presumably, could be subjected to a class action. That is the way I heard your comment.

Mr Melville—Yes, I am with you on that. The one I cited was the State Electricity Commission in Victoria. They were found at fault for causing the fire. There were damages awarded against them of \$79 million, in my recollection.

Mr McARTHUR—That is correct.

Mr Melville—In Victoria, they did not remove the trees from the power lines. I have subsequently seen the impact in New South Wales where they have implemented a tree reduction along power lines in close proximity, just so they will not be a hazard. By not reducing hazard fuels and completing hazard reduction, I feel that National Parks will also find themselves in a like situation to what the SEC found itself in.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think this coronial inquiry that the mayor referred to, where witnesses were subjected to very severe legalistic questioning, is the start of this process where National Parks are defending their position in a legal sense?

Mr Melville—It could be. I was not privy to that before I heard it this morning.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Melville, your submission obviously shows that you have a lot of concern primarily for life, limb and property in your immediate area, and rightly so. I think we would all agree with that—that at the end of the day we are looking to protect life, limb and property. You are also very critical, it appears, of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, making statements about neglect and complete failure. Am I right in assuming that you seem to be implying that the lack of hazard reduction regimes is basically the cause of all the major problems we are currently facing? If so, what do you precisely mean by ‘hazard reduction’? Is it in regard to the immediate areas around the built-up areas where life and limb are, or is it in general? How broad do you see hazard reduction as being?

Mr Melville—Our village and the five hamlets are surrounded on three sides by national park. I am advised that National Parks took control of that land just on four years ago. When they took control of it, there has not been any hazard reduction. The only hazard reduction that has happened subsequently is that which was caused by the fire—that is the only hazard reduction. Likewise, I was pursued by our local radio station to ascertain what hazard reduction had taken place, if any. Subsequently, my inquiry established that there has not been any hazard reduction. There have been upgrades of two fire trails, and that is all. No other fire trails have been rejuvenated post the fires. That is the answer that I can give to your question, and that is one of the reasons why I say that there has been no hazard reduction.

One other thing that you have to look at is regeneration. I walk through the bush a lot. It is now getting on to 18 months or two years down the track from the fire. The regeneration would absolutely amaze you. That area is probably looked upon as one where the hazardous fuel has been reduced because of the fire. If you walk through the bush there, you can see where the fire

skipped and did not touch. You have areas of forest that escaped unscathed. The threat still remains there: the hazardous fuel has regenerated on the ground and further up the umbrella.

Mrs GASH—Mr Melville, could you expand on your statement in your submission that says:

It is now a national concern and as such ought to have a far greater Federal Government involvement.

Mr Melville—As I stated earlier, the fire problem is now looked upon as a national problem. You have it all down the eastern seaboard and in South Australia, in Western Australia and Tasmania. When there is a fire in a certain area, the volunteers from interstate are very quickly under way to assist. Where you have governments—and I talk about federal government and state governments—at loggerheads over certain issues, this creates a problem. To my way of thinking, there ought to be one body that has the overall right to say what equipment will be given to the fire in that area.

It goes a little bit further than that. I saw in the media with respect to the compensation payments made by government that the state emergency services were a forgotten entity when it came to complete compensation for moneys lost. I feel that someone has got to take up control instead of each state government operating as an independent body. It is a national problem and of national importance. Hence there ought to be federal funding and the federal government ought to have a bigger and better overall say.

Mrs GASH—Let me remind you that that is the reason perhaps for this inquiry—to find out what people actually think we should be doing as a federal government. It has also been very difficult, and our hands have been tied when the state authorities from every state within Australia have refused to come to speak to us.

CHAIR—Not Western Australia.

Mrs GASH—Not Western Australia; I beg your pardon.

CHAIR—And partly Tasmania as well.

Mr SCHULTZ—I cannot speak for National Parks in this area because I do not have any knowledge of them but I certainly do have a significant degree of knowledge of the Kosciuszko National Park as a federal representative and as a state representative in the past. One of the things that I found, in fairness to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, is that successive governments in the last two decades have embarked on an expansion process in national parks, increasing the sizes of national parks and increasing the wilderness areas of national parks. We all know what happens when you declare a wilderness area—it is just shut down and everything is allowed to grow.

The point that I make in terms of fairness to the National Parks and Wildlife Service is that there has been no corresponding increase in manpower or financial resources to manage those particular areas. That compounds the problem and the scenario that you have been painting with regard to National Parks not having controlled burns and doing hazard reduction. Do you think that the increase in the size of national parks and the increase of wilderness areas is a contributing factor? Given that fires are occurring in national parks, I presume that you are

advocating that the national government should take a more positive role in terms of managing those national parks, perhaps in cooperation with the states. Is that the sort of thing that you are talking about? Do you agree with the point that I made, that it is difficult in many respects for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to undertake some of the things that the community would like them to undertake when they do not have the manpower and the financial resources to do it?

Mr Hawkins—I think that some of what you are saying is correct. The community's first line of contact is National Parks and I think this is why they get the brunt of it. But we must not forget that they are under the umbrella of the state government and get their directions from the state government. The state government is the authority sending down the line the instructions to National Parks to do whatever or to provide funding or, as you say, to establish larger areas or no-go zones—whatever you like to call them. When we talk about National Parks, we should qualify that it is really the state government that the criticism should be levelled at.

Mr SCHULTZ—In closing, I will make another observation. We inspected, as an example, areas in the Kosciuszko National Park and in Victoria. Just to illustrate the point about the fuel build-up, some of the areas there became so hot that that sterilised the ground below the surface and vaporised any seed that was left. Even after rain, there is no return of any vegetation at all because there is nothing left to seed. So I make that point for what it is worth. Is this the general thrust of what you are trying to convey to this committee?

Mr Melville—One thing I would like to add, Mr Schultz, is that National Parks implies that it is Australia-wide. There is an Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service based in Canberra and in the Commonwealth territories. They do not have much to do in the way of control; they are only a small body. But the overall thing is that I feel that the name implies that it is a federal government controlled organisation of national parks, when it is in fact not so. I think that state governments should take up names like New South Wales Parks and not National Parks.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Melville. I think that, as most federal politicians would agree, one of our greatest frustrations is the misunderstandings that occur in the community about who is responsible for what when we have three levels of government, and terminologies do not help along the way. Thank you both for your evidence here today and for the submissions that you have provided.

[11.58 a.m.]

WHELAN, Professor Robert John, Dean of Science, Institute for Conservation Biology and Law, University of Wollongong

CHAIR—Welcome, Professor Whelan. In what capacity do you appear today?

Prof. Whelan—I am a staff member of the University of Wollongong. I am a member of the Institute for Conservation Biology and Law at the University of Wollongong. I am appearing on my own behalf but representing the expertise of a whole host of people.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Would you like to make a brief statement in relation to your submission before we go to questions.

Prof. Whelan—Thank you very much. My perspective is that we have a problem; if it were not a problem it would have been solved long ago. The problem comes from the close connections between human related activities and a fire prone environment. That is not unique to this country. A number of countries around the world, especially those close to Mediterranean climate regions, have similar problems and are currently engaged in similar exercises. The thing that I would like to emphasise most strongly, from my perspective, is the issue of biodiversity as an asset. We have a whole process in this country that has developed to recognise the importance of biodiversity as an asset and to try to find ways of conserving this asset. It is an asset just like the economic assets of pine plantations and just like human assets in the sense that it requires some sort of tailored protection. I think the problem ought to be looked at as an issue of conflicting assets. I have illustrated this point in my submission, and I would be happy to field questions on it.

CHAIR—Thank you for that and, once again, for your quite detailed submission covering a number of areas. If I read your submission correctly and understood the thrust of it, you are basically saying that regular low-intensity fires in a number of circumstances are in fact more damaging than a very serious high-intensity fire occurring less often. Am I correct in reaching that conclusion from your comments? If so, I cannot quite see how you can say, for example:

Some plant species have seeds that are protected from the heat of fire in the soil or in cone-like fruits, but the adult plants themselves die when burned, even in a low intensity fire.

I feel you have used comments like that to support the premise that I put to you initially. But surely in a high-intensity fire everything gets burned and absolutely destroyed. Would you like to comment on that?

Prof. Whelan—Yes, I would. It is important to note that the ecological effects of fire are related to a range of aspects of fire. Fire intensity is important; a high-intensity fire is more likely

to cause mortality than a low-intensity fire. Effects of fire can be associated with the season of fire. For some species of organisms, a fire in spring may have a different effect from a fire in autumn. The effects of fire stem from differences in the type of fire. A fire that burns through the shrub layer will have different effects from a fire that burns through the soil surface, as we have just heard, and would have different effects again from a fire that burns through the canopy. The effects of fire stem from the frequency of fire, or how long it has been since the last fire.

One of the things that is commonly thought about high-intensity wildfires—and we always hear this in news reports after big fires—is that the landscape, the vegetation or the ecological community are destroyed. Even in the most intense fires, this is not the case. Individual organisms die in fires—and there is quite a bit of evidence to support that—but populations of organisms survive even high-intensity fires because they are able to recover afterwards, given enough time. This brings up the issue of the frequency of fires. Very high intensity fires at high frequency would have, in my assessment, even more disastrous effects than low-intensity fires at high frequency. The important thing to note is the interaction between these two features of fire.

Perhaps the most convenient and cost-effective approach to reducing the amount of fuel in an environment is hazard reduction burning. To achieve effective reduction of hazard, such burning would have to be applied frequently. We have all heard evidence of how quickly the bush recovers even after a high-intensity fire. The line of argument that I have been putting forward is an attempt to explain why it is that we ought to be concerned about the high frequency of fire—whether it is high- or low-intensity fire. So the evidence that I have tried to gather from the published literature and my own knowledge is an attempt to understand what effect on the ecology there might be of applying high-frequency fires, even at low intensity, to the environment.

For example, we do not know a lot about many of the plant species in our environment and their responses to fire but those that we do know something about allow us to conclude that even a low-intensity fire will kill the adult plants in some species, but the seeds of the plants may well be protected in the cones, canopies or soil and therefore be stimulated to recover and germinate after the fire—be it a high- or low-intensity fire. The critical factor is what time the next fire comes along. If the next fire comes along in, for example, four years and that time period is too short for the seedlings to have become adult plants and produce their own seeds, then local extinction is an inevitable consequence. There are some studies that suggest that is exactly what is happening in sites—including national park sites—where burning frequency has been high.

CHAIR—Would you agree that hazard reduction is still necessary? If you argue that high-intensity fire, irrespective of when it is, can have some disastrous effects then surely it is finding the right sort of balance with regard to hazard reduction and the compensation periods required by some plants—particularly for the plants that require longer periods of recovery time between fires. Is that a fair assessment?

Prof. Whelan—Yes. I think there are two important points to make about that. Firstly, it is the recovery time needed afterwards that is very important, whether it has been a high- or low-intensity fire. The second thing is that I am not arguing against hazard reduction burning as a management tool by any means. In fact, it is a very effective management tool which should be used to protect lives and property. The argument that I am making is that it cannot be applied extensively across the landscape, especially across national parks, because they have a

management objective which is to conserve biodiversity, and frequent fire applied across that landscape extensively is going to compromise that management objective.

CHAIR—Would you agree that five-year plans, whereby the right sort of environmental studies can be done so that hazard reduction can be better planned, would be a preferable solution to shorter-term plans such as one-year plans?

Prof. Whelan—Absolutely—even a five-year plan is relatively short term if you compare it with the lifespan of the organisms in national parks. Any amount of planning would be great.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you for your submission. Just following along on the same theme, it seems that one of the fundamental question is: which is worse—high-intensity fires of low frequency or low-intensity fires of higher frequency? I suppose we cannot make a generalised statement about that. In your submission you say that frequent low-intensity fires, by eliminating some species, can reduce biodiversity. Is it not possible that some species survive that sort of fire regime but are eliminated by the less frequent but more extreme fires? One of the submissions from a group in the Blue Mountains has indicated that a number of species have been eliminated by the greater occurrence of high-intensity fires over the past 40 or 50 years. That submission mentions *Eucalyptus fastigata*, *Eucalyptus oreades*, *Eucalyptus sieberi*—Mountain Ash, Black Ash et cetera. It argues that they regenerated where there was more frequent fire hazard reduction or cool period burning but the incidence of much more intense fires has basically eliminated them. Could you respond to that?

Prof. Whelan—That is absolutely right. In the environment, there are species with characteristics that suit them to particular conditions. So if we were to burn a wet forest area very frequently, it would quickly change to some other vegetation type with a grassy understorey. A set of species would disappear as a result of that but another set of species would be favoured by it. Likewise if we exclude fire from a wet eucalypt forest for long enough—and there are some examples of this across Australia—it will move towards becoming a rainforest. A set of species will be advantaged and another set will be disadvantaged. Peter Catling from CSIRO has extensively surveyed the mammal fauna of south-eastern Australia in a whole range of sites. I believe there is some information in my submission that describes the results of some of his studies. He recorded that, in sites that are burnt frequently, one set of native mammal species is favoured and another set is lost. Among those that are lost are species listed as rare and endangered.

I think this illustrates how complex the problem is for a national park manager or for any other agency charged with responsibility for biodiversity conservation, or even in considering ecologically sustainable development. It is not simple. But we can say that if a particular fire regime were uniformly applied across the landscape one particular group of species would be favoured. Having a variety of habitats across the landscape is an important way of maintaining conditions that suit the whole range of species. In other words, let us not make it uniform.

Mr BARTLETT—So the answer is a variety of hazard reduction regimes?

Prof. Whelan—Absolutely.

Mr BARTLETT—Depending on the particular local ecology?

Prof. Whelan—Yes.

Mr BARTLETT—You mention the problems of frequent hazard reduction under 10 years. Would many species be vulnerable if hazard reduction burning were taking place at an interval of 10 years or a little more? Would that eliminate most of the problems of species being threatened?

Prof. Whelan—That is an interesting question, partly because of the paucity of detailed knowledge in this area. I can think of a local species—in fact an iconic species within the Shoalhaven region, the eastern bristlebird—which depends so much on dense understorey that, in this habitat with relatively low-nutrient sandy soils, hazard reduction every 10 years would probably be a disadvantage. I should also comment that assigning a particular frequency should not be done across the continent nor even across a region, because the regrowth rates vary an awful lot between this side of the range and the western side. The effect of imposing a particular frequency of fire would vary depending upon the conditions.

Let us say there is a fire every 10 years on the ridge tops in the Hawkesbury sandstone—and by the Hawkesbury sandstone I mean the plateau vegetation surrounding Sydney and surrounding this region. A fire at that frequency is at the lower end but it is within the realms of survivability, if you like, for most of the species we know about. A fire that frequently in wetter areas would probably still have significantly detrimental effects.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Your fundamental starting point is that biodiversity is an asset.

Prof. Whelan—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—But there is no preordained formula for biodiversity, is there?

Prof. Whelan—I do not know what you mean by ‘formula’. Do you mean what we are striving for, our target?

Ms PANOPOULOS—No. There is no preordained category that is valuable in itself, because biodiversity at any one point at any place in Australia is unquantifiable in its total extent.

Prof. Whelan—I think I understand the question. I think there is a big philosophical question—that is too big for this forum and should not be tackled here anyway—about the value of the species in its own right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No, that is not what I was asking. My apologies for being unclear. What I am saying is that no scientist has as yet been able to quantify the extent of biodiversity in any one area.

Prof. Whelan—I think if you take the ‘ecologically sustainable development’ definition of biodiversity as including the diversity of species, populations and communities, and genetic diversity, you are accurate in saying that it would be almost impossible to define it. However, individual elements of biodiversity, such as the mammal fauna, the bird fauna and the vascular plant flora, can all be—and have been in many areas—quantified.

Ms PANOPOULOS—But part of the problem of having a comprehensive catalogue, I suppose, is that by its very nature it is forever changing.

Prof. Whelan—Absolutely.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Excuse me and help me out, because I am not a scholar of science, but didn't Australia's biodiversity develop—from the coral reefs to the rainforests—through a lot of lightning strikes and through what is commonly called the 'eternal torch' of Aboriginal settlements? When the white settlers first came, one of the images was this eternal fire from Aboriginal communities. Didn't that add to the biodiversity?

Prof. Whelan—There is a fair bit of evidence that it changed the nature of the biodiversity, if you like, within Australia. Whether it was human-caused burning or climate change and lightning strikes associated with it, it changed the distribution of many species, it pruned the rainforests back to the small patches that we see on the eastern seaboard today. It probably was responsible for the extinction of some species and undoubtedly was responsible for the spread of others, such as the eucalypts and the acacias. We are talking about a climatic change that happened as a result of Australia's move northwards three million years ago.

Ms PANOPOULOS—We get diversity in biological elements through adversity in nature, otherwise the whole world would be the same—it would have the same vegetation. Biological diversity occurs through natural adversity.

Prof. Whelan—'Adversity' is a loaded term. Let us call it natural variability within the landscape—of fire frequency, of soil types, of climate. Absolutely.

Ms PANOPOULOS—There are a lot of people—and a lot of them are my constituents—who would argue with those who say that we preserve biodiversity by locking up crown land, locking up national parks and leaving the land and not touching it. What they have seen is an adverse impact on native flora and fauna through noxious weeds like mistletoe. Have you conducted any extensive studies into the impact on biodiversity of noxious weeds in national park areas that have been locked up?

Prof. Whelan—There are a couple of assertions there which I need to comment on. Many national parks are not simply locked up and left alone. In fact many national parks have very active weed management programs as well as ecological burning programs and hazard reduction burning programs.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It is just a matter of whether you have done a study on the impact of introduced species and noxious weeds on the biodiversity in national park areas.

Prof. Whelan—The only study of weed invasion in which I have been involved in relation to national parks has been looking at the impact of control of bitou bush in the Myall Lakes National Park area. National Parks was engaged in a program of spraying to try to eliminate bitou bush from the sand dune areas and they were concerned about the potential secondary effect that the spraying might have on the native biodiversity in the area. So we did a study to look at whether spraying for bitou bush actually killed native species.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Far be it from me to advise you on a future area of research, but being in the field that you are I am sure that many people, particularly the layperson, would be extremely interested in the results of any such research into noxious weeds and their impact on biodiversity. In your written submission you make the statement:

A major challenge for any individual or land management agency charged with conserving biodiversity ... is the lack of detailed knowledge about the responses of many vulnerable animal and plant species to different types of fires.

I agree with you. I have not seen a lot of detailed studies—I know you have attached some studies as appendices to your submission, but I would say that they are not extensive in coverage; they cover very small parts of Australia. They do not cover the alpine regions that I am particularly concerned with and they do not compare the impact of frequent fires with the impact of the intense feral fires that we have had.

Prof. Whelan—I beg your pardon—did you say the intense ‘feral’ fires? I just missed a word.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I call them ‘feral’ because of their impact—the intense feral fires that burn asphalt. None of the studies seems to compare the impact of low-intensity, frequent controlled burn fires with the big feral fires that were experienced in south-east New South Wales and north-east Victoria during last summer. So I find them of limited value because they do not provide that evidence. But you have made a particular statement that there is a lack of detailed knowledge, and I agree with you. So I find it peculiar that you would reach a conclusion which says:

A range of studies in several parts of Australia reveals that high intensity wildfires kill many individual animals and plants. However, it is rare for *populations* of species to become locally extinct as a result of a single wildfire.

I find it extraordinary that you make both of those statements on the same page: on the one hand, you admit there is inadequate research and evidence and, on the other hand, there is a sweeping statement. The evidence you rely on seems to be very sketchy in describing not only what fires are covered but also the diversity of landscape covered in Australia. I find that quite disturbing because we do not have the evidence. I really have a strong feeling that if we are going to say, ‘Let’s not have hazard reduction,’ then we need to base that statement on science and not just on broad conclusions based on sketchy evidence

Prof. Whelan—You are quite accurate in pulling out of my submission the statement about the extent of the lack of knowledge. In Australia, depending on how you define them, we might have 600 to 900 eucalypt species, most of which have not been studied. We have 600 acacia species, most of which have not been studied at all, far less in their responses to fire. And there are many more species that are less obvious and significant than those and which have received still less attention. So we are making management decisions either to burn frequently or not to burn frequently in a climate where we have relatively little information.

I have tried to draw together the information with which I am familiar to help provide as much as we can in both of those arenas—the impact of a high intensity fire and the impact of frequent hazard reduction burning. You are quite right to assert that there are very few studies—in fact, I cannot think of any in south-eastern Australia—which have deliberately set out to compare a high intensity burning regime with a low intensity frequency burning regime. One of the reasons,

as I explained earlier, is that frequency and intensity interact. It would not be fair to compare a high frequency regime of high intensity fire with a low frequency regime of low intensity fire because both intensity and frequency have an impact.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You spoke about the need for some animals to have dense habitat. What the Aboriginals used to do and the impact of fuel reduction burning would be mosaic type burning.

Prof. Whelan—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Wouldn't that mosaic type burning allow animals to move into another area and not be burned out, whereas a feral fire would burn out the whole area and, as we saw in many parts of Australia last summer, there would be gullies full of dead native animals?

Prof. Whelan—Let us turn first to the issue of mosaic fires. This term 'mosaic burning' has been used colloquially to have two separate meanings. In discussions with the state government in New South Wales after the 2001 fires, evidence was given in the Blue Mountains using the term mosaic burning to mean that across the landscape we will have some patches of vegetation that are burned frequently and within the mosaic other patches that are burned infrequently. 'Mosaic burning' is more commonly used to describe a situation in which every patch in the landscape gets burnt—and this is the way you were using it—every five years but not the whole landscape in any one year; so it is rotational.

The consequence of that, if it were effectively applied across the landscape, is that after your first cycle of five years when the next fire was applied, no patch in the landscape would be older than five years—which is, after all, the intention of an effective hazard reduction program. The consequence of that is a change in the habitat to eliminate dense shrubs from the mid-storey, probably remove shrubs from the understorey, and therefore eliminate species like the long-nosed potoroo and the eastern bristlebird, which are common in this region. It is not even an issue of their being able to escape the patch where the fire has burned now and then recolonise some other patch. Fire at that frequency changes the structure of the whole landscape.

Mr SCHULTZ—I agree with the point you are trying to make. Because of its geographical position and the biodiversity that is in that particular geographical position, each area varies in terms of how you would apply the sort of five-year plan that you are talking about. Getting back to the point that Sophie Panopoulos has made, there is no absolute database of existing flora and fauna in our national parks, is there? I use as a classic example of what I am talking about the recent discovery of the Wollemi pine. No doubt there are other types of biodiversity, in the way of flora and fauna, that still have not been identified as yet because of the type of terrain that they may be isolated in.

This leads me to the next point and to the question. You made the comment that it is a National Parks objective to conserve biodiversity—a very noble objective. But, in reality, you see in the alpine country—which both Ms Panopoulos and I have some experience of—areas of the national park that have been locked up to wilderness and they are saturated with introduced weed species like blackberry, to the extent where National Parks has been warned for over a decade that a lightning strike in there would destroy an enormous amount of biodiversity, which has now happened. It has destroyed the biodiversity to the point, as I said earlier, where it has

vaporised any known seed stock that may have been below the ground, because it sterilised the earth to 40 feet below the surface in some areas.

I ask you: how can we justify in a broad statement that National Parks has a very constructive philosophy of conserving biodiversity when it allows that sort of thing to happen? In an environment where in isolated and inhospitable parts of our alpine area we may have killed off species such as the Wollemi Pine, which was discovered in my parliamentary colleague's area in the Blue Mountains, how can you justify making a broad based statement on the issue of biodiversity, as you have made in your submission, under those circumstances? It is just not feasible. How do you sell that sort of scenario to the people who are concerned about extremely hot fires that have occurred in an environment where they have totally wiped out species and where the only way we can see any vegetation returning is by aerial seeding of some of those areas in the alpine parts of Australia?

Prof. Whelan—There are a number of issues you are asking me to respond to there, but I am not representing the National Parks and Wildlife Service here.

Mr SCHULTZ—I understand that.

Prof. Whelan—I am not here to defend actions they have made or not made in the past, except to make an observation that their corporate plan makes it clear that they have a responsibility for the conservation of biodiversity, and that responsibility ought to relate to control of weeds and pests, just as it does to the appropriate management of the reserves for which they have responsibility. If it is indeed shown that soil sterilisation has happened to 40 feet below the surface, and if it is indeed shown that high-intensity fire has caused the sort of damage from which species in the Snowy—and it is not an area with which I am familiar from personal experience—will not recover, then obviously it is a fire regime that needs to be prevented in those areas. You would also want to know if an applied fire regime of every four or five years or an applied fire regime plus grazing in that area is likewise going to have a significant impact on the very thing they are charged with the responsibility of conserving.

Mr SCHULTZ—I would make the point that it is as a part of the National Inquiry on Bushfires that I raise those issues, for what they are worth. Many of the people who go out there in a voluntary capacity to fight those fires are confronted by obstacles that can put their lives at risk, and those same people have a total commitment to the protection of the biodiversity that you and I and the National Parks and everybody else are supposedly concerned about. From their point of view, it is very difficult for them on the one hand to advocate stopping controlled burning when on the other hand they know that, if it had occurred, we would not have had the intensity of the wildfires that we had in January this year and December last year.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you for coming here today, Professor Whelan. As a member of this committee I am finding that in this country there are a wide variety of landscapes with complex fire regimes—for example, the eastern part of New South Wales that I know, and areas such as Kosciuszko and Victoria. I am also finding that the attempt to manage these is in its infancy—in terms of research and putting in place technological regimes to manage fire. You are clearly suggesting that we should be very wary of frequent large scale hazard reduction programs, but one area we have not touched on here is biodiversity in the boundary protection areas. You have spoken about the big impact you can have in large areas such as national parks but this morning

we heard Shoalhaven Council talking about removing some of the tree preservation order constraints, which will allow individuals in this area to more easily cut trees for hazard reduction within urban areas. I was wondering about the whole problem of biodiversity in some of those urban areas. Could you mention the main point you were trying to make about this in your submission?

Prof. Whelan—My point is based on an observation that frequently a significant contributor to a house or property surviving a fire is the nature of the environment immediately surrounding the property. Properties that are poorly ‘curated’, in the sense of having weeds growing in the gutters and vegetation overhanging the roof, are much more difficult to defend. Likewise, the vegetation immediately adjacent to the house becomes fuel for spots of embers that blow in, creating flames around the house. Therefore, it seems to me that a key to protection must be the effective management of the surrounding area. Development control planning in fire prone areas, for example, identifies the need for fuel free zones and fuel reduced zones surrounding houses. That sort of fuel reduction can at least give the land owners and the people helping them a safer environment from which to carry out that protection. There must be focus on boundary areas, especially surrounding subdivision areas, and an application of hazard reduction—however it is achieved—in those boundary areas. That is the key.

There is a problem in some areas where we now have a reticulation of urban subdivisions as finger-like projections into bushland so that the perimeter area is substantial. There is a lot of effort and a lot of cost in protecting those subdivisions. There is a lot to police—if there was a policing program to ensure that the surrounding hazard reduction was done properly. In terms of biodiversity conservation, there will be circumstances in which a boundary area like that impinges, in a particular area, on a threatened or endangered species. That is problematic; it needs a local-level five-or-more-year plan, as Mr Nairn referred to earlier, to identify where those problems are and to come up with some creative solutions to it.

I think a blanket program would miss some of those situations in which local knowledge can identify where the problem areas arise. I use as my example a species that I referred to earlier, the eastern bristlebird, which is almost extinct in the north of New South Wales and southern Queensland as a result of high fire frequencies. It is present at Nadgee Nature Reserve and wilderness area in the south of the state but two fires close together in Nadgee caused almost complete elimination of the species there. So its two strongholds are now in the Shoalhaven—in the Jervis Bay region—and at Barren Grounds Nature Reserve, which is in the Kiama council area. As I mentioned earlier, the bird requires dense undergrowth. It occurs in areas which are now targets for subdivision within the Shoalhaven region. A blanket approach to looking at the boundaries without the sensitivity of asking, ‘Where are our problems in terms of fuel load; where are our problems in terms of biodiversity?’ is now becoming necessary because of the nature of development.

Mr McARTHUR—I have questions on two issues which you have canvassed. I will rerun them a bit. We have had over 400 submissions to the inquiry, and my understanding on reading most of them is that there is a strong recommendation about fuel reduction burning from both the scientific community and practitioners in fire mitigation. What would your recommendation be, in view of your academic background? Do you support that great weight of evidence on fire reduction burning or would you not do it, because of your concern about the frequency and the

arguments you have put to the committee? What would you do if you were in charge, if you were the minister?

Prof. Whelan—The implication there is that the minister is in charge; we will assume that that is true. The argument that I have made, and would make in that situation, is that there needs to be a planned approach. Hazard reduction, including hazard reduction by frequent burning, has its place. It is very important in protecting lives and property and should be used that way. It should not be used as a technique uncritically applied right across the landscape, because we would then undermine all the things we have tried to achieve in the area to protect other assets. It has its place. It needs to be planned; it cannot be applied wholesale across the landscape. There are two main reasons for that. I have spent most of my time today talking about one of those, and the other is whether it could be achieved anyway at high enough frequency in order to give the desired protection. A second issue is whether we would have the resources to apply it, and a third issue is whether it would really protect lives and property, even if we could achieve it, in a high-intensity fire environment. Those are some of the other issues. But even solely from the biodiversity issue—

Mr McARTHUR—It is a bit hard to know where you are at. Are you recommending it, or are you saying we will have some reduction burning in some areas? Then you get the difficulty, which other witnesses have put to us, that there has been insufficient reduction burning and therefore you get high-intensity fire which we as a committee viewed in northern Victoria.

Prof. Whelan—I thought I was clear. What I would do is recommend—or, if I were doing it, I would apply—hazard reduction burning in a targeted way to protect lives and property in the vicinity of lives and property. I would not apply it extensively across the landscape, for a variety of reasons.

Mr McARTHUR—National parks in a fire prone area inevitably suffer from wildfire every 15, 20 or 25 years. What do you say about the impact of that on the biodiversity argument? It will inevitably happen, and big areas of national parks will be burnt out.

Prof. Whelan—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—So are you saying that does not affect biodiversity? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

Prof. Whelan—It has an impact on biodiversity but, because it is every 15, 20, 30 or 100 years, depending on the region, it is not applying a single fire regime across the whole landscape. So its effects will be able to be recovered from.

Mr McARTHUR—So it does not matter if you burn out the national parks every 25 years or so? That will be okay, from a biodiversity point of view?

Prof. Whelan—Let me just clarify that. If you were to apply a fire to the whole of any national park every 50 years, or every 20 years, it would probably be just as bad as applying a fire every five years because, as I mentioned earlier, that particular regime will favour one group of species over another. One of the features, though, of wildfires is that they typically take different routes, have different patches and ignite in different locations from time to time. It is a

big problem for some very small national parks, though, because a single fire can now take out the whole national park. Management there—and this would need to be recommended to the National Parks and Wildlife Service—will need to prevent a single fire from taking out a whole park.

Mr McARTHUR—How would they prevent a fire, though? The evidence from northern Victoria is not too good about preventing fire.

Prof. Whelan—It is a challenge.

Mr McARTHUR—I rest my case.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—I note in your submission that you and 16 professional ecologists expressed your concern at the inappropriate demands for simplistic solutions that accompanied the 2003 fire event. In your submission you refer to broad-scale hazard reduction. Can I take it that you regard that, across the landscape, as a simplistic solution?

Prof. Whelan—Yes, it is. It does not take into account all the other needs we have for that landscape.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Can you make a comment on the adequacy of the research that exists at this point into our biodiversity and our landscapes. Is it adequate for us to effectively manage where we are now, in a community sense, as far as issues like sustainability and biodiversity go? Am I making myself clear?

Prof. Whelan—Yes. It is inadequate, but management nevertheless has to go ahead. One of the areas of my own research interest is trying to find ways in which you can learn from management as you apply it, in order to modify the management to take into account the paucity of knowledge.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—The community’s values have changed over 20, 30, 40 years. We are now in a new era of community expectations and knowledge about the landscapes. However, we do not have the detailed research at this point, given that community expectation, that would allow us to effectively manage the situation that we are talking about.

Prof. Whelan—I am talking about ecological knowledge here. I think the other area of knowledge is to do with fire behaviour, and I am sure you are going to hear about that in the process of this inquiry. In terms of ecological knowledge, it is certainly the case that we do not know enough about the responses of a range of animals and plants to high-intensity fire to enable us to make a generalisation about the comparison with high-frequency, low-intensity fire. But we do have bits and pieces of clues coming from different studies that have been done for a range of different habitats. So you are absolutely right—the knowledge is nowhere near adequate. The establishment of the Bushfire CRC is one approach towards dealing with that. As somebody—I think it was Mr Nairn—said at the beginning, we are really in the first stage of learning about this.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—That was my next question. I know it is a tall question at this point, given the inadequacy of knowledge: how would you pull together in some coherent way

the search for that knowledge? Obviously the CRC is an important step. Are there any short cuts that would enable us to prepare better so that we do not get into emotional debates or have communities setting themselves against each other about the management of this task? What is the best way to accumulate the knowledge? Do we first identify critical areas that have had intense fire episodes in recent times? Who conducts the research? How do we get the knowledge that would enable us to sit down as a community, given the different points of the compass that we come from, so that we can map out a plan for an area or say, 'Yes, a controlled burn in that area is appropriate; however, it is not appropriate here.' I am fearful that out of these events, which have been traumatic for communities, the simplistic solution is the one that becomes the mantra but at the end of the day does not meet the overall community need.

Prof. Whelan—As you set out by saying, this is a big question. The way forward has a number of elements. One element is the need for capturing what information there currently is and identifying and prioritising the needs for future research. I believe that the establishment of the CRC gives us an opportunity to do those two things and to start capturing knowledge that is currently dissipated. The recent textbook called *Flammable Australia* compiles research done throughout Australia in different states on ecological effects of fire. The one thing that it demonstrates most is the dissipation of the knowledge. There are innumerable PhD and honours theses in universities where people have looked little bits of the big picture. That needs to be captured. I believe the CRC will start to do just that. That is one element. The second element is to apply that knowledge and the insights gained from that to local contexts. The same formula is not going to apply in the Northern Territory savannah country as applies in the Western Australian sand plain heath environments or as applies in the rainforest patch environments of south-eastern Australia.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Or the alpine area.

Prof. Whelan—Or the alpine area. And further than that, it is going to vary from one patch of the Shoalhaven to another patch of the Shoalhaven depending on the types of soils and vegetation and the nature of the subdivisions, residential areas, other resources, pine plantations and so on. The challenge is going to be to capture that knowledge and theory which is Australia-wide and apply it at a local level. Achieving that requires planning over five years or longer and requires multiple inputs. It is going to require local knowledge of where the fire hazards are, what the fuel loads are, where a previous fire has been most severe, where the endangered species are and so on. There are attempts to start doing that in some council areas, including this one.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So we need to really ramp that up?

Prof. Whelan—Absolutely.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—The issue of local knowledge is a very important one. I would suggest that there resides in this room a wealth of experience and knowledge on a local area, on how to fight fires and on the behaviour of fires. Do you have any views—and this is just a general question—on how we effectively tap into that knowledge? It seems to me that, yes, there are PhDs that are done. They are printed in books and whatever. How do we harness that? As an academic dealing with the accumulation of knowledge and the presentation of it to committees

such as this and other decision makers, do you have a view on that, or do you want to handball that to somebody else?

Prof. Whelan—I have a view on it. I cannot speak for all state governments, but within New South Wales the move towards bushfire management committees—in relation to the fire situation—is one way of starting to put that together. You harness local experience and local knowledge, you put around the table the varieties of different knowledge and you need a set of clear objectives, so it has the potential to work. It will not work if everybody around the table simply keeps restating their own dogmatic positions. The first challenge is to get the structure, and the bigger challenge is to get the function right. I probably have to handball that one to somebody in the social sciences.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—It is a very valuable comment that you have made here about a whole range of issues. I am concerned here in this inquiry about the committee getting a focus on the fact that the community has changed, and dealing with fire is an evolving issue. Given the current values that the community is placing on biodiversity, for example, that raises the issue of national parks, and the point was made here about increasing acreages being determined by the community through governments to give effect to that value the community puts on biodiversity. However, resources are perhaps not being made available, and that is a very important issue.

There is also an issue about the fact that the climate has changed. We do have larger areas of national parks and they are going to be with us forever and we need new ways of managing the resource there. We also need new ways of responding. We are going to have high intensity fires because we have droughts and we have particular climatic conditions combined with what is happening. It is not just one simple issue here, and the management of the responses is almost as important as what you do in the context of the national park—

CHAIR—Will we take this as a submission from the member for Corio?

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—I might. While I am on the horse, I might as well—

Ms PANOPOULOS—If that value on biodiversity is there in the community, I would really urge you and your colleagues to do some research into the impact of noxious weeds in these wonderful national parks and their biodiversity as a priority.

CHAIR—And a second submission from the member for Indi!

Prof. Whelan—I could not put either of those things more eloquently myself.

Mrs GASH—Professor Whelan, would you consider giving access to relevant academics by offering their services to individual RFS brigades to manage their own areas better? Would you see this as a valuable opportunity to gain local knowledge? In other words, have you also provided your research—no doubt you have done local research—to any of these bodies as yet?

Prof. Whelan—Yes. In fact, there have been members of the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Wollongong who sit on bushfire management committees so they are giving their experience gratis. It is problematic in terms of—

Mrs GASH—Let me be more specific—particularly to fire brigades. I am not talking about National Parks.

Prof. Whelan—No. I mean district bushfire management committees which are run by the local councils in New South Wales and which have representation of bushfire brigades on the bushfire management committee.

Mrs GASH—Have you done much local study?

Prof. Whelan—Yes, I have in the Shoalhaven and the Wollongong area. I guess I can add to your former question by referring to work that we have done in collaboration with the Wollongong Bushfire Brigade on fires in the Wollongong region.

Mrs GASH—I am talking about Shoalhaven now.

Prof. Whelan—My research in Shoalhaven has been on the eastern bristlebird and on a number of other rare species in this region. Personally, I am not on a bushfire management committee in this region.

Mrs GASH—I noticed that you have done a lot of fire ecology in many other countries and I would be very concerned, seeing that you were locally based, to find out what information or research you have on the Shoalhaven area. Has the information been provided to those people? Do you provide advice to the National Parks and Wildlife Service?

Prof. Whelan—We do. One of the surveys we have been doing on the eastern bristlebird, the species I referred to earlier, in the Shoalhaven region was jointly sponsored and paid for by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the local council, on which the bushfire brigade is represented. Increasingly there are connections between universities across Australia and local councils and other agencies across Australia in an attempt to get that sort of collaborative work going. There are granting agencies that focus on industry links—industry being broadly defined to include government agencies as well. That is happening increasingly, and the CRC at a national level will only increase that. It has been happening within the Shoalhaven specifically.

Mrs GASH—I would like to clarify once again that you do provide your research to the local fire authority here.

Prof. Whelan—They have access to our research.

Mrs GASH—So you do not know whether they pass it on; it is a case of it is here.

Prof. Whelan—That is correct.

CHAIR—I would like to finish with a technical question. One of the other submissions we had, I think from an academically qualified person in the biology area, made the statement that there is no Australian native species that requires fire to regenerate. Is that statement true?

Prof. Whelan—I would think it very unlikely. I think there are a number of species that require fire as some part of their life cycle to stimulate flowering or to release seeds. They would

be threatened by inappropriate frequencies; nevertheless, fire is an important part of their life cycle, so I think I would take issue with that.

CHAIR—Thank you for your time here this morning, for your submission and for the evidence you have given. The committee appreciates it very much.

Proceedings suspended from 1.02 p.m. to 1.59 p.m.

[1.59 p.m.]

HANCOCK, Mr William Frederick (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Mr Hancock, you were here this morning when I detailed the aspects of the inquiry and reminded witnesses of aspects to do with false or misleading evidence, so I will not repeat that part. We have your submission. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we proceed to some questions?

Mr Hancock—My submission basically deals with the management of putting out fires. I was a fire captain in Katherine in the Territory. We had limited resources and manpower and had to react quickly to be effective. If we could get to the fire quickly and put it out before it became too hot, we would do so. In the event that a fire developed into a hot fire we would withdraw and proceed to back-burn and starve the fire to put it out. We had quite big fires, mostly grassfires, but we were never out overnight. By back-burning and starving fires we were effective in putting them out within 24 hours every time.

CHAIR—One of the objectives in your submission is about locals becoming the ones controlling the situation. From a lot of the submissions we have had, I think that one of the issues at the moment is the role of locals with respect to the hierarchy of organisations. I am not sure how long you have been down here but are you aware how the Rural Fire Service works? Would you like to say something about that, given your comment that things should be controlled locally?

Mr Hancock—I am a great believer in local community and in community building. I think that is where the resources—the manpower—lie. In the case of a bushfire, a quick response is generally very effective and community is where it will come from. The local community know their areas as well as most and are the ones that will determine which areas really need protecting and which areas need to be burnt to give the community protection and also to protect fauna. I think communities are the backbone of this country and that they need support.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Regarding the development of a register of private equipment and operators available to be used in an emergency, we have heard evidence today that the defence department is a significant presence and employs a lot of contractors who might have expertise to bring to bear. Was it your experience in Katherine that you came to rely on private expertise?

Mr Hancock—It was mainly farm resourced; we did not have the benefit of the Defence Force there. It was mostly things like graders and other implements to back up a back-burning team.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Have you been in this community very long?

Mr Hancock—About 28 years.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So you are a local?

Mr Hancock—Well, yes.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Is there an inventory of local resources that can be called upon?

Mr Hancock—I do not know. You would have to ask a local.

Mr McARTHUR—You suggest that the area be divided into sections. What is particularly different in this part of the world that you would fight a fire on that basis?

Mr Hancock—I do not believe that you should put your men into a dangerous situation. Once a fire becomes too hot, you need to pull away from it and deal with it in a different way. If an area is divided into sections by firebreaks or fire trails, you can sacrifice an area ahead of the hot fire; you can control the back-burn. But when you are attempting to control hot fires, as we have seen in Canberra and so on, that is impossible.

Mr McARTHUR—In this part of the world, how would you divide it up for back-burning on these bad days?

Mr Hancock—I would talk to the local community again, and get input from people like that professor, who was saying that probably you do not want to burn every area too often and that there are some areas that you probably would not want to burn at all; you would want to protect them at all costs. I think you have to divide your country according to your country. I am not a great believer in having an enormous area like we have out west of us at present, where once you get a fire into it you are basically dealing with a hot fire all the time. You cannot fall back and put that fire out by starving it.

Mr McARTHUR—So what would you have done with the couple of bad fires that you have had? What would your approach have been?

Mr Hancock—I was amazed when we first came down here. I followed the progress of a bushfire coming out of the Blue Mountains and day by day it progressed. I thought they would stop it at the Nepean River, but eventually it jumped the Nepean River. You could back-burn from the Nepean River. There are natural boundaries that you can utilise, like the Princes Highway, for instance. I was amazed at the fires that jumped it, whereas I thought they could have stopped them probably by back-burning off them. I think there is a bit of a fear to light a fire and back-burn. It seems there is resistance to doing it, probably from fear of falling into litigation or something.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your recommendation then?

Mr Hancock—I think the fire captain of the community should be God. I do not think he should have those fears. Once you get a situation where you have a fire, I think he should have control. He knows his area. He knows his resources. The quicker that you act on it, the better. He should not be waiting for somebody somewhere else to give him permission to do something.

Mr ORGAN—How long have you been fighting fires?

Mr Hancock—I was fighting fires for probably 25 years.

Mr ORGAN—Your submission has a lot of good practical ideas in it. In your experience, how much of firefighting training is actually teaching people how to fight fires as opposed to a lot of those preventative measures such as hazard burning and all that? Your submission seems to be talking about what we do after the fire has started about stopping it and managing it. Is that one of your issues that we need to be thinking about what we do once a fire has started?

Mr Hancock—Once a fire starts, as I say, with that initial response probably you can get there and put it out. Once it gets away, you need to withdraw and then start to burn back and be prepared to sacrifice an area to stop it. In our case, our guys seemed to pick it up pretty quickly when it came to back-burning. We would have a fire unit right there where the fire was lit at the back-burn, and another fire unit probably 50 metres behind checking it. And as that fire burnt back into the wind, there was a mop-up crew coming behind just to make sure that it did not jump the boundary. They are part of a team, they are there and they pick it up pretty quickly.

Mr ORGAN—Are you in any way critical of how fires have been fought once they start down here in the Shoalhaven?

Mr Hancock—Yes. It seems that they have a desire to fight the front with helicopters and things. Elvis is great when it comes to stopping a house from being destroyed or something, but by the time it empties its load and goes back and gets another bucket and comes back again, I just see a great waste of resource there.

Mrs GASH—Have you been a member of a fire brigade here at all?

Mr Hancock—No.

Mrs GASH—Just in the Northern Territory?

Mr Hancock—In the Northern Territory and in the central west of New South Wales.

Mrs GASH—You are aware of the network of fire trials we have here in the Nowra region. Do you want to offer an opinion on their current state?

Mr Hancock—Yes. I think they are disgusting, to be honest.

Mrs GASH—Can you give us a bit more than that?

Mr Hancock—A lot of the areas are too big. Once you get a fire into them and it gets going, by the time you get resources into it it is out of control. Your next fall-back position is then too far away. The country needs to be broken up into sections according to the vegetation and the geography of the place.

Mrs GASH—During the recent fires did you make comment on, or were you aware of, any confusion between the agencies?

Mr Hancock—I will tell you a story: I came across the Shoalhaven bridge and there was a queue of helicopters trying to land here in between this building and the fire control centre. They all had buckets hanging off them. When I drove past they were hot-refuelling these helicopters.

When I say hot-refuelling, I mean that the engines were running and the rotors were turning on the helicopters. I drove to within two metres of the tanker and I thought, ‘This is a disaster waiting to happen,’ especially because of the junction here where you come off the bridge. If one of those helicopters had gone down or if there had been an incident, we would have been isolated. This area is so important to the community, and it just seemed to me to be ridiculous.

Mrs GASH—You and I live on opposite sides of the river. I also saw the helicopters but I assumed that they were going to their place for refuelling and for getting the water. Was I incorrect in that? Were they actually landing there?

Mr Hancock—The fuel tanker was sitting on the side of Bridge Road and the helicopters were queuing up to land there to refuel. They were refuelling the helicopters with the engines running and the rotors turning, and the traffic was passing within a metre or two metres of the fuel tanker. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You have spoken about your experiences as a firefighter in the Territory, and you also mention in your written submission that a machine would drop capsules et cetera. Could you briefly describe what occurred and how the controlled burning was conducted up in the Territory?

Mr Hancock—We had a wet and a dry season every year so we basically had to put in fire prevention every year. Every year, a fixed-wing aircraft would come up from Alice Springs—I do not know whether it was based in Alice Springs, but it came from Alice Springs—and it had mounted in the floor a little machine that had capsules, not unlike film canisters, in which were Condy’s crystals. When they were ready they would inject glycerine into the Condy’s crystals and the capsule would be dropped out through the bottom of the plane. Depending on the amount of glycerine injected, that capsule would explode or turn into a fire, the time of which you could vary. You could also vary the spacing of the capsules. It would be announced over the radio that the burning would be taking place on such and such a week so do not be too bothered about smoke and things like that. That aircraft would then proceed to burn back into the wind from roads or whatever firebreak they could use, to get rid of the excess undergrowth. Because they could drop so many of these capsules and start so many fires, the fires would rarely burn for more than, say, 50 metres and consequently they were cool.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you know if current practices of this nature still exist in the Territory?

Mr Hancock—No.

CHAIR—You mentioned the need for water resources, both natural and man-made. Do you think the locating of those sorts of resources should be part of planning an area for management? Would you like to develop that argument a bit further?

Mr Hancock—When you get back to the animal conservation side of it, we have all seen the explosion of kangaroos because of man-made watering points. It seems to me that there are a lot of conservation areas that are just locked up; as we heard earlier, even the dams were filled in. It seems to me that if you want to look after the animals, especially in a period of drought like we

have just been through, you need to have man-made watering points. Those watering points are then available to draw water from in the event of a fire.

CHAIR—Mr Hancock, thank you very much for your time and your submission, particularly the suggestions you have made in that. We really appreciate it.

Mr Hancock—Thank you.

[2.16 p.m.]

ANDERSON, Councillor John (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Here in our open forum I understand there are five people who would like to have something to say. I think that all the people who are about to provide some additional comment were here earlier so they have heard the comments that I made with respect to witnesses. Councillor Anderson, I know you have a council meeting to go to so perhaps you could go first.

Councillor Anderson—I have some very brief comments. I am a volunteer firefighter, but a very new one in practical terms. I would like to address a couple of the points that were made by your previous witness. He was talking grassfires in the Northern Territory as opposed to bushfires here—a very different animal indeed. He also mentioned the dropping of pellets from aircraft. We do that of course—not as a back-burning exercise, not as a hazard reduction exercise, and there is a reason for that. If you start a fire at too many points at once there have been some studies done that show that as a fire front gets bigger and fire fronts join together they increase in intensity exponentially, so it is not a wise thing to do in bushfires.

He also mentioned stopping at barriers. Yes, it is a very obvious thing to do. I was out on Main Road 92 on Christmas morning 2001, and Main Road 92 looked like an obvious place to stop the fire. It is a reasonably wide road and I was there as the fire just lazily jumped the road with seemingly no effort. The highway was the next obvious one, but that fire that day spotted up to 3½ or four kilometres ahead. There is no real defence against something like that. Unfortunately you have to sit and take it. You preserve life and property as far as you possibly can and then, when conditions favour you somewhat, you can move in and try to do something about it.

As for fighting fires with helicopters, I agree they have their uses. I think that perhaps we were probably a little excessive in our use of them last time around. They have certain uses in putting out a fire that is just about to engulf a house. In this case Elvis put out of fire that was just about to engulf Berrara. It did not put it out, I should say, but it broke the fire front and allowed the firefighters to fight it. So they have their uses.

Somebody else earlier this morning spoke of getting there early, and I was thinking of what the people from Bombardier told us. They put out over 90 per cent of all their fires in Canada within the first five hectares, I think it was. That is an obvious advantage if you have got the equipment available to put the fire out before it develops. Once it develops into a hot fire you cannot fight it; you just preserve life and property and keep out of its way.

CHAIR—Can I ask a question of you as a councillor. Both the Manyana and Narrawallee citizens' associations made comments about the Shoalhaven City Council not allowing the removal of any dead trees, vegetation et cetera from reserves, and that being a source of build-up of fuel.

Councillor Anderson—I did hear that. We manage those reserves on behalf of the state government. The rules and regulations these days do not allow that material to be removed. I agree with the gentleman—I think it was my mate Ross this morning—who said we should be

able to move in and pick up the firewood and all the rest of it to help reduce the fuel load. It is all about the fuel load.

CHAIR—So state government regulation or legislation is preventing that.

Councillor Anderson—There are all kinds of legislation that inhibit the use of that. We probably have been a little tardy in some areas with reducing fuel, but it is difficult to make sweeping statements like that.

CHAIR—How will that fit with your new regulations for private land-holders?

Councillor Anderson—The new regulations that we are putting through relate to large trees close to houses, which physically threaten those buildings with the event of them snapping off, being uprooted or whatever.

Mr McARTHUR—How big a buffer zone would you recommend, personally, between a national park and domestic dwellings?

Councillor Anderson—Tom will give you a good answer on that. Tom was right on the buffer and feels quite strongly about it. It is very difficult to say, but we certainly need a buffer that is sufficient to stop the radiant heat doing the damage that we do not want done. I heard some people saying earlier that the trees have regenerated and it is all back there again. It is not, because it is all to do with fuel load. Fuel load is not green leaves on the trees; it is essentially the dead stuff on the ground. If you have a fuel load of about four tonnes per hectare, which is fairly light, you will face a fire with radiant heat the equivalent—if I remember these figures correctly—of about 200 one-bar radiators. Once you get up to about 30 tonnes per hectare—and we have lots of that and more—you are looking at a radiant heat equivalent to 5,200 one-bar radiators. The difference in all of this is the fuel on the ground—the fuel load—not the green leaves on the trees. Certainly they burn.

Mr McARTHUR—Why wouldn't you have a buffer zone of, say, 100 or 200 metres between the residential area and the national park? We saw areas yesterday on our travels where it seemed to me the national park was right on the back door of some of these domestic dwellings.

Councillor Anderson—If you go to Hyams Beach you will see that they are indeed right to the very back fence. In fact, it came right to Tom's door. I believe that you need a very considerable buffer—the more, the better. If the fuel is not there, it cannot burn and you cannot be threatened.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you advocating in council this more commonsense view that you should have a genuine buffer that is practical?

Councillor Anderson—There are quite a few of us in council who hold that view, yes.

CHAIR—The idea of this was more to hear statements, but if there are a couple of quick questions, I think we have the time to deal with them.

Mr ORGAN—Who do you think should be responsible for the buffer if, for example, I had a 30-hectare lot I wanted to subdivide and the land was next to a national park zone? Shouldn't the buffer be the responsibility of the landowner and developer?

Councillor Anderson—Yes, definitely. But there should be an overarching rule that requires it to be cleared; it should not be left up to them to make their own rules. Once that overarching regulation is in place then it is definitely up to the landowner to maintain the cleared space.

Mr ORGAN—Isn't it the case that a lot of developers will come in, develop the land and then say, 'Okay, we need a buffer. Please, National Parks or whoever, put the buffer on your land. We do not want it on my land'?

Councillor Anderson—That has happened in the past and that is the situation that we face in many places, but we will not in the future. We now require that buffer to be on the developer's land.

Mr SCHULTZ—I do not know whether you can answer these questions, but in relation to the helicopters—particularly the smaller ones that carry what is commonly referred to as Bambi Buckets, which hold about 300 to 500 litres—how effective are they? Secondly, we have heard from many people that a number of helicopters used in various fires were not achieving anything but were making a lot of money out of what they were doing. Can you make comment on either of these?

Councillor Anderson—I have heard the second question also, but I am not in a position to comment any further than that. With regard to your first question, it is for those who control the fire in a more overarching manner than some little firefighter on the ground. If you are in deep trouble it is nice to have one of those things up there that can dump that small load of water right where you need it. We do need the air assets for a whole range of tasks. Whether the Bambi Buckets were a bit overused is not really a question for me to answer. I was not paying for it—well, I was paying for it but more indirectly.

Mrs GASH—In relation to boundaries and hazard reduction, if I have a property and you have allowed me to develop it but tell me it is my responsibility and I am sharing a boundary—such as a common household fence which we share the cost of—with somebody else, does National Parks have no responsibility if you want a buffer zone?

Councillor Anderson—I think the jury is still out. This is an issue that has come out of the woodwork to a much greater extent since the fires. Their position has been, 'Why should we provide the buffer when it is private land?' and that the property owner should provide the buffer. That is why we now require the buffer to be on private land. That is a legitimate point of view. But where the development has already taken place there is indeed a difficulty. My personal view is that they should come to the party. The National Parks are there not for the purpose of the people who run national parks; they are there for the purpose of the people of Australia. That includes the people who are living right next door to it and facing the threat of bushfire.

[2.28 p.m.]

McMANUS, Mr Thomas Colin (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr McManus—I am here as a national parks bushfire victim.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening comment before we ask questions?

Mr McManus—We were totally wiped out. I live in Huskisson, which is on Jervis Bay. We back on to a national park. We were totally wiped out with the bushfire. There was only smoke coming through, and then my son and I walked into the carport. My wife was in my motorhome parked out the front in the driveway. I turned the car around and hooked up the boat and, as we walked to the front, all of a sudden it felt like walking from airconditioning out into a hot summer's day. The temperature just changed so quickly. There was a roar and then boom, we were gone. If we had been inside the house I doubt we would have even got out the door. We just got away with our lives. I know the difference between a high density fire and a low density fire, I will tell you. When we had got into the motorhome, as I hit the starter motor and it started, the fire came underneath it and straight over the top. It would not have been eight seconds and our house was virtually an inferno. After the fire we wrote a letter to National Parks complaining about the lack of clearance. There were even trees overhanging my property from the national park. We got no reply whatsoever, so I decided to go and see them. When I went in there a miracle happened and the next day we got a letter sent to our place.

National Parks then said, 'We'll have a committee and we'll come out to your block of land.' All I have finished up with is a block of land; there is nothing else left. I said, 'I'll try to get on to Mayor Watson and see if he can come out at the same time,' and they said, 'No. We don't want him out there.' So they lobbed out there and we walked down to the end of my property. As we were looking out over the back, the first thing they said was, 'This area out the back here is all mowed.' I said, 'Yes.' They asked, 'Who does that?' I said, 'I do. I've been doing it for 20 years.' It is the only access to the backs of those houses, so I keep it mowed so the fire brigade can get in and turn around. If you cannot turn around in a fire you are pretty dumb. That is why I maintain that area, so the fire brigade can get in and out through my next-door neighbour's property.

I have lost everything. One woman from National Parks said to me, 'If you mow that in the future, you'll be fined. If your dog goes past the back of your property, you'll be fined.' This is the type of attitude that you have from National Parks. Why would you have respect for them? I did not come to live in Huskisson because I hate trees, but there has to be a commonsense barrier between your residence and the national park. But there is none. Then they came up with the bright idea that they would clear six metres of trees and took 10 metres off the back of my property that I am not allowed to build or do anything on. I do not care who you are; that is an insult to anyone's intelligence. Mr Carr was down and said, '100 or 150 metres'. Sometimes I am not very diplomatic, but to me all that worked out to be was bullshit—and that was Mr Carr.

Wayne Smith was told to get this done. You never see Wayne Smith. Every time I went to his office—bingo—I was told, ‘He’s not here.’

Mr SCHULTZ—Who is Wayne Smith?

Mr McManus—The local state member who is no longer there; he is an ex-member. I really feel that, if he had got this clearing done around the properties, it would have given us better protection. Then they had the hide to ask me, ‘How clean was your backyard?’ My lawn was still there. I have pictures of the place; it was as clean as a whistle. I feel the only reason why they got the trees taken down was that the state Liberal Party leader, Mr Brogden, came down. Once that got in the paper and on the news—bingo—within two days they were getting quotes to take the trees down. National Parks have no commonsense. After they had taken 10 metres off the rear of my property, which I cannot do anything with, and the council had taken 7½ metres off the front, my place is getting shorter and shorter and the national parks are growing bigger and bigger. They have no commonsense. So how do you talk to them?

CHAIR—How long has your property been there?

Mr McManus—I have lived there permanently for 27 years.

CHAIR—Presumably the lot was there for some time before that?

Mr McManus—Yes. One house two doors down from me that burnt had been there for 52 years.

CHAIR—Has it always been national park behind you?

Mr McManus—No.

CHAIR—Was it state forest at one stage?

Mr McManus—Yes.

CHAIR—When did that change?

Mr McManus—I am not deadset sure—

CHAIR—Approximately.

Mr McManus—I think it was 1995.

CHAIR—As you have been there for 20-something years, have you seen a change in the way that land is managed under National Parks, as opposed to the forestry people?

Mr McManus—Yes.

CHAIR—What sorts of differences?

Mr McManus—I used to be in the fire brigade. They used to have back-burning, and they would have a slasher and slash the area regularly. Four months prior to this fire that took me out, there was a fire at Mooney Creek, which is at least three kilometres away. After we wrote the letter, the reply we got back from National Parks stated that the bush at the rear of Callala Street did not contribute to the fire hardly at all because there had been very low fuel in the area, as this had been burnt out four months prior to Christmas. That is the greatest load of baloney you have ever heard in your life. Surely I would have seen it, unless it went green again overnight! This is the type of rubbish that you are dealing with.

When we first moved down there, it used to flood a little bit at the back—so we came up six inches higher than what the water ever came to. After a while, the water got higher and higher. After the fires, there is hardly any water build-up at all. It builds up 30 metres from my place. Surely this has got to say that there has been so much rubbish and fuel on the ground. As I said, we have lived there for 27 years—and we had the house before then—and I have never seen it get burnt out yet.

Mr SCHULTZ—Reverting back to the situation where you lost your house—was your house insured?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—Did the National Parks and Wildlife Service—given that their park was responsible, in your view, for your house burning down—make any recompense to you with regards to the loss of your personal belongings or anything like that?

Mr McManus—No. In fact, when they were out there talking to me I asked them, ‘If I burn-off in my yard and it runs off and burns your national park, what would happen?’ They said, ‘We would take a very dim view of it and sue you and take you to court.’ I said, ‘Okay. Now it is the other way around and your bloody bushfire has burnt my house and I have lost everything.’ When I say everything, we finished up with our old motorhome and the clothes we had on. I was just thankful that my wife, my son and I got out with our lives because I thought we were dead. If we had been in the house we would have been. All the woman said was, ‘You can go us, but you won’t get anywhere.’ That is the type of attitude—you are only a little grub and we are National Parks.

Mr SCHULTZ—Was there a fence separating your property from the national park?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—Was it a timber fence?

Mr McManus—No, it was a wire mesh fence—like a really heavy gauge chook wire. Originally I had passionfruit growing around it.

Mr SCHULTZ—Did the intensity of the fire destroy the fence?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—Who replaced the fence?

Mr McManus—I did.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you.

Mr McARTHUR—Going back to the mowing of the grass—the grass was on National Parks land, was it?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—So you did this in good faith as a fire protection measure?

Mr McManus—It was the only park where a fire brigade could get in, plus it gave me fire protection. It was the only place a fire brigade could get in, turn around and be able to park there; where you can walk around without falling over things and be safe enough to get out, if it became too bad.

Mr McARTHUR—What was National Parks' attitude though, saying to you that you should not take this commonsense preventative attitude?

Mr McManus—Their attitude was that if I mowed it in the future, I would be fined. The media came around and I said, 'I am going to be fined if I cut the grass out there,' and they said 'What?' They wrote it up in the newspaper and suddenly I got a permit sent to me.

Mr McARTHUR—You got a permit to cut it?

Mr McManus—Yes, I have got a permit to cut the grass now.

Mr McARTHUR—Why do you think National Parks would change their views?

Mr McManus—Because they got a bit of advertisement. Also, I have been told by National Parks, 'Would you please not comment to the media any more?' All that says to me is that, 'You are doing all right if you are worrying them—keep going.' Hanging is illegal—what can they do to me?

Mr McARTHUR—You now have permission to mow the grass, do you?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you rebuilt your house yet?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—What action are you going to take, ready for the next fire? You are going to mow the lawn and mow the grass. What else are you going to do?

Mr McManus—What I have done this time is put up a Colorbond fence. I am illegal for a start because I am over two metres at the back—but the kangaroos will not complain. What I have done is put a Colorbond fence right along there, because Colorbond is very good for fire. I also killed the grass right around the edge of my fence and along the back and I mow out about 10 feet. National Parks come along every now and again and put a slasher over it.

Mr McARTHUR—Why are they so reactive to you? Is it because you have made a bit of a noise?

Mr McManus—You are not wrong. I screamed to anyone who would listen because—

Mr McARTHUR—In a similar urban interface between national parks and domestic dwellings what would you recommend to the committee in view of your experience?

Mr McManus—I feel that there should be at least a 100 metre buffer zone around the whole place. I do not know how other places are situated but, at the end of my street, there is a pipeline that runs out to Terara with treated sewerage in it. It is all treated and you are supposed to be able to drink it. Why couldn't the state government—I couldn't because I haven't got the money—fund an exposed pipeline right around the entire place? I do not know what types of jets are available but if we ever have a big fire again or if we have a drought, open the valve and let it spray up in the air. Cooling and water is what kills fire. A chap said, 'Stay and protect your property.' If a fire ever gets to the situation where it comes through again, I am going to do everything I can but I will not be there to stop it. How can you stop something that is 50 to 60 feet high with a garden hose? It should never have got to the stage where it was so far out of control. The fire brigade came around and said, 'We feel that the fire could come this way.' They did not know where it was going to come and I do not blame them. They said, 'If you hose everything down and fill your gutters, it should be okay.' So we hosed the buggery out of the place and the house next door as well and it did absolutely zilch. It did nothing.

Mr McARTHUR—Did you have your house before National Parks were on your boundary?

Mr McManus—Yes, a long way before.

Mr McARTHUR—They expanded their perimeter closer to your house rather than the other way around?

Mr McManus—It was crown land and then National Parks just took it over and Bob Carr said, 'Now it is a national park.'

CHAIR—It changed from state forest, Stewart.

Mr McARTHUR—Did the crown land have similar vegetation on it?

Mr McManus—Yes. It still had trees there but it was all slashed and kept down and then they would burn back through the scrub.

Mr McARTHUR—Was there a change of management between crown land and National Parks?

Mr McManus—Yes. National Parks are very good at maintenance, they are very good at repairing some fire trails that they really want to look good and they are good for putting up gates and chains. That is all they are good for in my opinion.

Mr McARTHUR—And in your own case, what did they do? You said the crown land was well maintained?

Mr McManus—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—And after, when Parks took it over, what happened?

Mr McManus—They did not worry about it; they just left it because that is natural that way.

Mr McARTHUR—That is until you made a public statement—they had a change of attitude then?

Mr McManus—I had a go and they said, ‘We slashed that area.’ They slashed the area. Four months prior to Christmas when the fire was at Mooney Creek they started going, ‘Ooh, hang on, that could run this way.’ At the end of my street, where you can get into the bush, they have large sandstone rocks. They were put in by the department of water conservation. I know that because the woman was there talking to us at my land and she said, ‘We put those in.’ I said, ‘You’re pretty stupid.’ The fire brigade could not get in there because of these large rocks. Because National Parks thought the fire might come our way, they got a backhoe in to move the rocks. They had a bloke out there at half past eight or nine o’clock at night with a slasher with headlights on it. That is their maintenance. That is how they are going to save the place. Anyone who drives a slasher knows that you do not drive them at night-time.

Ms PANOPOULOS—When you were told not to speak to the media again, what did you say to them?

Mr McManus—I just smiled.

Mrs GASH—That is not quite what you did. Be honest, Tom, tell them what you said.

Mr McManus—I just smiled. I said, ‘Okay, she’ll be right.’

Ms PANOPOULOS—There was a change from state forest to national park in 1995.

Mr McManus—I think it was then, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You obviously lived on the property before that. What changes have you seen with regard to the management of noxious weeds, if any?

Mr McManus—Noxious weeds—I did see a sign the other day. They have sprayed some blackberries, but not out the back of my place.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Was there greater control of noxious weeds when it was state forest?

Mr McManus—No. If it was green, they mowed it. That was it. The tea-tree area has thickened up. Out further, no more than 25 metres from where they have cleared to—in and out of the trees and slashed the ground—from that little belt of trees there it is only another 25 metres to a reeded area. All they had to do was leave some of the trees—spread them out a bit so that they do not run across the tops—and clear that area. That is all they had to do. You can fight a fire when it is on the ground; you cannot fight it when it is coming through 50 feet high, and you just cannot get through to National Parks.

I came up with that idea about running the sewer line around the place and, if we have a fire or even when there is a drought on, we could turn it on, wet the trees and let them grow green. It is better than drying out and being a fire hazard. The head woman from National Parks said, ‘But people wouldn’t like treated sewage being sprayed on a national park.’ If it is going to stop a fire, I do not care what they spray. They are pumping treated sewage into Jervis Bay. If it is so bad, why is it going into Jervis Bay? If it is so bad, how come they are pumping it out to the farms out here at Terara to spray on their fields?

As I said, I could not afford to do this thing myself but for a state government that would be nothing and it could also give employment in the area. I am sure that Mr Anderson would agree that it would do a good thing. There have to be sewage plants in other places around this state that are in the same situation and do not know what to do with the water.

CHAIR—Before the last question, can I recognise that the local state member for the South Coast, Shelley Hancock, has come into the inquiry.

Mrs GASH—Tom, can you tell me how many homes in your street were destroyed?

Mr McManus—Four. Can I say one other thing?

CHAIR—Sure.

Mr McManus—I went to the coroner’s inquest at Milton. I was glad to see Joanna and Shelley bring this up. It was not really advertised too much, but it got around. When you go to Milton court, 14 people can fit into Milton court. Straight away you knew that was a joke. Then they carried on and their barrister for National Parks would say to anyone giving evidence, ‘Were you there when the fire was on?’ If they said no, the barrister said, ‘Therefore, that’s hearsay.’ In his closing address—it was supposed to have gone for 3½ weeks; it went for 2½ days—the coroner said, ‘We’re not going to go after one o’clock today, are we, because I want to go.’ The National Parks barrister stood up and said to the coroner, ‘Your findings I feel must be taken from our National Parks experts, not the laymen’—in other words, not the garbage who live here. ‘If you fail to find in favour of National Parks, this could have a flow-on effect.’ And you are trying to tell me that this is justice in Australia. Christ! Forget it!

CHAIR—The committee has certainly been made well aware that there is a lot of anger in this region with respect to that particular inquest. I thank you for your comments today and for the information you have provided to the committee. We appreciate it.

Mr McManus—I thank you for the opportunity.

[2.50 p.m.]

HAIGH, Mr William Henry (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Haigh. Would you like to make some comments?

Mr Haigh—Yes, Mr Chair. I submitted some comments in writing. I drew a conclusion as to some of those comments and I will refer to that conclusion. I believe there has to be a single administrative authority to manage and implement bushfire policy. There has particularly got to be an emphasis on training and on changing the present culture to ensure the protection of personal safety and property and flora and fauna. What we have now—and I think it has been made very evident to the committee—is a culture operating in a number of state departments and, more particularly, in National Parks. The culture is one of preserving trees rather than looking to the welfare of the population—the residents—and also the flora and fauna. This culture means that there are no effective fire control methods being implemented.

In relation to the national park that was extended down at Manyana four years ago, a great area of that was controlled by forestry. Forestry did control the fuel build-up on the forest floors. They had a very strong financial asset to protect and they protected it very efficiently. After National Parks came in, they closed off fire trails and they did that effectively too by not maintaining the fire trails that were there. They let them be overgrown and the result was that they just closed off. That situation meant that there was a big build-up of fire fuel and that any fires that did come through there would be of very marked intensity. When that happened recently, the fires barbecued the native animals and burnt down the forest that they were required to protect. This has not only been seen here; this has been seen down the coast. I think they barbecued about 200 penguins about two years ago, so they have a pretty good history of this.

It is obvious that this culture—which has now moved through into local government, exists here in this council and has moved through to a number of other departments—must be a policy, because surely no department head would have the audacity to react against a government policy unless he was foolish enough to be putting his job on the line. So the whole of the policy situation in regard to fire control needs a great deal of review. I think that the policy that should be applied is the policy that was applied back in the late seventies when the emphasis was on prevention, with the creation of buffer zones and all of the other necessities that create this preventative method of controlling fire. Today we seem to have moved from that prevention policy—away from the basics. We have moved to talking about the hieroglyphics of how we will put fires out; we will employ all the technical expertise and do all sorts of things. But it does not matter what sort of a conflict you are in; you finally come back to needing people on the ground. It was the people on the ground that made these areas that are so prone to fire—and there are 47 villages in the Shoalhaven that are highly fire prone—very good places to live in and there is still some movement on overcoming the fuel on the ground, to lower the intensity of any fire that comes through, so that a reasoned safety measure is maintained when fires break out.

I came to the Shoalhaven first of all as a visitor and I enjoyed coming down for holidays from 1970. In August 1983 I moved to Manyana as a permanent resident, and I left there to move to Nowra in September 2002. In 1994 we had a very severe bushfire down there. At that time,

people were most concerned that the only access road from the highway—a road of 13 kilometres—was all overgrown. We approached the council and asked them to clear back to the road perimeters. The councillors avoided and ignored that from that time on. It is because of this culture that exists in the council—and it is not only this council. It appears that, instead of council officers and councillors taking the attitude that is set out in the Local Government Act that the council in the area is the proper authority—in other words, they are the people that should make the approach in relation to local government matters on behalf of the residents and the ratepayers—they do not do that. They wait to see what National Parks and other authorities have to say. It is an unfortunate situation but it will not change until this culture is exposed and the culture is altered.

At the same time, I believe there has got to be one administrative authority. I am not the one to determine which authority it should be but, in the submission that I wrote, I indicated how the Rural Fire Service were failing to carry out their responsibilities. I indicated a cul-de-sac and what was happening in it. In this large area of land, which is zoned for medium-density development and is overgrown with large trees and fire waste, they said to the applicants—the builders who put in a DA for building properties that abut that particular area—that they have to put up a 1.8 metre metal fence. I have no argument about that, but nothing is done about these other people who create the fire hazard. They are not required to clear, so you have got this overbearing culture going in there again. Maybe there should be a national administrative authority that sets out policy. As to how the policy is dealt with, that is a matter for you people, who have heard all the contributions, to come up with.

I also believe that there has to be a change in the method of taxing to pay for the control, the administration and the dealing with fire threats. As it is now, those people in both dwellings and commercial properties who insure their properties—and there are quite a number of people who do not—pay a fire tax. The people who do not insure do not pay any tax. The people who hold large areas of land that are zoned for residential or commercial development can leave them free of any development and they do not pay any fire tax; yet, because of the areas that they are controlling and holding, they are very prone to fire.

In Manyana, where I lived, there are two properties which conjointly amount to around 260 hectares. They are zoned for residential occupation. In Manyana there would be twice that amount of crown land zoned for residential occupation. Each of these areas has heavy timber growth, and no fire control takes place in those areas at all. So you have the ideal situation for intense fire activity. The people who come out are the people who are paid for by those who insure their homes.

The obvious question—and I heard it spoken about here earlier—is: how do you tax? There is one option that you can use. These things are not simple, as you well know, but there is an opportunity for review. That option is to tax people on the area of land that they occupy. It does not matter whether it happens to be a site for a cottage, a large area of land for speculative activity or a large area of rural land. Obviously rural land would be taxed at a different rate because it is not in a concentrated area where fire control would be of such danger. Where you have flat development you charge them on the area that they occupy through their strata or company title. This is something that could be looked to. I believe that that money should be looked at as a source of financing in the local government area. That money would be raised by the local government council when it issued its rate notices.

They are basically the points that come out of that submission. I stress the fact that it is not only a problem with the National Parks and the barbecuing of the wild animals and the burning down of the area of forest and growth that they are responsible for; it is a problem of the culture that is starting to permeate through the different areas. I think we saw this situation when the professor came down here and gave forth with his expressions but could not justify or show the veracity of the expressions he was making.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Haigh.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—I move that the written submission from Mr William Haigh be received as evidence and be authorised for publication.

CHAIR—So we will have the full submission on the public record. We are running a bit short of time; we have two more people to hear from. Does anyone have a burning question of Mr Haigh? I appreciate what you have provided to us, Mr Haigh. There have been some good suggestions.

Mr McARTHUR—You talk a lot about the change in culture. I wonder how you are suggesting you might change the culture of the National Parks.

Mr Haigh—I think there has to be more predominant public exposure of the failure of the National Parks administration. As one of the previous people said: once you expose, you get a change. Once you expose, if it is a culture coming from government level then it will change.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We appreciate that.

[3.04 p.m.]

FORBES, Mr Kenneth Andrew (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Forbes—Yes, thank you. I am a rural landowner from an area which was at the fire front. My property is 20 kilometres west of Nowra at a place called Burrier. Further west of that is the source of most of the fires which have occurred during the last few years—in particular, Touga last year. This area has 17 homes in a 10-kilometre radius—it is hardly densely populated. It is a hilly area with tall timber. It is the last easily accessible area for firefighting, which is why I said I was at the fire front. I have 100 acres: one acre of house, five acres of noxious weeds and 94 acres of tall timber—or rather I did have. None of this had been touched or burnt in any way for 20 years.

In 1999, 2001 and 2002 I put in requests for the rural fire brigade to assist me to do hazard reduction burning on my property because it was far too big a task for me to do on my own. People duly arrived and seven attempts were made during those three periods to do that burning. None of them was successful. Three attempts were called off due to weather. Four of those attempts were called off apparently due to lack of communication between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Rural Fire Service.

I would like to take this opportunity to mention one of these attempts in particular. The weather was fine, the forecast was good, it was all pegged out, the red flags were tied to everything, people were organised to do the burn and it was all going to happen that morning. The afternoon before I walked along the boundary of my property to have a look and see what would happen. I found a peg driven into the ground with what looked like a stapler attached to it and a number on the peg. I wandered back home wondering what this was. I rang a caravan park nearby and asked, 'Have you got any orienteering going on in this area?' They said no. I rang another one 11 kilometres away and asked the same question. They said, 'Oh yes, we have about 300 people coming through here first thing in the morning.' That attempt obviously failed; I rang the fire brigade and called it off. I later found out that the National Parks had given permission for the orienteering and for the burn-off but had not bothered putting two and two together. Somebody could have been killed. Incidentally, I resorted to running a bulldozer around the inside perimeter of my property, whether or not there were any trees in the way.

I turn now to the 2002 fire. We had the opposite experience to what we have been hearing about. For us, the fire went for 32 days. During that 32 days, either smoke or flames were visible—the flames were visible for 10 days—from our veranda or from any window on two sides of our house. During that time the police, SES, fire brigade, the Rural Fire Service, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the local community fire brigade—who call themselves a fire brigade but are not officially—and dozens of helicopters surrounded us. All of them were very helpful and appeared to be very efficient. I saw no sign of total confusion between them during the actual fighting of the fires. I can only commend them all for the effort they put in then. I do have a blow-by-blow description of the whole period of time we were under threat, but it has a few local names in it. If it is of any use, I will resubmit it without the local names.

The next thing I want to talk about has already been brought up: the National Parks and Wildlife Service ex state forest areas. My boundaries are in this category. Prior to it being taken over by National Parks, it was logged, tracks and people ran through it, and it was burnt fairly regularly. It is my observation, made from my extensive travels around this area as a bushwalker—and as a member of the Australian Plants Society I am out there at least twice a week—that that is the case everywhere in this area.

I believe that many of the so-called national park areas that are up against the houses are in this category. I fail to see how any of this could be called ‘pristine’. It has been logged, it has been run through by people and by fire and for a long time it has been generally used. It cannot possibly fall into the usually expected category of a national park. I believe it ought to be that they can become major buffer zones throughout the area. I feel that, if somebody could check on the accuracy of that statement, you will find that it may provide an opportunity to increase the zones. I will not take up any more of your time.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Forbes. You mentioned that, initially, you tried to do a hazard reduction burn on seven occasions and that you requested the Rural Fire Service to come and help you with that. But then you mentioned the National Parks’ involvement. Will you just explain to the committee why the National Parks were involved, because it was on your private land?

Mr Forbes—Yes. They were involved because part of the boundary of my land adjoins the national park. The natural barrier for the Rural Fire Service to burn from was a road that was on the other side of the national park property, so they wanted to do the national park as well as the private property. There was another block of private property involved as well. It was those two areas, and getting any sort of agreement between the two appeared to be impossible.

CHAIR—Thank you for that information. We would be happy to have that information you said you could resubmit at an appropriate time, if you want to provide it in whatever form you think is appropriate.

Mr Forbes—I think the documents should not have the names of individual local residents in them.

CHAIR—Yes, but if you want to submit it, by all means do so.

Mrs GASH—Did you actually lose your home?

Mr Forbes—No.

Mrs GASH—You lost the trees and everything else with it?

Mr Forbes—Yes, the fire burnt to within 30 metres of the home on two sides, and I suppose that 98 or 99 acres were burnt.

Mrs GASH—Did you stay on the property the whole time?

Mr Forbes—Yes, and I must say that I had about 25 locals and one fire truck there the whole time.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that.

[3.13 p.m.]

MILLS, Mr Philip Bernard (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Mr Mills, would you like to make a statement?

Mr Mills—The reason I am here is that I was under the fire but it never actually got to us. On that Christmas Day that it came over we had a split in the sky: half black and half sun—from then on, everybody knows about. The thing I want to comment on is that I am a four-wheel driver and I have a CB radio. There are many of us that have CBs but, for some reason, there was no communication between the average public and the fire units. At that time we lost our phones and we lost our power. I am not too sure about the time but I think it was for about a week.

On a number of occasions I went to Sanctuary Point and the Basin fire centres, and they were not attended. I used to be a firefighter in the sixties and the seventies. Of course, technology was different then, so everybody knew what was going on. Now nobody knows what is going on. They are grouped somewhere out in the scrub; there is nobody at the centres. You might remember that last year somebody robbed all the cars of the guys who were out fighting the fires. It was not in our area; it was somewhere else. That was because there was nobody there. I got nowhere at all. I came back and there were 30 or 40 of us grouped on our street trying to work out what was happening: whether it was coming our way, going that way or going this way. Nobody knew.

Something should be done. It is a simple matter of communicating to the average public, and not just through the radio station. If you did not have your little transistor with batteries, you did not have any radio contact. You had no telephones and no radios and the public were wondering what was going on. If somebody drove to a fire station, they still could not find out what was going on—and there we were with CB radios. It was simple. I can hear whatever the truckies say on the highway or I can get Cambewarra. From Sanctuary Point I can hear them coming over saying, ‘Eastbound over Cambewarra,’ because this is the normal thing: letting each big wheeler know what the other big wheeler is doing. So in fire control, for the public it would be a simple thing. Surely something could be thought of. There are thousands of people out there who do not know what is going on.

CHAIR—The CB is the normal type of CB that truckies and others have, is it?

Mr Mills—That most people have.

CHAIR—VHF or UHF?

Mr Mills—UHF, I think it is.

CHAIR—The issue of the incompatibility between organisations has come up in a lot of submissions. I think we have situations where the Rural Fire Service cannot talk to emergency services and things like that. In some states there are different frequencies et cetera.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mr Mills, are you a member of any sort of CB club?

Mr Mills—Yes.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So there is a local network of people?

Mr Mills—The club I am in is actually in Sydney. I am a member of the Range Rover Club.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Has there been any communication that you are aware of between, say, your four-wheel drive club and the fire services—any attempt to utilise your expertise?

Mr Mills—No. Things were so simple back in the sixties and seventies. CBs were a big thing then.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I am a child of the sixties.

Mr Mills—I love to find people who understand these things.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mr McArthur is a child of the fifties; I am a child of the sixties.

Mr Mills—Computers and stuff go over my head. You can see their value, but there are too many separations now. There are a whole heap of people in our street who do not have any type of radio at all, so they had no transistor. I asked all my neighbours, 'Do you know what is going on? They are calling for people to ring up the RSL at Huskisson to give them names of people who will take in families,' because they did not know how many homes were going to be burnt out. I gave my name because I have a couple of spare beds. But then the road was closed, so we were no good in Sanctuary Point—we were cut off. This was another reason you could not just go driving anywhere.

There were a whole heap of people coming up to me and asking, 'Do you know anything about what is going on, Phil?' 'No,' I replied, 'I can't get anybody. All I can get is an odd truckie saying, "It's just jumped the highway."' But I did not know where. The EFS should have one channel that at least broadcasts at a certain time of an hour—spot on the hour, even. They could give out a report on channel 40—which is the major channel for trucks—or any channel. They could just put that time in the paper.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You are now making a practical suggestion. I guess that is where I was heading. Obviously there are local communities here that are reasonably isolated in these sorts of circumstances. Your four-wheel drive club or your CB has a role to play here in informing people. People themselves should also be geared up with emergency equipment: basic things like batteries and a transistor radio so that they can plug in to the news. The suggestions that you just made are probably as practical as we are going to get as to how we can tap people like yourself and your resources into that communications network. Thanks very much.

Mr Mills—I would like to add a comment on what someone said earlier about blocking off trails. We do a lot of highlands driving and a lot of roads are blocked off now with lumps of stone and logs so that you cannot use them. I go along with the Tagalong mob, so we try to stick

to the legal places, but this is occurring more and more. We often think, 'If there is ever a fire here, how the hell are the trucks going to get through?'

CHAIR—How have those tracks been blocked off? Is it just by closing them or by taking out culverts and things like that?

Mr Mills—Digging holes does not worry us, but what does is that they have stuck a sign there that says, 'This is a closed road,' and they have put big blocks of stone there. You get that all the way down into the high country. It has gone mad. It takes a good fire before we ask, 'If this area is not opened up, how are we ever going to get trucks into there?' You cannot suddenly bulldoze a track for fire trucks. I was in the Wandilla fire in Mount Gambier in South Australia. Sixteen men were killed in that fire, because the trucks got bogged in sand. As another gentleman said, he was cutting grass so that the trucks could turn around. That is nothing to do with this, but these are all complications that are caused by somebody getting high-handed and saying: 'You are not going to come onto my property. This is a national park and it is pristine.'

CHAIR—Mr Mills, thank you for your input. For the information of the general public, the committee is to report to the parliament by 6 November. We will have many public hearings between now and getting that report together, and I am sure you will be interested in the report. I thank you all for your interest today.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Panopoulos**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 3.23 p.m.