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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

THURSDAY, 10 JULY 2003

COOMA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Thursday, 10 July 2003

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

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mr McArthur, 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.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 8.59 a.m.

PHILLIPS, Mr Winston Churchill, Deputy Mayor, Cooma-Monaro Shire, Chairman, District Bushfire Management Committee, and Chairman, Cooma-Monaro Shire Rural Fire Service Captains Committee

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the fourth one of this inquiry, following hearings in Nowra, Katoomba and Richmond over the last couple of days. It is part of the committee's program of hearings in and visits to different parts of Australia. The hearings and visits 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 at first hand and hear about some of the issues raised by the serious fires that have occurred in recent years. Before we hear from our first witnesses, I ask the Deputy Mayor of Cooma-Monaro Shire Council, Mr Winston Phillips, to welcome the committee to this region.

Mr Phillips—On behalf of the Cooma-Monaro Shire and our Mayor, Tony Kaltoum, I would like to welcome you here to our council chambers and our council meeting room. On behalf of the three shires, I would like to thank the federal parliamentary committee, which has been put together as a result of a lot of lobbying done by our local member, Gary Nairn. We certainly appreciate it in this area. There has been an enormous amount of work done, as can be seen from all the submissions that have been put together by local people. Looking at the list of names, I know the majority of these people, particularly those listed on the first page. I have worked for nearly 16 years in this area. All I can say to the committee is: listen well, because these people have hundreds of years of experience between them. They are terrific people who know what they are talking about. Listen well, and take note of what they have to say. Thank you for organising this, Gary.

CHAIR—Thank you, Winston, for the welcome. We appreciate the council facilitating the committee's hearings here in Cooma and covering, as you say, the three shires for this region.

[9.01 a.m.]

BOTTOM, Mr Peter, Group Captain, Rural Fire Service, Snowy River Shire

DIXON, Mr Darvall Sinclair, Group Captain, Rural Fire Service, Snowy River Shire

REID, Mr Philip Alan, Group Captain, Rural Fire Service, Snowy River Shire

WALTERS, Mr Ross Anthony, Group Captain, Rural Fire Service, Snowy River Shire

BLYTON, Mr Richard Ian, President, Past Captain and Volunteer, Nimmitabel Bushfire Brigade

COTTRELL, Mr Thomas Clive, Group Captain, Bombala Rural Fire Service

FLETCHER, Mr David Edward, Brigade Captain, Rocky Plain Bushfire Brigade

KING, Mr John Norris, President and Area Deputy, Berridale Rural Fire Brigade

MACKAY, Mr Stephen Barry, Captain, Dry Plains Rural Fire Service

CHAIR—I welcome the first group of witnesses. Does anyone have any comment to make on the capacity in which they are appearing today?

Mr Cottrell—My submission was sent in as a result of concern for a property that I manage called Wallendibby, a sheep and cattle property of some 4,000 hectares, which adjoins the Byadbo wilderness. I am also a group captain with the Bombala Rural Fire Service, and have been for 15 years. Prior to that I was a senior deputy captain with 35 years experience in the Rural Fire Service.

Mr Dixon—I am a land-holder on the Monaro. I also have land adjoining the national parks in the Snowy Plains area. I am a group captain with the Snowy River Shire Rural Fire Service. I have been involved with the fire brigade for the last 25 years.

CHAIR—Welcome. We thank you all for the submissions that you have provided so far. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I 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 a contempt of parliament. Mr Reid, would you like to make an opening statement or some key remarks that you feel need to be made in the first instance before the committee asks some questions?

Mr Reid—I would like to thank you for allowing us to speak further on our submission into the 2003 Snowy Mountains bushfires. This submission is put forward on behalf of the group captains in the Snowy River Shire. I have been a member of the Rocky Plains brigade for 36 years in which I was treasurer for seven years, president captain for seven years and group

captain for 10 years. My main experience has been in frontline firefighting and decisions. The role of the group captain is to represent approximately 700 volunteers in the Snowy River Shire. Support is also provided by assisting captains and section leaders in major campaign fires such as these.

I would like to make special mention of the volunteers of the Rural Fire Service who performed extraordinary tasks in unfamiliar roles. Their local knowledge proved decisive in the successful extinguishing of many outbreaks. This highlights that one of the criteria for positions of command should be local knowledge. These same volunteers were responsible for running the forward control centre at Rocky Plains for six weeks, supplying approximately 60 personnel 24 hours a day. A quick calculation works that out to be a total of 60,480 hours. At a costing of approximately $25 an hour, that is a saving to the government of $1.5 million. This does not include the running of private vehicles. For example, I alone covered approximately 5,000 kilometres. I add here that there were also three others at forward control at Rocky Plains at the same time.

We have put together four main issues. They are: hazard reduction, including on private property; fire trails; communications; and OH&S issues. Here to speak on hazard reduction is Clive Cottrell who has been a member of Delegate and Currawang bushfire brigades in Bombala Shire for 35 years. He was senior deputy for 20 years and group captain for 15 years. He was involved with the Slaughterhouse Creek and Byadbo fires in December 2002. Darvall Dixon has been a member of the Brothers brigade for 25 years. He has been equipment officer, vice captain for three years, captain for three years and group captain for seven years. His main role during the fires was as group captain, covering a lot of the areas. He will also speak on hazard reduction.

Mr Cottrell—I have a brief address, which I might cut down a little as you stipulated you would like time for questions. Our concern in the Bombala Shire is the Byadbo wilderness area. It is 69,700 hectares. It is on the western boundary of the shire. It runs from the Victorian border in the south, west to the Snowy River—a distance of 40 kilometres from private property—and north to the Snowy River, a distance of 3.4 kilometres from private property. I draw your attention to part 2 of my submission, which says that hazard reduction is of the utmost importance. Byadbo area has a high incidence of lightning strikes, and strong north-westerly and south-westerly winds are not uncommon. As a result, properties in the east and in the Delegate and Bombala districts are threatened.

The main concern is that sufficient hazard reduction burns have not been carried out. This concern is quite justified, as we have just experienced the largest bushfire in Australian history, with 70 per cent of KNP affected. The suggestion that hazard reduction and controlled cattle grazing have a greater effect on biodiversity than a wildfire is ludicrous. I explain that our hazard reduction burns have been tried in the autumn, without success. We feel it is definitely worth a try in the spring as, if something is not working, you have to try something else.

In 1968 cattle leases were not renewed, but grazing continued until 1972. The annual burns were carried out until this time from Tingaringy Mountain in the south-west to Kangaroo Ground Creek in the north. These burns were twofold, usually carried out in the spring, providing feed for the upcoming winter and reducing the fire hazard. In 1988, a fire on Black Jack Mountain burnt out of Byadbo, affecting eight landowners with a loss of fencing, grazing land and

livestock. The Bombala and district volunteers incurred a great deal of expense and man-hours during this fire. From 1972 to 1988 there was a 16-year fuel build-up in Byadbo, with the only successful hazard reduction burn in Jerrys Flat area—approximately 350 hectares. From January 1998 to December 2002 very little success with the autumn burns resulted in another wildfire. I believe the significance of these two periods relates to the lack of burns—which had been conducted by local graziers from Tingaringy Mountain to the south-west and Kangaroo Ground Creek to the north prior to 1972—and the fact that, up until this time, cattle grazing was permitted.

Another major concern in the Bombala and Delegate district is the Willmott forest pine plantation. With 15,500 hectares already planted, the company is hoping to expand with the planting of a further 2,000 hectares per annum. I got this yesterday from a chap who is managing operations. I know for a fact that they are trying to buy up more land in the Delegate area. A neighbour of ours put an exorbitant price on 1,200 acres and thought they would not meet the price—but they did. He said no, he was not interested in selling. He had a phone call offering him another $40,000—'And if that isn't enough, we'll meet your price.' So you can understand our concern in the Delegate-Bombala area when they are trying to buy up more land for pines. Getting back to the fires coming out of Stromlo in Canberra, with over 500 houses lost but only four people lost, it is quite amazing that there was not more loss of life. So you can understand that, with all these pine plantations in the Bombala Shire, we are greatly concerned. We need to reduce the fuel loads in Byadbo so that we do not get any fires coming out and into those pine forests.

In conclusion, I believe that hazard reduction should be carried out in Byadbo on a yearly basis, with considerable, large areas burnt to reduce fuel levels. Spring burns are preferable, depending on conditions. This needs to be flexible, as weather conditions vary and may need to be carried out in the autumn. These would be in areas and locations to be decided jointly by NPWS and local brigades, who will be able to define areas of concern. I therefore urge this committee to give this matter serious consideration. Thank you.

Mr Dixon—The bloke who really should be here addressing this meeting is Barry Aitchison. He has been our fire control officer for the last 25 years. He is a fourth-generation land-holder in the district and he has a deep passion for and great knowledge of these mountains. I think that he should be here to address this meeting.

CHAIR—We would have been very pleased to have him here.

Mr Dixon—I was involved from the word go when these fires started. We were sent first up onto the Round Mountain Trail to try to burn off there to contain the fire that was coming out of the Hellhole Creek area. The fuel loading was just too great so we just had to abandon that; we could not do it, and that was just through the lack of hazard reduction.

That gets back to the hazard reduction burns within the national park. When you do get permission to do a burn there are too many restrictions and not enough flexibility. I think we are meant to have our proposed burns in by July this year. How do you set a date for a burn next year in July this year? If the date is set to do a burn on a particular day and it is raining that day, it is off and abandoned for another 12 months. We have been trying to do a burn in the Denison area at Adaminaby since 1981, a strategic burn to protect that country out there.

As for the claim that this is a one-in-a-hundred-years fire, you saw what happened at Junction Shaft. That Tumut Ponds area and the Round Mountain were burnt in 1988 so there was a build-up there. As you can see, it was very hot in January 2003. Just from my observation, these intensive fires seem to encourage the species of plants that like fire to the detriment of the fire sensitive species.

The Gungahlin River, whose catchment area is the Snowy Plains—and I have land there—has been grazed, and they say it has been burnt, for the last 160 years. We stopped the fire on that particular front. The Gungahlin River is the only river in the Snowy catchment area that was not affected by fire. All the rest were affected by fire. You can see it. There is a piece that has been taken over by the national park that juts down into the Snowy Plains—that burnt. When it came out of there we were able to control it. These fires were started by lightning. All fires outside the park on private land that were started by lightning were contained within 24 hours.

Mr McARTHUR—Could you give us a couple of sentences on that?

Mr Dixon—Fires that were outside the park on private land were contained or put out.

Mr McARTHUR—How many of them?

Mr Dixon—Twenty.

CHAIR—Maybe we can come back to questions and be able to flesh out some of those things.

Mr Dixon—It was only by the grace of God that up here in these mountains we did not lose lives. If we had had weather that is normal for that time of the year, there is no doubt in my mind that we would have lost lives. We had blokes in places where we should not have had them and we had blokes in places where we were worried about them and we knew that we could not get them out if it really went wrong. It was the state of the fire trails that would not let us out of there. I left school when I was 15, but it does not take a degree to work out that big loads mean big fires.

Mr Reid—The next section is fire trails, which will be covered by Peter Bottom and David Fletcher. Peter Bottom has been a member of the Berridale Rural Fire Brigade for 35 years. He has been captain on two occasions for approximately 12 years and he has been a group captain for probably longer than 12 years. His main role was covering a big area mainly between Berridale and Jindabyne during the fires. David Fletcher is a member of the Rocky Plain Bushfire Brigade. He has been a member for 25 years. He has been equipment officer and this is his first year as captain. He was mainly running the control centre at Rocky Plain. I would like to call on them to make a few statements about fire trails.

Mr Bottom—I am a land-holder in the Snowy River Shire and also group captain for Snowy River Shire. My job is to give an overall view of fire trails, so I have divided them into national parks, shires and private ground. I will start with national parks. Other than major public roads and Snowy Mountains Authority construction roads, trails were virtually non-existent. What we found was two-wheeled tracks in most places, with scrub and bush that was slashed 300 millimetres high off the ground, potholes, wash-outs, wet spots, bogs and high contour banks.

Major time was lost on the reconstruction of these trails and on the reopening of old fire trails used in past fires that had previously been closed by National Parks. Lost time in the placement of firefighting crews on the fire lines: up to four or five hours at times to get crews onto the fire lines. Firefighting strategies had to be changed because the existing trails were not suitable for back-burning, therefore new trails had to be moved further away from major fire fronts to allow construction time. This also meant that, when we did back-burns, huge areas of the park had to be burned because of that distance. National Parks were reluctant to put large earthmoving machinery onto construction of the trails during the fires. We had trouble with getting earthmoving machinery placed in the right spots where we needed them. You have to take into consideration that it was a huge fire so there was a lot of travelling around roads to be able to move the machinery about.

Firefighting crews were put in extreme danger when new trails were constructed with no time for placement of fall-back safety areas, truck turning areas, escape routes et cetera. Construction was dependent on aerial observation because of the terrain and dense vegetation. A large number of these trails have now been reclosed and revegetated by the park, so the trails we put in are no longer in use. Solutions on that point were: whether they are internal or perimeter trails; and construction of numerous fully serviced major fire trails—looking at terrain, direction, width and vegetation, with vegetation being kept under control and well back from trails—needs to be taken into consideration. To cut things short, I went on to shires and private country. There was a little bit of difference here because of—as Darvall said—the open country. Existing maintained fire trails gave fast and safe access for firefighters. Firefighting strategies could be put in place days before the main fire approached us. New trail construction was made easier because of open grazed areas that were free from vegetation. New trail construction was greatly assisted by local knowledge on terrain, direction, water spots et cetera.

We still have a few issues with our trails in the shires. As you know, fire trails are not public roads, but people seem to use them that way. Where our trails go across private ground, we have this grey spot on mitigation of who is responsible if anybody gets hurt on those trails. With the New South Wales government making land acquisitions, we now have the problem of our fire trails crossing from private country to what used to be crown country, which is now park or reserves, and back into private country. What we need there is to keep those trails to a certain standard for both groups so that everything stays in line.

Due to funding cuts, the south-east cooperative group, made up of the four shires in our area, have difficulty in maintaining their current fire trails without considering the necessity of new fire trail construction. For example, the Snowy River fire district has 1,200 kilometres of fire trails to maintain, with no funding. For the past three years there has been no funding for private lands to assist with that; therefore, the Snowy River and other fire districts within the south-east cooperative group feel that funds are not fairly proportioned and are often misdirected for this use.

It is also thought that the bushfire coordinating committee ideas on fire trail construction and maintenance differ greatly from what is needed in these areas. Our local district bushfire committee has been seeking solutions to these problems for long periods of time without success. Due to the lack of success and the January fires, we have set up a fire trail subcommittee. On 25 June 2003 we invited Forestry, National Parks, the Department of Lands and Water Conservation, NRE from Victoria and the Rural Fire Service to be represented. The

aim of this committee is to standardise the classification of trails, signage, maintenance, funding, fire trail registers, standards, end water points, tree canopy clearance et cetera so that everybody has correctly constructed fire trails.

CHAIR—Thank you. David, do you have something to add?

Mr Fletcher—Yes. I will concentrate on some specific examples regarding fire trails in my brigade area and problems inside Kosciuszko National Park relating to fire trail location and maintenance levels. The brigade believe the Snowy Plains area on our western flank is very poorly protected by fire trails. Two critical trails to our west are the Grey Mare fire trail and the Calcite Gap trail. Both of these were completely impassable before these fires. Nine days were spent on the Grey Mare trail alone in getting that to a state where we could get along it. We could not even drive along it to look at fires. That was time spent when we had benign weather and when it was critical to control fires in their early stages. Both these trails lacked turning bays and refuges. If you head south along the Grey Mare fire trail, you travel for 50 kilometres to Guthega Power Station without a single escape route to the east. So to put firefighters down that trail when there was a large body of fires to the west and when they travel from west to east put firefighters in a lot of danger. We badly need some sort of escape route along those trails. Both these trails need to be linked by boundary trails skirting to the west of private country. There was no fire trail whatsoever on the western side of the Snowy Plains area. As no funding exists for private trail construction or maintenance, we rely on National Parks to construct that within the national park.

To give you a couple of examples, we had successful back-burns on the Burkes Track area behind Eucumbene Cove. That is an example of a trail that was well placed between Happy Jacks Road and Lake Eucumbene; it linked the two. We had a hamlet of 40 houses that was under quite a severe threat. That area had had control burn work done. We had favourable weather conditions and were able to do a successful back-burn with minimal labour and minimal risk, and that worked perfectly.

The other extreme is the Round Mountain area, where at a very important time no back-burning was able to be carried out because of the state of the fire trail and the fuel loads. As other people have mentioned, that was not too many years ago—I think it was 1988—when that area was previously burnt. I do have some photographs that I would like to submit to the committee. In conclusion, we would like to see a much stronger commitment from the National Parks and Wildlife Service to fire trail construction and maintenance.

Mr Reid—Another issue was communication during the fires. Steve Mackay and Ross Walters will talk about that. Steve Mackay has been a member of the Dry Plains fire brigade for 15 years. He has been an equipment officer, area deputy, senior deputy, and captain for five years. He has just been elected as deputy group captain in the last month or so. Ross Walters has been a member of the Dalgety brigade for 20 years. He was captain for three years and has been a group captain for four years. I will now hand over to Steve.

Mr Mackay—As the recently elected deputy group captain, I am here to talk on behalf of the Dry Plains Rural Fire Service, of which I am captain. I thank the committee for letting us talk about our concerns with the communications problems. Communication was very poor throughout most of the fires from before Christmas until they ended. Communication was often

impossible and sometimes there were accidents. They could have been life-threatening things. In one instance, there was an accident and there was no communication at all. We had to wait until we could get to a certain spot.

The methods of communication we had included the Rural Fire Service PMR—PMR standing for 'private mobile radio'. This is a system that seems to work adequately in day-to-day use but on the fire line it is not always so good. When things get so busy there just seems to be the one channel. We also had UHF CB radio and mobile phones. Mobile phone use was limited because it was difficult to get a signal out there in the mountains. They are a good alternative because they allow for one-on-one conversations and you do not have everyone else cutting in on you. But we did not have the towers around and a good signal all the time. I will not go any further into the radios because Ross is going to talk about that in a minute.

One improvement we think is needed is more phone towers. There was a proposed fire control centre for Jindabyne, which we think is not going ahead. It is possible that some of the funding for this control centre could be directed to more phone towers, more two-way radio repeaters—both PMR and UHF—possibly mobile units that can be moved to suitable areas as needed. We need radios with other agencies that are able to be turned to a common channel so that we can all talk to each other. This does not seem to happen.

The other thing that we thought the funding for this fire control centre might be able to help out with is power, two-way radios and phones to brigade sheds. Dry Plains has two sheds—one at each end of the brigade area. One has mobile service and phone access and the other has neither power nor mobile service. During the fires we found it virtually impossible to communicate between the two sheds, especially when crews were on stand-by. I was at home or out on the field and trying to tell crews where to be, and it was nearly impossible. If you could got on the PMR system you were told to get off it because it was too busy being utilised somewhere else. We realise we are not experts in this communication area, but experts should be able to solve these problems.

Mr Walters—Following on from what Steve said, interagency problems were the bugbear for me; not being able to talk to National Parks and Wildlife was difficult. It became nearly unworkable because we had a lot of National Parks and Wildlife people in the field but we could not talk to them. We did not know where they were or what they were doing. With respect to town brigades, I worked at Wallendibby up the Thredbo Road and on Australia Day this year the fire impinged closely on a lot of houses there. I had 13 town service fire trucks drive through that area and I was unable to contact them to get help. Police were another problem. It was unworkable. We just could not talk to them without going back through Berridale, and quite often, when we went back through Berridale, the danger had passed and it was all too late.

Forestry and aircraft were another problem. We used aircraft a lot and they were a great help, but to be on the ground and to be able to talk directly to the air would have been a huge asset. As I said, it was unworkable. You could not talk to the guys in the air and you could not get them where you wanted them. That pretty much sums it up. Steve has covered everything else. A remedy that I have thought of is for group captains and captains. I am sure there is technology out there that can be used so that we can talk to these other people, and I feel that it is imperative that we can talk to them in a management role. Thank you.

Mr Reid—We have two more speakers. The fourth issue concerns OH&S and paid firefighters. Richard Blyton has been a member of the Nimmitabel brigade for about 21 years. It is a brigade that is in the Cooma-Monaro shire. He has been captain for six years and he has been president for seven years. He also told me the other night that his father has been a member of that brigade for 52 years. So there is a fair bit of knowledge there.

CHAIR—I did not think his father was that old!

Mr Blyton—All the people that have spoken are in the Snowy River shire or the western part of the Bombala shire, and these fires may have impacted greatly on their livelihood. From a brigade that was 50 kilometres away from the fire front, I was able to stand back and say, 'Hang on, I'm sending people into an unsafe environment,' so at times I threatened not to send my people to that area. To me, issues of newly constructed fire trails, no hazard reduction and other issues are safety issues; to them, they are operational issues. They could not get in, whereas we could get in but it was not safe. The Grey Mare fire trail in one section was 25 kilometres long with no escape routes. If WorkCover were involved in this fire, there would not have been any firefighting done until it came out on private land.

With regard to welfare, I sent 32 men to this fire. Of those only one, I can guarantee, got paid for his eight-hour days. He worked for Woolworths, and they give him five days off per year to do community work. The rest were either self-employed or worked night shift. There were five from the shearing industry that received no pay. If you do not shear, you do not get paid. There were two sons that were self-employed. Compare that to a National Park employee—they were working alongside getting double time. I have heard of an instance where one National Park employee has bought a brand-new motorbike from the profit he made from firefighting.

It is also a problem that we are only insured for $150,000. If we want more than that, we have to go to court to get it. I have had heard that the people burned in the Wingello fires are still fighting for compensation. I do not think that is fair to us. I have been on page for 24 hours a day for the last six years and I do not think it is fair for my family that, if I were seriously injured or killed at my age, they would only get $150,000. It has got to the stage with these men here where it was going to affect their livelihood. It was not going to affect my livelihood but it could have affected me because of the safety concerns I had. Nimmitabel brigade were at the stage where, if it happens again, we will think very hard about not even turning up. We are only volunteers; we can make that decision.

The only reason we did attend was for our friends in the Snowy River shire, the Yaouk Valley and Bredbo Valley. I had men come back to me—I met them every time they came back—and I was told about the positions they were put in. Our category 1 vehicle was going to an area where you only needed a two-wheel-drive vehicle. When it arrived the person in charge put it into an area where it had to reverse out a fair distance, with great difficulty because the trails were unsuitable. I am not the captain anymore, because I have just about had enough, but as a captain the safety of my people is the most important part when I go to a fire. Putting the fire out is the second most important part. In my local area I can control the safety issues because the fire is usually on private property; you have large areas of grassland to escape to. We have written to Phil Koperberg to say that we will give due consideration in future and we will probably not attend. We feel that in an S44 period our volunteers should be paid the same amount as government employees.

As for the structure of the Rural Fire Service, in the late seventies-early eighties we all lobbied to get fire control officers in our local areas to help us with our firefighting and acquiring equipment et cetera. We have lost control of them now. They are now basically working for the bureaucracy in Sydney doing paperwork. It really upsets me that they have been told not to be involved in this process when, to me, the fire control officer is there to make our job easier and to assist us in managing our fires and getting them under control, whereas now they seem to be working more for this operation in Sydney. As a measure for that, I feel that we should separate the Rural Fire Service over the divide and let them have their fire brigades along the coast and Sydney. For some of those people that is their hobby, whereas we are in P&Cs and Lions Clubs; we have all these other jobs to do. We do not want to be part of the bureaucracy; we just go and put the bloody fire out and then go about our business. Some of these Snowy River fellows—these group captains—were doing 5,000 to 6,000 kilometres in their own vehicles over a three-week period. There is no way I would be committing myself to that loss of income and loss of my own resources. To me, standing back 50 kilometres, it was an occupational health and safety issue. In future, I cannot see myself going in there. If someone wants to go I will let them go, but I will not be asking people to go when I cannot guarantee their safety.

I had a lot more to say but I know we are running short of time. I shall submit all my examples to the inquiry, but I would just like to tell one story. On Friday, 7 February—I think that is what day it was; I am pretty sure it was—a Nimmitabel crew, which included me, was sent to the Rocky Plains area because the fire was spotting. When we arrived the conditions had improved and we were reassigned to help David Fletcher do a back-burn with the assistance of an arriving National Parks crew. While we waited for the trail to be constructed we found out that David had already been on the fire ground for 12 hours. At that stage, National Parks were doing their 12-hourly changeover—and I could tell of other instances where they actually left a fire that volunteers were still working very hard to contain because it was their changeover period.

Getting back to David, he had to supervise this back-burn. About eight o'clock, while we were waiting for this trail to be constructed, I heard David on the radio trying to establish where his kids were, because there are no child-care agencies in the country. While we were still waiting I was talking to David and he told me he had eaten two meals at home in three weeks. When we left the fire ground at 2.30 a.m., after being there for about seven hours, David was still there supervising the mop up of this back-burn. I think that is above and beyond the call of duty. For me, 50 kilometres back from the fire line, I will not be doing it to save any national park but I would go and help David and the like to save their properties.

CHAIR—Are we ready for questions now?

Mr Reid—Chair, John King from Berridale brigade has been a member for 40 years, president for 25 years and secretary-treasurer for 10 years. He wants to talk about hazard reduction on private land, and I think he wants to make a comment about communications too.

Mr King—I was involved in the initial stages in the park fires. I will not even touch on those, but I take nothing away from the previous speakers. I want to comment briefly on the fires that spotted out of the park onto private land and on some of the conditions that existed, and still exist, on private land. Some of the private land is regarded by its owners as just a house block. That house block may be just five-acres, or it may be a couple of thousands of acres. In some cases, there is absolutely no attempt at management of that land—management in the broad

sense of the word. But, for the purposes of this argument, I am talking about either grazing or hazard reduction by fire. So the situation is exactly as occurred in the national park, in some of the wilderness areas and so on.

There is a mentality out there that 'doing nothing' is conservation. In many cases, doing nothing is the only thing they know how to do, and they do it very effectively. The fact is that doing nothing commits the land to death, environmentally, eventually. Certainly, when the fire spotted into what became known as the Avonside Road fire, that was the case. All their houses, their assets and so on had to be protected. We had enormous difficulty in protecting houses that had absolutely no hazard reduction done around them, whereas others that had been grazed around were quite simple to control. When the fire came into land that had been cleared and grazed, it was relatively simple to control. But the patches, and they were pretty significantly big patches, that had had absolutely no management were just as bad, probably, as anything in the park. In granting permission for subdivisions and building sites, councils must take into account the management of those areas, their size and also the location of buildings. In a couple of cases we very nearly lost houses, but we lost only two dog kennels and a cubbyhouse, due to the incredible bravery of some of our volunteers. But it was touch and go.

I would now like to touch on communications. I am sorry that I did not have time to liaise with the others on that—I am just back from overseas. I was given a Parks radio, as part of managing our fire. Whilst it was physically very difficult for me to manage three radios at once, that Parks radio made the difference in my success in being able to control the fire. It meant that I was able to communicate directly with the helicopters. In two instances, that saved houses that we definitely could not have otherwise saved. In one case, the person in charge of the house was my own son, so I was fairly pleased to be able to do that. Just to illustrate that I am taking this whole thing fairly seriously, I would mention that my brother-in-law was one of the persons that died in the Canberra fires just a week or so before.

There are matters that need to be addressed on fire management and prevention on private land. In many cases, the people are not farmers as such—people who make money from the land and make their living from the land; they are persons who do not have a clue. There is an urgent need for an education process, beginning, I would suggest, with the persons making the decisions to allow people there in the first place and then for the persons who will occupy the land.

CHAIR—Thanks, John; and thank you all for that very good information. I am sure a lot of what you have told us already has answered some of our questions, but I will start with Stewart McArthur.

Mr McARTHUR—We are a bit short on time, but I have four issues. Could you respond to them fairly quickly, in the interest of time. What is the expectation of National Parks of the local brigades when a fire breaks out in the parks?

Mr Dixon—I will have a go at this one. If any of our blokes had been caught in the park the day before the fire started, they would have been fined. The fires then get going and suddenly Parks say: 'Please come in. Help us. Bring your own vehicles—bash the shit out of them.' That is the sort of mentality. There is a lot of ill will towards Parks from the neighbours, because they do not cooperate with us at all—you get back to wild dogs and so forth. That is the reason we

have trouble getting blokes to go in there, because one minute we are criminals and the next minute they are asking us to go in there and give them a hand.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the expectation—that they want you to go in there the day after the fire starts?

Mr Dixon—Yes. The day before they will fine you; the day after they are asking you in there.

Mr McARTHUR—Do they expect you to go in there?

Mr Dixon—They want you to, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—In your submission you say that Victoria and ACT are maintaining fire trails. Why is it that Parks, you say, have been closing off some of the trails that were constructed during the recent fires? What is the rationale for that?

Mr Reid—I believe that they do not want anyone in their park. They want it virtually closed off.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the fire next year? What will happen then?

Mr Reid—That would be a good question that I would like to see answered. Their policies and their roles are right out of kilter, as far as I am concerned.

Mr McARTHUR—So you people cannot understand why they are cutting the fire trails out and destroying them?

Mr Reid—No.

Mr McARTHUR—There is no reason given?

Mr Reid—Probably environmental issues.

Mr McARTHUR—You talk about the compensation to private landowners and you talk about the case of Mr Ron Flanagan. Could you help the committee with that? As I read your submission, if the private landowner created a fire that went into national parks he would be up to pay the compensation and, vice versa, if National Parks put fire into your land there is no compensation payable. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Reid—Yes, I would say that that is true and correct.

Mr McARTHUR—What happened in the case of Mr Flanagan?

Mr Reid—I think they were going to take him to court and then the case was dropped.

Mr Dixon—No, the magistrate threw it out.

Mr McARTHUR—So the case was taken to court?

Mr Dixon—Yes. He was burning private land and it was during the autumn, as far as I know, and the fire did escape into the park. It was a very minimal area. He was sitting there waiting, making sure it did not go any further until the evening came along. That is when they came along and got him and took him to court. I am not sure of the area, but it was a very minute area that was burnt.

Mr McARTHUR—So if Parks burn your private land there is no compensation payable?

Mr Dixon—No.

Mr McARTHUR—Has that been tested by any local land-holders?

Mr Blyton—I do not know.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you been thinking about it?

Mr Blyton—In a drought year, a lot of these blokes here were going to have negative incomes. They cannot think about going to court—court costs money.

Mr McARTHUR—My last question is: Mr Dixon, you said that there were 20 fires put out on private land compared to fires that continued to burn in the national park. What is that difference between those two scenarios?

Mr Dixon—The private land, of course, is grazed and there is a lot of fire mitigation that goes on—apart from what John is talking about, and that is becoming a bigger problem all the time. You have got blokes that will do what they are doing—doing burns when the time is right. They are doing it when it is right; that is when you have got to get your flexibility in your hazard reduction. You have got to have flexibility, because when the time is right you burn it. What happened up here is that they burnt it at the wrong time; they burnt it in January.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are saying that there is a clear demonstration that hazard reduction burning on private property where the 20 fires were put out, plus the grazing pressure, maintained the lack of fuel?

Mr Dixon—Snowy Plains is a classic example of burns and grazed area. We put out the fire, we beat it there. It is the same terrain as there is straight over the range into the park.

CHAIR—Darvall, could you explain the Snowy Plains area in relation to the national park?

Mr Dixon—Snowy Plains has a common boundary with the national park and it encompasses the head of the Gungahlin River, which empties into Lake Jindabyne.

CHAIR—And Snowy Plains is private.

Mr Dixon—Yes. Snowy Plains has been grazed for the last 160 years and burnt at opportune times, and that is where we held the fire and we stopped it. We did not have a good fire trail

system through there either, but we still stopped it once it got to the grazed land and the country that had been—

Mr McARTHUR—Are you drawing the comparison between that and the national park, just across the boundary?

Mr Dixon—Yes, exactly.

Mr McARTHUR—What happened in the national park next to that area?

Mr Dixon—It is gone—burnt.

Mr McARTHUR—How long did it keep burning?

Mr Dixon—It came out of there onto the Snowy Plains, but it burnt virtually for five weeks. It started further west and it just kept on heading east.

Mr McARTHUR—So what you are saying to the committee is that the fire burnt for five weeks in the national park but the 20 fires on private property were put out within 24 hours. Could you say that?

Mr Dixon—Yes.

Mr Blyton—These fellows from the Snowy River can also confirm that the water quality in that catchment was pristine, whereas there is still a lot of black soot and so on in the other catchment.

Mr Cottrell—I would like to comment on a couple of points. On private land, which is grazed, and grazed pretty short because we have been experiencing many droughts, there is access. We are talking about fire trails. Because of the access on private lands we get there quickly and extinguish the fires. The other point is about going into the areas before National Parks. In Byadbo the Rural Fire Service is usually there first because Byadbo is managed from Jindabyne. You can imagine the time it takes to get from Jindabyne right around to Byadbo. There is a National Parks office in Bombala but they are not responsible for Byadbo. They are in the Bombala shire but they are not responsible for Byadbo; that is managed from Jindabyne. So in our own interest, because we border Byadbo, we are there first and we take it from there. Because of the fires we have had in Byadbo, the people at Delegate think, 'Okay, we're not going to fight fires in the national parks; we'll wait for them to come out.' That is too late. We have to do something before they come out.

Mr McARTHUR—What is National Parks' attitude to the fire in their park?

Mr Cottrell—It is pretty difficult to assume what their attitude is. It is just something that happens and they are happy to go along with it. If we had more fuel reduction, which we have been speaking about here today, it would lessen the intensity of the fires.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you, everyone, for the valuable insights that have obviously come out of decades of experience and hard work in the field. As an introductory question, we had

indications in one of our other hearings that salaried staff certainly, and even volunteers, were being discouraged from appearing before this committee. Are you aware of any indications of others being discouraged in that way?

Mr Blyton—I know that the fire control officers in the Cooma-Monaro shire were told they were not to take part but I believe that the Rural Fire Service and National Parks were sending along spies to hear what we had to say. Under occupational health and safety we are supposed to bring up these issues, and they have not given us a forum to do so. They give debriefs and they all pat themselves on the back because the fires are out and everything but we have never been given the opportunity to bring up the occupational health and safety issues of this firefighting.

Mr BARTLETT—Why do you think they take that approach? Why do you think they would be discouraging people from attending?

Mr Blyton—To cover their backs would be one reason. About two years ago the New South Wales government took over the salaries of fire control officers and they created a bureaucracy in Sydney to run it. They put on 200 extra staff in Sydney to run the 400 staff. We have really lost control of our fire control officers. To me, they are of assistance on the fire line to manage the fire, to get me resources et cetera; but now all they seem to do is paperwork for Sydney.

Mr Dixon—I think at least 40 per cent—and it might have risen by now—of the funding for the Rural Fire Service goes to administration.

Mr BARTLETT—From what you are saying, it is a case of terribly misguided priorities and perhaps cover up.

Mr Dixon—The fire service was a volunteer organisation which did its job. When it was completely a volunteer organisation it did its job well. In our case we have a particularly good fire control officer so we are very lucky, but there are instances where fire control officers come out of Sydney, they do not know the terrain and they do not understand the people so there are problems there. The bureaucrats have got onto it and thought, 'Here's a good milking cow. Here she goes; let's get onto it.' There you go.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you. Richard, in your earlier comments you said that if you do not get better cooperation from the authorities and National Parks you will not risk your men in the field. That is certainly understandable. You said that your response would be simply that you will not turn up if there is a fire. If a lot of brigades took that approach, obviously there would be damage to national parks. Would that hinder your ability to protect property? Would you then just focus all your resources on property protection? What would be the eventual outcome of that sort of approach?

Mr Blyton—I honestly do not know. Under occupational health and safety rules I am not ultimately responsible for my men but morally and in the chain of command I feel I am. I am quite happy not to send them. They constructed fire trail after fire trail after fire trail. A lot of them did not have escape routes, none had turnaround bays, and they had soft edges so you could not get around another vehicle to pass. Some of these trails you go in a fair distance to find water and you could not get back past to find water. Hopefully, it will not happen again before I

retire but my way of looking at it is not to go or just to wait on the private property where it has been grazed and you have escape routes. Grazed ground is as good an escape route as anything.

Mr BARTLETT—What sort of response do you get from RFS headquarters or National Parks when they are made aware of the obvious inadequacy of the trails—the fact that people's lives are being put at risk and the fact that the result might be that you just will not be able to attend fires? How do they respond to that?

Mr Blyton—At the debriefing in February here in Cooma I was basically the only one that spoke up and I got no support. We have written to the current government and the Rural Fire Service chief saying that in future they should not rely on us because we will not be there.

Mr BARTLETT—And you have not had a response to that?

Mr Blyton—We have had: 'We are looking into it.' It is probably in the wastepaper basket somewhere.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can you make a copy of that communication available to the committee?

Mr Dixon—You were talking about what sort of pressure was put on. When the fires initially started, Philip, Peter and I were sent into that round mountain fire trail and we decided that you could not burn off. There was a huge amount of pressure put on us to do that burn, wasn't there?

Mr Reid—Yes.

Mr Dixon—It got to the stage where we said, 'We'll light it if the National Parks will patrol it.' We were going to light it by getting in a vehicle down at Hell Hole Creek and sticking a drip torch out the side and going like hell to get out of there.

Mr BARTLETT—They were putting pressure on you on the one hand but obstructing your efforts to do it safely and effectively on the other.

Mr Dixon—Yes, by their plan they were obstructing us. That was the only way we would have burnt it—by having a drip torch outside the vehicle and go.

CHAIR—We need to pinch a little bit of time for our next witness.

Mr SCHULTZ—I am aware of the time constraints. I have a lot of questions I would like to ask and I am quite willing to give my dinner time up to ask them if I have to. I feel angry about this because 11 years ago I, in my capacity as a state member of parliament and the former member for Monaro, predicted this would happen and nobody listened to us, so I can sympathise totally with all of you guys in relation to the concerns that you have.

Not all National Parks personnel are irresponsible people; there are some good people in there. I have met them and I have worked with them and I know them. Can you tell me whether you believe that there is a philosophy within the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service that is driven totally towards what they see as their role in the environment without any

due care or consideration for the safety of people who go in to fight these fires as a result of that sort of philosophy? Would you like to make some comment on that?

Mr King—Yes, I would like to answer that question. The attitude of the people who are driving things on the ground locally is, in the main, one of concern for the safety both of persons and their environment, but the directions they are getting from higher-ups are totally hamstringing them. I know of one National Parks person who spent every working day of the summer fighting fires. He is of the same sort of mind that the rest of us are. Incidentally, he happens to live along Avonside Road where the fire that I have been talking about was and he made sure that he told me that he was there as a volunteer for the time he was fighting that fire. That demonstrates, I think, that some of those people are fair dinkum.

Mr SCHULTZ—I am pleased to hear that. I forget who made the comment about the New South Wales government purchasing more land, but was that in relation to the expansion of the national parks and declaring areas wilderness. What are your views in relation to the capacity of the National Parks and Wildlife Service to handle that additional burden in relation to their manpower and their resources?

Mr Reid—My comment would be that I do not think they can look after the land that they have now, so why should they have more?

Mr King—Hear, hear!

Mr Dixon—They do not seem to be making any provision for firefighting in there. There seems to be an attitude of 'let the volunteers do it'.

Mr Cottrell—I heard a comment the other morning on radio from the RO in Queanbeyan that, when they have additional areas declared as wilderness or parks, they employ personnel to cope with this. But I think we would all agree that this does not happen.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I now move to communications. Has anyone experienced a situation where the National Parks and Wildlife Service in Tumut and the National Parks and Wildlife Service at this end of the Kosciuszko sent out instructions which were at odds with each other and created confusion in the field?

Mr Mackay—I had occasion to take over from Darvall at Adaminaby one night. When I got there, all the T-cards were in to show crews who were on and who were off and so on. I got out onto the fire line and found that there were crews there that I did not know anything about. Nobody knew who they were or where they came from, so I started writing down who they were and where they were from. It turned out they were a Riverina group sent into the area from Tumut. We had no idea they were there. We had put in something like 20-odd kilometres of back-burn and did not even know that they were there. They were on another end of the burn.

It turned out that one of the crew took ill and we had to get an ambulance for him. There happened to be an ambulance sitting on the Tantangara Road intersection of the Snowy Mountains Highway and he responded immediately. Because nobody knew that that ambulance was even there—it was sent in from Tumut as well—when an ambulance was called for another ambulance was deployed from Cooma. So then there was confusion as to which ambulance was

going where and what was happening. I got a call approximately 10 minutes after this all happened to say, 'Who is this volunteer who has taken ill and where is he from? We know nothing about him.' This was from fire control through Jindabyne. Nobody knew anything about them. It just happened that I had gone around and taken all this information down that I was able to tell them who he was and where he was from.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I ask some questions about aircraft. What sort of aircraft were used to fire-bomb and, before you answer that, were you aware that there were seven fixed-wing aircraft—namely, Air Tractor AT-802s and Dromaders, each capable of dropping 2,000 to 2,500 litres of fire retardant or Phoscheck—that were ignored from the day the fire started and that they were only within half an hour flying time of your fires?

Mr Blyton—I know there were some aircraft stationed at Polo Flat that they were not using because of temperature problems. I do not know whether they were to do with the temperature of the weather or of the aeroplanes themselves. Just quickly on that area of not knowing what the other teams were doing, we also had that problem here. The Cooma incident management team had problems with the Yarrowlumla incident management team. The western side of the Murrumbidgee River is actually part of Yarrowlumla shire and on one occasion the Yarrowlumla incident management team organised for a back-burn to be done and it was done on the wrong side of the road. It resulted in the fire emergency in that area on 30 January. That all goes back to communication.

Mr SCHULTZ—Finally, individually you might like to make a response to this. I include the gentlemen who came to the table earlier and are not here now. What are your expectations of this national inquiry?

CHAIR—Maybe we will have a couple of volunteers to answer that. It would be fine if Peter or Ross wanted to come back to the table.

Mr Reid—My general overview of it is, as we have mentioned here this morning, that we have four main issues. I believe that there are probably five main issues—the fifth one being volunteers being acknowledged. I think there is a big issue of taking the parks and freehold land and trying to draw a comparison. There are major issues out there that I could probably say have to be addressed, but I think they should be addressed.

Mr Dixon—I think that with the policy of National Parks there seems to be a complete disregard of local knowledge. In our area we have blokes who are 70- and 80-years-old who saw this park before it was locked up. They have a fabulous knowledge of that and they have a fabulous knowledge of fire, but if you have not got a degree behind your name National Parks think you are a fool.

Mr Fletcher—I wish to add to what Darvall said about local knowledge. We think of National Parks crews as knowing the area but a large number of the National Parks crews were from all over the state. I spoke to National Parks crews from Bourke and Glen Innes, and there was someone from a marine national park. I do not think they would get much firefighting experience in a marine national park.

CHAIR—We heard yesterday about an REF that included whales and dolphins.

Mr SCHULTZ—In a fire area 150 kilometres from the coast.

CHAIR—So we are learning all sorts of new things.

Mr Fletcher—As for our experience with local knowledge, on the fire ground at night in smoke and fog people that knew the area well were getting disoriented. At one stage when we had smoke and fog come in, we could not see past the end of the bonnet of the vehicle and it took us about an hour to gather all of our resources. We formed a snake of vehicles, because you could not leave more than a metre between yours and the next vehicle, and someone walked ahead with a torch and found where the bulldozer had been. That was the only way we were able to get out of there. So someone who did not know the area at all would have had no chance.

Mr Mackay—I would like to say, on behalf of the volunteers, that I think something needs to be done especially with national parks as far as access trails, hazard reduction and those sorts of things. As volunteers, we are in the Rural Fire Service because we need to be, not because we want to be. We are there to put out fires mostly on our own places and on our neighbours'. We are really not there to go charging off into the national park, but when it happens we have to go.

Mr King—I believe that the expectation from this hearing and the change that needs to be made are things that will address the fact—and it is a fact—that, unless management is undertaken rather than having wilderness and a total lack of management, the threat to our environment, the threat to Australia, is just totally unacceptable. We need to ensure that, if nothing else results from this inquiry, at least this land that we live in and love is going to be here for the next several generations in a better condition than it is in now.

Mr Bottom—I want to say something about hazard reduction, which we were just talking about. If the New South Wales government keeps forcing these environmental laws on us we will not be able to even burn private country, let alone anything in the national park. To be fair to the air tractors, we were using them out of Jindabyne airstrip at times but due to the turbulence and heavy smoke they had to sit on the ground a lot of the time.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I will try to be brief. You said there was assistance from brigades out of the region. Some of them were from further afield. There was a similar situation in my electorate where it is obviously very mountainous. One of the problems we experienced was flat country people coming across and being sent in the middle of the night to do some burning—and they had no idea. Perhaps one way of dealing with this—and I want to hear your thoughts on this just very briefly—could be to have some sort of system where, in the event of a fire breaking out in high country, the first brigades that are called from out of the region come from similar terrain, like high country areas. That makes sense to me. Would that be of practical assistance on the ground?

Mr Blyton—It would be practical. However a lot of the Great Dividing Range was drought affected this year so we could not have called on anyone in similar terrain in Victoria. Because we are locked out of the national park, in a lot of cases we had no idea of the terrain until a bulldozer made the track. If we cannot get in there and have a look before a fire occurs it is more dangerous during the fire. They were making aerial observations as to where to put these trails but once you get down to ground level the terrain looks completely different to what it does from an aircraft.

Ms PANOPOULOS—With regard to the fencing that divides private property from national parks, does National Parks pick up any of the cost of the fire damaged fences?

Mr Fletcher—Only the boundary fences.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So it does pick up the cost of the boundary fences. Is that 50 per cent?

Mr Dixon—On our block the state government has picked up the bill for the fence and the labour.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You are lucky; that is better than we are getting in Victoria.

Mr Dixon—Yes. I think someone might have had a bit of influence.

Ms PANOPOULOS—There are very diverse opinions about whether volunteers should be paid. Do your volunteers get any reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs?

Mr Blyton—I put in a claim for my phone bill but I did not put anything in for fuel. I know that these blokes in the Snowy River Shire who did 5,000 or 6,000 kilometres in their own vehicles on the fire trails got nothing. I actually put in a small claim for a phone bill.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Was that claim to the shire or to the state department?

Mr Blyton—My claim was via the shire to the state government.

Mr Cottrell—It is the case that volunteers are not reimbursed in any form. I can cite an incident in the Slaughterhouse fires where we were back-burning with the NRE, the Victorian forestry department. It was Christmas Eve and the Rural Fire Service had put in six hours and we were happy with our burn. It is pretty difficult to ask fellows at midnight on Christmas Eve to stay firefighting. The NRE fellow in charge could not understand why we were leaving. We were happy; we considered that the back-burn was safe. But they were staying on—they are paid. You can see the difference. This sort of thing happens.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That department has changed its name. They are DSE, locally known as the department of scorched earth. I have one other brief question. I know there are communication issues, with the different radios et cetera. With regard to ordinary people in their homes in danger zones, are any of you aware of communication issues and problems, and anything that was done or was not done by Telstra?

Mr King—Yes, but I am not referring to Telstra. At my fire, there was a no through road and there were 23 houses along there that we had to protect. I have a UHF base station in my house. My wife was my backup because she had phone access and is well known to all our community along there. The police and state emergency services came along and evacuated her and progressively evacuated everybody along the road until they got to me. I thought she had dropped off the end of the radio. I assumed that she had lost power and that severely hamstrung me. I had to carry on without her until the policeman eventually got to us—where we were at the sharp end. I was able to sort him out fairly quickly and that stopped the evacuation and the panic. He was saying to the media and to anyone who would listen that there were four houses on fire,

whereas in fact there were none. It was just creating the most enormous panic and it was most unnecessary.

Mr ORGAN—Do you think the weather conditions have been getting worse in any way in recent years with regard to it being hotter and drier, or is it just part of a normal cycle?

Mr Reid—I would like to answer that one. I believe that the summers are not as hot now as they were, say, 30 years ago and I do not believe the winters are as cold. With regard to rainfall patterns, I think we are probably just below our average rainfall over a period of, say, 30 or 40 years but we seem to be getting more rainfall during the summer and not getting it in the wintertime. That has a major effect on how hot or cold it is.

CHAIR—Peter, did you want to comment on that?

Mr Bottom—I was just going to add to what Philip said. We were very lucky with weather conditions during this large fire. If we had not had prevailing winds turning around from the north-west to the south-east—on most occasions—to help us with back-burning and getting things in place, this fire would have travelled on to the coast. We believe it would have gone to the coast without any worries at all. We would also like to table these photos, please.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Walters—I would just like to say that it is pity that National Parks and all the state government authorities that were involved were not able to be here to say what they thought. That is a crying shame.

CHAIR—I know we are out of time but I have one last question. Some of the committee travelled on the Grey Mare trail for several kilometres, where we had some wonderful cooperation from certain officers of the RFS, during this inquiry. We observed the fact that it had been obviously reconstructed during the fire but, subsequent to the fire, there had been work done on the track by National Parks. I do not know if any of you can shed some light on the rationale for the changes that have clearly been made to that track since the fire—that is, the construction of very deep channels. I have designed the odd road, or a hundred, in my time and from an engineering point of view I just could not understand why such very deep holes were being dug. They were clearly initially there for drainage but, by the way they have been constructed, they are just going to act as dams. Do any of you have a rationale for those sorts of changes?

Mr Reid—I would say it is mainly to make sure they keep vehicles out. That is probably the only reason.

CHAIR—What effect will those sorts of changes have on getting firefighting vehicles back in there, come the next fire?

Mr Reid—I would say it is going to be the same story as this time: it will just take ages before they get the trails opened up again to allow us in to attack the fires.

Mr SCHULTZ—It is probably a controversial question but did any groups identifying themselves as the Colong Foundation for Wilderness or any of those environmental groups help you put the fire out?

Mr Blyton—No.

CHAIR—We are going to have to make up some time during the day and that will probably mean we will cut down on morning tea and lunchtime. Thank you very much. I have allowed it to go a bit over time because it is very valuable information from very widely experienced people. Thank you for your submissions and your time here today. The committee really appreciates it.

[10.28 a.m.]

GLASSON, Mr David, Volunteer, Numbla Vale Rural Fire Service

CHAIR—I welcome the representative of the Snowy River bushfire management committee. Do you have any comment to make about the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Glasson—Although I am chairman of the Snowy River bushfire management committee, which is largely made up of state government land agencies, I do not necessarily represent them today. I am a volunteer. I have been a member of Numbla Vale brigade since 1972. I was captain of the brigade for 16 years. I was a group captain for 10 years. I was a shire councillor for one term and I have been in my present position for eight years. During the recent fires I acted as a deputy incident controller and in the local area as a divisional commander. But it must be made very clear that whatever I say is not necessarily part of the management committee's policy.

CHAIR—We understand that. We welcome you here. You were here earlier when I read out the formal part of the proceedings in respect of this hearing being a formal part of the proceedings of parliament, so I will not re-read that aspect. We have your submission and we thank you for that. I apologise that we are running a little late but you probably understand the reasons why. If you would like to make some opening comments, we will then proceed to some questions. I will just reinforce the fact that all of your submission is on the public record and the committee has had the benefit of reading that. You might like to use the time initially to highlight its key points or other information that you would like to give the committee before we go to questions.

Mr Glasson—Thank you, Mr Chairman. First of all I would like to table several documents. There is a scientific study prepared by Oliver Moriarty, Professor of Natural Science at the University of Adelaide. Professor Moriarty has prepared a lengthy document and photos of a lifetime of study of the waste of natural resources in the south-east of New South Wales. There are two letters: a letter from Bill Hurditch, retired chief coordinator of bushfire fighting in New South Wales, entitled *NPWS: Fire Manager that Failed*; and a letter from David Ryan, retired fire management officer for State Forests, entitled *Stop Killing Forests with Kindness*. Although the first letter was written in the mid-nineties, it highlights a lot of the problems we are going through at the moment. I am sure the committee will gain a lot of information from those documents, particularly the Moriarty study, to help it sort through some of the evidence.

I will briefly go through my submission which, as you alluded to, has been published on the Internet. Before I start, there has been information coming down through the line from headquarters at RFS that no uniforms were permitted. I think that has been changed for today, but we are an area that does not rely heavily on uniforms. I know there are representative from RFS and National Parks here today. It is a pity they cannot identify themselves and it is a pity they cannot speak. I think the committee should call upon at least the incident controller and deputy incident controller, namely Dave Darlington and Barry Aitchison, to speak in front of it. I hope it has the powers to be able to do that. Some of the information I will go through has already been discussed by the group captains. I hope it is not taken as repetition but as a reinforcement of what they have been through and what they have seen.

On 8 January 2003 there were some 50 lightning strikes in the alpine areas from the Victorian border to the ACT. Approximately 30 of these strikes were in national parks, and the remainder were on private property. Within 24 hours, all the fires on private land were either extinguished or contained. As we all know, the section 44 on the Kosciuszko South complex of fires was revoked at 10 a.m. on Monday, 24 February 2003—some 47 days later. The obvious question is: why the difference? As Clive Cottrell suggested, it boils down to fuel levels and access. Also, I think there is an incentive on private land—because it has a dollar value for the income of that landowner, they get in and put the fire out.

In terms of fire trails, the Snowy River Rural Fire Service has not had any funding for fire trail maintenance for three years. This is partly a result of New South Wales coordinating committee Policy 2-01: Fire Mitigation Works Funding. This coordinating committee seems to be out of touch with many issues relating to fire suppression and mitigation in this area. Basically, a lot of the policies they bring down are for the whole state of New South Wales and, as you can appreciate, there are major differences from the sandstone escarpments around Sydney to the alpine areas that we have. I might add that the coordinating committee were invited down to Jindabyne after the fires to inspect the area and to see the problems with fire trails and solve the funding problems. They declined, due to their funding being granted at the discretion of the commissioner. That is really an intolerable situation.

Fire trails in the Kosciuszko National Park are poorly planned, constructed and maintained. This was evident in the fires where some 35 bulldozers and graders were needed to allow access to the fires. This is despite the statement by Minister Debus on 18 February that every single one of the 1,100 kilometres of fire trails within the park had been maintained over the past two years. You must question how a minister can be so poorly informed. At that stage that particular minister had three portfolios—Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for National Parks. Surely there is a conflict there. Since then we have a new minister in Tony Kelly with responsibility for the Rural Fire Service so, hopefully, there will be some changes there.

Communication on the fire using the RFS network interagency was extremely poor and at times life threatening. I think that it is an area that needs immediate attention. In every debrief, every coronial inquiry, communications is the No. 1 thing discussed. It is about time that some people took some notice and tried to resolve some of the problems.

In all fires local knowledge is essential for the effective planning and control of such events. With the KNP policy of almost total exclusion of people from the park, how can local knowledge be maintained? From the pre park days a lot of the old people had leases there. Now they are getting to an elderly stage where they cannot obviously assist us and the next generation that has not been allowed into the park does not have the same sort of knowledge. The park staff are moved to other areas in New South Wales at regular intervals and we lose that knowledge. Compounding the problem there is minimum hazard reduction done in the national park and many of the staff have no appreciation of wildfire behaviour in the area. Hazard reduction is a very good tool to learn how to fight a wildfire. If you do not do hazard reduction you lose that skill.

One must ask what role the Kosciuszko National Park Advisory Committee plays. It is a committee that has been drawn up with local representatives and the government appoints the

chair and they meet on a regular basis. I heard from one of the members of the committee that he had no knowledge of the national park fire management plan. So how important is fire management in the park? I would suggest it is of very low importance. Dave Darlington, the incident controller, and Barry Aitchison, the deputy incident controller, did an excellent job during the section 44 and must be commended. I do not think we can continually knock the park. There are some very capable people in the park but their hands are tied.

Senior RFS staff came to Jindabyne and only one visited a local brigade station. Surely they should have given the volunteers moral support. Those volunteers, as you have heard through the group captains, risked a lot and did extremely long hours and the least we could have expected was that some of the white shirts from Sydney would have visited those brigade stations. I can recall the RFS padre coming into the control centre on one occasion—and he was one of the very few that did—and he gave tremendous support. So the volunteers need some moral support. It is not much to ask and it is not very difficult to give.

On the fire ground there is a growing problem arising with park employees receiving large amounts of overtime payments. Over $50,000 is not uncommon. The volunteer is usually self-employed and using his own vehicle and, hence, incurring numerous costs over and above lost working hours. For this reason, unless there are major changes in the management of the national park, it will be hard to see why any volunteer would willingly fight fires on public lands, and those public lands are growing.

The New South Wales government has strict environmental policies through its EPA agencies. In the past these agencies have prosecuted organisations for breaches of the law such as TransGrid clearing under powerlines to the west of Canberra. It is interesting to note that this clearing was invaluable in the recent fires in maintaining the power supply to Canberra. As a result of the recent fires in the national park, tremendous damage has been done to the environment, some of which will never recover. The assets of the Snowy Hydro have been badly affected with silting of the dams being a major concern. Country Energy lost over $1 million of assets—power poles, switching yards et cetera. Telstra lost the fibre optic cable to Thredbo, which became very public at one stage. Gaden trout hatchery has polluted water from the Thredbo River and yet there are no prosecutions. Would this be the same, for example, if a private pine forest—and there are more happening—had caused as much damage in a similar situation? I would hardly think so.

In the last weeks, there has been publicity on a scientific study in the national park to ascertain the lack of damage in the park. I am a little cynical about how representative the study was. No doubt they were shown areas that were back-burn areas and hence cool burns rather than the extremes of the burns in areas such as Wallace Craigie lookout or the alpine ash on the eastern side of Kiandra. Many landowners lost both boundary fences and internal fencing. Provided the landowner is not insured, Kosciuszko National Park or the government will pay for 50 per cent of the replacement of the boundary fence—obviously Darvall has a different arrangement—and for none of the internal fencing. If the landowner is insured, he or she has to make a claim through their insurance company and suffer the financial implications of doing so. Is this not a little unbalanced? You would attract penalties for making that claim.

Since my submission, there are several points that have come up. I guess things are evolving all the time. Being involved in the fire since 20 December 2002, I had greater exposure than a lot

of other people. Regarding the role of the National Parks, I think we need to change management policy to reflect the input of all interested people. Conservation groups have a high input into policy but no physical input in fire suppression. I do apologise to one of the members of the committee for that fact, but that is fact and it is coming from the fire ground.

Experimentation with different practices of hazard reduction, such as autumn burns, spring burns, grazing, use of chemicals and the interval of burns, needs to happen rather than just a blanket 'no'. Forming a core specialist group who can undertake the above procedures according to the operation plan and any environmental legislation with a minimum of notice is also necessary. Sometimes you only get a window of opportunity which may be only 12 hours when the weather is right and you need to go. You cannot continually rely on volunteers to hop in there and do that burn, because they have to run their own business.

It is also necessary to use local knowledge in the management plan of the park and to return the management to Jindabyne from Queanbeyan for more accountability. Some years ago Kosciuszko was a centre in itself; that has been taken to Queanbeyan, and the management is through Dr Tony Flemming. It is removing the accessibility to the park of volunteers, which I do not think is a good thing. As I said previously, there needs to be an increased work force in the park. Obviously, if you are going to take up more land, you need more people to manage it. That is common practice in any land management set-up, be it State Forests, a private landowner or whatever. If you get bigger, you need more manpower.

We need a complete external review of all fire trails, which should cover location, importance, construction, erosion control practices and width. Certainly the document that the coordinating committee has produced for fire trails is not worth the paper it is written on. It might be fine around Sydney but, in this alpine area, it is no good at all. An external assessment of the boundaries of the national park is also needed. To give you a background, we had a situation where Tumut controlled the Adaminaby area and Jindabyne controlled up to Lake Eucumbene and across to the western side of the mountains. At times that access was cut off. We had tremendous communication problems in Adaminaby, because it was coming from Tumut and that access was cut off. The park management boundaries perhaps need to follow the great divide rather than just a line on the map, particularly for emergency situations.

In 1996 the coroner's report said that the RFS should be split into a coastal city group and an inland country group. This still needs to be done. The bureaucracy in Sydney is getting bigger and bigger and we are just getting no information. The present situation is that the southern region extends from the Shoalhaven, down the coast, up over the tablelands, through the Riverina and out to Wentworth. Its headquarters is in Batemans Bay. This is hardly a structure for volunteers. You can imagine that the people at Wentworth, at one end of the region, would not receive any information whatsoever. Headquarters should be more central and regions should be smaller and reflect some commonality. Sometimes I wonder what the region does anyway because we do not get any information out of it.

Senior RFS staff have a commitment to assist volunteers. This was sadly lacking in the recent fires. They had a presence in Jindabyne but nowhere else. The RFS has an annual budget of some $170 million. I am not quite sure of the figure for the latest budget but it is in that vicinity. Of that $170 million, 40 per cent is taken up in on-costs—that is $68 million. As taxpayers we are not getting value for money. You will be aware that there was an announcement about a

Jindabyne fire control centre during the middle of the fires. Well it was not in the middle of the fires. The fires had just come out of the national park onto private land and then we had this announcement that there was to be $600,000 spent on a fire control centre in Jindabyne. The funds are needed more urgently in key areas such as communications, electricity to fire sheds and the modification of existing fire control centres. There was no consultation with local people whatsoever. Surely that is the key to the survival of the volunteer network; you have to talk to them.

Two days ago it was announced that the environmental plans for the upcoming hazard reduction have to be completed by 27 July. The timeframe for that is absolutely ridiculous. Hazard reduction needs to be inspected and assessed by an independent person. In a recent situation National Parks claimed an 80 per cent burn and a local volunteer claimed that 20 per cent was burnt. At the end of the year National Parks will claim that they have burnt that 80 per cent; in reality it is a fraction of that. Generally there is very poor consultation between RFS headquarters, regional headquarters, the fire control centre and hence with the volunteers. There is a bottleneck that is just not working. Hazard reduction blocks which are put forward by the district committee are frequently blocked by National Parks. This can be done in several ways but is done mainly through lack of compliance with the legislation so that the window of opportunity for a burn is lost. It is a very simple ploy but it is an effective ploy for stopping blocks being burnt.

We are told that these fires were a once in a 100-year event. Clive Cottrell was able to tell you that Byadbo was burnt in 1988 and again in 2002. So those fires are around and we can perhaps expect a similar event in 15 to 20 years. Tumut Ponds was burnt in the 15-year cycle and some of the committee saw the evidence of the 2003 burn. It was certainly a hot burn. The recent coroner's report, which was signed off by the incident controller, David Darlington, had no input by any RFS personnel, including Barry Aitchison, the deputy incident controller. Surely a valid report must have a cross-section of input. The report does not address any of the damage that occurred in the following organisations: TransGrid; Country Energy, who as I mentioned before lost over $1 million worth of infrastructure; Telstra, who lost their fibre optic cable to Thredbo; Snowy Hydro, who have obviously had the life expectancy of their dams reduced; and the alpine resorts, which suffered through lack of tourism and so forth. None of those things is addressed in the report.

Tigers Rest development west of Jindabyne was opposed in the planning stage by Snowy River Shire because of its high risk. The developer took council to the Land and Environment Court and won. This area took a lot of resources to defend during the recent fires and yet the court has no knowledge of the consequences of its decision. So we are getting developers putting an application in for a development, local government stopping it because of the problems of fire, the Land and Environment Court ruling in favour of the developer and the development going ahead. Who has to protect that development? It is the volunteer.

CHAIR—Are you close to finishing, David? We want to get to a few questions.

Mr Glasson—I have some recommendations, which are a summary of what I have just said. I think a person with a greater understanding of the area ravaged by fire should be appointed to assist the committee in understanding the problems faced by the volunteers. I would suggest that a person who would fit that is Barry Belt. He is a retired regional controller of this region and a

very capable man in terms of fire. An independent person such as a retired fire officer needs to be appointed to inspect hazard reduction on its completion to log the correct area burnt. I think that is very important.

Other recommendations are: the Land and Environment Court be invited to inspect high-risk fire areas so that they are better informed in their judgments; the Rural Fire Service be split into two to reflect the recommendations of the coroner in 1996; the committee summons the incident controller and deputy incident controller to appear before it; the inadequate planning and funding for fire trails be addressed both inside and outside the park; hazard reduction be encouraged by all, with the district committee having far greater powers to implement areas to be burnt—I guess that is a pet one of mine; hazard reduction plans have a shelf life of at least five years so that, if you do not get that window of opportunity to burn this year, all the planning is ready for the subsequent years; form a specialist group which is able to do hazard reduction work with 12 hours notice, again striking while that window of opportunity is there; move the chain of command for national parks from Queanbeyan to Jindabyne to allow greater accountability and input from the people who surround the park, as I think the volunteers certainly need some input into the management of the park; change the management boundaries to reflect local government boundaries, as I discussed before; and the cost of the fires be made public. Wilson Tuckey, when he was at Jindabyne, suggested it might be in the vicinity of $100 million.

I also recommend that funds be supplied to an area on a needs basis rather than on the affordability of the local government area. At the moment, basically the funding for the Rural Fire Service comes from the affordability of the local government, and there is a depopulation of rural areas; hence you have a smaller rate base, so you have less funding from the government. The on-costs need to be capped at 25 per cent. At the moment they are 40 per cent and growing. The last estimation was that they could even go to 50 per cent, and that is a deplorable situation. I welcome any questions; hopefully I can answer them.

CHAIR—Thank you again for your submission and for that additional information. It is very comprehensive and greatly appreciated.

Mr BARTLETT—David, I want to be sure I understood something you said in your introductory comments. I think you said it is a pity that staff of the RFS and National Parks cannot speak today. Can you clarify that for me, please?

Mr Glasson—As I understand it—and I have not had it first-hand—the instruction was that they were not to put a submission in. Obviously, through not putting a submission in they are not speaking here today. One would hope that this committee can see past that, because it is the total community which is affected by these fires—and we have to solve the problems. We will never get another opportunity to do so, so let's forget politics, let's work together and let's get on with it.

Mr BARTLETT—The other question I had was in relation to your comments about the RFS operations centre at Jindabyne and the commitment of the Premier to that. Steve Mackay earlier on made a similar comment; his view was that that money would have been better spent on communications or other equipment. I think you made a similar comment. Could you elaborate on that for us?

Mr Glasson—I will just give you the background. Minister Debus made the statement in Jindabyne. As I said, it was poorly timed. One has to remember that we were in the middle of an election for the state government. A figure of $600,000 was mentioned. When you get down to the nitty-gritty, local government has to put in their 13 per cent over three years for that, so it is not a direct grant from the state government. The fear is that if the local government is forced to pay the 13 per cent then, because of their tight budget constraints, that comes out of existing fire budgets. They are so pruned now that it is just not on.

There is no need to put a fire control centre in Jindabyne. We have a National Parks building that coped with the fires recently. If a fire starts, then before it becomes a section 44 you have already set up in the National Parks building. As it goes up to a section 44, why move it? They have the infrastructure there; they have the people there to run it. We are hoping that that $600,000 is still available and that we can improve our communications. If the powers that be do not acknowledge the fact that communications are potentially life threatening they have their heads in the sand. Just increasing the size of the fire control centre in Jindabyne is not going to cope with most of the fires. Not all our fires occur in the national park. Occasionally we get fires in grassland. We do not need a fire control centre at one edge of the shire. We need it in a central location. When I brought that fact up I was told—

CHAIR—I think Berridale has doubled. You said Jindabyne but I think you meant Berridale.

Mr Glasson—Yes, I mean Berridale. When I said it was impractical to have the fire control centre in Jindabyne, I said, 'What about Adaminaby.' They said, 'Oh, we can put computers over there.' Computers do not put fires out. It is a farcical situation.

Mr BARTLETT—This announcement was made without consultation with you as chair of the Snowy River bushfire management committee and I take it without consultation with other experts?

Mr Glasson—There was no local consultation with that announcement.

Mr BARTLETT—If I understand you correctly, in the context of an election, a commitment is made without consultation with locals that is going to take money from other areas of higher priority for something that was unilaterally decided by the government.

Mr Glasson—Yes. There was no consultation.

Mr BARTLETT—One could be forgiven for being a little cynical about the reasons for that decision.

Mr Glasson—I did hear the commissioner on the radio justifying it. It was ABC Radio in the afternoon. I did have to respond to that.

CHAIR—What was the response of the RFS to your reaction to it?

Mr Glasson—In fairness to the commissioner, I rang the commissioner after I spoke on radio and said to him, 'At least let us get the fire out and talk about the situation.' He agreed to that.

Following on from that I got a very unpleasant phone call further down the line. That occurred on 7 February. I do not think any volunteer should have to put up with that.

Mr BARTLETT—A phone call from whom?

Mr Glasson—The regional manager.

Mr BARTLETT—Who criticised you for suggesting what ought to be done?

Mr Glasson—It is probably the most abusive phone call I have ever had.

CHAIR—Because you did not agree with the—

Mr Glasson—No, basically because I went over his head and spoke to the commissioner.

Mr SCHULTZ—Expressing your view.

Mr Glasson—I am only a volunteer.

Mr BARTLETT—I would have thought that volunteers had every right to express their views, particularly coming out of their decades of experience on the ground, as to what things ought to happen.

Mr Glasson—Exactly. I thought I was fair in having rung the commissioner after he spoke on radio to talk to him. But it was not seen in that light.

Ms PANOPOULOS—If you feel comfortable, are you able to relate as closely as you can what he actually said to you?

Mr Glasson—He is a big man.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Size does not always matter.

Mr Glasson—I guess I can run, as well.

Mr SCHULTZ—There are parts of the anatomy to bring him down to the size.

Mr Glasson—It was on Friday, 7 February. I was instructed by the fire control officer, Barry Aitchison, to ring the regional manager in Batemans Bay. I rang him. I was abused for calling the commissioner, whom I spoke to on 6 February at five o'clock. I was told I was a little upstart. I was told that the communications were okay. He made a threat that the control centre would go to Cooma if it did not go to Jindabyne. This same gentleman told me that he had 10 minutes to make up his mind re where the control centre was to go. Steve Whan, the local member, actually knew about the control centre in October. My integrity was questioned.

He said he would meet with me later in the afternoon. I told him that I could either be at Berridale fire control centre, at Numbla Vale or on the fire line. I might add that after I spoke to

the fire commissioner I tried to ring this particular gentleman and I was told that he had two days off. I respect the fact that someone has two days off and I did not ring his mobile.

This gentleman arrived at Berridale fire control centre that afternoon, stayed a while and then went to Bombala. I was on the fire trail as we had a bit of a breakout that afternoon. From the fire line I made arrangements to meet him the following day at Numbla Vale fire shed. Because of the threats that I had had over the phone I had arranged for a witness to be with me. That is the only time that a senior member of the RFS had actually visited a fire shed.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you. To clarify one of your earlier statements, you spoke about the requirement of landowners to access their insurance. Was that in respect of boundary fencing?

Mr Glasson—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Their first option must be to access their insurance before the state government pays 50 per cent?

Mr Glasson—The first question is: are you insured? If the answer is yes, the insurance company pays for it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you.

Mr SCHULTZ—Before I ask my questions, I will preface them by reading some comments made by the Premier of New South Wales yesterday on ABC Radio. He said:

> I am not going to have people whose obligations are to run land management agencies for government tied up for months in a political exercise when they have already obligated to be at at least two other inquiries. Their job is to see the Rural Fire Service is doing all the hazard reduction and the other work required for the next season or to see the national parks are run properly and so on.

I will read extracts from the next paragraph:

> We have limited resources and people running National Parks, running State Forests, running our Rural Fire Service. They have got front line responsibilities. I am not going to have them tied down in a redundant inquiry.

They were the comments of the Premier of this state about this inquiry that is currently under way. Would it be asking too much to ask you to make a comment on some of those comments?

Mr Glasson—It seems rather amazing that we have them in this room—not wearing uniform. Everyone can judge for themselves.

Mr SCHULTZ—You are basically saying that the Premier says that they are too busy to come in and give evidence to this committee or to make a contribution to this inquiry but they can be in the room, out of uniform, listening to what is going on.

Mr Glasson—Yes. And coming in government vehicles—parked well away.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you. In relation to the aftermath of this significant fire in the Kosciuszko National Park, are you aware of the public relations exercise that was undertaken by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, particularly out of Tumut, where heavily advertised road coach tours were organised to take people from the community to show them the regeneration that was occurring in highly selected burnt areas of the Kosciuszko National Park? Would you like to give us your thoughts on that cynical exercise?

Mr Glasson—Certainly it occurred in Jindabyne as well. I did make the comment in my submission that, by the information coming out of Jindabyne, nothing abnormal has gone on in terms of the fires. In other words, a major disaster was not a major disaster. A lot of the scientific studies, as I alluded to, will be in very select areas. You only have to go to areas of high-intensity burns, such as Wallace Craigie lookout, or any of the alpine ash forests to see there is little regeneration. I went through the alpine ash forest east of Kiandra on Monday and there is not a skerrick of germination of anything. It is just a moonscape.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would it be correct to say, picking up the point that you have just made, that in some areas of the Kosciuszko National Park—and, indeed, in large areas of the Kosciuszko National Park—the fire was so intense and so hot that it vaporised any seed that was available for regeneration to the extent that, from our observations during our inspections of it, it would require aerial seeding to put any native plant species back into those areas?

Mr Glasson—I understand your point. I am in no position to qualify that, but it could easily be understood that that is the case. I see species that do have fire as part of their regime but, likewise, there are species that do not. Certainly the long-living mountain ash populations are the ones that have been devastated.

Mr McARTHUR—I have three issues to cover arising from your submission. You suggest that no prosecutions have taken place in relation to damage done to the property of Snowy Hydro, Country Energy and Telstra Country Wide. What are you suggesting there?

Mr Glasson—I am suggesting that you have two rules. If the damage had occurred from a fire started in a private forest or whatever there would be environmental prosecutions, but because the fire started in a government area there will be no prosecutions. It is similar to the Ron Flanagan case, where he started a fire on his place to reduce fuel. He was taken to court and the magistrate threw it out. There are two different rules.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying to the inquiry that when the fires started in national parks they will be immune from prosecution?

Mr Glasson—Time will tell on that; nothing has happened as yet that I am aware of.

Mr McARTHUR—You raise a number of fires in your submission: 50 lightning strikes caused 30 fires in parks and 20 on private property. You say that in 24 hours those fires on private property were put out but it took 47 days for the fires to be dealt with in national parks, and during that time section 44 was induced. Can you add to that set of observations in your report?

Mr Glasson—The section 44 was actually put in place well before 8 January, because the Byadbo fires started on about 21 December. There were four lighting strikes across there, so the section 44 was in operation then. We had just had a meeting on about 6 or 7 January to discuss whether we should wind up the section 44 because the Byadbo fires had been pretty much contained, except on the northern boundary; the northern boundary there being the Snowy River. Then on the afternoon of 8 January, following these lighting strikes, there was no choice but to recommend to continue the section 44. By having the section 44 already in operation we had tremendous resources to attack those fires, which normally we would not have. They were already in place.

Mr McARTHUR—In your assessment, what does section 44 mean?

Mr Glasson—Basically, a section 44 is when the fire moves out of the resources of the local area—in other words, you need aircraft, more personnel.

Mr McARTHUR—Who pays for that, in your assessment?

Mr Glasson—The taxpayer.

Mr McARTHUR—Which group of taxpayers?

Mr Glasson—Obviously there is the state government. My understanding is the state government pays a base level and then, through emergencies, the federal government tops it up above that. In terms of percentages, you could tell a lot better than I can.

Mr McARTHUR—Finally, in relation to the fire trails, in your submission you have included a letter from Minister Bob Debus, the Minister for the Environment, dated 28 February. In that letter, you have marked the point which states 'no firefighters were unable to get access to fire trails during the fires and every single one of the 1,100 km of fire trails within the park had been maintained over the past two years.' You particularly marked that. The evidence that we have heard here this morning and at other venues suggests that these fire trails were not maintained. How does the minister's statement relate to the reality?

Mr Glasson—Probably privately I could say a lot of things but, publicly, he was totally misinformed. I would suggest the minister should find out where the misinformation came from and deal with it, but whether that has happened I am not quite sure.

Mr McARTHUR—Does the minister's statement reflect the government's policy position on fire trails, would you think—that they presume the fire trails are well maintained?

Mr Glasson—I am not speaking for the government but one could guess that they want it to go away.

Mr McARTHUR—How does this statement tally with the points of view that have been put to the committee this morning—that in fact fire trails were destroyed after the fire?

Mr Glasson—It is a complete misunderstanding of the situation and the requirements of fire trails. I would suggest the minister has been poorly briefed and, although he is not the Minister

for Emergency Services, he still has a role in National Parks. I would suggest that he gets out and does a bit of legwork.

Mr McARTHUR—As chairman of the Snowy River bushfire management committee, what have you done formally to redress this misinformation?

Mr Glasson—We have continually sent letters to RFS headquarters, to regions and to the coordinating committee, with no resolution on the questions in our—

Mr McARTHUR—So headquarters have never responded to your observations?

Mr Glasson—No, and that is very obvious when you do not get funding for three years for fire trails. One hopes at the very least that that can be resolved. I do not know where we are going to get the funding from but we just have to do something about the fire trails, or the lack thereof, and the poor construction of them.

Mr McARTHUR—Some of your firefighting colleagues were suggesting that the lack of maintenance of fire trails has endangered the lives of your volunteer firefighters. Would you agree with that?

Mr Glasson—Very much so. In the construction of National Parks' fire trails, they tend to only construct a fire trail that is suitable for a cat.9 vehicle—that is, a one tonne Toyota LandCruiser type vehicle—because that is basically all the appliances they have. They have a couple of cat.7 vehicles, which are 1,300 litre type vehicles, but generally they only have cat.9 type vehicles. So they construct the trails for them, and that is certainly not suitable for firefighting situations where you will take in a vehicle with 2,000 litres and you cannot get it over the rollovers. It just bottoms out. So there is little thought put into what they are actually doing.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying that the fire trails are endangering firefighters' lives and militating against sensible fire suppression?

Mr Glasson—Very much so. Really, you cannot call them a fire trail and if you look at those photos it would be hard to call them an access trail.

Mr McARTHUR—The committee actually travelled on the track shown in a couple of those photos so we can confirm it is exactly as the photographs demonstrate.

Mr Glasson—In the transfer of land from reserves to national parks down in the Delegate area, I know where they have actually taken culverts out of existing forestry trails.

Mr McARTHUR—What would be the rationale for that?

Mr Glasson—To stop people going in there.

Mr McARTHUR—Firefighters included?

Mr Glasson—My word. The danger is that the trail is marked on the map and someone expects to get in there.

Mr McARTHUR—So in the heat of battle you would presume the fire trial would be operative, but in fact when you get there you find that the culvert has been removed and you could be in a life-threatening position.

Mr Glasson—Exactly.

CHAIR—Do you have any comments to make about the age of maps that were used during the firefighting, or the accuracy of maps that were available?

Mr Glasson—You probably know a lot more about mapping than I do, but there is a transitional stage in maps and in technology, which the RFS does not seem to be willing to take on board. Yes, there was a problem, because more and more people are using GPSs and not knowing the difference with a grid reference. It goes on. I am on a steep learning curve as well. There needs to be a lot of effort go into replacing all old maps, and an education process for how to use GPSs correctly. Philip Reid told a story where he was up at Snowy Plain and a fellow with a brand-new GPS said, 'Hang on, I will go and get it to find out where west is.' The sun was setting at that stage.

CHAIR—That is a good story, and I am sure an old surveyor like me can use it in the future! Thank you for your evidence today. Thank you for the comprehensiveness of your evidence and the honesty that you have given us on circumstances. Given some of the things that you have told us today, it is probably proper for me as the chairman to make the comment—not only to you but to have it on the public record for any witnesses that might appear before this inquiry or who have provided submissions to this inquiry—that any attempt by any other persons to intimidate a witness or embark on any sort of retribution as a result of comments made to this inquiry could well constitute a contempt of parliament. I think it is my duty to inform people of their rights in that respect, in case of anything untoward occurring.

Mr Glasson—Thank you. I did bring a flak jacket!

Proceedings suspended from 11.17 a.m. to 11.41 a.m.

HART, Mr Terence William, Treasurer, Access for All Inc.

SNELL, Mr John Charles, Member, Access for All Inc.

WADDELL, Mr Donald (Neil), Chair, Access for All Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome this morning. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I inform 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. We have your submission and we thank you for that. Would you like to make a brief opening statement before we lead on to questions?

Mr Snell—Mr Chairman, honourable members of the committee, ladies and gentlemen, I am the former secretary but was the submission writer for Access for All Inc. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to appear before it. It is our sincere hope that we can materially assist the committee in its work on this very important subject. While many, particularly in our cities, consider bushfires to be unfortunate events that afflict rural and regional Australia from time to time, we in Access for All—and we hope this committee—realise that bushfires are national disasters that must be addressed by all Australians. Furthermore, it is our view that all Australians must be prepared to share the consequences of bushfires and the cost of their prevention, management and fighting. As our submission tries to point out, more needs to be done in researching bushfire behaviour, bushfire fighting and bushfire prevention—or at least bushfire mitigation. We have to accept that our climate, land and weather mean that some fires are inevitable.

Our submission offers some suggestions on what the committee should be recommending based on our own limited research, and I will not labour these points. However, there is a lot that needs to be discovered and it is here that Access for All hopes that the committee will gather the relevant facts from witnesses and other sources and draw the appropriate conclusions. It is Access for All's contention that much of the burden of bushfire fighting falls disproportionately on rural and regional Australia. However, it is difficult to prove and many city dwellers we know simply write this off as an attitude confirming their contention that the bush is simply full of whingers. As you know, Mr Chairman and members of the committee, this is certainly not the case and there are lots of genuine grievances out there. It is in this direction that Access for All hopes the committee will do most to help by showing that rural and regional Australia does carry a big part of the bushfire burden—the Canberra fires of January this year notwithstanding—and recommending measures to democratise the volunteer firefighting services to make them more effective and to make better use of this singularly valuable resource.

The committee could also identify and recommend, we hope, the agency best able to conduct the necessary research that will allow costing of environmental damage so that we can make decisions on bushfire fighting, hazard reduction and fire mitigation on proper rational bases—certainly not the emotion and so on that seems to pass for debate. Further, the committee could help in recommending the measures that are needed to facilitate cross-border cooperation of firefighting agencies to produce more responsive and effective arrangements and that will

provide for better command and control arrangements, particularly in those areas to do with bushfires—the higher command arrangements. Another factor is the standardisation of state and territory laws to ensure speedy and equitable compensation of private landholders affected by bushfires on or originating in public lands and what state and territory bushfire authorities need to do so that there is better coordination of training courses and student availability.

In addition, there is another area that we did not address in our submission that we have come across since. It has emerged that there is an issue of Commonwealth contributions to firefighting. We do not know what the figures are, as an earlier witness to this inquiry mentioned, but we recommend that the committee investigate under what circumstances and how much the Commonwealth contributes to firefighting by the states and territories. We have a real concern that the availability of Commonwealth funds might encourage authorities in fact to allow a large fire to get larger in order to secure Commonwealth funding and effectively shift the costs of firefighting from the states to the Commonwealth. This is not a flight of fancy. We have seen it happening with people's lives in the health system. For some years now there has been systematic cost shifting between states and territories. It is a concern, and I firmly reject any notion that the states might say, 'We wouldn't do that, because we are dealing with people's lives when it comes to bushfires.' They have been dealing with people's lives in the health system for a long time, but it has not stopped them there. We commend these points to the committee, and that completes our formal presentation.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and those additional comments. The membership of Access for All from my own personal knowledge covers a lot of people who know the national park areas in their region quite well. Would any of you like to make some comments with respect to fire trails in some of those areas? We have heard evidence this morning about fire trails not being maintained, and I think the committee would like to understand just how widespread this problem might be. If you can shed any light on that aspect, we would appreciate it.

Mr Waddell—I fully endorse what people have said earlier, particularly about speed humps. They are certainly not in there for soil conservation values—to stop people getting in there. I worked for what was the Department of Water Conservation on a contract basis doing soil erosion control work so I feel I know a little about what I am talking about. I also have a good working relationship with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but they need to employ someone who has knowledge of rehabilitation work. I think it is only to block trails up; it is not to keep them open.

Mr Hart—After the recent fires in the Deua National Park I took the representative of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and also the Rural Fire Service from Braidwood to inspect some damage done by the fires. With the exception of probably five or six speed humps on one road, the four-wheel drive scraped over every rollover drain that was put in there and was freshly constructed.

CHAIR—That was done after the fire had been through.

Mr Hart—It was done as rehabilitation work after the fire had been through. And while the fire was on, in fact they had to get a dozer in and push the tops off some of the rollover drains so the four-wheel drive bushfire vehicles could gain access to those areas.

CHAIR—What about the closing off of them? We had evidence elsewhere in this inquiry of boulders and things being put on fire trails to prevent access to trail bike riders et cetera. The question has been raised as to the utilisation of gates, which firefighters would have access to, under normal circumstances where trail bikes or four-wheel drive vehicles are not wanted. Do you have any experience in that respect?

Mr Waddell—Yes. Access for All has been negotiating with National Parks now for four years on issues similar to that. Their attitude seems to be to lock up and forget, and the best way to lock up is to close the roads by bulldozing them.

CHAIR—So it is more a case of bulldozing the roads so that they are inaccessible and not having a system of gate access?

Mr Waddell—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—There are a couple of points you make in your written submission that I would like you to elaborate on. You make the statement that there should be provision for a more democratic and transparent process for the selection and appointment of volunteers to advisory committees at all levels. What has led you to make that statement and what do you see as deficient in the current process?

Mr Snell—Although there are various committees and so on within the New South Wales RFS structure for supposedly voicing to management committees and so on—as we have heard, for voicing the volunteers' concerns, to manage their input and to secure, one presumes, their local knowledge—the facts are that, in about eight years of service with the Araluen brigade of the Rural Fire Service, I cannot recall one occasion, and my colleagues could probably help me here, on which I was ever consulted, asked or told about an appointment to any one of those committees. It could have been the man in the moon on the committees. I never knew. I was serving at the rank and file level. I was not as exalted as a captain or a deputy captain and so on. If that is the case—and that is the experience, I am sure, of practically everybody else in our brigade and in other brigades, and I know that Neil and Terry can talk about that—what is happening with the rest of the world?

Previously under the organisation of the RFS a lot of that was handled, I suppose, through inputs to your shire councillor, because the fire control officer at each level was an employee of council. About 12 or 18 months or so with the reorganisation of the RFS all the permanent employees were moved to the RFS, and in New South Wales councils were then supported by a service contract arrangement. As I say, as far as I can perceive—and what I heard here earlier this morning only reinforces that—the voice of the volunteer into the highest echelons of the Rural Fire Service is not heard, is suppressed or is quietly pushed off to one side if it is not politically correct, or the perceived wisdom is handed down by the minister.

Mr Waddell—We have some members in our brigade who have been told not even to speak to the media about these issues.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you one of them?

Mr Waddell—No. While I am a member, I am not an active member; I am too old for that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Really?

Mr Waddell—I have a grave concern about the volunteer fire service, because it is being taken over by the government, to run along its lines in conjunction with all its other government agencies. That includes parks in the department of land and water or whatever it was. That would really be a tragedy.

Ms PANOPOULOS—The other question was with regard to one of the recommendations you have made in your written submission requesting a review and a development of policies and procedures to enable better cross-border cooperation—and I have a particularly keen interest in that, considering my electorate goes right up to the New South Wales border and right along the Murray and Kosciuszko. What led you to make that recommendation and how do you think things can be improved?

Mr Snell—This is anecdotal, but a number of my friends and extended family were firefighters involved in the Canberra fires and the fires in this area in 2002-03, and we concluded there were resources available that were not being used. Whether Canberra declined or did not know how to access the resources or whatever else, there did not appear to be—if not the will—the procedures in place to declare what assets were available. We had crewed tankers with fresh crews sitting here in Cooma ready to go to the ACT. Terry tells me there were crews in Tallaganda Shire who, when they heard about what happened, of their own volition were ready to jump on tankers and go across there. I cannot discern what happened; it may well have been that the higher commands from the ACT made some pretty bum guesses about how that fire was developing so that nothing happened.

As a former soldier I have some appreciation of what happens at higher command. Perhaps a salutatory book to read is Norman Schwarzkopf's *It Doesn't Take a Hero*. You achieve an appreciation in that of the different national groups and approaches. One of the points I got out of it is a sense that, despite these wonderful communications and the fact that if he wanted to the commander-in-chief of Desert Storm could virtually talk to the point soldier or the lead tank, he had to draw back from that and follow the pattern and call in what he needed from reserves. That was the thing that we were lacking. There does not seem to be a national approach to the business of disaster management. I do not think we have had that since Cyclone Tracy. Does that answer the question?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes, thank you.

Mr Waddell—I would like to take it a bit further. I live on the Deua River and also on a shire boundary between Tallaganda and Eurobodalla. Our local brigade is in Araluen, which is not far from where I live in Tallaganda. When the last fire broke out the brigade came to my place and said they were not allowed to do anything over the border in Eurobodalla until they got permission. Then they left.

Mr Hart—I would like to add something similar to that. In the 2001-02 fires, as a part of the brigade, we wanted to do a back-burn around a house to hopefully save the property and requested permission to do it. We radioed the fire control centre in Braidwood and then they had to contact Moruya because the incident controller was there. We had to wait three and a half hours to get permission to put a 600-metre back-burn in. In the end, they flew a helicopter over

us to see exactly where we were. We had two deputy group captains, two or three captains and some deputy captains there ready to go, and in the time it took them to do that the wind had changed and it made our task twice as hard to do.

CHAIR—In your view, do the people on the ground have the expertise to be able to make that decision?

Mr Hart—They certainly should.

Mr ORGAN—Whilst your submission makes a lot of good recommendations and comments with regard to the failure to listen to volunteers and take on board local knowledge—and we are hearing that all throughout the submission process—it is obvious the communication with government and bureaucracy is an ever increasing issue. That is one of the themes of your submission—the lack of communication. Your most vitriolic comments, however, concern environmental groups and the green lobby. Can you tell me where that has come from and how you see a way forward for those disparate groups in the community working towards a good outcome in the management of bushfires?

Mr Snell—This has come out of a long association—or you could almost say 'battle'—with various conservation groups which we have found in our dealings with them do not necessarily rely on good science. They do not plead on the basis of rationality, but almost on emotion. If we confine our views to firefighting issues, this is the case with things like hazard reduction and so on which have created these problems. As we have recommended, we need to do a lot more about deciding what the value of environment is in economic terms. We can value a farm and we can perhaps value a state forest, but we do not seem to be able to determine the value of a national park. Everything in that national park, in our experience, is treated as though it were priceless.

I know that a lot of it is very important—and we regard ourselves as conservationists, because we do not like to see the bush butchered by irresponsible groups that want to drive through and cause all kinds of erosion and so on—but there is what I would call the extreme end of things. There are people who even want to lock up state forests that rational argument and rational assessment have said can be and should be logged. This is the problem we have. They are a very powerful lobby, as you must admit. We were looking at some figures last night and, for example, the Natural Heritage Trust's last grant of about $86,000 was given to the Conservation Foundation in New South Wales. The Conservation Foundation and its affiliated groups account for 78 per cent of the Natural Heritage Fund grants that were made.

I do not know what the way ahead is. We have tried to engage in some reasonable and rational conversation and communication about this, but it does not seem to be happening. These lobby groups are well organised and well funded, whereas we are just a bunch of amateurs working on a $5 annual subscription from our membership of people who know something about the bush, have lived in it a long time and value it very highly. Very often we find these are people who are quite irrational in their approach. They do not really understand a lot of the issues and history. It is a superficial 'grab take'. I do not mean to put down what I regard as genuine conservationists in what you call our almost vitriolic attack. I believe we have a lot in common with genuine conservationists. Does that help answer the question?

Mr ORGAN—Yes, thank you.

Mr Waddell—With conservation, it seems to change within the system. With the recent fires, National Parks say they have burned in a mosaic pattern and the fires are not doing a lot of harm. Just a few years back, a neighbour of ours had a fire that got into the park. Then it was seen as major environmental damage. They are going have to decide what they want to see as major environmental damage.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I say at the outset that people who have a genuine interest in the protection of their environment in their own areas, for various reasons, should not be dissuaded from making comments about their concerns, particularly in an environment where they raise the facts rather than the myths that are spread elsewhere. I want to refer to the comment you made about allowing fires to become larger. In evidence to this inquiry we have not heard a great deal of that but, certainly in my experience over the years, I have had that put to me by various people, including Rural Fire Service volunteers, pilots et cetera. Can you extrapolate the comment you made? Is it something you have heard or seen with your own eyes?

Mr Snell—It is, yes; there is a number there. Again, as I said, our evidence is anecdotal and it comes out even in the wash-up. For example, in the 2000-01 fires in the Deua National Park area what started to emerge among a lot of the volunteers—I am talking about volunteers at group captain and captain level and so on—is that those fires were not being prosecuted by the incident controller in a manner that was nearly aggressive enough. Although it was consuming an enormous amount of resources and there had been a section 44 declaration on it, these were not being prosecuted. I can recall a couple who had been working in the fire control headquarters who—after the event, in the wash-up, the fires having been declared out because we had had rains and they had all gone out—looking back over it, because they were immersed in the milieu of what was going on at the time, concluded that perhaps some of the people who were on the ground were right in saying that if we had been allowed to do this at this time, we could have headed it off here.

Whole areas of the Deua National Park were effectively inaccessible but there was a lot more of the park that did not have to go if there had been some more aggressive behaviour and perhaps better marshalling of resources at the time. As I said, it is a very difficult one to put your finger on and it is probably an almost unprovable proposition, but we have that very real concern that when something like the national park is under threat and it is not yet threatening houses and property, which is the real bad news, and we had that area of it under control, perhaps it is better to let it go a bit further. That was the professional opinion of experienced rural firefighting volunteers up to group captain level.

Mr SCHULTZ—The comments and the evidence that we have received over the past few days have consistently centred around concerns about fire trails and the types of material that have been placed on fire trails that have been allowed to deteriorate and become overgrown. When I say material I am talking about huge boulders, which were put there by D8 bulldozers, and logs and chains and steel posts. Do you think that is a deliberate attempt to not only restrict access but to prevent access occurring at all? What do you think the outcome would be with regard to that sort of action not only during fire periods but also in periods where, for example, a bushwalker may take a terrible fall or have a terrible accident in areas that are accessed by

bushfire trails? What sorts of situations do you think would occur with that? Is life at risk, not only during bushfire periods but also in other periods of emergency?

Mr Snell—I would say most definitely, but I defer to my colleagues with the superior knowledge.

Mr Waddell—Without a doubt we have made those points over the last four years with parks: the safety of the people who they allow to go into their so-called wilderness areas and the way they are locking the wilderness up. It is going to be a major problem, and I think they should pay for it—the people who use the service. That is a major point.

Mr Hart—After the declarations of these wilderness areas access into a wilderness area is only by a self-reliant means, which is basically walking. So you have got these vast tracts of land that are locked up and only accessible to someone walking. If they left the fire trails open then if there was some sort of an accident you could get a support vehicle or whatever in and that would save the government a huge amount of money in flying helicopters in and all that sort of stuff.

Mr SCHULTZ—There is the other situation too where local historians around here have gone to an enormous amount of effort in finding, as an example, remnants of our historical past, like the grave sites of babies, women and men who have died in the Kosciuszko, only to see those sites lost. In one case I know of, after four years of research and finding them, mapping them and marking them, they saw them disappear again because of this fire. It is not just a question of protecting the environment and people's lives because of the irresponsible attitude to controlled burns and hazard reduction and fuel reduction; it is also a very serious issue in terms of the protection and maintenance of our historical past. Is that correct? Am I correct in saying that?

Mr Snell—Yes. That is part of our contention.

Mr Waddell—I had a meeting with National Parks just recently precisely along those lines.

Mr SCHULTZ—Are you aware of bushwalking groups that have offered the Kosciuszko National Park voluntary assistance in maintaining the walking tracks and they have been refused that sort of positive response?

Mr Waddell—We have done the same thing on the tracks in the Deua catchment and we have been refused in the same way.

Mr SCHULTZ—I think that just illustrates the point that I am making and that is why I asked the question.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you for your submission and the in-depth material you have put in that. For the record, so that I can just be clear on this: you have 450 members who pay a subscription—

Mr Snell—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—and you have an annual meeting?

Mr Snell—Yes, we do.

Mr McARTHUR—So this submission represents the broad membership point of view?

Mr Snell—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—So it is not just three or four activists that are using this as the front organisation?

Mr Snell—I would hope not.

Mr McARTHUR—I do not presume that but there are other groups that do use one or two activists for such things.

Mr Waddell—I would like to take that further, and I thank you for asking. They are family members and they represent roughly a thousand people.

Mr McARTHUR—They are aware of the point of view that you are putting?

Mr Snell—Yes.

Mr Waddell—They certainly are.

Mr McARTHUR—The second matter is the fire that emerges from public lands and the origin of the bushfire. Could you just add to your comment on that? You made some observations about that and there have been other witnesses showing concern about bushfires that emerge from national parks onto private land. Have you got a point of view that you could give the committee on that?

Mr Snell—Generally, we fully support the views that have already been offered. It is our members' experience with a fire originating on public land that comes onto private property that it is a long and protracted process to get any compensation. Certainly the first question that is asked is: are you insured? But the reverse operates, it seems, when somebody who is trying to do a bit of a back-burn or a hazard reduction that gets a bit out of hand and creeps into the park area is immediately prosecuted and there are all sorts of fines and levies and everything placed on individuals.

Mr McARTHUR—We think that is a very unfair—

Mr Snell—It does seem to be, if we put it that way, because it is a one-way street. One of our members, for example, who did not have fencing burnt down in the 2000-01 fires was asked to provide access through his property to enable RFS vehicles to get in to fight the fires in the Deua National Park catchment area. Of course he promptly agreed because it was in his and his neighbour's interest. With all those heavy vehicles going over his road it deteriorated and he has had to repair it. He has a contractual obligation to a neighbour to provide good access—in other words, passenger car access—to his neighbour's property. I do not know whether he has been able to resolve the issue yet of getting compensation for gates that were unfortunately damaged as trucks went through or for getting the cost of refurbishing the road surface.

National Parks wanted to get some consultants in to advise them on the cost of doing it up. The member's immediate reaction was, 'If you are going to get consultant engineers in it will cost you more that what I am asking for in compensation to fix the bloody road.' So we have that ridiculous bureaucracy happening here. Again, as we have said, it supports the one-way street observation that previous—

Mr McARTHUR—Have any of your members considered litigation against the National Parks for fires that have emerged out of the parks?

Mr Snell—Some of our members are a bit shy about that sort of thing, because they do not necessarily have a lot of resources themselves—they become members of our organisation because they do not know how else to access some sort of help. Litigation would always be a prospect but litigation is expensive and it is not always guaranteed that you will get your costs back. Unlike the United States, there are not a lot of—although, there are some—law firms operating on a contingency basis.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would it be appropriate for governments, whether it be at federal or state level, to consider putting a trust fund aside so that people have the ability through that sort of fund—call it what you like—to undertake legal action against departments that know full well that, in their own right, those people cannot afford to prosecute them in the existing circumstances?

Mr Snell—I think that would be wonderful.

Mr Hart—To comment on that from personal experience, I know of a case several years ago where a person had done a bit of reduction burning and it had escaped the private property and gone into the national park. He was taken to court, prosecuted and fined for that. In the 2000-01 fires, his entire property of private land was burnt out completely—it burned down one complete set of stockyards, part of another set and all the internal fences were gone. Up until now he has not seen one cent of compensation for that. In fact, the way you have got to go about it is that they say you have got to get a quote, do the repair works, send them the account and it is probable, but not definite, that you may get some compensation. We have just gone through the worst drought in 100 years and you are burnt out and you have lost your stock and you are supposed to come up with that sort of money on the basis that you may or may not get compensated for it.

Mr McARTHUR—There is no formal process to actually seek compensation?

Mr Hart—Not that I know of.

Mr McARTHUR—Has your friend actually made a formal application?

Mr Hart—He has not. That is what he has found out has got to be done.

Mr McARTHUR—He has got an unclear answer?

Mr Hart—He has got to pay for it himself first and then maybe he will get some compensation for it and maybe he won't.

Mr McARTHUR—Maybe?

Mr Hart—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Has he got that in writing?

Mr Hart—No, that is just word of mouth.

Mr McARTHUR—So, if he spends $100,000 fixing up his stockyards and his other damage, he may not get recompense?

Mr Hart—He cannot afford to do it anyway.

Mr McARTHUR—Yet he was fined quite severely for setting a fire?

Mr Hart—Yes, that was a good few years ago. The last two fires have burnt the place out completely and they have not offered anything at all.

Mr McARTHUR—Your group thinks that that is a bit inequitable, do you?

Mr Hart—We certainly do, yes.

Mr Waddell—I would like to comment further. There is more than one—there are probably about 20 that have been in touch with me in a similar position.

Mr McARTHUR—Could we move to section 44—about allowing a small fire to become a big fire. Could I get a perception as to the way in which your members see section 44? We have had other submissions which have regarded this as quite a major feature of fire suppression and the escalation of fires so that the Commonwealth can come in to contribute to the total cost of the fire. Could you add to that? Is section 44 a factor that is talked about by your members?

Mr Snell—It is, certainly. Technically, section 44—the declaration under the Rural Fires Act—means that the fighting of that particular fire has gone beyond the land-holder's, particularly public land-holder's, capabilities to manage within their own resources, and it then requires a concerted effort. The Rural Fire Services Commissioner effectively takes over control and prosecution of that fire.

Mr McARTHUR—Is there an understanding that the federal government somewhere along the line will contribute to that?

Mr Snell—I have heard so. I do not know the definitive answer. I have not found the legislation that triggers it. The legislation at the state level deals with section 44 of the act. I am not aware of what stage the federal government comes in. We asked that it be looked at or that the committee examine it to see whether there is perhaps some evidence of this business, particularly where the fire is not threatening houses and property but where it allows a threat to the environment and further parts of it to be burnt out.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you. I refer you to section 9 of your submission, where you draw a comparison between the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service and their operation of management and that of State Forests.

Mr Snell—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you like to help the committee with some of that detail?

Mr Snell—That was furnished as, I suppose, a rather limited example of our contention that you do not look after the environment by not undertaking hazard reduction. Hazard reduction in the State Forests scheme of things does include—and I think we have mentioned it there—a certain amount of controlled grazing to get the understorey down, therefore reducing the amount of fuel. Those figures seem to us to be fairly stark—admittedly, perhaps, isolated—examples of the consequences of not performing hazard reduction.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are saying that State Forests are good at hazard reduction—burning—whereas National Parks are not—

Mr Snell—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—and there has been a consequence of those two management practices.

Mr Waddell—Yes. I would like to comment on that. I think it would be fair to National Parks to say that State Forests have a far superior group of people to look after their areas because their contractors are working in the bush. They understand how to handle fire trail management and steep slopes, and those people are on the job all the time. State Forests have a far better training regime than National Parks because their people are being trained all the time. Their contractors are there and are available if a fire breaks out. That is the hardest thing.

Mr McARTHUR—Your evidence to the committee is that there is a working example of good fire control management under State Forests here in New South Wales compared to National Parks—

Mr Snell—Yes, exactly.

Mr McARTHUR—and that maybe National Parks might like to look at it.

Mr Snell—You would think so.

Mr Waddell—I would probably recommend it.

CHAIR—Once again, thank you very much for your submission and your time this morning to give further evidence and take questions from the committee. We appreciate very much the input to the inquiry. I know that other members of the public here today would like to have an opportunity to make some comments. We hope that at the end of the day we will have some time for other people to make some comments about the issues that are of particular relevance or interest to them with respect to this inquiry. We will make up some time at lunchtime so that there will be time for some additional comments at the end of the day.

[12.24 p.m.]

McKINNEY, Mr Ross, General Manager, Snowy River Shire Council

RAWLINGS, Mr David, General Manager, Bombala Council

CHAIR—Welcome to the inquiry. I will not go through the formal matters that you both heard earlier. We have both of your submissions to the inquiry and we thank you very much for those. They are very comprehensive and detailed submissions that include recommendations, which we appreciate you putting forward to the committee. First of all, would either of you like to make a brief opening statement? Bear in mind that we have the submissions and all of that is on the public record already. If there are additional matters you would like to highlight, could you limit the statement to those sorts of things.

Mr Rawlings—I think most of the issues in the Bombala Council submission have come from talking to our community and often the firefighters, so I do not intend to rehash all of that here today. One of the issues we do have is that these fires, when they do occur, seem to be getting larger, which does make it more difficult for the councils to manage the administrative side of section 44. So we do think that an additional area to be looked at and addressed is: when these fires do occur, exactly how are they to be dealt with?

The other issue is that there is probably a need to review exactly how our volunteers are treated during these types of situations. Originally, these people were really working in their own areas of the community and supporting their own neighbours, effectively. There seems to have been a change in that they are now travelling further away and working more often side-by-side with paid professional employees. This probably necessitates a bit of an investigation into exactly what role they do play, where the costs should be borne and whether farmers, who lose the productivity of their time in most cases, need some compensation, particularly in the larger fires.

Mr McKinney—Our submission is actually that of the subcommittee for councillors on our council and it contains 19 recommendations, which you have. Rather than covering them here, I will just go through and point out the ones we feel are of particular importance. One that has come up through these fires, particularly in section 44F situations, is damage to private assets. The New South Wales government is currently in the process of erecting fencing on common boundaries between Kosciuszko National Park and adjacent land-holders in fire affected areas as part of the post-fire recovery program. It is important also that the New South Wales government has recognised that a contribution to common boundary fencing affected by fire from Kosciuszko National Park not only is warranted but also has mutual benefits. I think it is important that that has been recognised in this exercise.

As far as we are concerned, an equally important issue of immediate concern is that boundary fencing between neighbours and internal stock fencing is currently not eligible for replacement under the post-fire recovery program. Many kilometres of fencing were destroyed by either wildfire or back-burning operations under the direction of the incident controller of the section 44 fire declaration. Property owners had no input or influence over the location or timing of

these back-burning operations and the loss of these fences has placed a major negative impact on farm production. Many of these fences separated herds of cattle or flocks of sheep as part of an ongoing breeding program essential to quality meat and wool production. The result of an inability to keep herds and flocks separated, in some instances, has severely degraded breeding and production programs that will take many years to bring back to pre-bushfire event status. That underpins our recommendation that, if a section 44F fire is declared which gives incident controllers and fire authorities access to any amount of land without permission and to use whatever means necessary to bring that wildfire under control, I do not believe the property owner should in fact bear the cost of that. I think that an act under that declaration should in fact entitle those property owners to 100 per cent immediate relief.

The issue of the frequency of the use of fire as a management tool, particularly for the purposes of reducing fuel loads, is a subject that usually conjures up equal amounts of emotional and factual argument. However, what is clear is that, if combustible fuels are allowed to accumulate by the deliberate policy direction of a managing agency—in this case, the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service—to the extent of increasing the risk of wildfire of destructible proportions, the managing agency must do so with the overwhelming support of the local community who must live adjacent to the increased risk of wildfire or be prepared to listen to well-reasoned argument on why existing fuel management policies are dangerous to the extent of the recent holocaust, and be willing to change policy and management practices. That is coming through loud and clear from many submissions to this inquiry.

Therefore our recommendation is that a separate fire management council be established—comprising representatives of land-holders adjacent to Kosciuszko National Park, commercial outback user groups, firefighting authorities and local government authorities adjoining Kosciuszko National Park—with the power to co-opt external scientific and other expertise and with specific terms of reference to provide yearly recommendations on fire management on KNP and adjoining lands directly to the minister for the environment. The reason we say directly to the minister is that it is very clear in this inquiry that the people on the ground are quite willing to do the work; it is the policies that are being formulated at the higher echelons within state agencies that are affecting production on the ground. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is one of those agencies that should never be judged by the thickness of its reports; it should be judged by what happens on the ground, and that is not happening.

Access has been well and truly covered, and it is already in our submission. The adequacy of hazard reduction is the next subject to talk about. There is a general community perception that the amount of hazard reduction, in particular the use of fire as a fuel reduction tool, by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service is deficient. Of particular concern is the situation that, as combustible fuel loadings within natural areas increase, there is a corresponding increase in risk of the ignition and possible subsequent negative impact on adjoining land uses such as sheep and cattle raising and including property, residences or tourism accommodation. This raises the issue of the priority of life and property in fire management.

As previously stated, the traditional fire paths are north-west to south-east, and therefore one of the highest priorities must be the interface between the natural area—for example, national parks—and the adjoining lands on the eastern and south-eastern interfaces. So we are talking about interface management as it is between natural areas and private properties. Because of the traditional fire paths, there needs to be far more attention paid to the south-eastern areas in

particular. In doing that, I think you would need to try to take the community on board with you. In other words, you should allow commercial and non-commercial activity groups such as horse-riding or mountain bike riding groups et cetera who will actually be on these trails to report things to park managers, state forest managers or whoever it is. Use the people to help, and do not keep them out. Keeping them out increases illegal incidents, quite frankly. There needs to be far greater interaction there.

Look at the primary north-east/south-west orientated fire access system. Some of these trails must continue to be in back-burning operational condition—not let go. They must stay in that condition in strategic locations. One of the ways of doing that is to have them prepared and allow access accordingly.

One of the other strategies, as the terms of reference asked for, was a greater acceptance of the utilisation of fixed-wing aircraft. Their use for water bombing in addition to observation duties would be advantageous. There are many suitable aircraft, for instance, that lie idle in winter months in the Northern Hemisphere, and a selection of these aircraft could be stationed in suitable locations such as the large lakes of the Snowy Mountains and elsewhere for the purpose of assisting prescribed burning operations, observation and detection, and wildfire suppression during the prescribed fire season. They lie idle over there; they can be sitting here and used accordingly. It would also give managers a lot more confidence to do prescribed burning knowing they had that sort of back-up if things did go wrong. I think that would be an added resource.

Earlier in the submissions the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes and the decision role of councils was raised. The Snowy River Shire Council is well aware of this and in fact applies bushfire prevention to particular aspects regarding life and property through its conditions of consent to development applications. These conditions are actually based—and this was brought up earlier—on advice from the locally based fire control officers of the Rural Fire Service based on statewide guidelines that in some instances are not as applicable as they could be or perhaps should be. The capabilities of the Rural Fire Service officers to assess generic guidelines is adequate. However, the expertise is not present locally to formulate development control policies that are specific to the natural environment of the alpine region. That leads us to suggest our recommendation that region specific guidelines for councils, planners, fire authorities, developers and homeowners be developed by suitably qualified and experienced persons that take into consideration the specific attributes of the region and not just rely on the generic statewide documents—because that does not work.

Pay versus non-pay is obviously becoming a bigger issue, and it was certainly voiced in our community. People were working alongside Rural Fire Service people in the fire control centres—unpaid people against Rural Fire Service officers, who are highly paid. National Parks, state forests, local government or other agency officers were also there being paid while you were working alongside them as a volunteer. That has raised some very important issues and divided some people in our community. It is well known that there is not much incentive to continue to do that and it has been stated here earlier this morning that that has now come under greater question. Therefore I think there needs to be a serious look at incentives that could be put in place for people. We require volunteers to have a higher level of training, whether it be in OH&S or GPSs or whatever, and all this takes a lot more time than it used to. Therefore they are spending more and more time as a volunteer in learning these things and in many instances some

of these local people would have better expertise than some of the people that they are alongside. This is a serious issue because you are losing volunteers. In fact, if you take a look at the interest in this inquiry and at the people who have addressed it and look around now—and I do not want to be the one to answer the question raised by this—the average age of the people in this room is not young. That reflects what is happening particularly in the rural communities. There is very little incentive for young people to get into these organisations and therefore on a national basis there should be some accreditation. Other countries and other organisations do it. It is not a hard thing to do, but I think it is time that you do that. I will leave it at that because I think that the other issues have already been canvassed. I am happy to answer any questions.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for those insights. I wish to start questions by asking both of you about council's administrative role under section 44. We had some evidence elsewhere that contractors were actually employed and paid by council but then council often waited quite some time to be reimbursed by state government for those outlays. Can either of you explain some of your experiences with respect to section 44 and the role of council?

Mr Rawlings—We put in two claims for our expenditure. The second one was on 31 March. It has not been paid yet. The previous one was paid about two or three weeks ago, I believe. So from when the fires were on up to that period we were funding about $90,000 worth of expenditure. In terms of using contractors, it is an interesting position that we are in now. In another part of section 44 we probably use more contractors rather than our own staff because the issue is that if we send out a grader with our own employee on it during the normal hours we will get back the higher rate of the grader but we will not get the cost of the bloke driving the grader. However, if we are hiring one from Bega Valley council we get the operator and the grader covered under section 44.

So there are these strange little quirks in what is funded under section 44. It does create a problem for the councils, as I have mentioned before, when these fires are getting bigger and more expensive to run. At the start of this particular incident there was a request for Snowy, as well as Bombala, to provide an order book to start paying for the cost of this fire. That was rejected. We asked for the National Parks to fund that. They did then provide the order book and did the major administrative work for it. It definitely would have been beyond our resources to be able to cater for that level of expenditure, taking into account that it would be a couple months before we would be getting the money back.

CHAIR—Based on what you have said, you were waiting more than 120 days to be paid, and carrying something in the order of $100,000. Bombala Council is a fairly small council. That is a fairly significant debt, is it not?

Mr Rawlings—That is the second-largest debt that we would have, yes. It is a significant drain on our cash resources and it does impact on the interest earnings that we otherwise would have in our budget that fund part of our operations.

CHAIR—And Snowy River?

Mr McKinney—We have not received anything back yet.

CHAIR—What sort of debt would you have outstanding?

Mr McKinney—$300,000.

CHAIR—That is quite significant.

Mr McKinney—It is, and, exactly as was pointed out, there are different ways and means, as you have suggested, of dealing with some of the ways to do that. For instance, we never questioned it when we were asked to provide fuel on a 24-hour basis out of our depot, but the question was raised later: because we did not receive an order for it, why should it be paid for? Our answer to that is: if you pick up the phone and ask us for something and we supply it, that is a commitment, that is an agreement, and that is as good as an order as far as we are concerned.

We have an ongoing set of circumstances with the Jindabyne aircraft landing area, which council manages. We approached the National Parks and Wildlife Service to suggest that landing fees and what have you are applicable to any aircraft that enters that area. That has been disputed to this date and yet we are faced with massive reconstruction of a damaged airport. We are also told by representatives of the Rural Fire Service who met with us on that date that the helicopters parked off the strip, not on the strip, so they were not part of the program.

CHAIR—While your submission is on behalf of Snowy River Shire, you do have some broader expertise in this area. Would you like to tell the committee what you did before you were General Manager of Snowy River Shire Council?

Mr McKinney—I came from the Rocky Mountains in Alberta for two weeks 33 years ago. I went into the National Parks and Wildlife Service and I was five years at Kosciuszko in search and rescue and stock work. I was two years at Armidale, Moree and Tamworth, on macropod management and research programs, and I was 11 years on the North Coast in the rainforest program and the heath land firefighting and endangered species programs. I was in charge of the South Coast, with the fires out at Montague Island and places there, and then I was five years in charge of Kosciuszko National Park, as the regional manager when Snowy Mountains was one actual region. I reported directly to the director-general and the minister for the environment, so the decision-making process was quick and direct, which was a considerably advantageous position to be in, not only in emergency management but also in terms of development applications or, indeed, mitigation programs. I was then five years in private industry, working as an environmental consultant on sustainable environmental works, including wilderness lodge constructions and so on. Then I took up a five-year contract with the Snowy River Shire Council, and I am probably at liberty to speak a bit more generally because I have fewer than 10 days left there before I take up a new position with the Game Council of New South Wales.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ross. I just thought it would be useful to note that you make your comments with some experience in the region.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I say, Ross, with some considerable knowledge, that not only were you a former employee of the National Parks and Wildlife Service but also you were highly respected by people inside and outside the service. That needs to be said in a public forum like this inquiry.

Mr McKinney—Thank you.

Mr SCHULTZ—I thank the chair for giving people the opportunity to understand the considerable experience that you have had as a former National Parks and Wildlife Service employee. Can you elaborate on what, if anything, has changed since you retired from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and is creating massive problems? I know that you have referred to the direct line of communication that you had with the director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. As a person who was in state government at the time, I can attest to the way in which your representations on behalf of my constituents on issues related to the National Parks and Wildlife Service meant that those issues were resolved very quickly because of that scheme. That is the reason I am asking the question now.

Mr McKinney—I guess the short answer to that is that when I was at the National Parks and Wildlife Service I made a specific mandate to ensure that the National Parks and Wildlife Service people under my control never lost sight of who their customer was—who was paying them. It is the community. The community, therefore, has a legitimate and rightful input into the management of a piece of land that you are managing on their behalf and the next generation's behalf. I believe that the National Parks and Wildlife Service have lost the ability or the will to take on community feelings.

A good example, in my opinion, is when you look at Australia as the most highly urbanised country in the Western world—82 per cent of the population lives within 100 kilometres of the coastline, one-quarter of the population lies in the Sydney basin, and more and more areas are being locked up for access. The population is getting older, but the access is getting less. There is well-reasoned argument that people in a motor car see more from inside a window than a bushwalker does looking at their feet. It is that simple. To me it seems that that needs to be addressed. These areas belong to the community.

Mr SCHULTZ—Ross, can I ask you what is probably another sensitive question, centred on your past professional life as a National Parks employee. What are your views on the gagging of National Parks and Rural Fire Service staff? Could you give me your opinion on that? Having done that, could you then give us an insight as to what you believe being placed in that position and not being able to talk is doing to the morale of the National Parks employees themselves?

Mr McKinney—I will take the last part of your question first. It is extremely demoralising for National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel who live in this community to be, in my opinion, instructed not to enter into or discuss—let alone put in—a submission. I feel a bit for the comments that have been made here today, with the respect of people who are sitting here and having to listen to that.

I think that my attitude with the National Parks and Wildlife Service was that, if I felt strongly enough about putting a submission to an inquiry, I should be allowed to do so. The example I would raise would be the commission of inquiry into the Ballina LEP. There, I went to the director-general of the service and said that the National Parks and Wildlife Service should really be allowed to make a submission and stand in front of that inquiry because we had some important issues that should be addressed there. On that basis—including the Ramsar convention, the international treaties on migratory birds and what-have-you for that inquiry—and under those circumstances the director-general allowed me to appear.

By the same token, it is no different to being a farmhand on the land: if the boss tells you to do something and you do not want to do it, and they say, 'Well, that's the way it is,' then I guess you can either do it and decide that you may not be much longer in that employ or put well reasoned argument. My attitude is that if you put well reasoned argument forward and you are given a no, as long as there is an answer as to why you are being given a no in that instance, it is okay.

An inquiry such as this has particular importance in respect of life and property and the future of species. There has been some absolutely devastating stuff up there. I do not believe that the research programs are in place, other than on a few of the picture animals such as the burramys—the mouse that is not a mouse—that attracts a lot of attention. But if you want to ask someone, 'What is the number of insects per square metre in leaf litter and what contribution does that make to the overall ecology?' you will not get an answer. The reason you will not get an answer is that the work is not being done. There is no real definitive research being conducted here which would lead anyone to a scientific direction on the role, the use or the frequency of fire in that area.

Mr SCHULTZ—You referred to water bombing and are obviously very much in favour of the concept, particularly when it is done with fixed wing aircraft. You talked about aircraft that were lying idle during the winter months elsewhere. Would you like to make any comment in relation to the aircraft that were lying idle half an hour's flying time from the Kosciuszko fires during the period from when the fire started to when it got out of control and went into the ACT? Some of those same aircraft, seven of them in number, were pulled out in frustration and went to Victoria to help the Victorians, which I know my parliamentary colleague Sophie will be very pleased about. Some of them were then tasked by the Rural Fire Service to go and sit on the ground at Camden and were not used at all. Would you like to make a comment? I am talking about Air Tractor 802s and Dromaders that were fitted out with bomb doors that could drop up to 2,500 litres of water, foam or Phoscheck onto the fires and could have done it within 48 hours of the fires starting, before they got out of control.

Mr McKinney—I was unaware of that until it was mentioned earlier today. That tells me that the available resources for these situations are not known, and they should be. It also tells me that there is not as coordinated an approach as there should be. It also tells me that, if a particular individual or group favours rotary wing as opposed to fixed wing—they both have their roles—that needs to be reconsidered.

Mr SCHULTZ—Those aircraft were contracted on a standby basis by the Rural Fire Service. I have a small question for the General Manager of Bombala Council. I note your logo says 'platypus country'. Are there any platypuses left after this devastating fire?

Mr Rawlings—Yes. We have been lucky in that regard. Most of the river system in our council area is still okay, and it does not feed from that direction, so we still have our platypuses there.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You spoke about the direct costs to council such as the provision of petrol. There are also the indirect costs such as using staff in the broader administrative process of fighting the fires and afterwards in the clean-up. Are you able to give a brief estimate of the total cost, including that indirect administrative cost? Also—not today, but over the next couple of weeks—are both of you able to provide the committee with estimates of the loss of revenue

from private business within the shires? One of the things we are looking at is the cost of the bushfires. Even if they are rough estimates from individual shires, that would assist.

Mr McKinney—I can tell you that during the month of December there was about a 50 to 55 per cent loss in revenue in the private industry in our shire. In January it was in excess of 95 per cent. It resulted in 120 employees being retrenched in one week. Most of those employees left the area with the considerable expertise that they had. I suggest to you that, if this winter is not a good ski season, businesses will be going out backwards. There is no question of that. That leads me to comment that where the natural attributes of an area are owned by the community and are entrusted to managers of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, in this instance, they need to take into account—which, I believe, they do not—that the condition of those natural attributes contribute highly to the economy and the wellbeing of the wider community. That is not taken into account in any way, shape or form.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Those percentage figures are terrific but, as I said, are you able to provide figures over the next couple of weeks or a few weeks?

Mr McKinney—When I go to businesses and say, 'Give me a dollar figure,' they say, 'Are you working for the ATO?'

Ms PANOPOULOS—I can understand that. If as you say there was a 95 per cent fall in income, is there a rough estimate that you use in your annual reports; do you say the amount of income generated by businesses in the shire is X million dollars?

Mr McKinney—Let me give you a rough estimate. The freshwater trout fishing industry in the Snowy Mountains is valued at $47 million per year. It did not occur this year. So take 95 per cent of that as a guide to form. To answer the first part of your question, 62 per cent of our staff in the whole of the shire were involved at one time in the firefighting effort from December right through to February. Quite frankly, we are so far behind we think we are ahead right now, because we could not pull in resources that fast to try to back up on the demands that were being made.

Mr Rawlings—From Bombala's point of view, it was not as large an impact on the community because we have virtually no real access to the Byadbo area which was burnt out and we do not have as big a tourist industry. While the fire was contained in those natural park areas, it did not impact on the economy to a large extent. However, we did have a large number of farmers who were basically either on standby or out there fighting fires for a month or two months. That impacts on their productivity, but not directly, so it is very hard to quantify. A number of jobs that they otherwise would be doing have all been deferred and backlogged.

From an administrative side, we would have had less involvement as well. A couple of staff would have been involved nearly the whole time of the fires. There is a cost of the staff that are volunteers. But even after the fire, for example, to make your claim you need to provide a copy of every single bill that you paid, even if it is $5. We ended up with a huge pile of paper that had to be all put together and so there is nearly a week's work just getting all that together and getting a claim in.

Mr SCHULTZ—On that point, how much did each of your shires contribute to the Rural Fire Service in terms of your contribution to the cost of fighting fires per annum?

Mr McKinney—It is in excess of $100,000.

Mr Rawlings—Ours is between $70,000 and $80,000.

Mr ORGAN—Ross, your recommendation A.2 talks about compensation with regard to things such as boundary fencing. Have you had any legal advice as to whether or not your council is legally responsible in any way for destruction of private property as a result of fire which comes off non-public land, which councils often have, whether that fire be an act of God or meaningfully lit—for example, as part of hazard reduction? Has council had any advice as to its responsibilities? There have been a lot of questions as to what the legal position is with regard to fires coming off public land onto private assets.

Mr McKinney—That is an interesting question. The reason I do not believe that has been terribly tested is that the full-time fire orientated employees who were employees of council have now been removed and placed under a separate state agency called the Rural Fire Service. To put that into context, previously if it was the fire control officer or staff of council who was in control of that hazard reduction that then went across into a private property and did some damage, then I think there was a claim legitimately laid on council.

Now that council is no longer a fire authority, it does not conduct those activities other than perhaps under contract on those lands that you talk about. You are right, we have not done an assessment at this point in time as to what tracts of land now controlled and managed by council would need to be the subject of the use of fire for the reduction of hazard fuels. We would have to weigh that up. I suspect that, like the way many councils are going—for example, our roadside weed spraying and what have you—we are getting in professional outside contractors to do that sort of work.

Mr ORGAN—The responsibilities of various public authorities is a question which the committee will need to get a really good answer to.

Mr McKinney—It is a very good question.

Mr BARTLETT—Thank you, gentlemen, for your submissions. Some comments have been made about the tension between the paid and the volunteer firefighters. Obviously fundamental to that is the issue of salary versus no salary. Can you give some other examples of the disparity or differential treatment between the two?

Mr Rawlings—One of the big issues for our area was the feeding of the volunteers and the professional people. I do not know if this is true but, based on the impact report that we got back, the level of food that the paid employees were getting was considerably above what the volunteers were getting. A small thing like that caused a huge amount of discontent out on the field, to the extent that the group captains and deputy captains called a meeting at the incident control centre to raise their concerns. For example, the volunteers who were working a 12-hour stint would have to feed themselves or were expected to feed themselves before they came along. They got a very small lunch pack and were expected to feed themselves when they went

home, as opposed to the situation of most of the professional people. They would be in accommodation or brought into the area, so their meals before and after were basically prepared for them. Issues like that blew up very quickly.

Mr BARTLETT—Have those problems been exacerbated by the movement of employees from local council to state government?

Mr Rawlings—I do believe it has. I think that it is seen by the volunteers as removing the fire control officers further away from being people who work with the local community.

Mr BARTLETT—How do we overcome what seems to be a problem of growing tension and dissatisfaction and therefore an issue that will impact on the effectiveness of local firefighting?

Mr Rawlings—That is a very big question.

Mr BARTLETT—Have you got a big answer?

Mr Rawlings—I do not have a very big answer. It comes down to something that local government recognises—that is, your community and community members do put a lot of value into these types of roles, and you need to make an effort to ensure that they feel that they are being valued for what they are putting in. So we need systems set up. This comes back to the issue that was also raised this morning by the volunteers: they feel their local knowledge and input is not considered as valuable as that of the professionals, for example. The processes need to be there so that they are consulted, that they feel to be a valid and active part of the decision making process, that they are not just someone who gets sent out to fight a fire but are part of an overall situation of protecting the community.

Mr BARTLETT—Is it fair to say that local governments generally would prefer the employment of the paid staff to be at a council level, or are you generally content with that move to state government employment?

Mr Rawlings—It varies amongst local government and each council has a different opinion, so I cannot give you an answer for local government on that.

Mr BARTLETT—Your shire council?

Mr Rawlings—We are of the opinion now that we are in a very awkward situation where we seem to have a lot of the responsibility but not the control. One way or the other the issue of the dissimilarity between who has the control of the resources and who has the responsibility needs to be resolved. That has been slowly dealt with, but there will be considerable problems there.

Mr BARTLETT—Ross, would you like to comment on that?

Mr McKinney—In terms of learning to crawl before we walk with this paid versus unpaid business, a lot of property owners around my way lost tyres and suffered burnt out pumps and the depreciation of their vehicles—whatever it was they did in their vehicles; somebody mentioned doing 1,000 kilometres—and they received no compensation for fuel or anything. I know that if you are a private contractor, for instance, and somebody from the Rural Fire Service

rings you and tells you to bring in your grader, your truck or whatever to cart water or do anything, it is X amount per kilometre—whether it is wet or dry hire, as in aircraft, or whatever it is. I would have thought that if these people bring these four-wheel drives in with proper firefighting apparatus on them, which they have on their farms, that it is easily dealt with in terms of how many kilometres you did. I can tell you right now that on a state government basis it is 60c a kilometre. That covers your depreciation, fuel and what have you. You may jack that up in a fire situation to $1 a kilometre or whatever, but some compensation has to be given to those people. The other thing I would like to comment on is that the federal government—I forget which minister it was through; you may correct me—introduced the $3,000 to $10,000 one-off grant set of circumstances.

CHAIR—It was the Minister for Small Business and Tourism.

Mr McKinney—Thank you. I asked the property owners around our way: not one of them wanted to go through that paperwork. I calculated that in my lady's business, it took her $1,700 worth of work to get $3,000 on that application. It is a bit like the grant applications for Regional Solutions. When you go to a rural community group and put down a funding application, which is probably about the size of the telephone book, their eyes glaze over—for good reason—and they say, 'Maybe next year.' I think red tape is a big issue, but it is not insurmountable. There are all sorts of things that can be done for these people. What happens with the Army Reserves? Aren't there some deals done with employees and payments if they do things? We are getting fewer volunteers, not more; and something has to be done from an incentive point of view to bring these people back in.

CHAIR—On the issue of small business, I am not sure that was everybody's experience, because 158 small businesses in this region benefited from that. I think we should have that on the record.

Mr McKinney—Absolutely; I think it was a great thing to do.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I suppose part of the problem is that the assistance that is broadly available is not always known to people.

Mr McKinney—That is true.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I think I had 300 businesses in my electorate access that grant, and a lot of them were at their wits end because there were forms for all sorts of other things. I know a lot of them did get assistance from the small business people in our local area consultative committees, who went around and helped people fill in the forms. But there is a lesson in that: there needs to be greater coordination of the personnel on the ground who are experts at filling in these forms to help your normal layperson.

Mr McKinney—Our council actually employs a person whose major job is to weed their way through all these grants—and there are hundreds of them—in order to assist our local communities in what they can access.

Mr BARTLETT—I have one other quick question. Ross, you mentioned in your submission the issue of insurance and those property owners who were not insured. You suggested some sort

of compulsory levy. I am interested in how that would work. Would it be through the council rate system, where those who could not give evidence of having an insurance policy could be compulsorily required to do so through rates?

Mr McKinney—There is a paper floating around right now from the Shires Association along the lines you are talking about, which suggests that perhaps funding for the Rural Fire Service et cetera should be attached to the land and not the asset. I do not know whether that is a reasonable thing to do, but some people will say, 'My assets are not worth very much; therefore, I do not insure them.' In the Canberra experience—and you would know better than I do—an unreasonably high number of houses apparently were not insured or were underinsured. But attaching it in some way to another funding source might be a way of doing it.

Mr BARTLETT—So there are two separate issues—the fire levy, even for those people that do not have property or do not have constructions that are at risk, and a separate insurance levy on those people who choose not to take out insurance but who have a property that is at risk.

Mr McKinney—I think people who are fully insured should not be hit with the burden of higher premiums to cover those people who are not insured.

Mr McARTHUR—You made a recommendation that horse riders and mountain bike riders, actual real human beings, be allowed into the national park to supervise the trails. Have you made a formal suggestion on that? Has that been well received by National Parks?

Mr McKinney—I will go back a ways. For instance, in the 70s most rangers were horse riders; there were horse units which were used in search and rescue, in survey work on plants and animals, in revegetation work and for packing emergency rations in and out of the huts in the high country. They were all disbanded.

Mr SCHULTZ—Some of them were landholders too, weren't they?

Mr McKinney—Absolutely. I can tell you from my experience—having come from another country—that if it were not for the experience and the knowledge of the park workers who rode horses in Kosciuszko that happened to be of the neighbouring families, it would have been incredibly hard if you were lost. Somebody once asked me, 'Have you ever been lost?' I said, 'No, but I have been bothered for 10 days.' That is precisely what it would have been. If you did not have that sort of expertise with you, it would have been an incredibly hard thing, but the local knowledge came to the fore and as a result of that I know much more. Having ridden it, I know a lot of that country. There is none of that any more.

If you look at the interface and you look at how you can have people use that interface, then you will get community support for those sorts of fire policies and those sorts of actions; whereas right now you have got a stand-off. The stand-off is that you can do something over here and you cannot there. That is all there is to it, and no well reasoned argument exists.

Mr McARTHUR—You are suggesting that you actually let Australians go into the national park on a horse and on a bike?

Mr McKinney—Absolutely. To me, it is living cultural heritage. In terms of horse riding, I do not believe that land managers in many instances are actually taking into consideration the contribution that the horse has made to the settlement of this country, in war and in peacetime. It has not been recognised. People will pay for that too. The National Parks and Wildlife Service needs to manage the activity, not ban it.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the attitude of your two councils towards National Parks? When a fire breaks out, are you requested to assist in whatever way possible? What happens when you have had an instruction from the state government to assist? What is both the informal and the formal position?

Mr McKinney—I should mention to you that in '88 I was the deputy controller for the Byadbo fires. You do not have many of these big events, so they are a little bit different. But our attitude is that, if the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the State Forests or the Rural Fire Service ring us and say, 'We need a grader. We need an operator. We need a tractor. We need a backhoe'—whatever it is—we just say yes.

Mr McARTHUR—And who pays?

Mr McKinney—That depends on who is quickest off the mark. To give you an example, I know one council—and no names, no pack drill—have said, 'No problem. What you are to us is a contractor. That is the way we deal with this.' If the National Parks and Wildlife Service rang me today and said they wanted a backhoe on Kosciuszko Road today to do X, Y and Z, I would give them the rates as a normal contractor. I do not see this as being any different whatsoever.

Mr McARTHUR—What was the position in the last fires?

Mr McKinney—It is still being argued out. As I said, our claims are in.

Mr McARTHUR—Can you tell us the magnitude of the claim you have put in?

CHAIR—He mentioned before that it was $300,000.

Mr McKinney—It is about $300,000. The airstrip, for instance, will have to be completely re-sheeted. We have had three quotes on that, and it will cost between $80,000 and $100,000 to repair the airstrips.

Mr McARTHUR—The airstrips plus the other is about a total of $300,000?

Mr McKinney—Somewhere in there.

Mr SCHULTZ—On the point you made before, Ross, a lot of us conveniently forget that the Kosciuszko National Park was created by politicians on horseback for Australians on horseback.

Mr McKinney—In 1944.

CHAIR—On that note, we will stop for a very late lunch. Thank you very much to both councils for your very comprehensive submissions and the evidence you have provided to the committee today.

Proceedings suspended from 1.16 p.m. to 1.49 p.m.

DOBBYNS, Mr George Ross (Private capacity)

GRAY, Mr Graham John (Private capacity)

JURSKIS, Mr Vic (Private capacity)

CHAIR—I welcome you all to the hearing this afternoon. 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 and consequently 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 a contempt of parliament. We have your submissions and we thank you for each of those submissions. Would you like to make any opening remarks in relation to those submissions? I remind you that the submissions are all published and are on the record, so you do not need to reput it all on the record. But if there are particular aspects or any other additional information that you would like to draw to the committee's attention, this is your opportunity to do so. If you do that briefly, the committee will then have an opportunity to ask some questions about your submissions. Who would like to go first?

Mr Gray—We have elected to make just one opening statement, and then we will be happy to talk to our papers or answer questions.

CHAIR—So Vic has been elected.

Mr Jurskis—We are foresters with 99 years combined experience from the fire line to the emergency control centre. We have seen a lot of changes in land use, fire regimes and forests. In respect of term of reference (b), we need to go through just a very brief history. When Forest Services was set up early last century, it tried to eliminate fires to protect timber. Fire suppression changed the forest structure and the fuel distribution so that when fires got away there were huge losses of life and property. Foresters learnt from their mistakes. Broad area hazard reduction burning and aerial ignition were introduced. At the same time, there was an upsurge in pasture improvement so that foresters and bushfire protection associations replaced graziers as the main burners in the bush. Since the late seventies there has been a return to fire suppression policies. Now, instead of protecting timber, we are supposedly protecting the environment, but we are making the same mistake. Ongoing development and environmental regulations are also making it more difficult to burn private land and state forest. Wilderness areas and destruction of access make it harder to get to fires. We still put out most lightning fires, but the ones that get away are inevitably disasters because of a large build-up of fuels and changes in forest structure over broad areas. Shrubbed-up forests will not burn under mild conditions, but they will burn intensely under moderate to high fire danger because there is a ladder of fuel mixed with a lot of oxygen, extending right up into the tree canopy. There is less chance of controlling fires in moderate conditions, so there are more large, active fire fronts burning on a few blow-up days, and those days are when fire control is impossible and most of the damage is done.

In respect of term of reference (c), over the last decade hazard reduction burning has been done on less than half of a per cent of the national park area in New South Wales each year, and

12 times that area has been burnt by wildfire, mostly on blow-up days. That amount of hazard reduction burning is inadequate. When it is done properly, it is effective. If you look at picture No. 1 of the photos that I have given you, contrast the left-hand side of the track, where there is a frequently burnt area, with the right-hand side, where there is an area where fires have been excluded for 30 years. Anyone with any fire experience would be a lot happier trying to control a fire on the left-hand side. I have also stood there and listened to an ecologist tell me that that is not really having any impact, because the fuel levels are basically the same on both sides of the track. The reason for that is that the fuels are measured up to only three feet, and they are only dry leaves and grass. They do not take account of all the standing green vegetation, shrubbery et cetera. Going back to term of reference (c), State Forests have deliberately burnt about three per cent of the area each year over the last decade. A lesser area than that was actually burnt by wildfire. We have all personally seen the effectiveness of hazard reduction burning, in that we have been able to control wildfires after they have reached hazard reduced areas.

The environmental impacts of hazard reduction burning are positive compared to fire exclusion and high-intensity fire regimes. In picture No. 2 there is a picture of a hazard reduction burn on the left and a picture of a wildfire on the right. The reason for the different scale is that if you take a photo of a hazard reduction burn at a landscape scale all you see is bush. You can see the difference in environmental impact there. In the next picture there is eroded dry gully with all the bush burnt around it and no protection, leaving a pathway straight into the river system when it rains.

On term of reference (d), broad area burning and good access, together with suitable response arrangements, will mitigate bushfire damage. The potential environmental impacts include healthier forests with less eucalypt dieback and more of the plants and animals that have declined since European settlement. Soil erosion, air and water pollution and siltation will be reduced. The perception that there is a conflict between conservation and hazard reduction burning is false. It is based on studies of wildfires and a whole range of false assumptions. The ecological theories do not stand up to scientific examination. They have been tested and have failed. Prescribed burning studies show positive environmental impacts.

In respect of term of reference (g), response arrangements, changes in land use have brought less effective fire surveillance and longer response times because there are less people on the ground and there is less access, so fires are larger and more difficult to control when they are finally attended.

On term of reference (h), deployment and sharing of resources, changes in land use mean there are less people with less fire experience and less machinery in the forest and incident managers often have little on-ground fire management experience. Many people on the fire line are volunteers from suburbs and have skills in life and property protection rather than managing forest fires.

Our recommendations are that policies should encourage broad area burning, better access, better training, more effective surveillance and quick and effective response and that resources should be put towards sustainable management on an ongoing basis instead of disaster response on occasions.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that additional information and these photos. All of you either have worked for State Forests or currently still work with State Forests. You would probably be familiar with areas that in the past have been within the state forestry areas that have ultimately become national parks and/or wilderness. Could you make some comments about any examples you have of the fire trail situation through those different types of responsibility for the regions?

Mr Jurskis—There are roads and fire trails that were maintained on state forests that have been deliberately ripped up and blocked off in some of the state forest areas that have been transferred.

CHAIR—On the fire trails that are established in state forest areas, are they purely there for accessing coupes for logging, or is there a regime set in place to initially look at the whole area from a fire management point of view and then additional roads for logging et cetera are planned beyond that? Is it totally from a logging point of view?

Mr Gray—If you go back in history, in the 1970s on the south coast there was a large extent of vacant crown land, unallocated crown land. It was not national park and it was not state forest. In those areas the bushfire prevention associations had a very active role in building fire trails into them on a strategic basis so that large blocks of land could be aerially hazard reduced each year. As those lands became divided into national park and state forest, on the state forest side the basic trail network was there and the road network then filled in the areas. So at this stage virtually all of the state forest areas are completely roaded for logging and that provides the fire trail network. In the other areas, some of those trails have in fact been taken out and they have only left in what they regard as strategic trails, which has left very large areas without any access at all.

CHAIR—Where an area has not been turned directly into national park but was state forest for a period of time and then became national park—and we have seen that in the last couple of years, where quite substantial additional areas under the regional forest agreement have gone from being state forest to being national park—it is conceivable that some of those roads that were in there would not be necessary for fire management. Is that true?

Mr Gray—That is right.

CHAIR—But a lot of them still would be?

Mr Gray—Yes.

CHAIR—What have your experiences been in that respect? Have only the unnecessary roads been taken out, or has it gone substantially beyond that?

Mr Jurskis—In my view, insufficient access is maintained in areas that have gone over to enable quick response and effective suppression when bad conditions are approaching.

Mr Dobbyns—In my view—and I have not worked since 1986—all the roads we built were essential for early suppression. We even maintained fire trails between the logging roads to break

the area up further, mainly for fire access and to give us through access from one road to another. I would have held all the roads, plus some further trails, purely for fire protection.

CHAIR—Once those trails are put into a reasonable standard for fire protection, is it a large cost for a particular region to at least maintain them to certain levels, or is it something that might only need some work done on it every couple of years to keep it up to a reasonable level? I know that will depend on the different forests, but let us use as an example the areas of the south-east forest that you are familiar with.

Mr Gray—I think once the trails have been established properly, it is not a big job in terms of cost to keep them in a state in which they are useful to you.

Mr BARTLETT—In your submission you mentioned the Eden fire study. Could you outline what that involves?

Mr Gray—It is an area of forest that has been set aside and broken up into a number of portions. Each portion is subjected to a different fire regime. You have a frequently burned block—and there are a number of replications of that—you have very infrequently burned blocks and you have some that are never burned. The idea is to reassess them for flora, fauna, forest health et cetera every few years to see what the effects of the different fire regimes are, because a lot is said about what frequent burning does and so on, but there are very few experimental areas run over the long term that give us some absolute information about this.

Mr BARTLETT—And the infrequently burned block will presumably be burned at a higher intensity of heat when it gets burned.

Mr Gray—Yes, it is likely to be.

Mr BARTLETT—How big are those blocks?

Mr Gray—My memory is not that good.

Mr Jurskis—They are about 30 hectares on average. Some of Graham's comments in his submission might be a bit redundant, in that that burning study area has been incorporated in the bushfire CRC project. It will be ongoing as part of that CRC.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Regarding the proliferation of noxious weeds, have you noticed a marked difference in the areas that you worked in between when you worked in them and now?

Mr Jurskis—I can answer that for the North Coast. I worked there 20-odd years ago. I have been back there fairly frequently in recent times, and there has been a very large, noticeable change in the vegetational structure. A lot of that is lantana, privet, camphor laurel and so forth. There have been very noticeable changes in vegetational structure and in the health of eucalypt trees with changes in fire regimes. The changes are not just in the areas that have gone to national parks, but generally in the landscape. Since the early eighties it has become more difficult to do the sort of broad area burning that used to be done, and that has created obvious changes in the landscape.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In the area that you refer to, has there been a decrease in the harvesting of trees?

Mr Jurskis—There has been, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Related to this, also in areas that you have worked in in the past, I want to know whether your experience is similar to that of ex-foresters in my neck of the woods, so to speak. They notice that in areas that previously had been regularly harvested—in terms of the old, dying trees, to allow the new ones to come through—there was a range in the age of trees. There were older trees, whereas now in some of my areas there are just a lot of young trees, because there has not been the culling of the older ones along the way. Can you comment on the size and density of trees in areas that you are familiar with?

Mr Jurskis—I cannot make any general comment on the age structure of the forest because it depends very much on both the logging and the fire history, and varies greatly from place to place. I can comment on the structure insofar as the understorey goes, rather than on the structure of the canopy trees. As I described a minute ago, with changes in fire regimes, the structure of the forest is a lot denser now and there is more understorey shrubbery, including exotic weeds and native weeds—such as pittosporum and she-oak, which take over the place. But that is more directly related to fire regimes than to logging history.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you for your submissions in relation to hazard reduction burning and the long experience in the forest industry. Why do you think you are losing the argument that fuel reduction is the scientific and correct way to go, given that we have had 420 submissions, overwhelmingly other witnesses have supported fuel reduction burning and witnesses appearing before the committee have also supported it? There is an element of thought, both within government and within the community, that fuel reduction burning is not a good thing. How come you have not won the argument, in view of your long experience and scientific assessment of the validity of the position?

Mr Gray—I think one of the earlier speakers today indicated that something like 80 per cent of the population in New South Wales lives in Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. Because they are so urbanised, fire is a completely alien thing to them. The only time they see fire is when it starts to impact on their houses on the fringes of the settlement. In the past, in the rural areas you had farmers who in fact used fire, many of them on a very frequent basis, to manage their properties. But their voices are lost against the 80 per cent that live in the urban areas. I think it is in there that we have lost the debate.

Mr Dobbyns—I could give you an example of where some hazard reduction was done one year around Easter. This was in Eden, where in 1952 the people of the town spent three days on the beach while the rest of the town had fire all through it. We covered Eden with smoke. The tourist operators and everyone else were up in arms, saying that we should not do it. It was only hazard reduction burning. Even people who lived in Eden said, 'You can't do it now; we don't like it.' So we now dodge Easter and the school holidays, even if they are ideal times to burn.

Mr McARTHUR—Why haven't you won the argument? We had some evidence from the previous witnesses, who were talking about the good work of the forest commissions in New South Wales versus the results under National Parks. They were saying that there was some

evidence on the ground that fuel reduction burning had assisted greatly in reducing the number of fires. But you are not winning the public argument.

Mr Jurskis—I think a lot of blame attaches to a very prominent, vocal section of the academic community. There are a lot of fire ecologists who do not really have any experience with fire and do not understand it, even to the stage where they do not understand that there have been very substantial changes in fire regimes since European settlement in terms of suppression of lightning fires as well as a reduction in the amount of Aboriginal fire in the landscape. These ecologists compare long-unburnt areas with frequently burnt areas and say, 'Okay, the differences are from the impacts of burning,' whereas a more realistic—

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying that they are wrong or that they are misguided?

Mr Jurskis—I am saying that there are differences, and the differences between long-unburnt areas and frequently burnt areas can more properly be described as impacts of fire exclusion rather than as the impacts of burning. The value judgments that are attached to it are such that that section of the ecological community regards dense shrubbery as a plus for the environment, whereas there is very good evidence that that is not the natural condition, even to the stage where we have scientific papers and studies asserting that grazing and burning had a serious negative impact on areas of grazing land that have been let go and put into national parks and that are now shrubbing up, because there was little shrubbery. The shrubbed-up forests are not functioning as an ecosystem. The eucalypts are dying; weeds are invading. These changed states are regarded by some as the natural state that we should aim for.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think there has been a change in public sentiment, even in recent times after the fires in northern Victoria and the fires in this part of the world, from the community at large—a belief that there is something strange going on about the way that the fires raged for 55 days on public land and were put out on private land and the argument about reductions in burning?

Mr Jurskis—I think the problem is that most of the sentiment that you are seeing is still based largely outside the major metropolis.

Mr McARTHUR—So the urban population are still not aware of the arguments?

Mr Jurskis—I suppose they are more aware, but there are still a lot who are blissfully unaware.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you care to comment on the change by the US administration, both Democrat and Republican, Bush and Clinton, to the longstanding policy allowing logging and reduction burning in state forests in the US? Do you see a ray of light in changing that public policy?

Mr Gray—I think that America a couple of years ago went through the fire season that we have just had. I think there have been some changes over there in terms of attitudes, but these things do not just happen overnight. It is one thing to have an attitude to say, 'We're going to do something.' It is another thing to get it done. Within government circles today, as people would

be aware, you have departments of the environment, with all their specialists, which are very difficult to convince about some of the practical, operational issues that confront us out there.

Mr Jurskis—The Americans are ahead of us in the academic debate as well insofar as there are a number of published studies that have recorded that same history of change in fire regime, forest structure and forest health. There are widely accepted published accounts of those changes that I have been describing in the eucalypt forests also having occurred, for example, in the inland north-west of the USA.

Mr McARTHUR—It is interesting that both sides of politics agreed with that change of attitude. That was the interesting thing in the American experience. Are you saying that it was only because of the massive fires across the whole American continent that this change of attitude emerged?

Mr Gray—I believe it was.

Mr McARTHUR—So until you have another couple of big fires you will not change the attitude in Australia?

Mr Gray—We have had a couple of big fires and I do not see a lot of change in attitude so the next one will be a very big fire. One of the issues we are facing at the moment, too, is that it is very easy, if you are of that persuasion, to say, 'These fires were something different. They only occur once every so many years—100 years or whatever—and there was nothing we could have done about them anyway. So it is inevitable. Therefore, we can continue doing what we were doing.' I am sure there is a lot of that floating around, particularly amongst some of the agency staff who are committed to protection.

Mr McARTHUR—Some of us would say they have been surprisingly quiet with their public comment. Would you agree with that?

Mr Gray—I have not followed the debate that closely.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you seen any comment by the agencies defending their positions?

Mr Gray—I have not, no.

Mr Jurskis—I have certainly seen in the major metropolitan media, on a large number of occasions, these types of statements, 'It is a bad drought—the worst drought we have ever had—and there is nothing we can do.'

Mr SCHULTZ—Gentlemen, what you are advocating here today has been advocated to this committee in evidence by volunteers, local government representatives, land-holders, some scientists and now you as people who have worked in the forest industry. Despite these concerns and recommendations being part of those community organisations over the last three or four decades, what is it that stops governments of the day acting upon that sort of advice and experience? I will ask a question that might assist you a little bit. Do you think it is politically based—that the decisions are being made on the basis of votes by political parties of all political descriptions simply because of votes and it is just an urban based think tank that is ignoring what

is going on out there, in rural and regional Australia in particular because that is where most of the fires are occurring?

Mr Gray—It is certainly very hard to see. There is no clear explanation for it in my view. The proposition you are putting up sounds to me like it satisfies most of the argument because the practitioners have been very confident about the process for a long time. Even now, though, within the RFA process and within some of the other licensing processes that apply to State Forests, for instance, there are very tight controls being put in on the use of fire as a reduction tool. Looking at them, you get the impression that they are concessions. They are not being put in as a tool of management; they are being put in as a concession to management because of the issues that surround it. If you breach the obligations of the RFA and the like, that is a very serious breach. People err on the conservative side. So rather than go out there and get some areas burnt, as we think they should be doing, they tend to pull back and wait until it is almost too late to be effective. It is a very insidious business.

Mr SCHULTZ—What about the issue that you raised where people are using excuses, like the most difficult or debilitating drought in 100 years being a precursor to the fires? From the evidence that we have received, it would appear that that is only part of the equation. You can have all the dry material in the world but it does not really mean anything unless you have the level of fuel on the ground to feed the ignition and create the heat. I am basically saying, 'Does one complement the other?' because it would appear from what I have seen in my lifetime that not only are the fires increasing in terms of their frequency but they are getting hotter and hotter in an environment where we appear to be locking up more and more land.

As an example, the increasing national park sizes and wilderness areas would appear to me as an outsider to be a precursor to a devastating impact. That is what people have been warning about for years and yet nothing seems to be done about it. Am I correct in saying that?

Mr Jurskis—All the disaster and damage happens on very few days. The reason why more extensive and disastrous fires are happening at the moment is that more active fire fronts are burning leading up to those few bad days. The reason why there are more extensive active fire fronts is that, because of the changes, it is more difficult to control fires due to the reduction in low-intensity fire in the landscape. Inevitably, if it is harder to control a fire in moderate conditions, it will still be going when the bad conditions arrive, when you can do nothing about it. To answer the first part of your question, there is no doubt that the votes are in the city and that there is a perception in the city that burning is environmentally evil and unsound. It is a false perception but it is there. If that perception is held by the majority of the voters, naturally the political decisions are going to go along with it.

Mr SCHULTZ—Mr Gray, I want to talk about recommendation 4 in your submission regarding the use of aircraft, and recommendation 7, which centres around your suggestion that a less resource-hungry model needs to be developed, with specialist firefighters trained to undertake the fire management role. Regarding recommendation 4, when you say we need to identify cost-effective ways of using aircraft and training, what sort of aircraft are you talking about? Before you answer that, can I tell you that we do have some very experienced fire-bombing pilots and aircraft in this country but, for some reason or other, they are ignored by the authorities at the cost of significant damage to our ecosystems and to lives and property.

Mr Gray—What you are saying is right as far as New South Wales is concerned. Victoria have used fixed wing aircraft in particular for a number of years. Whilst they still have their problems, they have developed the skills for using them far more than we have in New South Wales. Fighting fires is a costly business. If actual firefighting absorbs all the available funds, we do not do any work in attempting to see how we can better use aircraft. For example, the very large helicopters that have been brought in for this fire season have certainly been very effective around the urban interface but they are an enormous cost. Small helicopters that carry 200 litres or a bit more, dropping fresh water dipped out of a dam, are quite ineffective against fires of the sort of intensity we have seen. They have a role to play but it is certainly not doing that.

The money being spent on those inappropriate uses of aircraft might be better spent on agricultural aircraft, which can drop 2,000 litres at a time instead of 200 litres and can drop water that has been dosed with retardant or foam to make it 10 times more effective, and on strategically having them around so that they can be brought in very quickly. One of the issues that we really have not come to grips with as a community is that we have wilderness areas to which we have deliberately made access slow and difficult by reducing the number of trails and so on. The only way we can address lightning-strike fires in there is aerially, and our best chance is not by dropping 200 litres at a time with a half hour turnaround; it is by using multiple aircraft and dumping a decent amount of retardant on them.

Mr SCHULTZ—That is the very point I wanted you to get to, because there have been occasions when fixed-wing aircraft have been available to get into fires quickly. My view is that we should attempt to suppress fires very quickly and, more importantly, help the ground troops that are going in there to put it out. Going back to my last question about developing a less hungry model with specialist firefighters, could you elaborate on that a bit more?

Mr Gray—When I was involved in firefighting, we had management teams totalling probably eight or 10 people to manage some fires that were substantial but certainly not as big as the fires now. I quoted in my paper the example of Jindabyne this year where 16 days after the main fire had passed through there were still a very substantial number of people operating in the control centre and they were still deploying large numbers of aircraft. Talking to some of the people involved in the fire, it became apparent to me that a number of the people in significant control roles were in fact departmental people who had an administrative capacity but did not particularly or necessarily have a long firefighting history, and certainly not at that high level. I believe that the AIIMS model, which we have used for some time, probably now needs to be reviewed. Maybe we do need to go to a model that identifies particular individuals that have the capacity to fight fires as well as manage the fire event. I am suggesting we need some work done that looks more closely at that.

Mr SCHULTZ—In your opinion, is there an adequate supply of that resource on the ground at present?

Mr Gray—It would be pretty hard for me to say that, because I just do not know all the people available, but I think there would be sufficient people to bring teams together.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In your written submission you say that in Western Australia broad aerial hazard reduction was conducted for many years and that studies have shown there has not

been an adverse impact on the environment. Can you tell the committee the names of these studies so that we can access them and have a look at them?

Mr Gray—I cannot quote them to you offhand.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Could you provide that information to the committee?

Mr Gray—I will attempt to do that for you.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence today as well as your submissions. I think the committee have been very fortunate in getting such a cross-section of information and views, particularly the combined expertise of the three of you, which will be very useful for us in our deliberations.

[2.30 p.m.]

CLIFFORD, Mr Kim Andrew, General Manager, Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Ltd

HUGGETT, Mr Garry John, Property and Development Manager, Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Ltd

CHAIR—I welcome you here this afternoon. Do you have any comments to make about the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Huggett—I was the company's bushfire coordinator for the January bushfires this year.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearing 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 the parliament. We have your submission, which we thank you for. Would you like to make an opening statement before we move to questions? I remind you that your submission is on the public record—it has been authorised for publication—so you do not need to repeat it word for word, but maybe in your opening statement you would particularly like to highlight something or provide the committee with other information first of all.

Mr Clifford—We come here today representing Kosciusko Thredbo after having discussions with the other resort operators in New South Wales. The Kosciuszko National Park contains all the New South Wales ski fields—primarily Charlottes Pass, Mount Selwyn, the Perisher Range group and us. To put the situation of the resorts in context, we say that the Kosciuszko National Park is 690,000 hectares—I think that is a matter for the public record—and it is part of 1.6 million hectares of mountainous country in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. It represents a very large chain of protected areas that stretches some 340 kilometres. It is a huge lump of land and, in amongst it, the resorts occupy less than one per cent of that area. We occupy less than one per cent. I think it is fair to say that the Kosciuszko National Park has 54 per cent or thereabouts of wilderness areas, and we do feel—and we certainly felt this year on a couple of pretty frantic days—as though we are at risk of loss of life and property. Most of the resorts are gazetted fire districts in New South Wales. The New South Wales Fire Brigades have staff, personnel and equipment there, and we have firefighting infrastructure there.

As an opening statement, I will say that we are a bit unsure about who looks after bushfire management now. We have the New South Wales Fire Brigades, we have the management side of the Rural Fire Service—and I would particularly separate the management side of the Rural Fire Service from the day-to-day bushfire brigades—we have the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and since December 2001 we have had PlanningNSW. We certainly have no range of government agencies giving us a hand to try to run a viable, year-round tourist operation.

Mr Clifford—Going on from that, I think there was a lot of confusion at the time in regard to who was really responsible. As Garry said, we are in a quite unique situation where there is a declared fire district, in relation to which we give funds to the urban firefighters. They were

always on hand, but at the same time in terms of some of these decisions we ended up having a committee of 12 people involved in making a decision about back-burning or whatever process was going to go on. It took a lot of time, and there were mixed messages and no clear line of communication.

CHAIR—So the funding that Kosciusko Thredbo provides for the fire service in Thredbo—

Mr Clifford—All fire districts are funded by insurance levies to about 85 per cent. Then, normally, local government authorities pick up I understand between 11 per cent and 13.5 per cent. Kosciusko Thredbo picks that up in the case of Thredbo, so we have a direct role by fire district.

CHAIR—So you are in the same position as the shire councils in that respect in that it is about 13 per cent or something? I think that is the figure you contribute.

Mr Clifford—Yes.

CHAIR—But you do not have any control over the personnel that are involved in firefighting?

Mr Clifford—No absolute control. However, the vast majority are employees of Kosciusko Thredbo in a second task.

CHAIR—Right. In regard to the fire that threatened Thredbo in January, the committee—as you know—conducted some inspections through the region and we met with the manager of Tom Groggin station, which is actually physically in Victoria but on the border. We were told about some fire management that was taking place in that region to help fight the major fire that was occurring. There was some, as we understand it, back-burning done there against the advice of the land-holder. I am just trying to clarify this in my mind. The fire that was burnt supposedly as a back-burn: was that the fire that ultimately threatened Thredbo?

Mr Huggett—There are probably two issues there. After the initial lightning strikes occurred, we were briefed by the section 44 controllers at Jindabyne. There were two fires of immediate concern. There was one immediately in the area of Mount Kosciuszko and there was the fire at Tom Groggin. We did not see the one at Mount Kosciuszko as being as great a threat because our view was that the one at Tom Groggin, if it was not controlled and controlled promptly, would actually come up through—

Mr Clifford—Leather Barrel.

Mr Huggett—Leather Barrel and come straight up over the top and would have such a head of steam when it got to the top of the hill that nothing would actually stop it. It could only go one way from there with the prevailing westerly winds, which are the predominant winds of the area. It would come straight at Thredbo. It turned out that that fire took longer to come but it came with very little control having been put in place on it.

The other fire that came across the top of the hill actually got there. It burned towards Thredbo. It burned quite mildly for quite a while and possibly could have been controlled

except—this is my understanding—the advice to us is that resources were deployed elsewhere protecting life and property.

Eventually, we put in—in conjunction with National Parks, the Rural Fire Service and the fire brigade—a controlled burn around an area of Thredbo known as Riverside Cabins. That got aborted once but went ahead the next day under less than favourable conditions for a controlled burn. It certainly burnt. The fire then arrived under very adverse conditions two days later and hit that controlled burn and immediately jumped the Alpine Way and was last seen by us heading towards Ingebyra.

CHAIR—How long did it take you to get permission? What were the processes of getting permission to do that back-burn around the Riverside Cabins?

Mr Huggett—The Riverside Cabins area was seen as a particularly vulnerable area. It was an area of Thredbo that had been built to the west of the village and had gone beyond a firebreak that had been long established. There was therefore no firebreak between it and the bushland to the west. We met at Jindabyne fire control with a number of controllers. We met with the fire strategy planners and over four days it is fair to say that we met with seven separate planners. For example, when I rang back the next day to talk to one, this chap had been retasked to Khancoban or somewhere or other.

We eventually wrote a letter to National Parks—at that time the section 44 controller was Dave Darlington—and put some views to them. The burn was then scheduled to take place the next night. We spent a lot of time with the fire brigade effort and thousands of dollars in wetting down the cabins. The cabins are elevated timber structures. The burn got cancelled because a couple of people who were necessary for the burn could not make it. We then had a discussion at about midnight, and the burn went ahead at two o'clock the next afternoon and took about six hours to put in place.

CHAIR—From when you believed that you needed to do it to when you actually did it, was it five, six, seven days or something?

Mr Huggett—It was five, six or seven days. In the meantime, we decided that we had better keep going, and we cleared, I suppose, a significant amount of trees and scrub from along the western edge of the village.

CHAIR—Is there an overall fire management plan for the area around Thredbo, a five-year plan of hazard reduction or something like that to minimise the risk to Thredbo Village?

Mr Huggett—I suppose it is fair to say that, after the landslide in 1997, the company's head lessee undertook a number of risk management exercises. There were geotechnical exercises and exercises to do with LPG, bushfire, flooding et cetera. We got consultants to prepare two reports. One was prepared on the overall threat of bushfire to the village. Another was prepared on construction processes in the village and how to fireproof buildings in the village. At Thredbo the risk of bushfire comes from two sources: one is a large fire front entering the village and the other is as a result of a sustained ember attack that would come, we think, in advance of any fire front. We prepared those reports, got them to the final draft stage and then took them to the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

CHAIR—Where are they now?

Mr Huggett—I think it is fair to say that they are still in draft form. We spoke to the regional manager at National Parks—a chap by the name of Gregor Manson at the time—and he was quite emphatic that the National Parks and Wildlife Service had the responsibility for management of bushfire control, that his department would look after the preparation of fire management plans and that it was really nothing for us.

CHAIR—Was that in 1998?

Mr Huggett—It was in 1998.

CHAIR—So here we are in 2003 and there is no particular fire management plan.

Mr Clifford—Not that we are aware of.

Mr BARTLETT—It seems astonishing to me that in a village that is potentially so vulnerable, because of it being surrounded by bush, National Parks has not had a fire management plan in place. What about the situation prior to 1998? Was there a different regime of management and of preparedness?

Mr Clifford—There has been very little back-burning in the Thredbo Valley area for the last 30 or 40 years, from my knowledge.

Mr Huggett—In 1991 the company prepared a bushfire management plan but basically it was for an urban type area. It is fair, I suppose, for some to refer to Thredbo as a village but Thredbo actually has 4,200 beds built. It is quite a large area. That amount of beds is, I would guess, probably half the size of Cooma.

Mr BARTLETT—I did not mean to demean Thredbo by calling it a village.

Mr Huggett—It is a bigger area. Our company has hundreds of millions of dollars invested in infrastructure there and there is a lot of property that ought to be protected.

Mr BARTLETT—I appreciate that. In your submission you make mention of the communications problem because of Telstra's above-ground power lines being burnt down. What sorts of problems did that cause? Clearly that would have affected your ability to communicate and to resist the fires. Did it cause any increased risk to people? Was there a risk to life?

Mr Clifford—I think it was probably more that it increased the anxiety level of the residents who were kept in Thredbo. We were threatened by two fire fronts at Thredbo, and we could not leave Thredbo because the roads were physically blocked in both directions. Once you were there, you were there; you had no choice. There were no communications whatsoever. We are talking about no mobile phones. We as a company provided satellite phones to the fire brigade as well as to ourselves.

Mr BARTLETT—It would have been particularly distressing for families there, or families in other places with loved ones in there and not being able to communicate with them.

Mr Clifford—That is correct. We only had a limited number of satellite phones but we provided them for anyone who wanted to use them on a very limited basis, I guess.

Mr BARTLETT—Did the impact on mobile phones in any way reduce communication between those involved in firefighting?

Mr Clifford—Yes, I think so. Mobile phones were not working for obvious reasons. We lost all communications. However Thredbo does rely on a very good radiocommunications network which we just happened to have as part of one of our tools in operating a large resort.

Mr BARTLETT—Had there been any fears expressed in previous years about the inherent dangers of having Telstra's powerlines above ground?

Mr Clifford—In fact Telstra had informed us over the past five or six years that their cables were actually underground.

Mr BARTLETT—But they were not.

Mr Clifford—But they were not. We had the understanding that Telstra's communications links to Thredbo were 100 per cent buried from Bullocks Flat to Thredbo. In fact, they were about 50 per cent buried and 50 per cent above ground.

Mr BARTLETT—It is quite alarming that you could have been making planning decisions based on incorrect information provided by Telstra.

Mr Clifford—That is correct.

Mr BARTLETT—You have said in your submission that despite your requests Telstra has reinstalled telephone lines above the ground.

Mr Clifford—I understand that is correct at this stage but I do not think it is the fault of Telstra. It is due to the fault of interdepartmental bickering about bearing cables in the national park.

Mr BARTLETT—Which departments would that be?

Mr Clifford—I think there are disputes going on between Telstra and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Mr BARTLETT—So you are suggesting that the National Parks and Wildlife Service is making it more difficult for Telstra to place their cables underground?

Mr Clifford—I can only say that Telstra has endeavoured to place their cables underground for the last three to four months and they are still not underground.

Mr BARTLETT—And they need the permission of National Parks in order to do that?

Mr Clifford—That is correct.

Mr BARTLETT—So it could be concluded then that the procrastination or obstruction of National Parks in granting that approval to Telstra could hinder future communications in the event again of another bushfire?

Mr Clifford—Thredbo currently relies on optic fibre communication which is strung in the air. It is probably the only place in New South Wales I am aware of where that is happening. If it is above ground, it can be at risk from falling trees, landslips and obviously bushfires, as we know. There are a number of reasons that communications are not as secure as in other parts of New South Wales.

Mr McARTHUR—I pursue the matter of this cable without embarrassing you as the proprietor of the village. I understand the cable is above the ground at the moment—it is not covered.

Mr Clifford—We were reliant on what was initially a temporary unprotected cable above ground. Now it is a temporary protected cable above ground. They are currently working on the third solution, which is redundant new cable that will be in the ground for about 50 per cent of the way and above the ground for the other 50 per cent of the way.

Mr McARTHUR—I understand by way of hearsay that National Parks's argument is that they will not put the cable underground.

Mr Clifford—We understood they demanded from Telstra an indefinite and unlimited indemnity for any future loss or damage, which Telstra, I understand, was not willing to do.

Mr McARTHUR—Is it fair to say that Telstra Country Wide have done their best to get the cable underground?

Mr Clifford—During the bushfire emergency, we would actually congratulate all the semigovernment departments, such as Country Energy and Telstra, who worked tirelessly at all stages to provide us with as much help as possible. In fact, Telstra drove through the bushfire front in a police car with five satellite phones so we could have communications. So they went absolutely out of their way to get our communications back. Electricity and temporary telephones were back on in Thredbo within five to seven days, and Country Energy had to provide up to 240 poles to do that.

Mr McARTHUR—The fire was in January. It is now July and you still do not have a cable underground because of an impasse between National Parks and Telstra Country Wide due to National Parks's rationale that it would be unwise to put cable underground in national park area because it might upset certain plants and species. Would that be a fair assessment of the form guide?

Mr Clifford—That is our understanding.

Mr McARTHUR—So the position for the public is that communications for skiers and visitors to the Thredbo village are threatened because that coaxial cable is above ground and could be subject to natural elements, whereas most other cables are normally underground around the rest of Australia.

Mr Clifford—That is correct.

Mr McARTHUR—It is an interesting set of events. So what would happen if the cable were cut by some natural hazard in the month of August?

Mr Huggett—Say, if a kookaburra flies into it.

Mr McARTHUR—A kookaburra?

Mr Huggett—Yes. It would be cut.

Mr Clifford—Thredbo—and the Thredbo fire brigade—would lose 100 per cent of communications. There would be communications within the village, but you could not gain any access outside the village.

Mr McARTHUR—Can I ascertain that National Parks are totally intransigent about their approach to the way this cable might be put on their land?

Mr Clifford—I just think that it is amazing that it has taken them six months to re-establish or improve the normal services that are expected by people in the rest of the country.

Mr McARTHUR—I reiterate the point: Country Wide have done their best to get the cable in.

Mr Clifford—Telstra?

Mr McARTHUR—Yes, Telstra Country Wide. Just one other question: I understand there was a comment made that Thredbo village was never threatened by fire because it was at the end of the fire restricted area and therefore it was not necessary to take the normal precautions. That comment was made on our informal visit to the village. Is that an attitude that some of the fire authorities had in Thredbo's case?

Mr Huggett—I do not understand your question. What was the comment?

Mr McARTHUR—That Thredbo would never be threatened by fire because of its location and the village's history.

Mr Huggett—If that was the case, the amount of resources that were put into fire suppression in and around Thredbo village would have been surprising. The fire brigade—

Mr McARTHUR—This is prior to the fire period.

Mr Huggett—I think there was a view held by the landowners—National Parks—that fire would not come over the alpine area and that that very high alpine area was not conducive to burning. I would be very surprised if they still have that view.

Mr McARTHUR—That was their view prior to the fire?

Mr Huggett—That may well have been, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—But it would not be their view now—there is a bit of evidence to suggest that the fire came over the top and was pretty close to the village.

Mr Huggett—The fire came right from Hammel Spur, around that area into that Bogong Creek area and then burnt slowly downhill, under quite good weather conditions, right to the edge of the village.

Mr McARTHUR—And you were not allowed to do anything about it as the proprietor of the village?

Mr Huggett—We do not see ourselves as the state's firefighting forces; we are there to augment the forces and help and do a whole range of things, which we did. We did may things within our own power. We had the snow making systems turned on to provide water for hazard reduction, we wet down a lot of buildings—all that happened until we actually lost the power. We had no power then other than in the hotel and a few other major buildings which are part of the back-up power system.

Mr SCHULTZ—Leaving aside the obvious problems that could occur with the Telstra cables being above ground which you quite rightly pointed out—falling timber et cetera—it is also open to vandalism, isn't it? Somebody could go along and cut that cable without any problems at all.

Mr Clifford—The temporary cable, yes; the one on the poles, no—it is quite high.

Mr SCHULTZ—No, the cable on the ground.

Mr Clifford—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—I have two or three more questions to ask you. Mr Huggett made a reference to wilderness areas and then followed that up with the threat of loss of life. Were they related?

Mr Huggett—I believe that National Parks have a bit of an issue with the amount of wilderness area. I do not think they have thought out how to do fire control and prevention measures there. I believe I saw that in the Riverside burn. I have seen that with some people in National Parks, particularly those in middle management who were in control of these sorts of fires. They had problems at Kuringai Chase with hazard reduction where unfortunately they lost some of their permanent staff. I think that really weighs upon them. That issue is not lost on Kosciusko Thredbo. We lost 17 staff in 1997. OH&S is a big issue and it does play on the minds of some of the people. I think it is fair to say that our view was that it was a pretty conservative

firefighting effort. They preferred to fall back to well-established lines that were miles away from the fire front. We would prefer to fight fires not right on our doorstep.

Mr SCHULTZ—Do you think that, because of the expansion of the national parks and the increased areas of wilderness, and the lack of resources within the National Parks and Wildlife Service to cope with that traditional area, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has a very serious problem with regard to being able to put in the manpower required to manage the area?

Mr Huggett—Certainly these fires were very widespread and I do not think anyone would deny that. I think that everyone's resources were stretched. From what I saw at Thredbo, I thought the government agencies managed their staff quite well in terms of people standing down after two or three days. I am not sure that that occurred with RFS volunteers, some of whom worked for days and days and did not seem to get days off at all. It causes us some grief when we see people working those long hours, but I think everyone was really stretched. We got good support from the New South Wales Fire Brigades. I thought they were absolutely excellent in terms of the resources they brought in but, at the end of the day, they were relying on the judgments of the section 44 controllers.

Mr SCHULTZ—Getting back to your comment, I cannot remember whether it was the bushfire prevention plan or what, but under state law are you required to put up one of those plans?

Mr Huggett—No.

Mr SCHULTZ—You just do that as a matter of course?

Mr Clifford—It is a risk management issue.

Mr SCHULTZ—What sort of contribution does your alpine village establishment make to the Rural Fire Service in the way of a levy?

Mr Clifford—We do not. Because we are a fire district, we pay money to the urban firefighters.

Mr SCHULTZ—What sort of money are you talking about?

Mr Clifford—Depending on the budgets, I think the village pays between $30,000 and $60,000 a year plus all the insurance levies.

Mr Huggett—Plus we supply probably half the retained firefighters in Thredbo. They are staff members who attend fire training et cetera with no loss of pay from their normal pay.

Mr SCHULTZ—In your submission, I think on page 5, you comment on the tardiness of the Rural Fire Service in accessing development applications. Could you inform the committee of the significance of the development application in a fire emergency, and what the consequences were of the delay in the Rural Fire Service assessing the development applications?

Mr Huggett—Our query with the Rural Fire Service at Rosehill is that we submit a lot of development applications to PlanningNSW, the consent authority. It is what is called 'integrated development'. The state government planning laws require the referral of developments on what is termed 'bushfire-prone land', which the whole of the national park is apparently gazetted as, to the Rural Fire Service. It has taken the Rural Fire Service's planning people at Rosehill up to 100 days to review a submission. In one instance it took them 101 days to review it and send it back, saying, 'Approved, with no special conditions.'

We wrote to Mr Ken Prendergast, who was the chairman of a bushfire recovery committee—constituted, I think, by the state government—to point out that one of the things which would really help the recovery from these bushfires would be to get the economies rolling again and to get people employed et cetera. We have literally millions of dollars worth of development applications now waiting to be carried out, starting from the October long weekend, for which we have not been able to get approval, basically because of the inaction of the Rural Fire Service planning officers at Rosehill. The legislation that they are working under was introduced and passed by the minister at the time, Bob Debus, who was also minister for national parks and Minister for Emergency Services, in the August session of the state government sitting last year. The legislation imposed a reasonably onerous condition on rural fire services to give authorities for developments. My understanding is that they are just not geared up to do it. One would think that it is not more than just a coincidence that you are in town today and they had a meeting about it in Queanbeyan yesterday, and there does seem to be some progress.

We have been advocating that, basically, it is absolutely sheer stupidity to be thinking about fire proofing a new development that might be an infill amongst 20 or 30 other buildings. If a fire comes, what is the point of saving one building if the other 20 existing buildings burn down? If the other 20 catch on fire, trust me, that one will also burn down. We are saying that, in terms of resort protection, we should be looking at a precinct based approach, where you try to save the whole village. Our village is probably five-, six- or seven-eighths already constructed. We have only another 400 or 500 beds to build at Thredbo; Perisher has another 1,300 on top of about 4,000 that they have. We should be trying to protect the whole of the village. I would find it amazing if you went to Cooma and the Cooma town brigade told you that they were only going to protect and put out fires in Lambie Street, Commissioner Street and up near the railway station. It simply does not make sense to me.

Mr SCHULTZ—Finally, regarding the problem that you are having with the planning department, is there a statutory requirement, as far as a time frame is concerned, to respond to applications within 28 or 30 days?

Mr Huggett—The statutory time frame for that would be 40 days. If you did not get a response within 40 days, you could take it to be deemed refused, and then you would have a right of appeal to the Land and Environment Court.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you.

Mr BARTLETT—I want to pursue that a bit further if I could. The statutory time frame is 40 days, and these have been delayed for how long—did you say since October?

Mr Huggett—Lot 276 at Woodridge was submitted and it took 101 days, as I said, to come back approved, with no special conditions attached.

Mr BARTLETT—And others have been delayed indefinitely?

Mr Huggett—Yes, quite a few have not come back yet, so it is a bit hard to pin a tail on it. One was submitted on 5 December and still came back with such draconian conditions imposed. They said that you needed to implement asset protection zones, which had to be clear of all vegetation for up to 30 metres from one building to the next. It so happens that, within 30 metres, there is another timber building, so I am not sure whether we make it a development condition that the chap who builds here can only build if he knocks down the bloke's place next door.

Mr BARTLETT—And the only recourse is expensive action in the Land and Environment Court?

Mr Huggett—Yes, you go to the Land and Environment Court.

Mr BARTLETT—So, by indefinite delay, obstacles and difficult conditions, the RFS can effectively prevent, rather than just delay, anyone.

Mr Huggett—They can. The reality is that in the resort areas we traditionally only build from the October long weekend until June the next year. If they hold up a DA that is in there now for more than two or three weeks, it is just not going to be possible to get started. Most people would not start, because they would not be able to complete a building that might have a value of $1 million, having to spend $750,000 to leave it in the ground for a whole winter and not get any return on it. They might as well leave it until the next year.

Mr BARTLETT—Given that this legislation can effectively either deliberately or, through frequent delays, unintentionally sterilise the block of land, what is your view of the fact that the state government has refused to compensate people whose land could effectively be sterilised?

Mr Huggett—In the case of Thredbo they will run the risk of a commercial challenge. I got a letter, it was undated but we got it on 4 June, where the Deputy Director General of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources advises:

… the Department is working to achieving a more integrated and efficient approach to the assessment of development proposals including bushfire management and the advice of the Rural Fires Service.

The Department is conscious of ensuring that the development assessment process is both comprehensive and timely, with a view to assisting sustainable construction activity in the resorts.

Mr BARTLETT—Is that timely or time consuming?

Mr Huggett—It could be a mis-type.

Mr BARTLETT—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you put a dollar value on what Thredbo lost through that fire period?

Mr Clifford—Kosciusko Thredbo, as a company, made an insurance claim in excess of $800,000. We expect the village lost a similar amount of money in direct tangible revenues and profits. We provided a lot of goods and services free of charge—food, accommodation—to a variety of people. Those costs were not included in our assessments. Due to the bushfires and the circumstances that Garry was talking about, we have probably lost five developments worth up to $15 million. They have been stalled for 12 months. One of those developers has actually walked away and said that it is all too hard.

CHAIR—You said earlier that you contribute that amount and so you basically have the same role as a shire council. We have heard from shire councils that when the fires were on they provided various things like graders and other equipment. In some cases they may have hired stuff from subcontractors, and they have subsequently invoiced the New South Wales government for the use of that equipment and reimbursement of the subcontractors that they employed. Presumably Kosciusko Thredbo is in the same sort of position?

Mr Clifford—Yes, we probably are. We provided an array of equipment. I guess Thredbo is a bit like a shire council, in that we have one of most things. We provided anything that we could provide and that was needed. However, we took the position that being a good corporate citizen we would not bill anyone for any time, work, effort, machinery, radio, satellite telephones, accommodation, meals et cetera. We accepted that as part of our role of providing for the Thredbo community. We were also really thanking the services and the people who turned up to Thredbo to help fight the fire.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can you put a figure on that corporate contribution?

Mr Clifford—We had a hotel some nights running at 100 per cent occupancy. There were firefighters staying there. We fed people three meals a day for up to six or seven weeks. Sometimes we were feeding 200 people a session. I imagine that we have probably contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars. I want to add one thing: a lot of people talk about hazard reduction in the sense that it seems to automatically mean burning. In Thredbo and all of the resort areas, we believe that a lot more hazard reduction could be done by clever clearing, ridge line clearing—not big scars but we think that it does not necessarily mean burning. As a resort operator, we do not really want back burning or hazard reductions every six years that make the bush blackened. There are other alternatives in highly sensitive areas.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submission and your evidence this afternoon. It has been very useful for the committee.

[3.10 p.m.]

ALLEN, Mrs Beverley, Member, Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association

LITCHFIELD, Mr Charles (Ian) Antony, Treasurer, Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association

LITCHFIELD, Mr James, Member, Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association

MAGUIRE, Mr Robert Edward, Member, Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association

MITCHELL, Mrs Susan Kathrine, Chairman, Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association

CHAIR—Welcome. I do not think I need to repeat the formalities aspect of the proceedings and evidence, which you all would have heard with previous witnesses. We have the submission of the Cooma District Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association. I am also aware that James Litchfield has put in a separate submission, as an individual. Those things are on the public record, and the committee has that information. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mrs Mitchell—We want to draw attention to the diversified effect of the fire. The fire has not only burned the park but it has also burned private land. It has done enormous damage to the environment. There will be enormous weed problems in the parks afterwards, and there will be enormous social problems for farmers. What I have done today is to ask a diverse lot of people to come and support what we have said in different ways. I thought we would start with Bob, who is probably our most impassioned one.

CHAIR—I can vouch for that!

Mr Maguire—Here are some photos that were taken of our block the day before yesterday. It joins the park, and the park is wilderness. Ninety per cent of our block burned. It displaced 100 cows and calves. It will cost us, in my opinion, up to $50,000 to fix the block and to keep the cattle going. The worst part is that the block is not recovering. In the timbered areas it is eroding. I think I need advice as to whether it would be suitable to take the stock back next year. If I cannot, I definitely will consider a challenge to the park for compensation.

My biggest problem is that, over the last years, nothing has been learned. The fire that went through in 1965 was stopped on graze country within the park, in 1983 it was stopped on graze country outside the park, and this time it was stopped on graze country again. There is ideological belief that burning is the only answer, but it is not the only answer—it is a tool, and it has to be used with stock or some other method.

Recommendation 10 of Dr Edgar's report—the man who shut the park—was that grazing be used as a tool, but it has never been done. The beauty of using stock as a tool is that you know the number you put in, and you can decide when to take them out. The way it has been going in the last 30 years is that, where the country has been burnt and the damage has been done, they say, 'We have to lock this up and let it regenerate.' What it does is it locks it up and makes a bigger mess because it scrubs up and builds up and you have the dead timber from before. A prime example is to drive down the Tantangara Road and look on the right-hand side at the mess that was created since 1983. I was there. You could have driven a mob of 1,000 sheep through that country with one dog, and now you cannot walk through it sideways. The horrific consequences of that will wipe out Adaminaby next time there is a fire. Nothing has been learned, and that is what I am passionate about. That is enough from me for the minute.

CHAIR—Thanks, Bob.

Mr I. Litchfield—On the environmental side, I have a letter—which I given have been permission to give to the inquiry—which gives a picture of how that total area was, going back many generations. We have been talking about the environment and the biodiversity of the park, which we consider has drastically changed for the worse. The letter reads:

Dear Bruce,

As requested, a brief summary of my years living in the Kosciusko National Park.

Being the fifth generation to live in the park (my family having lived in the Yarrangobilly area), I can remember quite well being taken to and fro from the Yarrangobilly in the north to Charlotte Pass in the south, where my parents went in 1930 to manage the Chalet at Charlotte Pass.

All through the 1930's and 1940's the High Country, and I mean country right to the top of Kosciusko, was open to grazing, if only for a very limited time each year.

I had the pleasure of riding the main range, as a boy, with a Mr. Jack Adams who camped at Spencer's Creek for over sixty-five years straight, attending to his sheep. The things that stick most vividly in my mind was the large patches of snow daisies—they were everywhere, and every kind of wild-flower.

January was a magic month to be in the mountains; the colour was something to be seen. I have photos (taken in the 1930's) around the Seamen's area, of sheep grazing on snow-grass, which look much like a crop of rye at harvest time, and literally acres of snow daisies in the back-ground, obviously not showing any adverse affects of being grazed.

All the park, from the Pilot Mountain in the south to Talbingo in the north, was burnt after muster in the autumn (weather permitting) and sometimes in the early spring, which didn't seem to have an adverse affect on coming summer displays of flowers and, indeed, the wild-life, that was abundant in those years.

As grasshoppers were always plentiful, bird life was something to be seen. Even in the middle of winter one would get visits, on good days, from birds that had moved to the safety of the Thredbo, Murray or Gihi rivers for their winter home.

There were mountain huts all through the mountains and tracks were always kept in order, mainly by constant use, and access was always available for people from all walks of life to visit and enjoy, whether it be on foot, horse, and in some parts, vehicles.

I remember, very vividly, the fires of 1939 as I was home from school staying with my grandparents at Yarrangobilly Caves house. The Caves house was saved by family and resident stockmen in the close vicinity. It was all done for the love of the mountains.

I remember travelling back a few days later to the Chalet to my parents. Kiandra Plain was still green with lots of sheep and cattle and, I would imagine, all sorts of wild-life. I believe all the other plains—Happy Jacks, Boobie, Grey Mare etc. were also spared from the fire, which was really only in the timber canopy.

After the fire things really came back fairly quickly, with the exception of those parts that had been locked up and had added fuel.

The Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric story is known by one and all. I was one of the first employed, and was there for a short time in 1949 through to 1951, and wild-life abounded then.

I have since paid a few visits to the High Country in summer, and find it difficult to come to terms with the difference. No bird life to be seen in the High Country, kangaroos and wallabies not sighted, but pigs are plentiful and lots of country rooted up by same. The trout streams, once alive with fish, are now in very short supply. All in all, not a very happy experience compared to what it was once like.

Looking back some sixty years plus I find it hard to believe that stocking was the cause of the reputed damage done to the park. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent trying to revegetate on the leeward side of the mountains, that the snow stays on well into the summer and sometimes all the year around, for no visible results.

Now, I believe most of the huts, that withstood the fires of 1939, have been burnt because nobody was there to protect them. Another part of our history destroyed through lack of care.

There must be a way around the imparkation that has occurred. A compromise must be reached where we get animals back into the mountains to balance what it was like before we “whites” arrived and what it is now.

CHAIR—Who is that letter from?

Mr I. Litchfield—That is from Gordon Day, whom I think Mr Schultz would know well.

Mr J. Litchfield—My concern has been the question of management. We all know that bushfires have always been with us and they always will be. It is when they turn into firestorms that we have the complete evidence that management has failed. That is the crux of the position that we have to face, because if it does not change it will go on happening over and over again. To do that we have to examine the natural order that prevailed before settlement. At that time there were plenty of animals in these areas and the Aboriginals burnt regularly. It is those two things—animals and fire—that formed the natural order and that is the only thing that will maintain it in a satisfactory condition.

There is plenty of evidence that the landscapes in Australia were quite different before white settlement than they are now. In the submission I made I have listed a whole lot of people—explorers and early settlers, from Abel Tasman in 1642 right at the south of Tasmania to Leichhardt right up in the Northern Territory—who reported on and described the landscape. They all say that the landscape was open grassland studded with trees: ‘parklike’ was the

common word that they used. I think that applied to the mountains as well as around Sydney. It obviously does not apply today.

The only way we can mimic those conditions is to use fire judiciously at the right time. But to reduce very much the amount of fire that needs to be used animals should be applied to the area because they can control a lot of the growth of the fire assisting scrub that is there today. That means that at the end of the season only little patches of mosaic burning have to be done. Animals have many other aspects. In every environment you need some disturbance to take place because that is how you stop the vigorous growing plants from overshadowing the little ones. The action of animals in the soil creates seedbeds, allows water penetration and generally speeds up the breakdown of the inert plant material—the dead stuff—and its return to humus and to the soil.

The other aspect of having animals up there, which is also very important and has been touched on today, is that you have in the mountains people who learn about the mountains and how to manage them. They are there all the time looking after their animals and therefore they provide a very large body of knowledge about the area. This has been lost to us now as most of the old hands have gone. The other thing they can do is contribute to the control of noxious weeds and feral animals, including the two-legged variety, and generally assist in the total management picture. As has been brought up already today, the areas that are controlled in this way—the land cannot be grazed everywhere of course but most of it can be—are areas that provide access. So when fires start you would have quick, safe access to the fires to handle and stop them before they get going.

In short, we really do have to rethink this right from the beginning. It is a major task. There are so many vested interests and set ideas out there that it will be extraordinarily difficult to do, but unless it is done we predict now that the same thing will happen—just as we predicted this was going to happen.

CHAIR—Thank you. Mrs Allen, do you have something to add?

Mrs Allen—Thank you for this opportunity to speak. I just wanted to reinforce some of the things that have been said about the hazard reduction programs and the opinion around, from some people, that they are worthless. If hazard reduction is not a good tool, why was it used in Canberra north when the suburbs were threatened? I believe they got in with bulldozers and a little bit of hazard reduction to try and help save Canberra north. There was a program on TV—some of you may have seen it—about Tharwa and the fire control officer there, who had predicted this but saved Tharwa village very efficiently by having very good methods of hazard reduction and prevention in place at the time of the fires. Phil Cheney is the CSIRO expert and I imagine you probably will consult him. He has been up and seen Barry Aitchison on many occasions and said we should be doing a lot more hazard reduction, not less. I respect his opinion. I have read a lot of what he said, and I think it would be wise if you were all familiar with what he has done.

The second thing is the differentiation in the compensation for the various different firefighters, which has caused a lot of anxiety and a lot of upset between the different teams that came in—some being paid and some not. How can we compensate? I know it looks impossible but I think it is very important that this should be top of your agenda to look at. There are

farmers that have lost six to eight weeks of work on their properties. Quite apart from getting a bit of remuneration for the 5,000 or 6,000 miles that they have done in their vehicles, they should have other remuneration or tax relief or something. You have better minds to work it out than I have, but there must be something to bring this down to a common denominator.

The third thing is to do with when I was involved in a backup for catering. I think Dave Glasson was the only one that touched on the subject—maybe a couple of others did—of how very stretched people were in little fire brigades like Rocky Plains, who rang me at one stage in a bad state. We got organised in no time quick, but I think we could do a lot better. I only involved three local organisations in Berridale, but we could have had 10 local organisations involved. We could have had a real team going. It is something that we should put in place throughout New South Wales. It could be the CWA, or the local fire brigade officer could choose someone different to coordinate the whole thing so that we have a backup.

I do not want to throw any aspersions on the catering team that were in Jindabyne, who I believe were terrific, but they did send the men out carrot, avocado and lettuce—and firefighters want bread and meat! That is what we have to provide and it has to be done well. When you think of a little fire brigade like Rocky Plains having five or six fire brigades coming into the little place for breakfast—and then lunches had to go out and then there was dinner at night and again a packed meal had to go out at night—you can see that the backup was very necessary. This was not just an organisational thing for the food, but also the people were very stretched emotionally and mentally. Most of our families were out fighting the fires. We did not know where they were. Just the fact that we got people calling in and saying, 'I'll sweep the floor or clean the barbecue or just go and chat,' was very necessary. We must have that backup organisation in place for another disaster.

CHAIR—Thank you. Do the New South Wales farmers have any sort of assessment of the ongoing emotional impact on farmers in your area resulting out of the fires, because it hit at a time of difficulty, drought-wise, and a lot of people were probably trying to feed sheep and cattle as well as fight fires. It must have caused huge strains on families. Do you have any assessment of the ongoing impact of that?

Mr I. Litchfield—I do not think we have a very good idea about that because, quite frankly, people do not tend to talk about those things. I think the government agencies have done a study in that regard. To be quite honest, I do not know what the outcome of that has been, but it was certainly indicated through the press that they had done so.

CHAIR—Maybe Bob will know the odd thing about this next matter. Subsequent to the fires, you passed around some photos of dogs hanging in trees. What has been the experience—and others can speak about other areas—of wild dogs prior to and after the bushfire?

Mr Maguire—Prior to the fire they were getting heaps and now they are getting more. The park does not know how many are there—they have admitted that—but it is just becoming catastrophic. They have crossed the Eucumbene River out at Snowy Plain and they are now in Rocky Plain, so next they will be at Hazeldene. It is not a stupid thing to say because they are coming out in huge numbers. I saw four dogs on one kill in January. There were 42 dogs caught at Snowy Plains—over 70 dogs since the fires at Adaminaby and Yaouk. There is an area of ground from Yaouk to Bolero that is now virtually destocked of sheep. I am talking about 30,000

sheep—that is a lot of bales of wool. For every thousand sheep, you are talking $40,000 that someone is losing. That is the problem with the dogs—I have lost 50 sheep this year.

Mr McARTHUR—If there are no sheep, there is no food for the dogs. Is that right?

Mr Maguire—If there are no wallabies there is no feed for the dogs, so they come out looking for the sheep.

Mr SCHULTZ—Just on that point, you might give people an indication of the type and breed of dog that we are talking about—monstrous dogs that will attack human beings, are we?

Mr Maguire—These pictures are not real flash, but there is a picture of my dog. He is a dog that stands up to my knee and he is beside those dogs hanging in the trees. Forty-two dogs have been caught in that area and the trapper has protected three flocks of sheep for the summer in semi-open country. If the sheep went back—and this is the crux of it—to where they did run, the kill figures would go through the bloody roof.

Mr SCHULTZ—I mentioned that because I have seen the skins of the dogs.

Mr Maguire—We cannot work out what they are derived from. There appears to be husky in them. They are thick legged, huge boned dogs. Some of them have big bushy tails. I am at a loss. But with the dogs and the fires, to be a park neighbour is not a good thing.

Mrs Mitchell—You only took those photos yesterday.

Mr Maguire—Two days ago.

Mrs Mitchell—So it has not recovered at all, has it?

Mr Maguire—The problem with the whole thing is that there is a set way of dealing with the management up there, and they will not deviate. With the telegraph line that runs from the park boundary outside Adaminaby to Kiandra, they want the telecom to pull them out with a helicopter, because they will not let them drive the vehicles onto the grass.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I say at the outset, Ian, that I was a little bit emotive when you read out that letter. It sounded like the person that you said wrote the letter. I think that illustrates the depth of feeling that people that know the country and have lived in and experienced the country have for the environment. I wanted to make that point, for what it was worth.

I noticed that in the submission there was reference made to discussions that occurred during the regional forest agreement process and reference to Aboriginal elders who went into the Kosciuszko and commented on the disgraceful condition of the Kosciuszko. A suggestion was made that it might be appropriate for those people—and I understand the suggestion came from the Aboriginal elders—to start cleaning up and looking after it, and it was knocked backed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The reason that I am raising that particular part of your submission is to give the community at large an indication that this concern about the Kosciuszko National Park and the way it is being managed is not just coming from us Caucasians who have settled this country from day one but also coming from the Indigenous

people of this country, who also have a concern about the way in which it is being managed. Have you heard any more about their request to the National Parks and Wildlife Service in terms of whether they have been recognised for the concerns that they have?

Mrs Mitchell—No. I was on with the RFA and they came to us at one meeting and I suggested then that this should happen, that it would be a fantastic opportunity for the Aborigines to manage it the way they had and that we should manage our bit beside it, and they just laughed. I thought it was the most wonderful opportunity we have missed.

CHAIR—Who laughed?

Mrs Mitchell—Everybody at the meeting. They were parkies and conservatives and conservationists and the lot. It was a cross-section. They just thought it was a bit stupid. But I think it would have been the most fantastic exercise. It is an opportunity that has been missed. But I suppose it still could happen.

Mr SCHULTZ—I would also like to have some comment on or extrapolation of one of the dot points in the submission where you talk about the issue of the lack of groundcover and the problems that that may create with regard to future weed infestation, particularly the serrated tussock, which I notice is becoming a very real problem in this area. I know how quickly that spreads because I have got a lot of it in the electorate I represent.

Mrs Mitchell—It is a very virulent seed, isn't it? If there is no ground coverage, it is sure to survive.

Mr SCHULTZ—And it is light seed that floats a long way. Could you comment on the sorts of things like that that you are concerned about?

Mrs Mitchell—We found out here in the grasslands that where there has been a drought, and it is a very bad drought for some time, the amount of seed that germinates afterwards has a lot of serrated tussock amongst it, and there are great mother lodes in the park. We are guessing that this is what will happen, that this weed will proliferate, because that is what it does. Where everything else has gone it just builds up and gets very strong.

Mr SCHULTZ—On another matter, we have heard in the evidence that we have received through this committee over the weeks we have been under way, taking written submissions and verbal evidence, that there is an enormous amount of concern out there in the community about the way which the morale of volunteers is being affected when they see National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel working shifts and working a specific amount of overtime and then knocking off. Can anyone give us an indication of the sorts of concerns that have been raised with you on that issue?

Mr I. Litchfield—Yes, just a personal experience, and certainly the parks service individuals that we were working with were very cooperative while they were there. It was a fairly small area of grassland within the park running down to the Gungahlin River that we were asked to control so that it did not jump the river. There were only four of us there—that is inclusive of the parks personnel. At 8 p.m. they were very apologetic but they said that they had to go and that their relieving team would be in there within half an hour. They never appeared. We were very

fortunate that the weather conditions meant that just two of us were able to contain that small fire. But when that happens all over the whole fire spectrum obviously those who know that they are going to stay there feel somewhat put out when people just leave and there is nobody there to relieve them.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you very much.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Maguire, what of wild dogs? I have some wild dog problems in my electorate up in the north-east of Victoria, up in the upper Murray area. What exactly would you recommend to deal with the wild dog problem?

Mr Maguire—Aerial bait them in May and September or whatever time you like. That is what would be the thing. Then you follow up with your trapping and so forth. But with the number of dogs that are there it is impossible to get to the boundary of where you want to get. We are down here somewhere at Snowy Plain and up there has not been touched, but they are all coming in from here.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And you are not allowed to do that currently?

Mr Maguire—No, we cannot aerial bait because we might poison the quolls. There had been research going on with it, but it has been halted. There is no aerial baiting in the park and there is no baiting above the ground. When you aerial bait, you chuck it every 10 seconds out of a helicopter going at the enormous speed of 1,000 startled gazelles, as I can tell you as I have done it. That is the ultimate because you can travel a lot of rough country in a short time and put them where you want them.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What does the New South Wales government currently do to deal with the wild dog problem?

Mr Maguire—It is handled by the rural protection boards, although they have changed their name. Most of it is done in parks. That is where the dogs are sourcing from. It is coordinated with the parks and the Rural Lands Protection Board.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What do they actually do?

Mr Maguire—They mound bait. They dig a hole in the ground. They shove the bait in there because the quoll will not dig down so far. Then they shove an iron post alongside it with a cattle tag with the number of the mound on it flapping in the breeze and the dog is supposed to come along and eat the bait.

Mr SCHULTZ—They spot it and read the sign saying the meat is down here!

Mr Maguire—Yes! We have had dogs pass 12 mound baits and then be trapped.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Does the relevant authority recognise the relative failure of this approach?

Mr Maguire—Oh no, it is successful! The numbers of kills have been reduced. The percentages that they have fiddled with are probably true, but the country is destocked. I am saying there are 30,000 acres not running sheep and the sheep cannot go back because if they do they will get killed.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mrs Allen, I was reminded by your comments of all the efforts to which the non-firefighter volunteers went to feed the hordes over the many weeks. It was a terrific effort. Quite often too many members of the public, particularly those in the cities, forget that it is not just the volunteer firefighters but the SES, the CWA, the Red Cross and everyone else who feels they need to do something to pitch in that keep the whole firefighting effort going, so our many thanks and congratulations for your efforts. I certainly know that never before have I had a greater—or better—variety of baked cakes over two months as I did during the fires.

I was very interested in your comments on compensation for volunteer firefighters, because we do have a problem. There has been a lot of discussion about whether it is appropriate when you have a volunteer force to pay them. There are quite passionate opinions. Some volunteer brigades say that this would ruin the very essence of what it is all about, but at the same time there is a recognition that it is quite often those who can least afford to lose money who are part of the brigades. There is the issue of out of pocket expenses and whether there should be some nominal daily rate. I like your idea of tax relief. Do you have any other ideas about the sort of relief we should have? Also, if you raise the question of some sort of financial compensation for volunteer firefighters do you then extend it to other volunteers—whether they are in the SES, CWA or Red Cross et cetera? That is another potential problem.

Mrs Allen—Yes, I can see we are stirring up a hornet's nest. I just feel that there were so many in our district who gave so much of their time. We have to remember that their businesses were still there. Maybe their wives and family were working too; it is very difficult to keep that business running. Tax relief would be a very real incentive. Another idea is to have a separate, autonomous body—I think Ross McKinney talked about this—to handle the fire control in the national park. Perhaps it might be an incentive for volunteer firefighters to be members of such a body. It could be an extra job for them to join the various hazard reduction burn-offs that are organised by such a body and be paid for it. It is just a little incentive—it is an off-farm income. It would not impinge on those other things that you are talking about.

Mrs Mitchell—Could I just add something to that? I think that the problem in this area is that we abut on the national park. It is fine for the park to pay the people that are protecting their land, because that is their job. But it is the volunteers that go in there and get dumped in there after the paid workers have done their 10 or 16 hours and then it is time for them to go home—'Sorry, mate.' They are left there fighting their fires for them. That is the problem.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I appreciate that. It is very demoralising.

Mrs Mitchell—Yes, and it is very complicated. I can understand that they do not really want to be paid volunteers, but—

Mr SCHULTZ—It is pretty disconcerting when the commitment to protecting the biodiversity that they talk about from time to time seems focused on how much overtime they use when the fires start burning it up.

Mrs Mitchell—You cannot blame them for doing that: it is their job. I think it is excusable. I do not like it much, but I can understand why if your job is working in the park and you have worked so many hours in a week and then you have to work extra hours you accept that.

Mrs Allen—I would like to say something about the serrated tussock we were on a minute ago. John King was here this morning and he was talking about the Avonside Road fire. I went down that road afterwards and saw that the whole of it was totally washed away all the way to the Snowy River. I do not know if you saw it on your tour, but half the mountain seems to be down in the Snowy River itself because they had a flash flood when that fire ended. I think John said it was something like 70 millimetres in 20 minutes. So it all washed away—we could not get to the bottom of the road; we had to go around another way to see it. All the understorey is gone. There is no bush at all under the trees. The various conservationists who were with us said they would have liked to have seen some natural regeneration. It will come; there was some there. There was just the tiniest bit of serrated tussock already starting in that sand, right down on the Snowy River. We should think laterally and on that steep country throw out a lot of rye, phalaris—what would you say, James?

Mr J. Litchfield—We would need to have a look at it first.

Mrs Allen—We have to think differently. It is the mother lode of all mother lodes of serrated tussock. If we can deal with it now, while it is bare, and throw it out, it would be a huge saving.

CHAIR—The committee certainly saw some of the environmental impacts on those very hot, burnt areas following rain. At Junction Shaft, for instance, there was a red slick, like an oil slick, on the water. I understand that the Snowy hydro was actually diverting that water. It would not put it through the turbines because of the potential damage that the water could do to the turbines.

Mr McARTHUR—We have been talking about the wildlife and feral animals. Can we just get an understanding of the number of wildlife losses? You refer to it in your comments, but can you just give us a bit of a judgment? Secondly, how many feral animals are there in the national park? We have talked about the dog population getting out of control. Are you seeing these two things becoming a problem? We will talk about serrated tussock in a minute.

Mrs Mitchell—There are dogs, pigs, goats and rabbits, although there are not so many rabbits now.

Mr I. Litchfield—There are also horses.

Mr McARTHUR—Can you just tell us which feral animals you have in large numbers?

Mr Maguire—There are lots of horses. Pigs are definitely worrying—the trapper who does the dogs on the Snowy Plain has shot about 60 or 80 of them in the last 18 months and has brought their numbers down a bit, but, of course, they are still breeding. The parks service shot 30 pigs from a helicopter on the side of Jagungal and they thought that was good. I said: 'I reckon if you went up there and only found one, it would be good. If you found 30, there must be oodles of them there.' As to the wildlife, on the Snowy Plain, where we have the block, there were bands of red wallabies in groups of 20 and 30—you would see them every time you went

up there to check your stock. I did not see one of them in front of the fire that came through. I went there two days ago and I saw two.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your local judgment on the devastation of the wildlife?

Mr Maguire—Every time you back-burn, you kill them. As the fire spots ahead, they get done, too. If the main fire is coming along and it spots, say, a kilometre or two kilometres ahead, you get another fire front and it just drives them into it.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are saying that the hot fire really devastated the wildlife?

Mr Maguire—Hot fire kills everything. It is a total wipe-out. The dogs seem to be able to get around it, though. It must have burnt dogs, too, but it did not burn enough of them.

Mrs Allen—Only the slow ones!

Mr McARTHUR—Can we just get back to the serrated tussock argument. You were good enough to send some serrated tussock down to western Victoria—it was just a small package, sent down on a saddle or something—and we thank you very much for that! Some of us have great concerns about it because it can spread quite dramatically. But would you say that the serrated tussock problem could really be one of the biggest devastations coming out of the fire in the national park and this recent fire, in that it could spread totally over the Monaro—apart from the fact that it is totally over there now?

Mr J. Litchfield—After a fire and a drought, the ground opens up and you get much better germination of weeds. But, as far as the park itself goes, I do not think that is the main weed problem. I think that St John's wort, briars and blackberries are really rampant up there.

Mr McARTHUR—So you guys have the serrated tussock under control out here in the good country?

Mr J. Litchfield—Pretty well.

Mr SCHULTZ—The water resources have a lot of briar and St John's wort in them, and that will seed into the park anyway.

Mr McARTHUR—What was the attitude of your group to going in to fight in the national park, bearing in mind that the fire trails have not been well maintained and there has been a build-up of fuel material because of a lack of reduction burns? We have heard other submissions and points of view.

Mrs Mitchell—Absolute frustration, I think.

Mr J. Litchfield—We absolutely support what was said. The experience of everyone who has gone near the fires has been the inadequacy of the fire trials, particularly those that have not been maintained and those that have been deliberately blocked to stop people from going in.

Mr McARTHUR—One or two of the earlier witnesses said they would not go in next time. Would that be a reflection of the New South Wales Farmers Federation's opinion?

Mr I. Litchfield—Looking at New South Wales farmers throughout the state, there are definitely brigades with New South Wales farmers members in them who have categorically stated that they will not fight fires on government land.

Mr McARTHUR—Because?

Mr I. Litchfield—Because of these very—

Mr McARTHUR—The trails and the build up of material?

Mr I. Litchfield—Also the bureaucracy that is now involved.

Mrs Allen—And the danger.

Mrs Mitchell—There was a guy who could not come today, whom I asked to come, and he said that the fire people should listen to the locals. National Parks and forestry, who were trying to manage the fires, had no idea of the country. They were reading maps but did not know how to read them—they did not do that very well. The Rural Fire Service has people who are playing at firefighting and who are not prepared to do any work—not all of them; some of them are fantastic but some of them were playing soldiers. Fire crews from the park were good and worked well together. Of the 40 kays of back-burning, half was done on private land and half in the park. The point I wanted to make really is that he felt that people should be asking the locals how to fight fires and that the people who come in to the park have not got the experience or the knowledge of the terrain and the country. It is a mishmash.

Mr McARTHUR—The other point you raise in your submission is the mountain cattlemen's huts and the dams in national parks to assist in firefighting. Could you help us with a couple of comments on those two issues?

Mrs Mitchell—They just felt that the water is not there anymore.

Mr McARTHUR—Some witnesses have said that dams have actually been filled in.

Mrs Mitchell—That is right, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—What would the rationale be for that?

Mrs Mitchell—To take it back to nature. To take the western division, for example, there is a theory that there is an explosion of kangaroo numbers because of the watering points. I do not know, but this flashed into my mind when you asked this question: in the park they are probably trying to keep a natural flow of animals, as it always was.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you advocate creation of some dams and waterholes?

Mrs Mitchell—It would be great if you could keep the native animals in the park and not on our paddocks. As it is now, farmers are carrying the stock of the national park.

Mr McARTHUR—If you put a dam in the park you might get more native animals coming onto your farm. Is that what you are saying?

CHAIR—No, it is the other way around.

Mrs Mitchell—They might stay in the park if the dam is there. What is happening now is that they are coming out of the wilderness areas because they cannot jump around in there—

Mr McARTHUR—And drinking your water.

Mrs Mitchell—And eating our grass.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the cattlemen's huts? We have had some comment on that in Victoria.

Mrs Mitchell—They are part of the heritage of the mountains.

Mr McARTHUR—The suggestion by some informal comments is that they are not worth saving. Do you have a view on that?

Mrs Mitchell—I think they are part of our heritage. I am an old-fashioned girl.

Mr Maguire—They should be renewed. The park policy is that you should not rely on a hut because you could get there and find it is burnt down and you might perish, so take a tent with you and be prepared to do your own thing. That is the serious thing. That is dead set right. They are trying not to renew a lot of the huts.

Mr McARTHUR—But your group is advocating that you renew them, for historical and practical purposes?

Mr Maguire—Yes. I am, personally.

Mr ORGAN—You have said that dogs and fires have had a major impact on local farmers. Can you tell the committee when the park was closed to grazing, for example, and what impact, apart from feral dogs and fire, this has had on the livelihood of farmers and graziers in the immediate areas?

Mr Maguire—The park was shut to grazing on snow leases in 1969. Permissive occupancies were allowed to run their term to 1975. That is when it was shut to grazing. It has had that amount of time to build up. Studies about it have been done. Max Leitch, who is now deceased, wrote *A recipe for disaster* in 1986. *A look at the park after 20 years of closure to grazing stock* was done by university students, which included my daughter. And there was the *Report on the condition of Kosciusko National Park etc* by R.W. Condon. They are must-read things to get a grip on what has occurred in the past. The whole point is that, when the park was grazed in blocks of 1,800 to 2,500 acre paddocks, someone was there to look after it. It has now all been

let run loose and allowed to grow. You can imagine 20 or 30 years of bark piling under trees. This is what gives it the big whoosher and sends it into the crowns.

Mr ORGAN—Did this closure have a financial impact on farmers in the immediate area?

Mr Maguire—It did. It has taken a lot of money out of the area. But the reason for that was that they reckoned that growing wool and beef in the park generated 40c an acre, but they could get 70c out of harvesting the water. That was more money, so the stock had to go. But they did not realise that they both went hand in hand. There is less water coming into the creeks because of the blotting paper effect of the undergrowth, the rubbish and the scrub that has grown up. It all takes water out of the land and, while you get a bigger run-off after the fire, you also get the soil that comes with it.

Mr ORGAN—Has this impact had any effect on the families and the ability of local people to engage in bushfire fighting?

Mr Maguire—It has had a huge financial bearing on the town. This town would be like Tumbarumba if it were not for the Snowy Mountains Authority and the scheme. It would have a population like that of Tumbarumba, where the café shuts for lunch.

Ms PANOPOULOS—To clarify your answer to Mr Organ, when you said 'they', referring to the 70c return on water, who were you referring to?

Mr Maguire—The park wanted the stock out. The park said that the stock caused damage to the ground and were the cause of erosion. That is the challenge that we have.

Mr BARTLETT—Mr Litchfield, you commented a few minutes ago that, because of the frustrations and the lack of safety with fire trails, fuel accumulation and so on, the temptation is that a lot of people will decide it is just not worth going into national parks to fight fires there. We received the same comments this morning. I am trying to clarify my own thinking on that. If people go into the national parks to fight the fires there, does that make it more difficult to protect our own properties when the fires come out of the parks and onto the properties? Or, by putting all of your efforts into property protection rather than fighting the fire in the national park somewhere, can you adequately protect your own properties?

Mr I. Litchfield—I think under the present regime of park management, if we had waited until the fires that we have just experienced came out, a hell of a lot less effort would have been put in and the fires would have been much easier to control.

Mr BARTLETT—But would there have been a greater or lesser chance of protecting property then?

Mr I. Litchfield—I do not think that there would have been any less chance. I do not think the situation would have been any different.

Mr SCHULTZ—During the committee's inspection of the high country, we went up onto the plains area where grazing occurred in the past.

CHAIR—Some still occurs there today on the private blocks.

Mr SCHULTZ—We were astounded to see that the fires burned areas that were a significant distance away from the timber. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr Maguire—In our particular case, in our block, the fire went out when it hit the plain. It is three-quarters timber and one-quarter plain, but the fire went out. We did not put it out. It jumped the firebreak, but it went out. It kept going in different lines, but the grazed country had less fuel, so there was less fire. Up at Happy Jacks it scorched across that plain. That is just another example of locking country up and letting everything go rank.

Mr SCHULTZ—Happy Jacks is the area I am thinking about.

Mr Maguire—I saw thousands of sheep and cattle on that country when Happy Jacks was grazed out, and you would not have found a better patch. Now it is worthless.

Mr I. Litchfield—I think there was a question earlier this morning with regard to litigation against the park service, and the explanation for why people do not take that on was the expense of doing it. New South Wales Farmers have investigated taking action regarding the Goobang fire in central New South Wales about 18 months ago. The cost estimate that they were given to mount a case was $700,000.

CHAIR—I guess that is why people are reluctant to take some legal action.

Mr I. Litchfield—Basically, it boils down to even our representative body wondering whether it is worth it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence this afternoon and your submissions. It is very much appreciated.

Proceedings suspended from 4.06 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.

WALTERS, Mr Sidney William, Director, Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board

GREEN, Mr Michael James, Director, Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board. You have both been here during the afternoon, so you are aware of my opening statement with respect to evidence and the proceedings here this afternoon. We have your submission and we thank you for that. Would you like to make a brief opening statement, and then we will have some questions.

Mr Green—The board prepared the submission as an overview. The board was not directly involved in firefighting, although our staff were available for animal welfare issues that arose as the fires came onto the private land. At this stage of the afternoon we would have to say that our submission certainly supports the other submissions and an enormous amount of what has been said here today. We certainly acknowledge that fire is a fact of life anywhere and our submission notes that our eastern border from Badger right through to Steeple Flat did not burn this year. It is national park which has been run under the same conditions as so much of our western country that burned this year. We also note that our western side certainly burned this year and will burn again, whether that is sooner or later. Through the submission we made reference to where the board has been very heavily involved with wild dog management plans. At this stage, the best success we are achieving is where local knowledge is being used, where we have got access and where we are putting an integrated program into place using all methods that are legally available.

Mr Walters—I am a grazier from the Numbla Vale area, which is right on the edge of where the fire got to. I represent the Cooma Rural Land Protection Board in B division. I happen to be one of the old fellows that had stock on a mountain lease at Currando. I know exactly how we used to use fire to help the grazing fraternity in the mountains. As we mustered in the autumn, the mountain grasses behind us would be lit with a cool fire—we never, ever burned a tree and I do not think we ever burned a fencing post. The following summer when we went back for our few months—and it was only a few months—the part that was burned in the autumn was the best part of the paddock and there was no way you could light of fire on it and there was no way a fire could cross it. It had been burned, the dead fuel was gone and had been replaced by nice, green grass. Of course, you could not do the ridges in the timbered country like that, but this left breaks, in my opinion, between the ridges where you had some sort of a chance of holding a wildfire if it got going. We only ever had one while I was in the mountains, and it hardly went anywhere.

Besides that, I am here to represent B division of the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board. The fire came, as previous speakers have said, from Kosciuszko and Thredbo straight through to the back of Numbla Vale. It stopped actually on our boundary—we stopped it. There are a lot of people between Kosciuszko and Numbla Vale that lost many kilometres of fence, and it is still down. They have lost their livelihoods insofar as a lot of the bush grass has gone, but there was one thing that was proven again with stock. My brother's boys have still got a property, and where it was properly pasture improved and stocked properly, the fire parted and went around it. That backs up the value of stock in a fire situation, in my opinion.

I feel for our ratepayers in that area from Numbla Vale through to west of Jindabyne who have lost so much of their livelihood. I might add that a lot of them have also lost their good friends. There has been a certain amount of falling out—I do not know how to put it—between people who were good friends before the fire. I do not know why that happened, but it did in some cases. Down our way, in the Numbla Vale area, it did not. We stopped the fire on the western boundary of Numbla Vale. It was a godsend: we had a wind change for a couple of days.

I would like to see something done for my ratepayers in that Numbla Vale-Jindabyne area who have lost so much. I have been ringing around, and I found that one fellow has lost 20 kilometres of fencing. They have lost a lot of their stockfeed. One fellow lost his hay shed full of hay. Those are the sorts of things, and they are not being reimbursed as they should be. I will say this: there was a really good handout by the federal government. Every person I have talked to has received that, and they are very appreciative of the federal government and what they have done in that way. I do not know what the amount was; I did not happen to be one of them—but I nearly was.

I could go on all afternoon about how I think you could use fire to stop fire, but it has to be used the right way. I will get back onto Mr Maguire's subject of wild dogs. That is right: in the fire a lot of the little animals in the Kosciuszko park were burnt. The dogs have to eat something. I do not know how they got away; I suppose they are much faster—a dog generally has a bit more brains than a kangaroo, anyhow. They must have got away from it somehow. Now they are coming out onto private country—a lot more than they were. I think the reason is that they cannot get enough to eat in the park itself.

CHAIR—Sid, you mentioned that you grazed stock in the park before it was blocked off to you. We asked this, in part, of the previous witnesses. Could you explain the role of the land you had in the park, and how it worked with your overall management of your property and stock?

Mr Walters—We took a good half of the stock off the property at Numbla Vale and went onto a snow lease.

CHAIR—What time of year was that?

Mr Walters—We generally got down before Christmas—we got home for Christmas, I mean. We took it and let them go some time in December, and they had to be out before May. If you left them in until May, you ran a good chance of being caught in snow. That is where the moisture was that made the grass grow in the spring. It was a big help. I was running the property with my father at the time, and we ran a lot more stock. I will say this much: the stock that was run in the mountains was wool growing sheep. It was pure wool that came out of the mountains—there was no grass seed; there was no burr; it was pure wool, very clean.

CHAIR—So is it true to say that the loss of being able to use that land would effectively put a lot more pressure on the balance of your property—the fact that it is not getting that relief while you take some of the stock into the mountains?

Mr Walters—That is right, to a certain extent. It is so long ago now that I have had to make other arrangements, but it would have been really good over the last year or two—over this really bad drought period. I was back at Currando the other day—that was where we had the lease—and when I got onto where our lease was, like Mr Maguire if I had had my dog with me,

it would have run backwards to bark. It is that bad. It is grubbed up, and it used to be just a plain—we used to canter about all over it.

Mr BARTLETT—Mr Walters and Mr Green, you suggested in your submission that what would be valuable would be a meeting of interested stakeholders, including Rural Fire Service, NSW Farmers, National Parks and Wildlife Service, State Forests, Land and Water Conservation, conservation groups, Landcare et cetera. Has such a meeting been suggested before in this area?

Mr Green—I do not know if there has been with regard to the fires. That is the formula we have been using to try and address the dog situation.

Mr BARTLETT—So you have managed to bring all these representatives together?

Mr Green—We have brought together all stakeholders, acknowledging every pocket of country. The dogs are like wildfire—they do not know any boundaries.

Mr BARTLETT—Are you suggesting that a similar meeting ought to be set up to establish a common approach to dealing with the bushfire issue?

Mr Green—Certainly, starting with an open public meeting where all stakeholders and anybody who wants to have input can have input. But it must be built from the ground up. It is not something that can be built from Sydney or Canberra back down to here.

Mr BARTLETT—Do you think there would be a fair chance that you would be able to get such a meeting? Do you think—and I imagine this would be even more difficult—you would get any agreement out of that, given the very different views we have heard in evidence to this committee?

Mr Green—I think we could. I refer to the first of the management meetings we had in Jindabyne with regard to the dogs. I cannot remember how many people were there, but certainly all the stakeholders and all government agencies were there. There were easily 100 people there. At the end of the day, we came together to work towards the management plan. The management plan in that area has seen the men go into the field as dog trappers. With regard to the dogs, it is not perfect and there are a lot of gaps there, but it is a lot better than what we were doing.

Mr BARTLETT—You mentioned in your submission that one of the causes of bushfires is the wild dogs. Am I right in saying that that is because they remove or threaten the grazing animals and therefore there is greater growth of grass, fuel and so on?

Mr Green—Certainly, and I will let Sid talk to that in a minute too. Since the fires, roughly 200 dogs that have been trapped have come in. They have been trapped out of the way now. I think everybody has had a dog at some stage. Imagine trying to feed 200 dogs. That is only what has been trapped. That does not count those that have been poisoned and those that are still out there. We heard this morning with regard to Snowy Plain that where the grazing animals are the fires were able to be stopped. Snowy Plain is almost encompassed by national park. Browsing animals, be they wallabies or sheep—who cares?—all have the same effect, whether it be

grazing, trampling, recycling, camping underneath a tree, dispersing bark or those sorts of things. Big populations of dogs do not equal big populations of grazing animals.

Mr Walters—I would like to reiterate something that was said earlier. I think you have to have animals anywhere—I do not care what sorts of animals they are—to do the job. Mr Litchfield mentioned this earlier. If we had animals in that country, we would have access to it. The way it is, any of the tracks that I knew when I was there have pipe gates across them with locks on them. We cannot get in there. Therefore that is not used. That does not block any fires if you have grass growing right across it, does it? You have to have animals there. There are wild dogs hunting them all out, and people are not getting in there to get the wild dogs out. When I was at Currando, wild dogs were unknown in that country. I do not think I ever had anything to do with them. I was up there the other day and Teddy Taylor told me that he could have shot five off the veranda of the Currando house. That is how they multiply.

Mr McARTHUR—How are you going to handle the wild dog problem we have got? You are in charge of it, aren't you?

Mr Green—Yes. On the wild dog problem, we heard aerial baiting mentioned a while ago. Aerial baiting took over, as I see it, from the stockmen in the mountains, where they had broadscale control over a huge area. As the mountains were closed down to stock and people retreated, aerial baiting took over, whereby select ridges—known breeding areas of dogs—were aerial baited once or twice a year. Aerial baiting is efficient. You can cover big areas and it is fairly economical. At this stage aerial baiting is not a legal option; it is illegal in national parks. We still do some little pockets of private land.

The only way we can try to achieve broadscale control now is through a network of men—we will call them trappers—who are more than capable of using all legal methods available, be they mound baiting, shooting or, after getting permission, ground baiting. Certainly at this stage the only option we have to try to halt the spread of the dogs is to get a network of men in place who have fair dinkum jobs—who are funded and provided with vehicles, not working 10 hours a week—and all these sorts of things.

That is at the board level, through the management plans. They came about because of a state government directive on schedule 1 and schedule 2 lands that areas must be set aside for the preservation of 'purebred' dingoes—that is, all lands, public and private, must be addressed with regard to setting aside these core breeding areas, plus the other lands that are not identified and where wild dogs are regarded as a noxious animal.

Mr McARTHUR—How many wild dogs do you think you have in the territory? Do have a figure?

Mr Green—I could not begin to answer that.

Mr Walters—You would know as well as we would.

Mr Green—Certainly there are large numbers.

Mr McARTHUR—Give us a ballpark figure—what do you mean? Is it a couple of thousand? Is it 10,000 or 2,000 or 500 dogs in the park that are causing the trouble?

Mr Walters—We could not put a figure on it, I am sure.

Mr Green—We just could not.

Mr Walters—What I wanted to say, though, Chair, is that I think we are held down mainly by Kosciuszko National Park. This should be national. I think that the wild dog problem is national. I have been right around this continent and I know they have just as many wild dogs as we have here, if not more, in the northern part of this continent—but they do not run sheep. We run sheep, and this is why it is our big problem. But I do think it is a national problem and it should be fronted by the federal government. I do not think the state government should do it.

CHAIR—They have not succeeded yet, have they?

Mr Walters—No, they have not.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You know what they say: you have got to have a bit of mongrel to survive in politics. I suppose you have got to have a bit of mongrel as an animal to survive a wildfire. You say you cannot, for obvious reasons, quantify the number of wild dogs but that there has been a marked increase over the last—is it 20 years?

Mr Green—Yes.

Mr Walters—Yes, that is quite right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—As much as you can from your own experience, could you explain what has happened as the number of wild dogs has increased, and the corresponding effect that has had on other animals. Also, what is the impact on those living off the land, and what are your predictions if this situation is not remedied?

Mr Green—You people today have wanted everything quantified. We heard earlier mention of the Yaouk Valley. There have been 30,000 sheep taken from there. As the dogs have bred up, as they have invaded the freehold country, as the park boundaries have been extended, the number of sheep has probably declined. The number of sheep that Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board now has on its books could be compared to what it was 20 or 30 years ago. I am sure there are records there but honestly off the top of my head I could not tell you.

The cattle have taken over to a certain extent with regard to where sheep have been withdrawn. Sid mentioned earlier about the higher country producing some of the best wool in the state. The cattle are probably not as suited to that country as the sheep were. Certainly there has been an impact there right along the line to our saleyards, where there are reduced numbers of animals going through there as well. I cannot actually give you a ballpark figure. I am sure it is available but I have never actually seen it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What practical changes has the increased dog population made to the life of a family living off the land adjacent to a national park?

Mr Walters—It makes quite a marked difference.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In what ways?

Mr Walters—I am one of those who are affected. I happen to have stud stock. I have had my young rams killed on three occasions. Most of them were killed in land adjoining the park. Wild dogs do not know what fences are. If there has been a wombat through first, they can come through, too—that is wild dogs; dingos do not do that. Our wild dogs are made up of anything now. I was reading this week that during the gold rush at Kiandra some fellows had German shepherds to look after their tents because while they were away digging someone would rob them. They reckon a lot of those got away and crossbred with the dingos. We do not know.

Mr Green—One answer to your question is that there is certainly socioeconomic impact. But dog attacks also equal emotion. The antagonism between the private landholders and those who are in charge of public lands becomes very intense. It certainly also causes very deep divisions within the rural community, perhaps with accusations of where the dogs are coming from or who is not doing work—those sorts of things. Wild dogs equal very intense emotion and they certainly disrupt community life.

Mr Walters—That is right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You made the statement that the federal government should take over the responsibility for dealing with the wild dog problem. Is that because to date the state government, in your experience, has been totally inept at dealing with the problem?

Mr Walters—I would not say 'totally'.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So why would—

Mr Walters—My reason for saying that is I have done a lot of touring around Australia and I have seen wild dogs in a lot of places in Australia. My point was that I do not think it is unique to this area. The reason why it hits us so much is that we depend entirely on a fine wool fleece—not all fine wool but generally. The federal government should have something to do with it, although I do not say 'entirely'.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What could the federal government do, for example, in your local area to alleviate the problem if not eliminate it that has not been carried out by the state government?

Mr Walters—It is pretty hard to say. I would say they could put their foot on the state government a bit.

Mr Green—An answer to that is that the dogs' ability to travel is well recognised. Working with our dogs here, it is only by dealing with them on a regional level in the south-east that we can look at even gaining some measure of control. As you know, we are fairly close to a large Victorian border. There have been times when we have said that the Victorians are not doing enough and there have been times when the Victorians have said we are not doing enough.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I think your dogs are coming across!

Mr Green—I think it is the other way around, thank you!

CHAIR—Have they got a passport?

Ms PANOPOULOS—But surely the problem is not purely geographic; it is not that dogs can travel. We do not have the number of wild dogs that we have because they are reasonably mobile. There is something more, surely, that is crying out as the problem.

Mr Green—There are two points: one, by having it addressed federally, you would have uniformity of what methods are accepted as legal; and, two, by doing it nationally, you would certainly have a lot better focus on the channelling of research. Every time we have a dog meeting, we hear little pockets of research from New South Wales or wherever. Some fellows recently came here from America where they are dealing with coyotes. Their research and the funding they get for research is that far in front of us it is not worth talking about.

Ms PANOPOULOS—If the situation were not to change and the federal government could not, for whatever reason, take up the responsibility of dealing with the wild dog problem, what would you recommend the state government does?

Mr Green—There is research into aerial baiting—which was instigated by, I would have to say, probably more than anybody the New South Wales farmers a couple of years ago—in the Wallace Craigie area which, as you know, was very badly burnt. The first part of the research was done last year where they went in and trapped whatever quolls were there and microchipped them. They found a fairly healthy population of about 21 quolls in—I forget how big the area was—not a huge area. By the time that was done, the female quolls were very close to reproducing, so there was no actual aerial baiting done on the off-chance that a pregnant female would be killed. This year, there should have been an aerial baiting at our traditional time of May in that area with the microchipped quolls to see if any, or what, took an aerial bait. Unfortunately, the population of quolls was badly knocked around by the fire down there. I think they have retrapped seven of the original 21 quolls. They have picked up six others, which either are juveniles or have come into the area.

The other factor is that last year their food was possum, bush rat, rabbit—and I will say bandicoot but I could be wrong. However, since the fire, they have found that the possums and the bandicoots have gone and the quolls are living on a few rabbits and an odd European rat that survived down there. The feeling was that to go in this year and simulate an aerial baiting into the area, when there was an even greater chance than ever that the quolls would take a bait, would probably have been foolhardy. But certainly without the federal government coming in to give assistance, certainly the state government would need to use all the resources it had to look at reintroducing aerial baiting.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do dogs eat quolls?

Mr Green—I do not know. Certainly, I know that people who have done work on quolls will tell you that, if you want a good population of quolls, you remove the foxes. If you want an even better population of quolls, you remove the wild dogs as well.

CHAIR—On those numbers, potentially two-thirds of the quoll population that was there got wiped out in the fires?

Mr Green—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—The committee are hearing a lot about bushfire management and related technical issues, but today we have also heard from you and others about the social impacts on this community as a result of the fires, not just the wild dogs. In your submission you talk about so-called hobby farmers coming in and not following traditional land management techniques. Mr Walters, you spoke about a falling-out between friends over the bushfires, but you did not specify the reasons for that. Is there increasing social turmoil in the community as a result of many of these issues? Do you think government is aware of this and is adequately dealing with it?

Mr Walters—I did not know about this until yesterday. In the Numbla Vale area that is not so. I went further afield, amongst my ratepayers, and I found two or three lots that fell out mainly over the—

Mr ORGAN—Were there any specific reasons for the falling-out?

Mr Walters—Something, but I do not know what.

Mr ORGAN—What about you, Mr Green?

Mr Green—To clarify that answer, Cooma Rural Land Board has approximately 2,300 ratepayers, of which only 700 have a sheep flock of more than 50. So roughly two-thirds of our ratepayers live on what we would probably call lifestyle blocks. They are rough figures—you could probably challenge them—but about two-thirds of our ratepayers live on lifestyle blocks. We have what you might call 1,400 absentee landholders—people who have come here to escape—and to have that escape continually interfered with by wild dogs, bushfires and bushfire management practices creates a big impact there.

Mr SCHULTZ—Mr Organ raised an issue that I was going to raise and you have touched on it. I was going to ask you whether the falling out was between the different ratepayers—the small blockies against the large blockies—but I think you have basically answered that question. I would like to take you back to the issue of wild dogs. You know and I know that they are hybrids; they are commonly referred to as 'superdogs'. Nothing will be done about them by governments until they attack and kill a human being—and that is not far away, according to what I have been told. Are you aware of the Yass Rural Lands Protection Board dog control project?

Mr Green—Using the Brindabella methodology, yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—Are you using the Brindabella methodology? I am talking about the project in Wee Jasper last year.

Mr Green—Yes. When I refer to the management plans, that is what we are using.

Mr SCHULTZ—From what I have seen of the figures in the documentation that came out of that, it is a very good project.

Mr Green—The Brindabella methodology was the management plans that I have been referring to. The methodology is for nil tenure—by 'nil tenure' we mean addressing the scope of the problem and the range of the dogs, wherever they travel—and for all stakeholders to have equal input. It has been a tremendous breakthrough in addressing the dogs in the area of their range. The early figures on Brindabella are certainly terrific. I was speaking with Noeline Franklin, who was one of the main authors of that. The main failing of the Brindabella methodology was that even though it encompassed 30,000 to 50,000 hectares it was just not big enough. It is only now that we are addressing this at a regional level—and by that I mean from the Hume Dam to Batemans Bay, to Eden and back again, and trying to bring the Victorians in as well—that we are giving ourselves some hope that we may be able to hold this flow of dogs.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would you be interested to know that I have tried to influence and convince politicians that that is a good project and that we should be behind it from a funding point of view?

Mr Green—Certainly.

Mr SCHULTZ—To extrapolate the exercise I am going to give my parliamentary colleague, Ms Panopoulos—the little terrier on my right—a copy of one of those documents so that she can see what it is about and she may be able to convince the Victorians to take it up. I will just go back to the history that you, Mr Walters, are part of—and that is the early grazing of the high country. Can you explain to us why it was stopped? What were the arguments for it being stopped in the first instance?

Mr Walters—I think the main reason was that it was supposed to be causing soil erosion. They would rather have 5,000 tonne of charcoal in their dams than two tonne of sheep manure. In other words, they did not want the stock in the mountains.

Mr Green—Could we just clarify that down this way we actually call serrated tussock 'Yass river tussock'.

Mr SCHULTZ—Is that right? You are not far wrong; that is where it came from.

CHAIR—Thank you very much again for your evidence and your submission.

[5.04 p.m.]

PHILLIPS, Mr Winston Churchill, Deputy Mayor, Cooma-Monaro Shire Council; Chairman, District Bushfire Management Committee; Chairman, Cooma-Monaro Shire Rural Fire Service Captains Committee

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

Mr Phillips—I am appearing as the chairman of the Cooma-Monaro shire district bushfire committee and I am here to support the captains and the volunteers because I am the chairman of their committee as well. I appear in my capacity as deputy mayor but also in relation to the experience that I have had as a volunteer bushfire fighter for about 35 years. I know I do not look that old but I am, I assure you. Before I moved to the Monaro I made my living from farming and grazing for 18 years in the central-west/north-west area near Coonabarabran. I was in three fire brigades there. I was in the one where I grew up on the family property. I was an ordinary member of that. When I moved to buy and lease and manage some other properties, I was deputy captain of one and, across the river, I was the secretary-treasury of another. So I had quite a lot of experience there, and I have kept up my involvement as an ordinary volunteer here, as well as being on the various committees. My 15-plus years working for the Rural Lands Protection Board gave me a good overall knowledge—although nowhere near the detailed knowledge of a lot of the people that have spoken here today—of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains areas.

Very early in the piece I went out with one of the wild-dog trappers, Tim Russell, whom you know pretty well. He did not say too much about what was happening out in the mountains. I think he wanted to test me to see if I could pick up what was going on out there. After a couple of hours out in the mountains west of Yaouk and Adaminaby as I kept looking around and I kept looking at him, I said, 'All right, Tim, what's wrong with the place?' He said, 'What do you mean?' I said: 'Where is the native wildlife in this park and where are the birds? What's gone wrong here?' He said that in his father's time and in his early youth—as people have mentioned many times before—there were lots of wildflowers and there was lots of wildlife and no wild dogs in that area at all. He said this was what it had deteriorated to and that it must be something to do with the changed management practices. He quite cleverly waited to see whether I would come up with a comment like 'What's wrong with this place?' After having lived in the bush all of my life and having grown up in a family in which conservation was a word used before it became trendy—my father and grandfather really believed in conservation farming long before it became trendy—that was my observation. Tim's assessment that the situation has deteriorated has been repeated to me by literally dozens, if not scores, of people who are experienced in the mountains.

All the time that I have been here they have warned about the fire situation being serious. I saw it myself; I saw the build-up of fuel and the limited amount of hazard reduction. Bushfire hazard reduction—and you have heard Bob Maguire talk about grazing and you have heard other people talk about hazard reduction by burning—is like pest animal control and noxious weed control. To be done effectively it has to be done on a big scale, and the bigger the area that you

are talking about, obviously the bigger the scale that the programs have to be. And they have to be ongoing. It is no good just saying, 'We're going to burn five per cent there and five per cent over there, or graze five per cent there and burn five per cent here,' as that really does not make any difference. We have heard the Minister for Emergency Services and even Commissioner Koperberg say that hazard reduction did not work. In a lot of cases it did not work because there was not bloody enough of it; the fire just went straight across it. Hazard reduction will not stop fires and it will not stop them occurring but it will reduce the intensity of wildfires.

There seems to be this funny attitude—and we have heard about the percentage of people that live on the coast and in urban areas—that all fire is bad. Fire has been used by man, ever since he managed to harness it, as an agricultural tool. According to early historians—and later scientific research has proved this—our eucalypt forests and our coarse grasslands evolved as a result of a fire regime of the native Australians. There seems to be this strange attitude that you cut out that fire regime and that you block out all of the 50,000 or 60,000 or 70,000 years of Aboriginal occupation and use of fire. If that is not used, things get rank. We have heard about dieback increasing where the country has not been hazard-reduced with fire and indeed where it has not been grazed and all that sort of thing. So I really think that people, by ignoring that history of fire management, are dooming the Australian bush to evolve into something that is completely different from how the Europeans found it.

Fire to a lot of the native trees and grasses is like pruning to deciduous trees: you prune them and they come back more vigorously—that is, fire from control burns and cold burns but not wildfire. Wildfire is destructive. I have seen the difference in the park and in Pilliga forest near where I used to come from. We were about 30 kilometres away from Pilliga. Wildfire leaves the country looking as if a nuclear blast has occurred, and it takes a long time to come back if it is really hot, and if it is an ordinary hot bushfire, the regrowth usually comes back as thick as the hairs on a dog's back. Wildfire really changes the whole nature of the country. Cold burns do not do that. They have that sort of pruning effect and are beneficial to the country. Not every area needs to be burned all the time, but it has got to be done on a big scale.

Getting back to the January fires—to us they were the January-February fires and to the Snowy River Shire and Bombala people they were the December-February fires—this shire was lucky. I am the section 44 nominee as well as the fire control officer. We were the ones who had to make a decision to apply for section 44 nomination. We had held back and held back because we did not want to pre-empt it. The fires were a fair way away but they were certainly threatening us. On 17 January that hot dragon's breath was blowing from the north-west. I talked to the fire control officer that day and he said, 'What do you think of the weather?' and I said, 'What do you think?' We both agreed that if that wind kept going that day the fires would not be contained as they had been. So we applied that afternoon for section 44 nomination. It was approved at 10 o'clock on the Saturday morning, and that afternoon Canberra got its backside burnt off.

I did not say this to too many people, but those of us who have seen what fires can do when the weather conditions are like that—a hot north-west wind—would understand why I honestly believed that the Monaro was gone at that stage in time. I think it was pure luck with the weather and the good work of our volunteers that saved us. I hope all of you around this table understand how close we were to being wiped out in this area. A funny thing happened in that nearly every night or every afternoon a cool south-easterly, easterly or north-easterly wind blew in and held

the smoke here. The next morning it was quite humid for a long time. The smoke was holding all over the top of the country here. It kept the humidity up, so the fires were not really getting savage until later on in the afternoon in most areas. I know that varies as the countryside varies. Generally the people around here could not work out where the fire was. The people in town were panicking because smoke was everywhere. You could not actually see a single fire because it was covered in smoke. The easterly wind holding the smoke and the humidity is, I believe, what saved the Monaro. We had somebody on our side.

In our shire about 7,000 hectares ended up getting burnt. That was mostly bush ridge sort of country. Our volunteers were looking after 74 kilometres of fire break from Michelago right around to Yaouk. We had no major injuries. We had no loss of houses, sheds or occupied dwellings. I think a couple of huts got burnt right up in the mountain country and some fencing, but virtually no loss of property. Of that 7,000 hectares, very little pasture was burned. That was less than three per cent of the total fire area facing us. At one stage we had about 80 kilometres of fire coming towards us from Canberra to Lake Eucumbene, with a bit of a gap, a couple of kilometres, near Tantangara.

When the fires hit Canberra, the ACT government basically abandoned the Namadgi National Park. It took us three days to get a liaison officer here and, whilst that liaison officer was good, that allowed our volunteers to get into Namadgi National Park, establish a fire break a few kilometres in and start back-burning before the main fire arrived. That back-burn, even on that terrible day of 30 January when there were howling gales and the fire spotted in just about every area, prevented the fire from getting away in this shire. I believe that was the result of the tremendous work that had been done by the volunteers.

They had not really been impeded that much—except in one area where we join Yarrowlumla shire. We could not get permission one night to do a back-burn. The captain of the Bredbo brigade, Will Goggin, rang through and wanted to back-burn and the request went through from here to Yarrowlumla shire. They refused permission for us to back-burn because the area was actually in their shire—that is that country across the Murrumbidgee on the way to Canberra, on the left-hand side. They refused to let us back-burn, and on that bad day on 30 January that is the one place where the fire got away and burnt right to the road at Michelago. From that you can see the value of the good work that was done by our volunteers, and somebody up above helped us with the weather.

The ferocity of the firestorm in Kosciuszko National Park became evident on the Friday and Saturday, as I said before. That fire never came near us but the ferocity of it was evident from the amount of debris that was raining down from the sky. It was like a nuclear blast; a huge convection cloud went up in the air. I picked up debris—and I will just pass a sample around—on my little property out at Cooma. I know the debris was falling as far out as Countaguinea and places like that. In that sample you will see green leaves and scorched leaves and bits of bark and ash and all sorts of things. The damage done by the ferocity of a firestorm like that, as a lot of people have said who have seen the damage in the park, is immense. If those areas could have been hazard reduced there would have been a fire through there but I do not believe this would have happened. That really was a frightening time for people who do not understand fire because they thought the fire was just over the hill, but that huge convection cloud was dropping it from 50 to 70 kilometres away. I am sorry; I am probably taking up too much time, Mr Chairman—

CHAIR—We have got to hear from another couple of witnesses.

Mr Phillips—We have heard of the economic effects, we have heard what the volunteers have said around this table and we have heard from all the forestry people and so on. I just want to say, on behalf of the shire—and I am sure I speak for the volunteers—that I endorse all those comments that were made. I apologise that we did not have a written submission in but that is just one of those things—there was a lack of time and, personally, I had a few things on, so I did not get the job done. What did it cost the shire? We have been reimbursed for our section 44 stuff but there was $28,000—I checked with the general manager recently—which was non-refundable. This included things like the wages of council staff. It did not include plant hire. But $28,000 was not reimbursed, so there was that cost. People were asking how much shires put in: in the last financial year we put in $131,819—that was our 13 per cent contribution to the bushfire fund.

CHAIR—Thanks, Winston. Does anyone have an urgent question?

Ms PANOPOULOS—At the beginning you briefly mentioned wild dogs and their impact. Have you had any direct experience in combating the problem of wild dogs? If so, in what capacity?

Mr Phillips—When I first came to work at the Rural Lands Protection Board in 1987 I was the only ranger and my role was coordinating and overseeing wild dog control, right up until September 2001. I was directly involved with wild dog control for a bit over 14 years, so in an overall sense I have got a lot of experience with wild dog control.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And what have you noticed over time?

Mr Phillips—I have noticed that the problem has moved out. The problem was basically on the boundaries of the national parks when I came here nearly 16 years ago and the problem has certainly moved out. There are a lot of areas of grazing country that have been de-stocked, as has been mentioned by people like Bob Maguire; in that area around Yaouk and Adaminaby 30,000 sheep is probably not a far-fetched figure.

The more the problem moves out, the harder it gets to control, because you end up with so many land managers. You have all the hobby farmers and the graziers themselves trying to muster their stock. If there are poison baits and traps set, it just makes it so difficult. One of the reasons behind the dog problem moving out is that the broadscale wild dog control programs have been cut back bit by bit. We used to aerial bait quite a lot of the parks all around here, but that has been cut back to the stage where, towards the end of the nineties, it was cut right out. Trail baiting is a good alternative method, but that was also cut out. Trapping has been used extensively, but unfortunately trapping and mound baiting are very cost ineffective—they are very costly. All the experts on wild dog control will tell you that the best way to get rid of wild dogs is to have a thorough baiting program, which will get rid of about 90 per cent of the dogs, and then—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Using aerial baiting?

Mr Phillips—Any sort of baiting—trail baiting or aerial baiting, but not mound baiting. That will get rid of about 90 per cent of the dogs if it is done properly, and then you follow it up with trapping. If you go into an area to try to trap dogs, you are really encouraging trap-shy dogs, because if you have 10 dogs running down a track and they see their mate go over, sniff a tussock and then get caught in a trap, one or two of those dogs are going to get the message. If it happens again, they will all get the message. If you are trapping and there are two or three dogs coming down the track, you are less likely to be educating dogs about traps. Trying to trap the dogs out is an expensive and relatively inefficient way of doing it. A good poison program is better.

The bait stations are good in environmentally sensitive areas, because of the quoll populations, but the problem with bait stations is that they select for stupid dogs in the sense that it is fairly obvious that man has created something there for them. There is a mound of earth and, as Bob Maguire or somebody mentioned earlier, there is a steel post with an ear tag on it. Those bait stations are run regularly—they are checked regularly. There are a lot of human signs around them, so you are actually teaching the dogs that you are after them. You want to have as little sign of man as possible. Really, to get the clever dogs, it takes a very astute and clever dogger. It is no good just sending anyone out there to do bait stations and set traps.

I believe when they first started using bait stations in Victoria in the early to mid-eighties they were getting about 20 per cent bait rejection. It is up to about 60 or 70 per cent bait rejection now, so they are virtually ineffective. In the relatively short time they have been used here—about 10 years—I believe the effectiveness of bait stations has certainly declined. And because they have to be run regularly they are a very expensive way of doing a job that trail baiting or aerial baiting can do with one or two passes a year.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Phillips. We will have to leave it there. Thank you for your insight and for the information you have given the inquiry.

Mr Phillips—Thanks very much.

[5.23 p.m.]

APPS, Mr Michael Charles Seymour, Owner/Managing Director, Polo Flat Airfield

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have a statement or some information to provide to the committee?

Mr Apps—Thank you very much, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I will make two introductory points, if I may—very quickly; you do not want a lecture. Firstly, I have 60 years experience in aviation, from the military to owning my own aeroplanes, running businesses, running airfields and even operating off British carriers, so I do know a bit about aviation. This statement is directed specifically to the aviation operations at Polo Flat Airfield during the emergency and is in no way a criticism of the method of firefighting, about which I have absolutely no idea.

The Rural Fire Service asked to use Polo Flat on 20 January 2003 in a state of panic because their aircraft at Jindabyne were directly threatened. They had to evacuate them. They flew across to Polo Flat Airfield on the afternoon of the 20th. They had no idea of the aviation capabilities of our airfield. They came to see me and they took away a book of mine which gave the details of the airfield, photocopied it and never returned it. They remained at our airfield until 24 February, leaving behind a facility so badly damaged that it is not fully operational today. We are still, like other councils, waiting for payment.

From the above, it should be apparent that the extent of the impact of this on our assets has been extremely bad. We have had to close the cross strip, severely limit flying operations and cancel the disabled flying course. We run the only flying school for disabled people in the world, we run a flying training organisation for a club of nearly 60 members and we run a charter organisation for the Snowy Mountains Authority to their airfields at Khancoban and Talbingo. With escalating costs and a much reduced income, our business may not survive much longer. The airfield is now up for sale and this valuable asset to this particular area may be lost as an airfield.

It was obvious there was a serious problem of command and control between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Rural Fire Service of New South Wales as far as the aviation firefighting resources were concerned. Both went on bushfire checks to the same sites, duplicating each other's efforts, and neither seemed to be capable of making a decision on what to do when they got there. A nine-to-five office routine is not the way to conduct serious bushfire operations. The pilots concerned at our airfield were frustrated and felt they were wasting their time on the ground. Unfortunately, they are not prepared to comment to you or anyone else publicly as they would be blackballed by the firefighting organisations, and since our aviation business is already in crisis they are not prepared to jeopardise their future livelihood.

Frankly, after 60 years in aviation and having commanded and owned many aircraft, I consider the lack of experience and amateur approach to the conduct of air operations that was displayed at Polo Flat as something that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The volunteers were outstanding. They gave of their time. At our facility, they were hardworking and

we were impressed by their dedication. However, they were unsafe. They had not been trained in several important aspects of aviation communication equipment and the use of other equipment, as well as in general and aviation workplace safety.

On the first day, they connected a hydrant at our refuelling point. It was connected to a hose with the wrong fittings and a massive flooding of our car park ensued. The damage to the airfield and the building on that particular day cost my wife and I nearly $9,000. They seemed totally unaware of the dangers of smoking in an airfield close to our hay stalls, right beside the refuelling dumps and at aircraft refuelling points, despite great big notices which I had put up all round the airfield and constant reminders by me.

They had to be constantly reminded to keep clear of aircraft, propellers and moving vehicles. Hoses, chemical containers and other obstacles were not kept contained in safe areas. Empty containers were just left where they were and rubbish was allowed to accumulate and litter the operational areas. Rotor blades and propellers then blew litter into paddocks. It was chaos. When the threat was declared to be over, they just disappeared and left the stores all over the airfield, blocking the entrance. They left me, my wife and a friend to clear up and then organise the removal of thousands and thousands of dollars worth of stores, fuels and chemicals.

In conclusion, to say I was unimpressed would be a gross understatement. I considered there to be very serious problems with lines of communication, areas of responsibility, delineation of command and control, and fundamental knowledge and experience of aviation operations. A two-week course and a periodic simulated exercise is hardly the way to combat real and deadly bushfires, however enthusiastic the volunteers.

CHAIR—I do not want to interfere with commercial-in-confidence or other commercial information, but can you give the committee some idea of the cost to you and the cost that you are trying to recover as a result of the airfield being used during those operations?

Mr Apps—The immediate damage cost $9,000. My wife and I footed the bill for that in order to get the disabled flying course, which was scheduled for March, up and running. Unfortunately, we did not get it repaired in time and, in any case, the course had to be cancelled. The amount for damage to the airfield itself—it required spraying and refurbishing—is similar to the amount for Jindabyne, but ours is only $83,623.16.

Then there is the question of rent. We charged them $2,000 a day and that was for my services for about 12 to 14 hours a day. Frankly, had I not been there, I think it could have ended in a bit of a disaster. The Civil Aviation Safety Authority visited and said it was one of the best run organisations they had seen, and I took that to mean that we were probably doing it right. That $2,000 a day came to $56,000. We did originally say that, because we had closed the airfield and reduced our capacity to earn, the profit loss was probably $24,757.

What we are actually asking the Rural Fire Service for is $166,000. They have come back and said that they want me to pay thousands of dollars to mediate an amount. We cannot afford it and we are not prepared to do it. However, I have said to them, in a fax through our solicitors, that if they are prepared to pay for the cost of the repair of the damage, which comes to around $90,000, we can then talk and mediate on the question of the rent. But I feel that, when they paid nearly $1,000 a day for a security man to walk around what was a very secure airfield anyway—

and I had to wake him up on a number of occasions—$2,000 a day for my airfield is hardly going to break the bank.

CHAIR—What would they have done if your airfield was not available for use? What were the alternatives for the two services?

Mr Apps—I suppose they would have had to evacuate further afield. But they were able to use my airfield close at hand, which was 10 minutes flying time to the fires. Six aircraft could have each dumped 3,000 litres of fire retardant and water every 10 minutes. That is 18,000 litres per aeroplane per hour. If you multiply that by six, you are dumping tonnes and tonnes of water or fire retardant—Phoscheck—on the fires. However, they just left them sitting there for day after day and I found that extraordinary. I watched them.

Mr SCHULTZ—May I compliment you, Mr Apps, on the way in which you have put to this inquiry your concerns about the Rural Fire Service and its incompetent handling of aviation. They are not uncommon—I have heard it all before, from pilots of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Would you be interested in making any comments to this inquiry about the Rural Fire Service and its knowledge of air operations?

Mr Apps—I find it difficult to comment without being highly critical, because the people that came to control the air operations were basically from Queensland and other areas, their knowledge of air operations was virtually nil and they were unable to appreciate that, if you are going to use helicopters and fixed wing in conditions of low visibility, you need an air controller sitting up there with good communications.

The communications was not set up until within about three days of the end of the worst of the fires. Three days before they pulled out they brought in a caravan and communications. Instead of briefing the pilots on the night before and saying, 'I want you here at five in the morning, when the air is calm and we have good visibility; I want to send you out there to hit the fires hard,' they worked a nine to five routine. They had their briefings at 9.30 or 10 o'clock. By that time the wind was up, the fires were roaring off again, visibility was down to zero and it was another incompetent shambles.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you. That is part of the information that I have received from those pilots that I spoke to you about. What are your views on CASA handing control of air operations in bushfire situations over to the Rural Fire Service? I am asking that question in the context of, in particular, safety for the pilots and the impact of possible decisions taken in the air, in pressure situations, because of a lack of communication from a professional at the ground level.

Mr Apps—From a personal point of view, I think the whole of the aviation operation in an emergency situation needs to be thrashed out around a table so that you know, the chair knows, the members know and the Rural Fire Service knows exactly what their lines of communication and lines of responsibility are, and they know what they are going to do. It is no good picking a guy who has had two weeks of a familiarisation course to come down and take over the reins as a senior officer. He may be a clever firefighter, but he will have no idea of how to control the air and all the advantages that aviation can offer him.

Mr SCHULTZ—Given the safety concerns in Australia—and particularly the vigorous activity of CASA in those areas at some stages—would you think that the issue of CASA, under those circumstances, handing over control of aviation type operations to a state based organisation, which has had absolutely no experience in aviation whatsoever, is questionable? Would you think that it is something that the minister of the Crown at the federal level should really look into, with regard to that sort of permission flowing down from an operation such as CASA, which is under his direct control?

Mr Apps—The answer is yes, yes and yes. He should certainly look at it. He should certainly very seriously consider to whom—and their level of experience—he is offering aviation safety, because we are already going through a crisis. Quite frankly, CASA needs to carry out a very careful audit of the various organisations under the emergency umbrella to see what expertise each organisation has and whether they are capable of conducting those operations. If they are not, CASA needs to put in place education and training programs, so that they are capable if that is what they want. I believe the only way to conduct an aviation operation is to let the aviators do it at the scene, rather like the way you have gone around today and asked the people who are here on the site at the time, 'What was it like? Where did it go wrong? How can we put it right?'

Mr SCHULTZ—On the comments that you have made, I totally agree with you. It is just a question of who is going to have the intestinal fortitude to address the issue, which is very serious and which at some stage is going to kill pilots and/or people.

Mr Apps—Yes, it will.

Mr McARTHUR—I wanted to ask about the briefing at 9.30 a.m. when, with the smoke, the visibility was zero. We have had another witness bring the same matter to our attention. Why couldn't sensible people do a briefing at 5 a.m. and execute the aircraft operations in clear conditions? What was the rationale for not doing it at that time?

Mr Apps—I have absolutely no idea. I went up to one of the senior people who came from Queensland and was running the aviation site and said, 'For God's sake, why don't we brief tonight, have the pilots here at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning, aeroplanes loaded full of water—you can put 18,000 litres into them tonight—and hit it tomorrow at five o'clock?' He said, 'You don't understand the problem.' I said, 'You're making it!'

Mr McARTHUR—What did he mean by that?

Mr Apps—I assume he thought that I did not understand firefighting; I did not understand that these guys had to go away and discuss today's disasters to formulate the plan for tomorrow to combat it. Meanwhile the enemy fire is coming roaring on down. Just when the fire is waking up the next morning is the time to hit it. He said, 'Oh yes, but we've got to let it burn to the back-burning lines,' or whatever they called them. He wanted the fire to come to where they had already made the firebreaks.

Mr McARTHUR—In fact in your experience on most of these days the aircraft did not get in the air—because it could not.

Mr Apps—No. The aircraft got in the air one day and did 93 sorties. They flew on four days in total out of 24. That is 20 days when six aircraft, worth $1½ million each, with enormous water-dropping capacity, sat on the ground with the pilots sleeping, watching television and getting very fed up.

Mr SCHULTZ—What you are saying, I understand from my knowledge and from information I have received from pilots, is what they were saying to me—that is, the aircraft should have been off the ground whilst the air was moist and the cloudbank was low on the fires, to give them an opportunity to get in and drop water.

Mr Apps—Absolutely.

Mr SCHULTZ—The other point that you made—and correct me if I am wrong—is that they left it until the afternoon, when 90 per cent of the time the aircraft could not fly because of the smoke concentration and therefore they were paid to sit on the ground on stand-by, doing nothing in an environment where the valuable cargo that they could carry and dump onto fires was not able to be used. Is that correct?

Mr Apps—One hundred per cent correct.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Apps. We appreciate the evidence that you have provided to us, and hopefully you will come to some arrangement with the relevant authorities with respect to your airfield.

[5.43 p.m.]

GALLARD, Mr Angel John (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments about the capacity in which you appear here today?

Mr Gallard—I am now retired. I did work for 23 years with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I have a background in the engineering trade, so I also have a diploma in engineering geology. I have fought fires from Nadgee and Byadbo and Khancoban in 1973 through to the Blue Mountains, the upper Hunter and Ku-ring-gai over the years. I carried my first knapsack when I was 14, in 1948, in fires around the Hills District. I cut my teeth on fires in Hawkesbury sandstone country, which is some of the most ferocious country you can fight fires in. I have listened intently to what has been said here today, and I have made a number of notes.

I would like to make one reference to fire trails. I have been disgusted with the condition of fire trails for the whole of my service career. The fire trails originally were put in by the Bushfire Prevention Association. I knew men who put them in and worked with them. They were done in the late 1950s and 1960s—most of the blokes that did them are dead now—and they were maintained annually by a budget which, from what I understand, was ongoing. It was considered then that the maintenance and care of fire trails was essential to safe progress for firefighting crews. This still applies. We have seen many situations in recent years, including coroners' inquiries, where young men were burned to death in vehicles that were trapped in fire trail situations and there was no avenue of escape for them as a result of overhanging timber, trees and shrub layers that encroach on the side of the vehicles, no turnaround areas and dead-ends with no proper turning facilities. These are essential requirements if you are going to send blokes into the bush in difficult firefighting situations. The best thing is not to have to send them in there at all, which can be achieved with proper management of hazard reduction units.

I support the comments that Ross McKinney made earlier. I was one of the rangers that used to ride on horseback with people like George Freebody. George was a contractor-stockman for the park and taught most of us how to ride—and nearly killed me in the attempt a couple of times. Back-country patrols were done. John Trudgen was the back-country ranger, and he organised the back country patrols. They were used for providing foodstuffs for huts and the maintenance of huts. Contrary to a lot of comment that has been made by some of the so-called conservationists, the huts are an important part of the history of Kosciuszko and they are also important as lifesaving aids. I have been involved in the rescue of people with broken femurs, broken lower legs and dislocated shoulders from places like Whites River Hut. The huts helped immensely in saving those people's lives, despite the fact they were carrying tents.

There are times when you cannot get into some of those places for two or three days in bad blizzards. In those days, John Sheddon was the local doctor at Jindabyne. I probably should not say this, but I used to have a supply of morphine capsules—little squeeze-packs—in my safe at Smiggins Hole so that, when we went out on a search and rescue, particularly if it was for a bloke with a busted femur or something like that out in the back-country, you could give them a jab in the buttocks with the morphine, provided they were not unconscious, which would relieve

their pain. In the end, I finished up giving them all back to John Sheddon and saying, 'I don't want the responsibility for these in my safe,' because there were lots of drug problems in the resort at the time.

I think huts are important. It is very sad that they lost some of those historic huts. I think it was an extremely generous offer of the Kosciusko Huts Association and various other interested groups to replace and rebuild those huts. They should not be given any option; they should just wade into it and say, 'Yes, thank you,' and welcome them with open arms. There is not enough trust in the National Parks and Wildlife Service to invite the community at large to come into the parks and help with things. We heard about the maintenance of walking tracks. Walking tracks are great things for the community to get involved in and take part in. It gets them involved with the park. Instead of being isolated from the park and saying, 'We are looking after the park; you don't know anything about it,' they should involve them in it. Get everybody involved.

The other thing I want to talk about—and this is critical, and I have heard nobody mention it so far—is that somebody touched on the ability of the Forestry Commission to have men on the ground: for example, their contractors, their tree-fellers and their loggers. They have large crews of very experienced land managers—people who have worked in the bush from teenage years through to adulthood—who have countless years of experience. The National Parks and Wildlife Service have on average—and this is from the latest annual report—two field officers per 21,000 hectares of parkland in the whole state of New South Wales. That is a pretty low ratio, and if you consider the number of people who are desk jockeys—the scientists and people with degrees in all sorts of different things; I was a non-graduate ranger, not that there is any shame in that as we were all tradesmen in the early days of the service and were taken over in the trust parks under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act when it came into being in 1975—the trust parks wanted blokes who could think on their feet, make decisions in the field and act on them there on the ground and not have to phone head office and get somebody to do a plan and management of it before you could turn around and do something. This is one of the big problems.

There is also a lack of continuity in staffing national parks due to the incredible turnover and the restructures. I think there have been six restructures in the parks service in the last 20 years since I left the job. I retired because of a heart attack due to stress. There were 14 rangers out of 145 rangers who had heart attacks. You wouldn't believe that, would you? And nobody wanted to know anything about it. You would have thought that they were as healthy and fit as all get out. But the stress of the job was just getting to them.

I have touched on hut safety already. After the 1973 fires, which I was involved with—Byadbo, Khancoban, Nadgee and what have you—Tom Lewis agreed to allow agistment in the park. That agistment was given on the basis of people having water available on their properties. They were able to buy feed, but water was a different matter. Water was set as the criterion for agistment in the park. We had vast numbers of people—I did the inspections in every shire adjoining the park—applying for agistment. They came into the lower altitudinal ranges of the park, and that worked extremely well.

The other thing I wanted to mention was the wild dogs. Somebody mentioned something about huskies. Huskies were trained in the park as part of the Antarctic expedition work. A number of those dogs escaped and some of the dogs that were brought back from Antarctica,

which they did not want to put down, were released there. This was before it became park. They have mixed with the dingo population and crossed with them and produced these super dogs that you were talking about. That is why they have got the big bushy tails and the big, strong heavy feet and long fur. That is where the breed line comes from. There is heaps of documented information in the National Parks and Wildlife Service files in Kosciuszko National Park about all these things. There has been a tremendous amount of research done on dingoes and their behaviour. They have been monitored by collar attachments, radio controlled collars, since back in the seventies when I was still here. All this information is there and I do not know why it cannot be ferreted out and drawn on in future work. That is something that could be considered.

I would just like to say something on the subject of payment for volunteers. I was a firefighter with the New South Wales Fire Brigades. I was firstly involved with them at Glenbrook and Lapstone in the 1968 fires. I was an auxiliary to the New South Wales Fire Brigades. I had a sand pipe and fire hoses out the front of my place at Lapstone Estate. I also worked in the park. We had the park's fire brigade, which consisted of the old R-type Bedford tankers, which were cows of things. The volunteer members of the New South Wales brigades were paid not for training but on a turnout at any fire. That is something that could be considered—whether actual attendance at fires, not training, could be recompensed.

There are lots of other alternatives with regard to reducing fuel, but somebody from Thredbo said something about not wanting to see a blackened landscape every eight years. I am going to go into that a bit in a second when I have read this to you. Ensure funding in all states for land management, as it knows no state boundaries. That is something that was touched on just a little while ago. This is where the Commonwealth and the state governments have to learn to work together to ensure that there are these programs of maintenance of fire trails, noxious animal control, weeds, erosion—they do not recognise boundaries. They need ongoing budget supplements so that the services involved, the various departments, can plan 10 to 20 years ahead as to how they are going to attack these problems. The whole handling of it is too short range.

The other thing I would like to quickly run through is not very long; it is part of my submission to the inquiry. I am of Aboriginal descent—and Alby mentioned that you had not had much input from Aboriginal communities. As an individual Aboriginal person I have made these comments, but I know I have the backing of many Aboriginal people, particularly the Darug people in Sydney, because I was one of their sites and recording officers up there. The oldest practising spiritual land managers in the world hold the key to wildlife management in this country. Wildfire knows and recognises no federal, state or local artificial boundaries. Wherever there is fuel, a wildfire will burn. Wildfire is as big a threat to Aboriginal sustainable resource based land management as it is to any rural or urban modern developments. Aboriginal people have successfully used fire to protect their resources from wildfire for countless thousands of years. Aboriginal use of fire in land management for clearing up the country was and is a spiritually based process designed to benefit both humankind and the environment. Aboriginal burning practices were and are in the control and directional hands of elders steeped in generations of knowledge and wisdom about their country.

In terms of their country, the language area was broken up into what approximates subcatchments which supported a clan, or mob—a family unit—up to approximately 100 people. These tracts of country vary in size but have been equated by scientists to be approximately 60

square kilometres in area. Their country was known intimately to all members of the community, as was some of their adjoining countrymen's land. The use of fire was and is a prescribed burning program that maintains a wide variety of habitat at various stages of growth and productivity. The mosaic of fuel reduction interlocks with surrounding clan lands which extend across the language group area. These areas can cover hundreds of square kilometres which in turn abut other language group areas. The practices used in this mosaic—varied fuel level, habitat and resource level—ensured that natural wildfire was allowed to burn with the knowledge of the land managers and that it was burning in a location where they knew the condition of the bush and how and where that fire would burn within their prescribed burnt country. This is a lesson we have to learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

When we eventually realise that local knowledge and local community bushfire districts can be drawn on and used in the same way as the traditional custodians and owners of the land, then we will be on the way to preventing destructive holocaust type wildfire. To achieve this will require a complete change of mindset in the established bureaucracy, which is currently creating bigger and better technology to fight bigger and better wildfires irrespective of the practical experience of elder volunteers and professional firefighters who are voices in the wilderness. Decentralised, local community based land management provided local communities with sustenance and resources for living for at least 50,000 years. In 215 years this tried and tested system has almost been destroyed. Note well: this applies not only to wildfire management but also to management of all systems. The answers to all our land management problems are to be found in knowing our country, respecting it and the creator of it, and learning to live with it, not against it. That is the perspective of both an ex-park man's point of view and an Aboriginal point of view.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr BARTLETT—I have one quick question. Mr Gallard, I would be interested in your view on a question asked earlier: if volunteer firefighters are less and less willing to go into parks to fight fires due to safety concerns about inadequate trails et cetera, will that make it easier or harder to fight fires and protect property, once the fires come out of the parks?

Mr Gallard—If local communities can establish a good relationship with their particular park operatives, I think that they can probably work together. I have worked this way in the east Blue Mountains area, and I worked this way in the early days with the local brigades in Jindabyne and Dalgety. If proper procedures were put in place that allowed for the incredible amount of years of experience that exist not just in able-bodied firefighters but in blokes like me who are getting up to the 70 mark and in people beyond 70—people in their 80s who still have their faculties who have an enormous repository of knowledge about their country—to be incorporated into the local brigades, it could probably work. If that local brigade information could be recognised by what I now call the isolated rural fire authority up in Harris Park, or wherever they are now—and I know Phil Koperberg; I fought fires with him in 1968 in the Blue Mountains; Phil is a career public servant, in my personal opinion—and if that could be integrated with these governmental departments which are now operating entirely differently to how bushfire brigade members used to operate, it might work.

Blokes in the bushfire brigades are now starting to feel isolated. That is where all the experience of the country is, and yet it is often ignored. You have some bloke who has a degree

in fire management who has fought one or two fires in his life, if you are lucky, and who may have done a few hazard reductions, put in charge to run the whole show. These blokes try to have an input and they are pushed aside with comments like, 'We're running the show. You just sit back and take notice.' You have to have an element of trust of local knowledge and local people. Think about what I said about Aboriginal communities. You have a 60-square kilometre area for a clan or horde of Aboriginal people. Each year, when the furred animals have left the pouch and the birds have left the nest, or when you are coming down off the mountain with your stock, or after you have had a feed of bogong moths, which is at the end of the season, if you drop a match as you go, you have a fire that is burning gently downhill, down the slopes behind you, and you can walk down the hill safely without it even catching up with you. It leaves a nice bed of pot ash and everything to prepare the soil for next year. We have to have this sort of communication filtering through from the people in the field, people with experience in the local communities, to these upper echelon fire managers, as they call themselves.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Gallard, for your evidence today. I thank all witnesses—the ones who are still here this afternoon—for your input today. It has been a long day but we have collected very good evidence. In just wrapping up, I would like to read from a document for the benefit of witnesses so they fully understand their rights when appearing as a witness at a parliamentary committee hearing with respect to parliamentary privilege. It says that the giving of evidence to a parliamentary committee is privileged. Essentially, this means that no legal action can be taken against the witness in relation to the evidence given during a hearing. This immunity does not apply if after the hearing the witness repeats statements made in evidence. Additionally, persons who intimidate or threaten a witness may be punished. Thank you everybody, including my colleagues, for your participation in this hearing. It is only the fourth of many. There are quite a number still to come in various parts of the country.

Mr McARTHUR—Mr Chair, I support your remarks and thank the gallery for being with us since 9 a.m. I have been to a lot of parliamentary hearings on railways, ships and roads. The participation and interest of our gallery today has been first class. They have been interested and supportive in the hope of finding the genuine points of view in the whole discussion.

Mr SCHULTZ—I add to that by saying that the one thing that you can be assured of, and that will be inevitable, is that the truth will overcome adversity. That is certainly going to be the case, I believe, because of the way in which people like the witnesses today have come forward with courage and concern for their communities and the environment. I speak on behalf of all of my parliamentary colleagues in saying thank you to them.

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 6.05 p.m.