



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

THURSDAY, 24 JULY 2003

WODONGA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Thursday, 24 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 Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz

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

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

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

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

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Committee met at 9.39 a.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the seventh of the inquiry. We have conducted hearings in New South Wales and the ACT over the last few weeks—in Nowra, Katoomba, Richmond, Cooma and Canberra. Today's hearing is part of the committee's program of hearings and visits in different parts of Australia. The hearings and visits allow us to pursue some of the issues raised in the 450 written submissions to the inquiry. I would like to advise those in the gallery that, before the conclusion of today's hearing and after we have heard from the listed witnesses, there will be an opportunity for others to come forward and make short statements that will go into the record of evidence. Before I call on the first witnesses today, I ask the local federal member, Sophie Panopoulos, to welcome the committee and others to her electorate.

Ms PANOPOULOS—To the committee, welcome to the wonderful electorate of Indi; to everyone in the public gallery—there are many familiar faces—welcome. I think it is going to be a very interesting two days. It seems quite strange that we are here today in Wodonga to have hearings into the bushfires yet it is raining so nicely outside. Many of you in this room asked me to lobby the federal government to have this bushfire inquiry. The electorates of many of us who are sitting at this table did suffer in the recent bushfires. I am very happy that the inquiry finally materialised and that we have hearings today in Wodonga. There were just over 100 submissions from Indi, and we have two days, which is very generous timing, for us here in Wodonga. I hope that many of you in the gallery who perhaps may not have put in a written submission will find some time to give oral evidence later today in the open forum, as the chair mentioned. Thank you very much and welcome. We are very keen to hear additional oral evidence that you have to give today.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[9.42 a.m.]

DOWD, Mrs Jeanette, Secretary, Bush Users Group, Indigo Region

MORGAN, Ms Win, President, Bush Users Group, Indigo Region

RICHARDSON, Mr Robert, Committee Member, Bush Users Group, Victoria

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

Mr Richardson—I am a committee member of the Bush Users Group. I am a member of the state committee and I put in the submission from the Bush Users Group on that basis. Also, I come from Seymour and not from this electorate.

Ms Morgan—I am the President of the Indigo branch of the Bush Users Group and I am also a committee member of BUG Victoria.

Mrs Dowd—I am a resident of Eldorado in the Indigo region and Secretary of the Indigo branch of the Bush Users Group.

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

Mr Richardson—Thank you for coming to Victoria and to the electorate of Indi, and thank you, Sophie, for organising this and also helping to get this parliamentary inquiry because it is quite important. I have supplied the committee with a photograph showing an area of forest in the Rubicon-Snobs Creek area of Victoria. If you look at it you will see a rather more open forest structure than you would normally find in Victorian forests, especially ash forests. They would usually be much more dense and have a bigger understorey, and you would never be able to see that far—you would never see a group of individuals so far through the forest. Some of those photographs are missing the captions but you can see that it is a product of burning and grazing by cattle for a period of 70 years up to the 1920s. There is a reasonable assumption that that period would overlap with the practice of Aboriginal burning, which we want to come back to.

I want to take up the issue of catchments today, not just because it is raining but because it is probably useful to look to the future in Victoria in terms of our submission. It is fairly commonly talked about in political circles and in the Department of Sustainability and Environment that the Greens, this year, will commence a heavy campaign to lock up more of Melbourne's catchments. They will concentrate on the fact that logging does remove a small amount of run-off and the fact that Melbourne's water is undergoing great shortages and they will say, 'We have to lock the area up and create more national parks to prevent that water loss.' If the past is any guide, the

political process will ignore the long term and just look at the short term. People commonly discuss not if but when those catchments will be further removed from use. What you will get is an incremental position where a relatively small number of jobs will be lost, so people—especially politicians—will say, ‘Well, it is not a big number and we will give them a redundancy package.’ The slow incremental death of the timber industry and the fact that we have steadily built up a forest products trade deficit of \$2 billion a year will not be taken into account; they will just focus on that small event.

What these recent bushfires show is that catchment management by neglect, by locking it up, is not an option. Trees have to regrow; they have to have a process for their regrowth. That process can be managed and you can actually control what happens: you can harvest trees and regrow them or, for that matter, if you want more run-off, you can actually create cleared areas, grass them over and leave them cleared—in fact you can get more run-off into a catchment if that is what you want—but that will be ignored. Ultimately, if the catchments are locked up, they will burn, and you will have an intense burn such as you had in the mountains near here. As a consequence of that intense burn a lot of trees will be killed. For a while there will be more run-off and then, as the regrowth takes over, there will be much less run-off and that will last for 80 years or so. There will be less run-off into the catchments and you will get the problems in Melbourne that I know are being experienced in Canberra at the moment. So that is the longer term: the fact that forests need management and processes by which they regrow will be completely ignored. Ecological disasters such as we have just had, which has probably killed, at a conservative estimate, 300 million native species—if only 100 died per hectare, 300 million would have died in that fire; so it must be termed an ecological disaster—will occur. They must occur—history says they must occur. So the choice is between managing them by fuel reduction, harvesting and so forth and letting them just happen by accident.

The other thing that will happen of course, in removing the forest products industry from those areas, is that the trails will be let go because the money that is used to build the trails will not be paid any more. There will be less money coming into the department in royalties and so forth, so you will have the problem of getting less income to manage the forests but having more parks to manage. We think it is going to be important that the committee recommends a moratorium on new national parks and that there is a proper scientific study into whether they are meeting the biological and biodiversity outcomes that they should meet. We also think there needs to be a serious look at multiple use management so that we can get income from forests and use that income for proper adaptive management and management for outcomes, not management as icons.

We need to learn from the Aborigines. There is so much evidence that Aborigines burned the country persistently and therefore encouraged a more open forest structure which produces a different, less intense fire outcome and also greater biodiversity, and we have totally ignored that experience. We have totally ignored 50,000 years of experience, and we have just assumed that we can lock up forests, leave them alone and they will be all right. This has resulted in the kind of disastrous outcome that we have just had, and we will have it again. We will just keep repeating history unless we look at forests and realise that we have to manage for outcomes. I will finish on that note and turn the discussion over to my colleagues.

Ms Morgan—If the committee is agreeable, I would like to forgo the time that I was given to speak and Mrs Dowd will speak on behalf of the Bush Users Group. But I would like to take the

opportunity to thank Sophie Panopoulos for the massive amount of work that she has put in to getting this inquiry going. It really has been a marvellous effort. Thank you.

Mrs Dowd—Our submission focuses on the dominance and pervasive influence of what is a dysfunctional and disassociated type of conservation that has been percolated into legislation, regulations, policies and practices. We feel this is actually a core contributing factor to the magnitude and longevity of the bushfires as well as to their intensity. We just hope this might provide some positive input. We thank you very much and, again, we thank Sophie very much indeed for her considerable efforts.

CHAIR—Thank you. In each of the submissions you raised the issue of the impact on some of the properties adjoining the national parks and other crown lands. Can you take me through what occurred with respect to fencing and stock and things like that in the most recent fires and what is being done to rebuild those assets since the fires?

Mr Richardson—My knowledge of it is from one farmer who will be testifying tomorrow who was interviewed for the next edition of *Flamin' Parks*, which is the booklet that we put in with our submission. So my knowledge is from the case study of that one event. What I understand is happening is that farmers who had expertise handed down through many generations for fuel reduction burning to protect around their properties were stopped from doing that on public land some 12 years ago in parts of this area. In three generations they were never burned out. In fact, they picked up the Aboriginal burning techniques: they practised them for three generations and they were not burned out. Twelve years ago they were stopped from doing that and this year they have been burned out. I guess they will tell you their stories.

CHAIR—Who stopped them 12 years ago?

Mr Richardson—What is now the Department of Sustainability and Environment—that is my understanding. So now their fences have been burned out, they have cattle with hooves burned off and they have seen kangaroos hopping by literally on fire. The kangaroos have suffered an awful death, and they also spread the fire because they were on fire. Those are the experiences. Because the government is now offering only partial payment, and on the condition that the farmers put in a dog fence, the farmers are suffering financial disadvantage by having to replace their external and internal fences.

CHAIR—What sort of partial assistance are they getting?

Mr Richardson—I suggest you ask Mr Scales tomorrow to get the accurate figures, but I think it is less than half—and I would have to check—of what it will cost them. I am glad you raised that, because public land, probably mostly parks, has become a kind of oppressive taxation on the people who live adjacent to the parks. They have to suffer the losses from dogs and foxes, they have to suffer the bushfires and then they get a subsidy, maybe—if it is politically desirable at the time—after they put the fences in. They go on year after year with those sorts of disadvantages.

Going to the Stretton commission report, which we referred to in our submission—the Stretton commission said the public land-holder should be on the same legal basis and responsibility as the private land-holder. If the public land-holder does not maintain the land in a condition that it

does not cause economic loss or fatalities to other people, they would be equally liable as if you or I had not maintained their land properly. That has never been taken up. The state is always in the position of saying, 'It is just a natural event; it is really not our fault.' The state—whatever government is in office; I am not having a go at any particular government—is in a position of passing the real costs of the outcome to the people who suffer the fires. My understanding—again, I should not speak for Mr Scales as he will give you the details—is that people like him, and others, have a debt that will take the rest of their lives to pay off.

CHAIR—What about your members? Have they said anything about the insurance that they carry?

Mr Richardson—My understanding is that it is not sufficiently covered by insurance. Again, you should ask Mr Scales tomorrow to get those details. My understanding is that, by the time they have paid for feed, agistment, refencing and transport of stock, some people will come out with huge debts that they will carry for the rest of their lives. My argument for the future is that there should be a wide boundary around properties, which is protected and fuel reduced, so that there does not have to be an ecological disaster. That is one thing. The state should be put on the same basis as anybody else. If the state does not manage the land properly, it should compensate fully those people who suffer losses as a result. Because it has happened so frequently, the outcome is predictable. Nobody can say, 'It was not my fault. I did not know. God did it, or it is a one in a 100-year event.' It is predictable and it is going to happen.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Your submission is about your personal experience during these recent fires and also the fires in 1985. I would like to ask about a couple of issues. You have given specific details about track closures around your property fire trails, I assume.

Ms Morgan—This is the second time in 18 years that people in my area on the Chiltern-Beechworth Road and the Eldorado area have suffered this same experience. We had fires in 1985 that took all our fences out. There were tracks made behind our properties for bulldozers et cetera. To my knowledge those tracks were never maintained. But the main comment I made about tracks was that there are other tracks that have been closed within those bushlands that we feel should never have been closed. One track in particular that I know of—there is a lady here who knows the exact location—was closed; it had been deep ripped and a great tree put over it. At the other end it was open until you got in a few kilometres. That to me was a heinous thing to do because, if somebody had gone up the other end and gone halfway during a fire, that could have meant death.

Taking up what Bob said about buffer zones around the perimeter of all private land, it would be a sensible move because it could then also be used for bulldozers et cetera. Instead of having to disrupt the environment again to make new areas, this buffer zone would already be there. It seems commonsense to me.

The other thing—and Bob has suggested this too—is the government being the good neighbour and going for half the cost of the fencing. Twice in 18 years is a lot for people to have to go into debt for putting new fencing up.

Ms PANOPOULOS—For you and your neighbours, what would you estimate to be the average cost of fencing?

Ms Morgan—I do not own that property anymore, so I do not know and I would not like to put an estimate on it. There are other people here much more qualified about fencing than I am.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did you make any attempts to try and get the relevant authorities to clear the tracks?

Ms Morgan—Through the Bush Users Group we have tried endlessly. Specifically when the Box-Ironbark National Park was going through, we tried to get them to listen to us about potential fire but to no avail. They were not listening and would not even meet with us on many occasions.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So you were warning them.

Ms Morgan—Yes, we warned them for a few years before that this was a catastrophe, particularly around the Eldorado area.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What did you say to them and who did you speak to?

Ms Morgan—We just said, ‘These are fire hazards. They have to be looked at.’ But they would not even come and have a look at them.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Who did you make these approaches to?

Ms Morgan—We asked Ms Garbutt to come and have a look with us. She was otherwise occupied.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And over what period were you making these requests?

Ms Morgan—Probably 18 months or two years. Perhaps three years.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So for a couple of years you are asking the relevant state minister to come and have a look and she did not.

Ms Morgan—Yes, and we were saying that this was going to happen, that our alpine regions would explode, because I knew that areas up there were overloaded with hazard on the forest floor. Tracks were closed in those areas simply because they were covered with blackberries and feral weeds and the like. We knew all this was happening but nobody would listen. They just passed us off as a group of people who want to have a gripe.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Knowing that the committee has toured around the area where you live and we have seen the devastation of the fire, how did you feel soon after the fires were over?

Ms Morgan—We told you so and you did not listen.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Richardson, you made some comments about buffer zone management. Is there a particular buffer zone area that ought to be in place? Is it 100 metres, as has been suggested here? Is it a case of allocating an area and then managing it by grazing and

selective fuel reduction? How do you see the issue of buffer zone management? It has come through in other discussions.

Mr Richardson—I think the CSIRO has got pretty exact figures on the sorts of separations there should be between, say, an asset that you do not want to burn and the bush. I think it is 100 metres, from memory, under normal circumstances but it extends if the property is on a hill, because the fire would come up the hill and it would be much more intense. I think the CSIRO should be consulted about the minimum distances where you would allow high fuel load if you allowed it at all. I would say a minimum of 100 metres, but I go back to the Stretton commission report. The Stretton commission report said up to half a mile. I do not think it has got to be necessarily a totally cleared area and I do not see it as an ecological disaster. I have travelled through national parks in this area and you can come through a thick forest and see no wildlife and come out on to a power line which is cleared and people would say it is an ecological disaster, yet the wombats, wallabies and kangaroos are feeding on the cleared area because there is no food in the forest because it is too thick. So in my view you could actually improve the ecology by having a cleared area adjacent to properties. If it has got the appropriate vegetation on it, it is actually going to benefit some wildlife.

We should stop looking at it as though there is only one structure for the bush—and that is that it has got to be thick and it has got to be left alone. That is just wrong. When you have been in the bush a lot, as I have, you can ride for 20 or 30 miles and not see a kangaroo or wallaby until you come to a rare, open grassy area. What does that say to you? It says that there is no food in the bush. So it is not necessarily an ecological disaster to have a buffer zone that is managed.

It is going to be different in different areas. We should be looking to grazing as part of it, because we are going to have to find ways to resource all this that does not cost the taxpayer or that costs the taxpayer less. When clearing an area, we should get a timber company, a pulp company or a firewood person or whatever to do it. Where we can, we should be getting some money from it. That is what the Aboriginals did. They were not managing the land for fun; they were managing it to get a living out of it—to get a feed from it. That is what we are neglecting. Trails are inevitably going to fall into disrepair.

Many of the staff in DSE are quite professional and know what is going on, but you cannot do things without resources. I would guess that, at a minimum, there would be about 10,000 kilometres of trails through the bush in Victoria and a lot of them would have been financed by the timber industry. When you extract timber, you have to pay a royalty for every tonne. If you do not pay the royalty, the roads do not get put in. I know that because I have been a consultant who has studied these things. A lot of the roads are built directly from a specific budget; they are not built by the government. If you remove that timber extraction and you remove the royalty, how are you going to pay for the maintenance of the trails? How are you going to keep thousands and thousands of kilometres of roads in the bush at a reasonable standard? All these issues have got to come together. I think it would be a mistake for the committee just to say, ‘We need more of this and more of that.’

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Yes.

Mr Richardson—The state governments have got to be forced to do a budget for the management of public land and national parks. They have got to see how much it costs to

manage the safety and the biological aspects and stop looking at it as a kind of Holy Grail that costs almost nothing. It costs and we should start putting a cost on it.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Taking up the issue of tracks and trails which you have alluded to—and which other witnesses have alluded to as well—is there any place in all of this for pedestrian trails? Are we talking about vehicular trails only or are we talking about pedestrian trails? I am interested in this because, in some areas where there have been fires, people have talked about the difficulty of getting people in there—in vehicles, but people as well—to back-burn and fight fires and those sorts of things. Is there a place for pedestrian trails and the maintenance of those?

Mr Richardson—For fire purposes and even for some environmental purposes I would not neglect the pedestrian trails, but obviously trails that you can drive a vehicle on are going to be important. How else are you going to monitor the biodiversity of these areas other than by trails or by air? But pedestrian trails would have their place. A lot of our members are interested, obviously, in continued, responsible, regulated access. We do not necessarily want to impinge on what you might call wilderness areas, but our members see a kind of rolling, incremental agenda where a forest is closed up for a national park, some limited access is allowed and progressively over time the access is downgraded either because the trail cannot be maintained or because there is a deliberate closure some time in the future. It never happens all at once; there is this incremental loss. For a lot of our members the main concern is that it is public land and they see a time in the future when they will have no access to that public land unless they are prepared to walk. If they want to ride a trail bike or a four-wheel drive or a horse or whatever, they will not have access to that land; access will be for an elite group of people who are at that stage of their life when they can carry a backpack or that is their interest.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Your submission makes the point about the area of national parks being declared and the level of resources that are available.

Mr Richardson—Yes.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You say that those are inadequate. Do you have a view as to the appropriate staffing levels for the acreages that have been declared?

Mr Richardson—No.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Is there somebody who has examined this aspect? It seems to be a fairly critical one.

Mr Richardson—No. That is our point: it is all blind faith. Nobody really estimates the cost of parks. I had a conversation with the deputy premier of Tasmania in which I put the question to him. I said, 'Look, people are always saying that Tasmania is an economic basket case.' It is turning around now, but it is an economic basket case. Until lately it has had all the worst social indicators in Australia—for crime and unemployment. You name it; Tasmania had it. I said to him, 'I find it surprising that there is never any debate about the economic effect on Tasmania of having 40 per cent of the state land mass—not 40 per cent of the forests; 40 per cent of the state—in parks.' Nobody debates the economic effects—you could have a bigger forest industry and a bigger mining industry—and the uncertainty that comes with that. Nobody debates what

that has done to Tasmania. He said to me, ‘No, nobody ever estimated the real economic cost of creating that many parks—in terms of the economic losses or the real costs of it.’

So we have quite deliberately steered away in our submission from putting a figure on it because nobody has even tried. People such as Kevin Tolhurst, who is an expert on ecological burning, talk about more staff. People in the CSIRO talk about more but nobody has put a figure on it. Australia has at least 10 million hectares of forested parks. That is just the forested parks—not the desert parks and the other ones. How much would it cost per hectare to maintain the biodiversity and do the ecological burning? You can go back to the fact that the Aboriginals burned frequently. They did not have to consult with anybody and they did not have anybody down town taking some money out of their budget first. They did not have to consult with the EPA or the conservation movement; they just did it. So they were field staff on the ground all the time, creating the situation where the animals prospered and then they ate the animals. They were not doing it for fun; they did it to get food to eat. What are the implications of that?

Nowadays you have to have consultation and environmental impact surveys, you have to consult with the EPA and you have to argue with the conservation movement. And there are smoke pollution problems. Tolhurst says that on average in each area of Victoria there are only 12 days under the current conditions when you can do burning. So what are the implications of that for the costs? Nobody looks at it. Everybody just says, ‘More.’ That is why I have tried to emphasise that the committee needs to look at that and put a figure on it. Nobody has ever put a figure on it.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Are you suggesting that this ought to be an area where we examine the appropriate levels, get expert advice on that and look at the historical data et cetera?

Mr Richardson—Yes. If I had to guess I would say that Syd Shea, the former head of the Department of Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia, would probably have the best handle on it because I think that department did have the sense to use the income from the commercial forests to help subsidise the parks’ operations. I think that would be a good place to start but I do not know that even he could put a dollar figure on it.

CHAIR—We will hear evidence from Mr Tolhurst in Ballarat one day next week.

Mr HAWKER—Thank you for that, Mr Richardson. I must admit that it is hard to disagree with anything you have said. My question is about the point you made earlier about whether the state should compensate for the costs of not properly managing their part of the land. Have you got any precedence for that occurring, either locally or overseas?

Mr Richardson—No, I do not. I just know that the Stretton commission made that recommendation more than 60 years ago and I have observed recently—by having interviews with people and doing the research for *Flamin’ Parks* last year—that farmers on the outskirts of parks suffer dog predation problems that just go on and on, and are getting worse, and that the states do not handle those problems properly. They also suffer from fires and therefore—

Mr HAWKER—Wasn’t there a case recently on the dog question where a farmer did get compensation?

Mr Richardson—Yes, there was, but it was not automatic. He had to take legal action to do it. I cannot remember whether the state withdrew the appeal, but the state did talk about appealing the case at one stage. The person concerned has died of cancer and I would argue that the stress of those events and that case might have contributed to that. I think it should be automatic. The state should be in a position where if a bushfire comes out of its land which it is not managing it should say to the farmers, ‘We’ll put all your fences back, rebuild your houses, restock your property and pay for your seed.’ You should not have to have \$100,000 legal cases that drag on for years to get the money; it should be virtually automatic. When a mistake was made in controlled burns in central Victoria—and mistakes will be made—DSE immediately offered compensation, straight up, for rebuilding the fences. That should be done automatically on every occasion. It would be a discipline; the state would then have to make sure that events did not happen. It would have to maintain the buffer strips and those sorts of things. It is just not fair. If I caused a fire on my land and it was by my negligence or lack of foresight, I would be liable. But the state is not.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like to raise three issues. In your submission you put forward the suggestion that there be a watchdog like the ACCC to ensure the departmental and government policy is both accredited and accountable. Could you add to that statement?

Mrs Dowd—There is no consistency of interpretation. There needs to be a much better control of the quality of the policies that make the legislation and the regulations.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you. The second issue is that you also put in your submission that the 28-day consultation with the community is a very short period relative to the government and the department spending years developing a policy position. Could you add to that?

Mrs Dowd—It is not just how it impacts. There is such a variety of circumstances within a particular view that obtaining the correct information to demonstrate the impacts that you are going to suffer can take longer than 28 days, particularly when it is a regulation that is going to be implemented over a large area. The impacts are widespread. There are time imperatives as well as data collection. The time frame which has been afforded to the preparation of the legislation is much greater; there is not a great deal of equity when there is such a short time provided for the community. I know it extends the time frame of implementing whatever regulation or legislation is necessary but the time available to respond and give clarity to the impacts that would be suffered is insufficient.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think that it is a deliberate policy by governments and departments?

Mrs Dowd—No, it is probably an accrued outcome. But there is a legislated time frame and they need to keep to it and it does not always occur.

Mr McARTHUR—What would your recommendation to the committee be?

Mrs Dowd—That there be more flexibility within the time frame.

Mr McARTHUR—Within the 28 days or are you suggesting a three-month period of consultation?

Mrs Dowd—There should be a better approach to flexibility built into the time frame. There are time imperatives within that. There are many other considerations. It is rather inflexible.

Mr McARTHUR—You talk about a third issue in your document under the heading ‘Dissemination of influence: Primary contributing factor’, and you make some quite strong statements. You say:

P.R. Conservation resulting from the dominance of a dissociative form of conservation, characterised by an intransigent fixation on belief before knowledge, entirely dismissive of any evidence inconsistent with its own narrow views or goals, producing dysfunctional policies.

That is a fairly strong statement.

Mrs Dowd—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you add to that position? I notice that in your document you outline how these things come to pass. Would you add to that statement?

Mrs Dowd—From which aspect?

Mr McARTHUR—As I understand it, you are suggesting that there is a preconceived position. Would you like to help us a bit by telling us what you mean by that?

Mrs Dowd—It seems to be that a fixation has developed. You are focusing on a viewpoint, interpretation of data and impacts which are accumulative impacts. It is a viewpoint—and it has developed—that there is only a one-dimensional view. It is not one dimensional; there are other dimensions and it is how that is collated and how it percolates through to influencing the outcome. It is not necessarily a deliberate outcome but it does present the dynamics that act upon the decision-making outcomes.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you be saying that locking up the parks is one of those policies, that governments and departments lock up the parks, without due consideration of all the issues?

Mrs Dowd—There is not enough degree of inquiry or quality of inquiry.

Mr McARTHUR—In your view, what is the outcome: that the parks should be locked so that nobody can visit?

Mrs Dowd—Again, that is a one-dimensional view. It does not embrace the much wider interpretation of the complementary values of other ways. It focuses only upon somewhat selective views of utilisation. Mr Richardson has very well articulated that problem. There is a very large complementary view.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the impact of this point of view at the local level?

Mrs Dowd—There is a large disenchantment about a lot of policies. The impacts are not only in relation to public land. The viewpoints are fixed, and we cannot breach that barrier of fixation

with issues concerning fire volumes, fire fuel levels et cetera. It breaches the communication between those who will listen and those who will not listen.

Mr McARTHUR—From the point of view of the Bush Users Group, does that mean that access to the parks is limited because of this policy setting and the fuel reduction burning and all that sort of thing? Are you saying that is a problem, from your point of view?

Mrs Dowd—There are aggregate impacts that produce adverse results. If it is merely foot access or vehicle access—it is like a toy-box mentality in some respects. It is not necessarily a responsible outcome from the point of view that there are so many other problems that aggregate and impact in that area that the result is not one of environmental preservation and human coexistence at all.

Mr ORGAN—I know you have included in your submission recommendations on the way forward, but do you have a vision about the mechanism you would like to have put in place at both the regional and the local levels so that community groups such as yours would be able to sit down with government bodies, firefighters, conservationists, so-called green groups et cetera to deal with your concerns? You obviously feel that you are not being listened to, and you have been trying to put this across for a lengthy period. Do you have a vision of some mechanism as to how you could be listened to at the regional and local levels?

Mr Richardson—We have suggested in other forums that they look at the model forest program in Canada, which we only know of from the literature and from what you can get off the web. That involves community, Indigenous people and industry in the forest management. But great care has to be taken with that model. Consultative groups have been set up at various times in forestry in Victoria, but they are not set up in a way in which they have to take responsibility as well as authority. So a community group, or the majority of the members or whatever, will say, 'I don't like forests being cut down', or 'I don't like woodchipping.' So there is a political campaign where the consultative forum is just used to lock up more areas. So you have a park and a state forest and you have a consultative group on the state forest which then wants to lock up more of the state forest.

First, you are going to have to resource people with scientists and everybody is going to have to rigorously examine their positions. Secondly, the economic responsibility is going to have to be put on them. They will have to find a proportionate sum for the forest management. They cannot just say, 'I want this,' or, 'I want that,' and the taxpayer is going to pay for it. There is a group operating in Central Victoria in the Wombat Forest at the moment and my observation of it is that it has not had any economic responsibility put on it—it is all care and consultation. The community that is managing it has not been told, 'The taxpayer is not going to fund fire reduction in the forest to the full extent'—or biological management or whatever. 'You are going to have to manage the forest for its economic outcomes and for its safety outcomes and its biological outcomes. Don't dream that you can go back to non-interference.' I advocate community involvement but it is going to have to be thought about very deeply and very rigidly put in place, with lots of science and control or it just becomes another political forum and creates more problems. It is not going back to what we say is the core problem, and that is this ethos that you lock a place up and it is all right. It does not address the fact that management costs. It is not a freebie; it is a cost. In modern days we have lots of consultation and bureaucracy. I think people would be staggered to know the cost.

In my past life I was an industrial officer for the Australian Council of Trade Unions in charge of the forest industries from 1985 to 1997. In 1987 we put a plan to the then Labor government which by now would have meant that we had no forest products trade deficit. We needed stability for that plan. We never got it. Some of it will never be achieved. For instance, you will never have a pulp mill in East Gippsland because there is not enough resources there any more. So, whereas we calculated that we would have obliterated our trade deficit in forest products by now, we have still got a \$2 billion deficit. Nobody counts that cost because it is done in little increments—you shut a mill here, you shut a mill there, you forgo a pulp mill. Proponents do not even come forward because there is not enough resources. Nobody counts that cost. My argument is that national parks have cost Australia \$2 billion every year in trade deficit. What that is in terms of taxes and wages, I do not know, but that is where you have to start looking. Those committees will not work. They will just be another problem unless they address how you pay, and not go to the taxpayer. But I agree with them.

CHAIR—I will just finish with a couple of questions. You talked about the need for park management plans to be in place before any declaration of national parks, and the example you gave was the Box-Ironbark National Park, which was declared in 2002 without any park management plan. Is there a park management plan in place for that yet?

Mrs Dowd—I do not think so.

Ms Morgan—It is in the throes of being organised, as I see it. Is that right?

Mrs Dowd—Yes, it is still being formulated.

CHAIR—Has it been the norm with other new national parks that they tend to be declared and then management plans subsequently done?

Mr Richardson—Yes.

Ms Morgan—The management plan is never worked out before the park goes ahead, as I understand it. It is always three or four years down the track. Isn't that right?

Mr Richardson—The box-ironbark forest is a good example of the things we are talking about, because the environment council that did the proposal on the box-ironbark forest did agree—in fact I think there was agreement amongst most of the parties—that the forest needs thinning. It is not at its pre-European state; it is much too thick, and the only way to get it there quickly is to thin it—that is, to cut trees down. You have to either cut them down or poison them, then the rest will grow faster and thicker. Our proposal was: 'You do not have to put anybody off from the timber mills to do that. Just keep them going. They will thin the national parks and, instead of you paying them, they will pay you timber royalties, create jobs and get income.' They did not take any notice of that, so they put 100 people off who were working in something like 190,000 hectares of park that has to be maintained, paid them exit packages and provided retraining and all that. They have since put up to 10 people—there is a bit of argument about that—back on, on a trial basis, to do the same work. It is stupid. The taxpayer is going to pay those people, one tenth of the people, to do the work of 100 people, whereas the hundred people were paying the taxpayer, because when they went into the forest they paid a royalty.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the outcome of that scenario?

Mr Richardson—I do not think the thinning is going to get done.

Ms Morgan—No.

Mr Richardson—I do not see how it is going to be financed and 10 people cannot do it. If you drive through the forest there is so much thinning to be done. I just do not think it is going to get done. I will give the Victorian government its due: it did grasp that nettle in a small way, but it was not prepared to go to the whole way and say, 'The scientific recommendation is that the forest has to be thinned.' When somebody comes along saying, 'I am prepared to pay you, the government, to do it,' they say 'No, we won't take that offer. Sorry, stick it up your jumper. We are going to put you all off, pay you a redundancy package and then put a few people on to do the same work.' I do not think the work will get done.

CHAIR—Presumably a good part of that was thinned out by the fire.

Mr Richardson—No, the trees will not all have been killed. There will be a lot of problems. Another aspect of it is that the ethos is supposed to be to preserve the habitat trees and create new ones, and we agree with that, but the habitat trees are the first to go in a fire. There is that relationship: if you are not doing the fire mitigation, the habitat trees are the first to go because they are the hollow ones that, if they get a fire in them, they act like a chimney. If they do not go of their own accord, if they are spreading sparks out over the rest of the forest, somebody comes along and the best way to stop it is to cut the tree down. We have seen a 300-year-old habitat tree that had to be cut down as a fire prevention. It is all stupid; it is all icons: 'If we have a forest and it is a national park, we are looking after the environment.' It is just not true and the fires are an excellent demonstration.

CHAIR—Are you aware of any urgency within the department now to get a plan of management in place, given the extent of the fires earlier this year? Okay, a lot of this park was not burnt out, but it could be next time. Is there some urgency around?

Ms Morgan—There has been no communication as far as I am concerned. Nobody wants to know about it.

CHAIR—What was the tenure of the Ironbark national park prior to being a national park—was it a working forest?

Mr Richardson—Yes.

Mrs Dowd—It is fragmented across a large area of Victoria. The Chiltern national park was declared four years earlier and then there was a multipurpose park which was included in the recent declaration. The township of Eldorado was like a cul-de-sac. The multipurpose park functioned and interacted in that area, whereas the areas down towards Bendigo are larger, but they are fragmented. It was the consolidation of fragmented public land into an acreage, which was what was required. The status of national park changed the quality of firefighting from the point of view of how the firefighters were allowed to work. They more or less had to ask permission to go into the national park.

CHAIR—Those are the changes that have taken place.

Mrs Dowd—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence this morning and thank you for your submissions. They obviously form part of the evidence that the committee will be using when it puts together its report and recommendations over the next few months. Thank you for the assistance the committee had when we came down some weeks ago for inspections as well. We appreciate that.

[10.38 a.m.]

PLOWMAN, Mr Antony Fulton, Member for Benambra, Victorian Government

CHAIR—Welcome. We are in your electorate and we appreciate the hospitality that the committee has already been shown, in the brief time we have been here this morning. I do not think you were here earlier when we opened proceedings. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the 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. I know you have not made a formal submission but please make some opening remarks and then the committee might have some questions.

Mr Plowman—Thank you, Chair. I have not put in a formal submission. I had proposed to put in a written submission when I gave evidence, and I was expecting to do that tomorrow, so my apologies for not having put in that written submission to go with the verbal submission. This fire has been the most tragic event in my 11 years, coming on 12 years, as a member of parliament. In round figures, half of my electorate was burnt. That is a staggering proportion of the area that I represent. I would suggest that half the citizens of my electorate have been affected one way or another by the fires, so they have had a significant impact not only on the area of forest that has been burnt and on the area of private land that has been burnt but on those people who have been affected directly and indirectly by the fires. I see it as a very significant event and something that I think we need to learn from.

With your indulgence, I would like to briefly run through my involvement during the fires, my further involvement, my observations, the events that have occurred since the fire and what I think should occur in the future. In respect of my involvement during the fire, on the onset of the fires I made it my business to make contact with many local farmers, CFA members and CFA brigades close to and surrounding those areas where the fires first initiated. I also made it my business to make early contact with the incident control centres that were based throughout north-eastern Victoria.

I provided a tour and an inspection of the fire areas for the shadow minister for police and emergency services so that he could see first hand the extent of the fires and the way the fires were being handled. We visited four of the incident control centres, and we looked at the fires from virtually one end to the other. Later I also provided a tour and inspection of the fires and the fire area during the fires for the state Leader of the Opposition. On both those occasions we spent quite a lot of time meeting with those personnel who were running the fires and the incident control centres. My further involvement has been acting as liaison between those local people—the farmers, the CFA members, the CFA brigades and the incident control centres—with whom I had established contact earlier.

The other involvement I had was an inspection of the fire areas themselves. I will cite two occasions. One occasion was as the fire was on the south of Granite Flat and then, when the wind changed, as the fire encroached upon the Granite Flat area, which, as I understand it, was

the first of the private land to be burnt and lost in this area of the north-east. I was there with the regional fire officer, Graeme Armstrong; the group officer, Max Woods; and the deputy group officer, John Cardwell, who I believe is to give evidence soon after me. Another occasion was when I inspected the fire area south-west of Dartmouth prior to the fires actually burning through Dartmouth. I was there with John Cardwell, who is the fire captain of the Dartmouth brigade.

I was involved on another occasion when I was contacted by the ambulance officers from Mitta who were concerned about Mitta being directly under threat from the fires. Unfortunately, I cannot give you the date of that occasion, but it was when the fires were approaching Mitta from the north. The fires had been surrounding Mitta on two sides prior to that, but when the fires came in from the north the township was under direct threat. I was able to take the opportunity to contact the incident control centre at Corryong, ask for the redirection of the sky crane—which occurred—and I believe the involvement of that sky crane materially assisted the firefighting effort to stop Mitta being burnt out.

I will just touch on my observations over the fire period and since the fire period. The first one, undoubtedly, is the effect of fuel reduction burning on those areas that had been fuel reduction burnt as against those that had not. There are two areas that I would like to instance. When I inspected the area on the south side of Mitta I clearly saw that, in areas that had been fuel reduction burnt, where the brigades were holding the fire on a containment line and burning back from that containment line, the brigades were able to travel at about twice the speed with that burn-back on the areas that had been fuel reduction burnt. In other words, their effectiveness in containing the fire within a containment line was about doubled. I also saw the containment line on the south and east of Granite Flat, which took four days to burn. The fact that that containment line was jumped after four days of work was because the fire came from the area that was not fuel reduction burnt. Despite the efforts that had been put in over four days, those efforts came to nought largely because of the extreme fire, which was due to not only the extraordinarily dry conditions but also the extent of the forest litter on the forest floor.

Another observation that I think should be noted is that the cooperation on the fire front between the CFA and the departmental firefighters has never been better. I observed that on about four or five occasions at all different times of the day and night, and I have to say that on the fire front the level of cooperation between the Country Fire Authority and the DSE brigades was outstanding. The observations I made that were to the contrary of that were to do with the difficulty in getting advice from the fire front, particularly from those people in CFA brigades, back to the incident control centres. There was substantial frustration felt by those people who were fighting the fires at the fire front in not being able to get the local knowledge as to what they believed would be the better means of fighting those fires back to those people making the decisions in the incident control centres. There was also a difficulty that I found when I was at the incident control centres in getting the local knowledge they required and the advice they wanted back to those local brigades. It went back through the departmental structure better than it went back through the CFA structure, in my belief—certainly, from what I saw. That is not a criticism of the CFA; it is a criticism of the way the advice was delivered from the incident control centres back to the fire front.

I think the other issues that I would like to comment on really amount to two things. One is that we are faced with the loss of trained foresters in the forest. That is brought about by the

reduction in the forest and timber industries in our forested areas in Victoria. Together with the loss of those trained foresters—those people who have been trained not only to manage the forest but also to fight fires in the forest; from my observation, those people who were of the most value in the fighting of these forest fires—we also lose and are losing the logging industry from the forest areas of Victoria because of the reduction of the forestry industry throughout our forest areas. If you put those two groups of people together—those trained foresters and the logging industry that also provides the heavy machinery required to build containment lines to get into fire areas immediately to try to put out the fire or constrain it to a restricted area—I think that the loss of them is going to have disastrous consequences when we have future forest fires.

The other issue is anecdotal. Various people who have had substantial forest training and substantial involvement in the forest industry in north-eastern Victoria have said to me that these fires were not fought in an aggressive manner, that they were fought in a containment manner rather than in an aggressive manner. I cannot comment on that personally; I can only pass on that anecdotal evidence. It comes to me from people who were leaders in the department in respect of past forest fires. It also comes from people who were leaders in the CFA in respect of how forest fires were attacked in the past. I accept that the main reason for this is to ensure the safety of those people fighting the fires, but I would have to say that evidence indicates that the approach to fighting fires now is totally different from 10 to 15 years ago.

There is also anecdotal evidence that would lead me to believe that there were many occasions when the opportunity to put fires out was not taken. Again, there was an underlying message that on days that were not of severe risk it was better to stay away from the fire front to ensure safety rather than—as we all do when we fight fires—take the risk, go in and confront the fires. I was a member of the Country Fire Authority for about 30 years before I became a member of parliament and I have been involved in a lot of firefighting over those 30 years. From a personal point of view—as a member of the Country Fire Authority—it is strange to have that fall-back approach rather than an attack approach.

There were occasions when the decision was made to join up separate fires in order to try to create a containment line and from that containment line to hold the fires. There were occasions when this led to areas being burnt, and I cite the areas around Tom Groggin. On this occasion both those containment line burn-backs were done by the New South Wales parks services and in both cases substantial areas were burnt that otherwise would not have been. The effect that has had on Tom Groggin Station has been dramatic. There are other cases where local knowledge was not accepted and where local CFA members and local farmers were sure that, had certain areas been used as containment lines, the fires would have been better contained than they were with the containment lines that were put in. I bring that back to the difficulties those people had in getting that advice back to the incident control centres.

After the fires, the major areas of concern and frustration were in respect of fencing and the clearing of fence lines. It was disappointing for those people who lost fences as a direct result of those fires but more so for those who lost fencing because fires were burnt back into the forest area or because of the building of containment lines and did not have their fencing restored. It is a direct criticism of the government of the day that it was not policy to do that where that occurred.

The suggestion that three metres is a sufficient area to clear back from a fence line adjoining crown land has created enormous concern and enormous frustration for people wanting to build those fences. There are undoubtedly occupational health and safety issues relating to that which should be considered. The other area of concern that I have personally is that enormous stands of alpine ash have been burnt. We all know alpine ash does not regenerate except from seedlings, so those ash trees will be lost. Alpine ash are actually an incredible asset to the state because they can be salvaged within two years, in some cases within three years, if they are in the lower and wetter areas. Within both state forests and national parks, there needs to be an extraordinarily high concentration of effort put in to salvage as much of that timber as possible.

In the future, we need to increase the fire cycle—as has been considered and is occurring both in California in the United States and in southern areas of Canada. They are looking at increasing the fire cycle of all areas of state parks, provincial parks and national parks. I think that should occur here and the fire cycle should be no more than five to seven years where state forests or national parks adjoin private assets. Across state forests and national parks generally, we should have a fire cycle of no less than 30 years. You will have received or will receive evidence to suggest that this be more in the order of 200 to 300 years, which is totally inadequate.

This is not just to reduce the fire risk in those areas but is because for 45,000 years we had a system of burning forests, which led to an environmental outcome which we have not had for the past 200 hundred years. To achieve the major biodiversity of these areas we need to get back to mosaic burning, as occurred under Aboriginal occupation. This will also lead to a better ability to put out lightning strikes as they occur in forest areas and a better ability to put out major fires, such as this fire that we have had.

I would like to make the observation that for a fire to burn for six weeks, for a fire to have a front of 360 kilometres, and for that fire not to burn to the coast, or to burn down through the Dandenongs into Melbourne, is nothing short of good luck. I cannot see it any other way. I will finish by saying we need to have water resources sited strategically through and close to our forest areas in order to fight these fires in the future and to maximise our aerial support. There should be no more national parks established without management plans developed beforehand which take account of the need for firefighting. We clearly need to effect state policy in respect of fencing lost in firefighting and as a result of fires emanating from crown land. We need to have a better policy regarding cleared land on those fence lines and we need to have a completely new look at fuel reduction throughout our state forests and national parks in Victoria.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that evidence. I should have thanked you at the start for coming forward today with the timing changes we had. We appreciate the fact that you were able to appear before us at short notice, rather than tomorrow as was planned. You talked about the lack of aggression in fighting the fires. Do you have some information with respect to response times in those early days? We have had evidence from a variety of witnesses to this inquiry that when lightning strikes in forested areas the rule of thumb for generations was to get in and get it out as quickly as possible. Clearly in the most recent fires in various parts of the country that has not occurred. Do you have any information of lightning strikes starting fires in some of the public areas in your region—as opposed to private land—and what occurred, time-wise, in response in those respective areas?

Mr Plowman—My understanding is that in my electorate there were no lightning strikes on private land. I might be wrong but I am not aware of any that were lit on private land. The anecdotal evidence from people close to the Razorback fire—and many of those fires—is that there could have been an opportunity to hold that fire, which became one of the bigger parts of the total fire scene, had more resources been put in there earlier. But I have to balance that by saying that I learned in my meetings at the incident control centres—when they ran through the whole procedure that they had gone through when all the fires were lit by lightning—that the achievement of getting the majority of the fires out took a major effort. But the anecdotal evidence is that there were often cases when the fires could have been fought but, on the basis of the day being proclaimed to be a day of possible higher winds, fire units were withdrawn from fires—and in fact those winds did not occur. Again anecdotally, there were very many occasions when there could have been more work done at night. My understanding is that in all the years of fighting fires in Victoria, we have never lost a fire fighter during a containment of a fire at night. So I think we might not have used our night-time fire fighting ability as well as we might. This information comes from those people who were on the fire front and those people who had extensive experience in the CFA and department of natural resources and environment in past fighting of forest fires.

CHAIR—Did the Eldorado fire start on private land? It was possibly not a lightning strike—is that right?

Mr Plowman—The Eldorado fire could well have started on private land. As you would appreciate, those two fires—the Eldorado and the Stanley fires—were an adjunct to the major fire fighting. The difficulty there was that the majority of resources were away fighting the major fires. It was a superb effort to bring the resources in. One of the areas that I think we should be very aware of is the extraordinary involvement of the New South Wales fire fighting service in order to get in as quickly as they did, particularly to the Eldorado fire.

CHAIR—In relation to the New South Wales National Parks, you mentioned that they did a back-burn—for want of a better word—in Tom Groggin. The committee went through Tom Groggin and spoke to the managers there. Are you aware of a similar circumstance ever occurring—where a New South Wales authority has come across the border and carried out a back-burn or ‘fire management’? Are you aware whether that was done with the cooperation of the Victorian department or Country Fire Authority?

Mr Plowman—The initial back-burn was done on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, in order to try to put up a break on the national park area of New South Wales should the Pinnibar fire burn out of Victoria and into that area. In fact, exactly the reverse happened: the fire came out of New South Wales into that area surrounding Tom Groggin. I am not aware of any occasion before—it may have happened, but I am not aware of it—where the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service came into Victoria and burnt that area on the south of Tom Groggin station, which effectively burnt out the majority of their forest lease country.

CHAIR—It seemed an unusual circumstance, particularly as the local station people were clearly against what occurred—they gave strong advice it should not happen.

Mr Plowman—The local management—the manager, his wife and his children—not only contained the fire around Tom Groggin but kept it out of the picnic area on the New South Wales

side of the Murray, which was later burnt out by the New South Wales parks service, which I thought showed a level of contempt for the work that family had done. Things happen with a fire that you may not like, but there certainly seemed to be little appreciation of the extraordinary work that was done by that small family unit in Tom Groggin. Can I say that I have never seen more appalling circumstances than exist there at the moment—they are shooting up to three, four and five cows a day because those cattle, which have been restricted by these fires and not by the drought, are under enormous stress. That management unit are having enormous difficulty meeting those demands, and I would suggest that is directly a result of the fires.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you, Tony. I have to say from the outset that I am very fortunate to have a state colleague with the experience, the empathy and the knowledge that you have. You mentioned the destruction of fencing and the lack of financial contribution to private land-holders. One of the previous witnesses mentioned some funding for dog fencing, but they were unsure about the actual relationship between the funding and the different sorts of fencing available. As the state member, can you inform this committee about the state government's policy regarding the replacement of fencing and how that interacts with funding for dog fencing.

Mr Plowman—I am a little bit cynical about this whole exercise, but I will be as non-political as I can be. The only assistance available is to farmers who have had their boundary fences burnt out. Half the cost of those fences will be provided by the state government if a wild dog fence is built in an area where a wild dog fence is required. For the majority of farmers affected by these fires there is no need for a wild dog fence, so that assistance does not apply to them. In many cases, the additional cost of building a wild dog fence takes away the assistance, in effect, that should be given to those people to supply at least the material cost of the fencing.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Was the funding for the wild dog fencing in existence before the bushfires or was it a new initiative?

Mr Plowman—The funding was available prior to the bushfires but I think it was made in addition to the existing fencing subsidy available prior to the fires. I cannot say from what bucket of money that came—whether the assistance was coming from the existing funding source—but it was available to those people who were burnt out, and for that I am grateful.

Ms PANOPOULOS—As an estimate, what percentage of private land-holders would not be able to access this funding?

Mr Plowman—I cannot give you the figures of those farmers who have taken up the offer, but it is my understanding that there are very few farmers who are eligible and very few who have taken up the offer. When you consider that countless thousands of kilometres of fencing have been burnt, I think this is a very unfortunate situation.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you.

Mr HAWKER—What changes have you seen in public attitude towards the management of forests since this has occurred? Is this just an initial thing or do you think there has been a genuine shift in people's attitudes?

Mr Plowman—I think there are two ways to look at that. One is that those people who were working on the fire front with DSE brigades, where they work well together, were certainly encouraged by the fact that the firefighting effort could be done collectively and could be done well. There were occasions when there was enormous frustration, when departmental firefighting units left the fire solely to the CFA. I think that built up a level of resentment, which was as unfortunate. The changeover of DSE brigades away from the fire front meant that sometimes for many hours the fire front was left without their support. Again, that was an unfortunate occurrence. When you look around the farming fraternity near crown land, it is an indictment that the majority of farmers believe that the Crown is the worst neighbour you could possibly have. That is something as a government we have to take very seriously.

Mr HAWKER—What about in the wider community?

Mr Plowman—I think the wider community is not as aware of this as those people who actually border crown land. The wider community were certainly aware of the extraordinary effort that was put up by firefighters. They are very inclined to congratulate those people who are involved in fighting the fires because of the significance of these fires.

Mr HAWKER—Do you see any change in attitude towards the management of forests as a consequence of this?

Mr Plowman—I think it is too early to state that. I certainly would hope that that occurs. The evidence given to your committee, your report and the report coming from the state inquiry should give direction to both state and federal governments to reassess the way we manage our state forests. There is a lot of responsibility on the reports from both inquiries to give that level of direction.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could you expand on the statement you made about fires being fought in a containment philosophy rather than an aggressive one. Has the culture changed in the wake of Linton? It is something that I have been intimately involved with, because my firefighters burned to death in that fire. Is this the reason, do you think? Is this the sole reason or is it an amalgam of various things that have caused this change in philosophy?

Mr Plowman—I really cannot give an answer to that, because I do not know what has changed in the minds of those people who have determined how forest fires should be fought. What I do know—anecdotally, again—from those people within the departmental structure and within the CFA structure who used to be in charge of running the fires, is that they can see a significant difference in the way this fire was fought. On that basis I would put it down to the emphasis on safety. Nobody could argue with that. The safety of firefighters must come first. You rightly point out that when you do lose firefighters, nothing is more important than human life. But as I said before, it was nothing short of luck that these fires of such magnitude did not either burn to the coast or burn down through into the Dandenongs and in towards Melbourne. The possibility of further life then being lost would have to be weighed up. The indication is that there has been a change in attitude, but I cannot tell exactly what has caused that change of attitude.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—On the issue of the cooperation between the CFA and DSE you made the comment that on the ground it was good and the problem seemed to be in getting

information back to the incident control centres and utilising local knowledge. Could you expand on how are you would see that occurring? You are obviously somebody in the political process and you have had some experience in government. How could this be improved?

Mr Plowman—I was fortunate in that I was able to see both sides of the firefighting during that six-week period. I did spend a lot of time on the fire front meeting with people fighting the fire and at the incident control centres. I believe that both groups of people were doing their role as well as they could, but I think there was a dysfunctional situation between the incident control centres and those people at the fire front.

More recently, since the fires, I happened to be at the Shell refinery and I asked them what they did in a state of emergency, whether it be a spill, an explosion or a fire. They said that they had an incident control centre. I asked them how it worked. They said that the incident control centre was there to give support and strategic support to those people running the fire and making the decisions as to how to combat the fire at the fire front or the emergency. Frankly, I do not think that is the way the incident control centres work in firefighting and maybe a lesson could be learned from the way the incident control centres work in an area like a major refinery.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—The Canadians, in those areas they designate as needing protection, have a philosophy of containing the fire within a three-kilometre front and they employ substantial aerial assets to effect that. What has been your experience in the use of aerial assets in these fires in your area and do you see a role for that sort of aerial asset or a variety of aerial assets in future situations?

Mr Plowman—It is my belief that the greatest use of the aerial support is in first-strike capacity. Probably the most significant firefighting affect can be achieved by that first-strike capacity in getting into isolated areas quickly and effecting control that would have taken longer if personnel had to be got in there. But that has to be followed by personnel to black those areas out and to properly contain them. The other area, of course, is in major asset protection. As I said, the use of the fire crane in the two townships of Stanley and Mitta, I would suggest, made the difference between those townships burning and not burning. I think there was a great level frustration that more aerial support was not able to be used because of the level of smoke. I can only suggest that how aerial support can be used more effectively in a big fire like this might be reassessed. Certainly, in my 30 years as a CFA member and since that time, I have never seen a smoke bank as deep and as solid and as dense as the one that was over this fire in north-eastern Victoria. I believe the climatic situation of the fire area was actually materially altered because of that extraordinarily dense bank of cloud that hung over the area for weeks on end.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Plowman, for your evidence this morning. We really appreciate it. We have covered a number of issues which are paramount to this inquiry and we have had a great insight into the fires in your particular region.

Mr Plowman—Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 11.19 a.m. to 11.40 a.m.

CARDWELL, Mr John Raymond Robert, Captain, Mitta Rural Fire Brigade

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you very much for being available for today's hearing. I think that you were here earlier when I read the legal part about the proceedings and the evidence, so I will not go through that again. We have your submission to the inquiry, which forms part of the evidence. It has been published. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we ask some questions?

Mr Cardwell—Yes. I wish you had turned up during the fires because you seem to turn up when it rains. What a pity. I have the Razorback fire down here as the overlooked or forgotten fire. It seems to be the one that threatened us the most, but there was never much action on it. It started on 8 January 2003 due to lightning strikes, but it was not until Sunday, 12 January at a meeting at my house of four local captains that some action was finally taken on this fire. We finally got it recognised. It was not until the Monday, when Tom Walsh, Mike Walsh, John Scales and John Kissane drove through and started investigating where the fires were, that we realised just how serious it was—trying to get the recognition out of the people involved.

After numerous phone calls to DSE Swifts Creek control, David Foster—a Parks Victoria ranger from Omeo—met these locals at Holloway's mill site at Granite Flat. We studied the maps of the area and established a plan of attack—control lines and containment lines. The local DSE representative, Ernie Cole, saw the plans and asked for them to be put in place, but the control centre at Swifts Creek refused until he went to Swifts Creek 2¼ or 2½ hours later. Valuable time was lost at all times. Fires are important things; you get in and you put them out quickly if you can. At this stage two bulldozers had been dropped off from Gippsland, but they could not start work because there was no plan—the plans were refused.

On Tuesday, 14 January at 1426 hours I requested a strike team for back-burn. The weather was favourable. Finally, at 1800 hours CFA strike teams from Tallangatta group joined with DSE for back-burning operations along the containment lines: Dartmouth to the Omeo highway. This was an operation of extreme difficulty due to the terrain, the weather conditions, the delayed start and the immense fuel loadings in the area. It was horrendous trying to work along single-lane tracks that were overgrown in the parks.

In the light of the resulting concerns and questions, we now realise that this fire could have been put out in the early stages. The local DSE rep on the fire line asked for resources and was refused. Why weren't the local CFA crews, such as Mitta, Eskdale, Dartmouth or Noorongong, contacted and used to control this fire on 8 January by helping to support the DSE?

This area had huge fuel loadings. Fuel reduction burns in these areas over the last 30 years would have decreased the intensity of this fire. There were also difficulties with the definition of what had been reduction burnt. When a fire has been started as part of a reduction burn but it does not 'take', the area cannot be set aside as 'burnt'. It can be classified as burnt only if, in fact, the fuel has been burnt effectively. Pine plantations too close to the roadside caused great difficulty and danger in getting crews to the fire front. Permission for pine plantations areas must take this into account and must not allow plantings to be so close to any road. I believe the

Hancock's pine plantation, which did get burnt out in the Mitta Mitta area, has taken this concern on board.

CFA crews were working on the control lines. DSE crews would leave the control lines and return 4½ hours later. CFA crews were left to control large areas on their own while the DSE changed shifts. That was of great concern. Orders which made CFA strike teams meet at the Holloway's mill site were futile when, just 400 metres down the road, there was coffee at the Red Cross catering centre and toilets for those who were sitting on the bare road waiting to get the okay to go in.

Throughout the fire, asset protection for a farming community was not defined. Only houses seemed to be an asset. This caused great distress, as livestock in cattle yards were left unprotected and grassland, the cattleman's livelihood, was left to burn. We could not get the message through that grass is the cattleman's asset; that, without grass, you do not have livestock.

As a strike team leader, not having weather reports or up-to-date maps of the fire made briefing strike teams extremely difficult. Added to this, outside strike teams seemed to have vehicles and pencils; at this stage, we had none. Difficulties with outside strike teams not being willing to accept directions from the local strike team leader on deployment of their strike team caused unnecessary stress to the local strike team leader, who had the local knowledge.

On my own property at Granite Flat, my request for back-burning to be done was refused. At this time, CFA tankers, DSE slip-ons and crews were in attendance and weather conditions were perfect. Had my request been accepted, the resources could have been despatched to other areas of concern. A bulldozed control line between Walsh's farm and my farm was left unattended at night. The fire subsequently jumped the control line and caused fire damage to Walsh's farm. Consequently, a new control line had to be established. Had the original line been patrolled, loss and work would have been minimised.

Attempts to inform the DSE of the seriousness of the western flank of this fire did not seem to concern them. It was not even mapped. Group officer Max Woods, regional officer Graeme Armstrong, Tony Plowman, MP, and I drove to find the fire front and to establish its possible dangers to Mitta Mitta township and Granite Flat. At times we were promised strike teams, but they did not come. They finally arrived after the devastation on Australia Day. Had they come when promised, our human resources would not have been stretched to the limits and beyond.

The setting up of Dartmouth as a control centre was beyond belief. There was only one way in and one way out. Tallangatta was supposed to be our control centre for all fires in this area. If a closer network was required, Mitta would have been the logical and safer area, because this was the strike team's staging post. The communications between Dartmouth control and the Tallangatta group were puzzling. We were not even aware that the Dartmouth control was closing or that it had been closed. I drove up to try to find out where they were and they had left, unbeknown to anyone.

At a municipal fire meeting in Wodonga, a representative of VicRoads was asked why they were not asked to supply equipment. This additional equipment would have helped us at Granite Flat and Mitta Mitta township. An evacuation called at approximately 0200 hours at Granite Flat

caused unnecessary stress to the landholders, with no resources left for them in the evacuation plan. In contrast, the evacuation of Mitta North and Eskdale allowed for resources to be available and was much smoother.

Now for some suggestions—we will get away from some of the negatives. The first is more than a suggestion, it is a must: local members must be included in the incident control centres and in the incident management teams. Fuel reduction burning must be increased. Only one control line held, due to that area being fuel reduction burnt in recent years—Tony Plowman mentioned that in his report. The Mitta township was saved by the air crane and a change in the weather direction. With the air crane stationed locally—that is, at Albury—we might have saved more property during these fires. Also, the formulas for the use of air cranes must be changed. Population alone cannot measure the huge community loss in energy, morale and assets, and its impact on the future. In other words, let us change where they can be used and what time they can be used. More medium-sized helicopters in the early stage of these lightning strikes could have contained these fires. We need a lot more of them; they might have got onto these fires a lot earlier.

Minimum 30-metre buffer zones are required around private property adjoining public land. This would enable the mineral earth breaks to be erected more easily outside the landholder's property, back-burning to be a lot easier and our jobs, trying to get bulldozers and control lines around farmers' places, to be made a lot easier. I would task two different sections of bulldozers on these lines. Having local DSE permanent staff in low numbers, such as one or two, is a policy that brings about its own decay. At least five local permanent staff are required in an area with such vast geography. The value of local knowledge and experience cannot be underestimated in government departments.

I turn to some positives and gains from the experience. These are not in order, but this is how we came up with them. Member of parliament Tony Plowman was hands on—fantastic—in delivering food, satellite phones and information and even taking the injured captain home. That was great. Graeme Aldrich, the communications officer of Tallangatta group, was outstanding in maintaining contact with us, always in a professional manner. The liaison between the local police and me was excellent. The local Red Cross did a fantastic job with meals. The SES, supporting the Red Cross in the delivery of meals and drinks, are to be congratulated. The supply and quality of water for human consumption on the fire lines was outstanding—we could not have faulted the amount of water we were given. The support given by David Foster of Parks Victoria, Ernie Cole and Dave Sakes at Mitta Mitta was excellent. The bulldozer and operators from Brooks Logging and Strickland's from Gippsland were excellent. They worked in extremely different conditions—it was dusty and they worked till two or three o'clock in the morning—and they did a fantastic job.

Crews from the Tallangatta group CFA worked under extremely difficult conditions and should be admired for their efforts. They were not found wanting. Many left their own employment to help crew the tankers. They also slept on the ground—no feather beds for them. The army deployment, when they got to the township of Mitta Mitta, was fantastic. They were excellent. Our own CFA crews showed an extraordinarily high level of commitment and service. Also, when more personal protective equipment was requested from the region, it was in Mitta Mitta township the next day.

In conclusion, added to my own report on the involvement in the January 2003 fires, I strongly endorse the submission of Captain John Scales to the House select committee, as many of our experiences were shared. Many of our CFA members are dairy farmers. Some had to pay for relief milkers to replace them while they went out to the fire fronts. Others relied on family members and friends to maintain their businesses. Personally, the support I received from my family members is something I can never forget. I trust and hope that this report will be useful in improving our system. The report is not meant to blame anyone. I just hope that it will help us in preventing any further tragedies.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Cardwell; that is good information for our committee.

Mr McARTHUR—I will raise two issues. You mention that the fire was not put out on 8 January. Why did that unusual set of circumstances arise, that a potentially dangerous fire was not put out when it had the possibility of being extinguished?

Mr Cardwell—I was not at any incident management centres. I really can only recount what we have been told: they wanted the resources somewhere else and the fuel loading could have been too big for them.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think that as a local firefighter you could have, with minimum resources in the early stages, put out the fire which started with the lightning strike?

Mr Cardwell—I have been led to believe that. If the DSE had asked for help or more resources and the local CFA had helped them with personnel, yes, I think we could have put it out.

Mr McARTHUR—And what would have been the effect of putting that fire out in the first instance, relative to the final damage that was incurred?

Mr Cardwell—There are always lots of ifs and buts when it comes to fires. Sometimes we think we can put them out but we lose them. But if we had a try and achieved what we thought we could do there would have not been this huge Razorback fire.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you tell the committee the extent of the Razorback fire?

Mr Cardwell—It would have stopped that Razorback fire.

Mr McARTHUR—But how big was it, just for the record?

Mr Cardwell—Sorry, I have no detail of the size of the Razorback fire.

Mr McARTHUR—But the Razorback fire that you referred to was quite an extensive fire that started from this small lightning strike.

Mr Cardwell—A small lightning strike, and it joined with all the other fires.

Mr McARTHUR—Is it your view that if you had been in charge you could have put it out, that if you had been allowed to use your local knowledge to deal with the lightning strike you could have put the fire out?

Mr Cardwell—If the local DSE representative that was on the fire line at that stage had used local fire teams, yes, I think we could have put it out.

Mr McARTHUR—I will turn to my second issue. You suggested that some of the fire lines were unattended at night. That seems a strange set of circumstances—how did that arise?

Mr Cardwell—The fire lines were unattended due to the changeover shifts of the DSE. At that stage, the CFA kept on the fire lines while the DSE seemed to have a policy of changing their shifts over from Omeo and then bringing them in. At this stage it is documented that 4½ hours later they finally turned up, which left the containment line that we were putting in to that strike team of local CFA crews.

Mr McARTHUR—What was the consequence of that unattended fire line during that 1½ to two hours?

Mr Cardwell—Due to the extreme efficiency of the CFA—the local teams—they managed to hold it there, with great difficulty.

Mr McARTHUR—This was in the evening burn, was it? Was it the changeover period?

Mr Cardwell—The one I have down is in the morning from around 0700 hours until 1100 hours.

Mr McARTHUR—From 7 a.m. until 11 a.m. there were no firefighters on the job?

Mr Cardwell—Apart from the CFA crews.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you find that surprising?

Mr Cardwell—Yes, we did find it surprising. It angered a lot of members of the CFA, but it seemed to be the policy for the way it worked at that stage. Later on, I do believe, they did change a lot of it.

Mr McARTHUR—What was the policy, though, to allow the fire to be not controlled? How would that policy evolve?

Mr Cardwell—I think you would have to talk to the DSE representatives at the incident management centre at Swifts Creek. Only they seem to know what the policies were.

Mr McARTHUR—On the one hand, you had people fighting the fire for a number of hours in difficult conditions and, on the other hand, you had a policy position where the fire was not being fought at a time of day when it was getting hotter. One would have thought it was important to take every possible action to contain the fire.

Mr Cardwell—At this stage we were putting in containment lines and back-burning along the containment lines. The fire front was still a fair way away from us. We were hoping to get these containment lines in quickly and to provide a large buffer zone so that the main fire would not jump our containment lines.

Mr McARTHUR—You talk about the buffer zones. Are you talking about buffer zones between the national park and private land? Is that what you are talking about in terms of 30 metres?

Mr Cardwell—I am talking about national park or crown land wherever it is adjacent to farmers' properties.

Mr McARTHUR—Other witnesses have had a range of views as to how wide the buffer zone should be. What is your recommendation? Where should the buffer zone be? Should it be on parks land or private land?

Mr Cardwell—It should be on parks land, if possible, and my recommendation is 30 metres. That would enable easy access for bulldozers and it would save the farmers' fences from trees falling over them.

Mr McARTHUR—Why wouldn't that sensible policy be implemented?

Mr Cardwell—I would like to answer that one, but I am afraid it is the state government of Victoria that runs those policies.

Mr McARTHUR—From a landholder point of view, you see the lack of buffer zone on crown land as a major impediment to protecting private property?

Mr Cardwell—To protecting our private property and protecting our boundary line fencing.

Mr McARTHUR—Could you tell us what the current position is? Is there no buffer zone? If a tree falls on a fence, that is the responsibility of whom?

Mr Cardwell—There is no buffer zone and the local farmers have responsibility for the control of their fence lines.

Mr McARTHUR—If a tree falls off the parks-crown land onto a fence that separates the crown land and private property, whose responsibility is that?

Mr Cardwell—It is the responsibility of the farmer himself.

Mr McARTHUR—It is the farmer's responsibility, although the tree fell out of the parks-crown land?

Mr Cardwell—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—How do you reach that set of circumstances?

Mr Cardwell—It is the way it has been.

Mr McARTHUR—What do the farmers do to maintain the fence line if a tree falls on the fence line?

Mr Cardwell—Patch up and remove the tree.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you allowed to cut up the tree or not?

Mr Cardwell—I am not sure on the policy on that one.

Mr ORGAN—You mentioned the pine plantation in the area near your house. I think that is what you said. You say in your submission:

... certain CFA tankers refused to drive through this pine plantation as they felt it was too dangerous because of the narrow cleared area.

I was wondering if you had any comments on how pine plantations burn, whether they burn differently from, say, the normal Aussie bush and how you fight those sorts of fires. Do you have any general comments for the committee with regard to dealing with pine plantations?

Mr Cardwell—The pine plantation I mentioned here was a small pine plantation run by Hancock's. It was threatened by fire—the main fire that burnt out Scales's place around Dartmouth and was threatening the pine plantation and burning behind the pine plantation. It was also heading into the top end of Callaghans Creek. It was a very narrow tunnel road, and I had extreme difficulty in going through because I did not know where the fire was. The pines were dry, and we had no anticipation of the explosive effects—whether they would just explode if the fire hit them or burn slowly. Some areas of the plantation that we had inspected later burnt very fiercely; in other areas it just gradually burnt the pine needles and flared up a fraction. It was a hard decision to let tankers through. We only let one tanker through in the early stages of the fire to get to some houses. For others we thought it was too dangerous for the crews in the CFA tankers to go through and we kept them back until the fire had gone through. It was a decision to protect men as well.

Mr ORGAN—I just want to get a feeling for pine plantations versus normal bush. Based on your experience as a long-term firefighter, is their fire behaviour different from that of the normal bush?

Mr Cardwell—I have not seen pine plantations really go up. This is the first one I have seen go up. The bush exploded extremely hotly that day.

Mr ORGAN—How much time do you think was lost in dealing with the Razorback fire which you feel did not really have to be lost? You mentioned a couple of hours here and there, but was it a lot more than that in getting stuck into the Razorback—was it days or just a couple of hours?

Mr Cardwell—The fire started on 8 January due to the lightning strikes. It was on Sunday, 12 January that I called a meeting of the four local captains at my house, and we finally got the fire

recognised. It was at about four o'clock that day that we finally got the proper details of that fire. It was not until Tuesday, 14 January at 1426 hours or 1800 hours that we finally got the major containment lines going and started to back-burn along those containment lines.

Mr ORGAN—Was that about four or six days after it started? I just want to get a feel for what you feel would have been the earliest time that you could have gone in and done something if it had been left up to you and your local people. Would it have been a day or so after it started?

Mr Cardwell—We would have liked to have been in there when it started, right at the start—8 or 9 January.

Mr ORGAN—Do you think that you could actually have done that if you had had a bit more—

Mr Cardwell—If the DSE had asked us for assistance, we could have supported them in that fire.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You said in your submission that there needed to be a change in when aircraft could be used. Could you please elaborate on that and explain why you made that statement?

Mr Cardwell—We believe that there is a formula. I have not sighted the formula, but I have been led to believe that the air cranes will only work to protect assets such as major towns; major properties, such as pine plantations; or small towns, such as Mitta. Without the air crane Mitta would not have survived. I would like the formula to be changed so that it might become usable a lot more quickly and a lot more often even in small fires, which helps us firefighters. We could have used it a lot earlier, especially at Dartmouth and at some other times in the incident. As for the smaller attack helicopters, I do not believe that we have enough of them in the state—or even in New South Wales; I am not sure. These could have been resourced, and we could have a lot more.

Ms PANOPOULOS—We all know that all the fires joined up to create an enormous fire front slicing through north-eastern Victoria, and going into New South Wales and into Mr Nairn's electorate. There has been a lot of discussion about an aggressive attack on fire rather than containment. Do you believe that, if the policy of an aggressive attack on fire had been adopted across the north-east, the fires would not have joined up and could have been contained in smaller areas?

Mr Cardwell—Yes, I agree about that—but remember: all fires are different. I can only speak about the fire that I was involved with. If we had used an aggressive tack right at the start we might have contained this fire. That is when we should have been very aggressive with it. I know there were a lot of fires started by lightning that day but we should have been more aggressive: got in and got them out quick.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I will go to a separate issue. As a farmer you saw resources directed at protecting certain assets. Do you think there is adequate value placed on the resources and the assets on farms, when planning to put out fires?

Mr Cardwell—I can only quote my neighbour. He said, ‘I would love the fire tankers to protect my stock or my hay. I don’t want them around my house. My house is insured; let it burn.’ That is the only way I can answer that question.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you saying there is no consideration at all to protecting any assets on a farm other than dwellings?

Mr Cardwell—It was a funny policy that we would like explained more. That is why I put it in. We would like ‘assets’ defined a lot better than it is. Rather than ‘houses’ and ‘businesses’ we have to define the word ‘assets’ for farmers.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Well, a farm is a business.

Mr Cardwell—True. The grass is the farmer’s.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Your cattle would be your trade in stock—so that is a business. Would you agree that there is a restrictive definition of ‘assets’ that, in effect, is prejudiced against farming businesses?

Mr Cardwell—True, there seems to be a belief that you should let some of the country go—let it burn—and just save the houses or the outbuildings.

Mr HAWKER—Mr Cardwell, I was wondering if you could, for our benefit, explain the process of authorising someone to fight a fire such as the Razorback one, which obviously started on crown land. What is the process of authorising someone to fight that sort of fire?

Mr Cardwell—The DSE would have to go to the CFA requesting their help—usually from the regional group—who would then contact the local group, which would be Tallangatta. That Tallangatta group would then contact the local brigades. That is the how the process should be done—all through Melbourne.

Mr HAWKER—So you, as the local CFA brigade, cannot take any decisions without written agreement of the DSE?

Mr Cardwell—It would have happened this way: we would have been sent in there by the Tallangatta group to help the DSE.

Mr HAWKER—If, for argument sake, you saw a fire start 200 metres inside the fence, surely you would have the authority to say, ‘Look, if we get there quickly, we will stop that fire coming out,’ wouldn’t you?

Mr Cardwell—That is true, yes.

Mr HAWKER—So you can do that?

Mr Cardwell—Yes, we would do that.

Mr HAWKER—But in the case of one that was further in, you wanted the DSE to authorise it?

Mr Cardwell—Major fires in the bush are their area of responsibility. They would have to request, through the CFA, our attendance at that fire.

Mr HAWKER—How do you make that distinction between the one that is on your boundary and the one that is a couple of kilometres inside?

Mr Cardwell—The one on the boundary is a lot closer and is going to beat the poor old cocky first. I am sorry, the one way back in the bush has a lower priority.

Mr HAWKER—You just act if you see an immediate threat but you have to go the long route if it is further in—you have to make that assessment?

Mr Cardwell—That is correct. If I did have a fire like that—200 metres outside the boundary—I would also be seeking the help of the DSE in the first instance, so that we could work together at all times on the fire.

Mr HAWKER—But in relation to the response time, you would not be waiting that long, would you?

Mr Cardwell—No. We would attend but we would also seek the help of the DSE and run it as a joint fire.

Mr McARTHUR—I am seeking clarification of the definition of the fire. Are you saying that it started on 8 January and took until 12 January to be officially declared a fire?

Mr Cardwell—That is what we were told. We had a meeting and could not seem to get any recognition of the size or the concern of the fires. At that time, a report to John Scales made by Mrs Anne Walsh of live embers falling on Granite Flat altered the agenda of that meeting. We did realise then that there were concerns that this fire was a lot bigger than we were led to believe. We wanted it noted that we had expressed our concerns. This was the trouble: it took four hours of phone calls to DSE and CFA to establish any details of the fire. We were assured by DSE that the controller had flown over and it was of no concern. We were also assured by the controller at Corryong that there were no worries with the fire—that was on the Sunday. But Mrs Anne Walsh reported to John Scales that live embers were falling at her house. At that stage, a Mitta fire tanker was fighting the fires at Cravensville. At 1500 hours, officers from Max Woods' group requested that the Mitta tanker be returned to the township of Mitta Mitta.

Mr McARTHUR—When did it officially become a fire? Are you saying that it started on the 8th and then became a recognisable fire on the 12th?

Mr Cardwell—It was during the many telephone calls on the Sunday. It seems to have been instigated by the group of us. We finally got complete recognition that this was a fire of concern.

Mr McARTHUR—Four days later?

Mr Cardwell—Yes.

CHAIR—What is your recollection of the weather conditions between the 8th and the 12th?

Mr Cardwell—Very hazy, I am sorry. We were involved in fighting the fires at Cravensville and resourcing crews. I am sorry that I am not making a direct conviction. It was a long campaign.

CHAIR—Do you recall whether the weather got worse as the fire went on? From a weather point of view, were there better opportunities for getting at these fires in those early days than there were later on? Was it compounded later on by the fire getting bigger and the weather conditions getting worse?

Mr Cardwell—The weather was definitely better at the start, as you have said. It did get worse. The weather had a huge impact on the fire. At no time in our experience with bushfires in the Mitta Mitta area have we seen the reaction or behaviour pattern of this fire—especially late at night. It was just immense. It had a mind of its own at 12 o'clock at night and one o'clock in the morning. Then it would be very benign for days.

CHAIR—You mentioned in your opening remarks that some crews went out with out-of-date maps. What mapping was being used? Presumably there were crew from outside the area coming in to assist without the real local knowledge. What was the age and reliability of those maps?

Mr Cardwell—I mentioned myself as a strike team leader, and I can only report on a couple of other strike team leaders, who are local people. We had no, or seemed to have no, weather reports, up-to-date maps of the fires, maps of the fire line—

CHAIR—Sorry, it was maps of the fires that you were referring to.

Mr Cardwell—which made the briefing of the strike teams that we were in charge of very difficult.

CHAIR—Sorry, I thought you were referring to topographical maps of the region for people to use to find their way.

Mr Cardwell—No.

CHAIR—So you are talking about the actual maps of the fire front?

Mr Cardwell—Yes, and of the communication breakdown between the incident control centres and us as strike team leaders. It seemed to be broken down. It is something to be looked at.

CHAIR—I turn to a slightly different issue. You are a farmer; what insurance do you carry for your fencing, for instance?

Mr Cardwell—I have certain insurance on my fences and on the buildings, and that is it.

CHAIR—So if you lose fencing it is covered by your insurance policy?

Mr Cardwell—One portion of the fencing is. You can state which part of your fencing you want insured and which part of your fencing is not insured.

CHAIR—So the insurance companies offer you different rates for different-risk fencing; for instance, presumably internal fencing is at a lesser risk than external fencing that abuts forested areas. Is that the case?

Mr Cardwell—I am not sure about that one. I just have block insurance.

CHAIR—You can nominate which fencing is part of that insurance?

Mr Cardwell—That is correct.

CHAIR—Do you know from your farmer colleagues whether that is the norm?

Mr Cardwell—I know from some colleagues that some had fencing insurance in areas and others did not. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submission and your additional evidence today. We really appreciate it.

Mr Cardwell—Thank you, Chair and members of the select committee.

Proceedings suspended from 12.22 p.m. to 1.34 p.m.

NICHOLLS, Mr Ian, Manager Environment Services, Alpine Shire

SHARP, Mr Doug, Chief Executive Officer, Alpine Shire

COSTELLO, Mr John Patrick, Chief Executive Officer, Indigo Shire Council

TAI, Ms Ruth, Manager Community Services, Indigo Shire Council

LENAGHAN, Mr Peter, Manager Technical Services, Towong Shire Council

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House 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 the parliament. We have each council's submission. These have been authorised for publication so they are on the public record and form part of the evidence for the inquiry. Would you like to make some opening remarks before I ask the committee if they have some questions for you?

Mr Costello—As our submission is a public document, we do not propose to regurgitate exactly what is in it; it is there for everyone to see. But we do have a couple of pages we would like to run through just to amplify a few issues and cover a few issues that have happened since. I will lead off on that and Ruth will add any other comments as we go. One thing we would like to state is that the efforts of the emergency services, especially the CFA and its support crews, cannot be overestimated. Other emergency services such as the police and SES played a major role in combating the fires and providing support to the CFA and to Parks Victoria.

In the background of the major combating authorities, enormous effort was provided by the Red Cross and other support agencies such as the Salvation Army and the Department of Human Services. The council played a major role in the operation of the Municipal Emergency Control Centre, providing resources as requested by the combating authorities and providing information and support to the community. The council also established emergency relief centres at three locations, and we were prepared for two others to be established if the need arose. Our business arm, Indigo Way Services, actively participated in providing equipment, resources and manpower to those fighting the fires. All in all, there was an enormous effort by many of the regular emergency services and other organised service groups.

Very importantly, though, in the background of this was the enormous volunteer effort of the community in general. Indigo Shire was immediately assisted by the Department of Human Services as part of the initial response and recovery activities. I might point out that our recovery activities basically started the same afternoon as we initiated the response activities. Funds were at that time provided for a community development officer from the Department of Human Services. The state government instigated a tourism recovery strategy and assisted the region with publicity to attract visitors back to the area.

Minor funding was provided to the council to assist with some events, for example, the Beechworth Golden Horseshoes Festival at Easter. There is a meeting in Melbourne next week that our economic development tourism manager will be attending which will be a summary of what has happened to date and further roll-out with the state government and their advertising agent, Mojo Partners, who are targeting further advertising to help the area recover. Last week the state government announced grants of \$568,000 towards infrastructure projects in fire affected townships of Indigo Shire.

It is extremely disappointing that promises made by the federal Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Mr Joe Hockey, during his visit to Beechworth on Friday 14 February have not been honoured. His promises at Beechworth of funding similar to the Blue Mountains funding and campaigns gave a lot of hope to the area. These promises have not been fulfilled and have left a lot of people disillusioned.

A major issue has arisen with the loss of fencing along national park and state forest areas where they are adjoining private property and within private land areas. Government assistance was requested by way of minimum half-cost fencing restoration. The government did announce that other areas would be funded for dog proof fencing but not for standard fencing. The inability of land-holders to re-erect fencing has placed and continues to place a significant burden on the farmers. The actual cost being faced by farmers is in the general vicinity of \$50,000 for each property. No funds have been provided for shared cost fencing on crown land boundaries other than for the dog proof fencing mentioned, and most of that is in areas other than Indigo Shire. The state government refuses to recognise any responsibility for funding of fencing reconstruction or repairs on boundaries abutting crown land. Council believes a case for a special circumstance should be recognised for these boundary fences. Council recognises community suggestions that if the state government is not going to provide for shared cost fencing then other arrangements need to be agreed to, to include appropriate management of crown land, including adequate cleared buffer zones along boundaries with private property.

A further issue is that stock feed and water are scarce because of the combined impact of the bushfires and the drought. Stock are still having to be contained within small areas as farmers have been unable to afford materials to reinstate their fencing. Feed and water are having to be carried to maintain the stock. Huge amounts of hay were made available to the area. Fire hay did not last very long. Many farmers have had to sell off stock as they realise they have no capacity to maintain their herds.

Water resources have been depleted because of the use during firefighting and the impact of drought. Many farms have now run out of water—that is a bit ironic today, isn't it—for stock and domestic purposes and are forced to pay for daily water supplies. The recent rains have done very little to help the situation. This was obviously written yesterday. The ongoing needs will be forever. Most farmers have reached the end of their tether. There is absolutely no hay available for feed and it is unprocurable at the moment. The drought had not severely affected Indigo Shire until January of this year. We then saw streams and springs dry up that have never dried up before, and destocking and general crop failures have been experienced. Irrigation and pump specialists in the region have advised of a large increase in bore depth required to access potable water.

Firebreaks and containment lines have now been repaired. It took a long time to get that done and in the end the council did liaise with the DSE to provide assistance and get a lot of that done, and it is good to see that now done. Individual efforts to protect property, combined with a high probability of failure, have resulted in very high levels of residual stress, and that is obviously still there with much of our farming community. There is evidence in the community also of a loss of confidence and a sense of disillusionment in choosing to live in a rural community. Many people feel disadvantaged compared to urban dwellers in terms of access to services and support. Stress and frustration have also been expressed by landowners at the perceived lack of redress or compensation available to them for actions undertaken by their neighbours, in this instance the government, to contain fires on crown land, resulting in damage to land and loss of productivity, assets and lifestyle.

Council staff continue to deal with an enormous requirement for information of assistance to residents because of the combined effect of the bushfires and the drought. The financial impact of the fires will continue to impact on rural landowners for the next three to five years, in our opinion. Ongoing financial assistance, counselling and support are therefore still required for this sector.

Economic damage in the area has not just been brought about by the recent fires. Prolonged drought and the storms in the Stanley orchard areas on 26 November 2002, followed by the fires, has wreaked havoc in the regional and local economy. Some \$12 million of direct and indirect economic loss has been incurred because of that severe hail damage to the Stanley orchards on 26 November. There is an enormous direct impact from this as much of these funds are spent locally by the orchardists themselves and on itinerant labour.

There will be little evidence of drought funding relief in our municipality as many of the affected landowners do not meet the stringent eligibility requirements. Additional drought recovery funds are needed to be allocated to such areas in Indigo Shire to assist with the construction of further water supply points, water transport, fodder transport and supplies to assist in social recovery. That has been a significant demand for fodder following the bushfires and little rain to encourage regrowth.

Recovery needs to take place in the short term, medium term and long term. Federal funding for employment creation schemes including fencing schemes and restoration of national park assets, environment works by the North East Catchment Management Authority and for heritage and other environmental and community building projects in the region would also provide the required economic and social stimulus. Demand for both financial and general counselling is only now beginning to be realised.

Direct government assistance was promised early during the fire activity but took a long time to come to fruition. Council has been reimbursed for most of its out-of-pocket expenses in combating the fires and providing additional recovery activities. However, council has incurred a very large amount of hidden costs in managing this difficult situation. Obviously, this is a cost that council bear in providing for and looking after its community, but which is ultimately paid for by the community via our rating structures. Those are the comments that we would like to add in addition to the submission that was placed before you on 7 May.

CHAIR—Thank you. Who else has got something to add?

Mr Sharp—Mr Costello touched on the irony today that we are on a minor flood warning in the Alpine Shire. It just seems ironic that we are here talking about the fires. Our submission that was presented to you, of which you have a copy, was based on our own experiences in dealing with fires and also feedback we received at a public meeting held in Mount Beauty in April of this year. As you read the document you will see shire recommendations and interspersed are comments from public meetings which we believe are relevant to future thinking about moving forward with the bushfire recovery.

I would like to elaborate on our submission and try to bring you up to date with what has occurred since. By way of an overview, the fire that affected the Alpine Shire lasted some 24 days and affected virtually every area and community. Our attached map—I assume you have something similar—shows the scale and extent of the fires. Some 80 per cent of the land mass of the Alpine Shire was burnt by the fires. Council went into complete emergency management mode during this period and all resources of the shire under our emergency management plan were directed towards responding to the fire threat. Public information meetings were conducted regularly by the shire in conjunction with the combating authorities—the CFA and the DSE. They proved very beneficial and informative to the public in alerting them to what they should and should not do during the course of the fires.

Council commenced a fire information call centre and operated a Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre—known as the MECC—during the period of the fire threat. Evacuation centres were established in each of our main towns of Myrtleford, Bright and Mount Beauty and were operated by the shire. Such was the scale of the fire at the time that in some instances, such as Bright and Myrtleford, we had to put two or three evacuation centres on stand-by. The impacts—which are all contained in this submission, but some of this is updated for your benefit—were that all regular services of the shire were either severely curtailed or halted during that period. An estimated 30 per cent of our resident population were evacuated during the course of the fire threat. That does not include all of our tourists. The January school holiday period is probably one of the most, if not the most, popular period for tourism in the shire. So on top of the tourists that left as a consequence of the fire, up to 30 per cent of our resident population also evacuated.

There were significant economic and social impacts associated with that outcome. I can update a little on the economic outcomes. We have done a survey, which was completed only in July of this year, which shows that the economic impact to the shire as consequence of the fires is nearly \$30 million—\$29,810,000. This does not include the impact on agriculture, which we estimate to be around \$17.5 million. In obtaining those figures, some 120 businesses were interviewed individually and those figures were gleaned from their experiences. So the impacts economically were severe. We highlight those in the report and we do not need to continue on that aspect.

In addition, the social trauma was quite enormous. For the best part of a month, our communities—and sometimes simultaneously right across the entire shire from Dinner Plain to the back of Mount Hotham—were on fire threat and on evacuation alert varying from day to day. Sometimes they would be on alert; sometimes they would be off again. The communities would have to respond, relax and then respond once again, with some attending evacuation centres up to six times over that period. So the consequence of the trauma associated with that is quite

significant. The shire's actions have been towards helping with some trauma and financial counselling and with other support services in response to those sorts of experiences.

The shire took action by being involved in an immediate recovery program from both an economic and a community perspective. A comprehensive economic recovery program was prepared and presented to the state government, focusing on immediate financial assistance for a campaign to change perceptions about the region and on longer term help to stimulate recovery from a business and economic perspective—as those survey results showed.

With regard to immediate perceptions, the shire and this entire region suffered for a long period after the fires as a consequence of the smoke hanging around and the sorts of media reports that indicated that the whole area had been burnt out. In actual fact, the valleys and the towns were largely untouched, as were the alpine resorts. Our focus was to try to get people back into the valleys and towns as quickly as possible. That formed a major plank of our recovery process.

A regional recovery committee was established by the Department of Human Services, focusing on all aspects of the recovery process. Of course, the shire played an integral part in that. This was complemented by the shire's own local recovery committee, which supported the aspects and programs going on at a regional level. We also appointed an economic recovery officer and a community recovery officer, and they continue to work in the shire, funded by DHS, to assist with these recovery programs.

The state government bushfire task force assistance package announced in the aftermath of the fires also reinforced action at the local level, and that was further complemented by federal government announcements of assistance to small businesses. The shire's direct costs have largely been met, although hidden in-kind costs, particularly in relation to the lost service delivery and work backlogs experienced by the shire and our businesses, remain. They are being worn by the shire as we speak. A regional firefighters thankyou celebration was held in June of this year to try to give some sort of closure to the whole event—other than, of course, what occurs during these proceedings.

From our point of view, there are still some outstanding issues. With regard to the fire response, the way in which the incident management teams were established needs review. There were some four or five affecting the shire, and we had severe communication problems associated with getting information back to the shire to enable us to run our MECC effectively. We were also operating a call centre and relying on up-to-date information to keep our public and our community aware of what was going on, and we make recommendations about what should happen with regard to the establishment of IMTs in the future.

Some anomalies became apparent about the way in which the fires and the recovery process were handled. I think the way in which the containment lines were put in needs addressing, and we are making a recommendation about that. I will not go into that any further, but I will be more than happy to respond to questions. Centrelink's payment of benefits to individuals who may have lost income during the course of the fires remains an issue. As you know, Centrelink is a federal body. In the situation that prevailed, particularly in the alpine areas such as Dinner Plain, Mount Hotham and Falls Creek, people were physically isolated from getting to Centrelink offices. In some cases, they were incommunicado throughout the fires. Under

Centrelink arrangements, those people cannot get retrospective benefits for their lost income even though they were unable to recover it because of the fire situation. I do not think the regulators foresaw a threat of such a prolonged nature affecting the regulations in that way, and I think that needs redressing.

In terms of the future, a number of fire protection measures were put in place around towns and they need assessing to ensure that some of the good work that was done during that time is not lost. We are not saying that all the fire breaks, containment lines and things need to remain, but I think it needs a thorough investigation to ensure that the measures that have been taken that are useful into the future are looked at and, if possible, implemented. As I say, the public comments received at our public meeting are in the report, and the shire puts those forward to you for further consideration.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Towong Shire Council, do you have something to add?

Mr Lenaghan—I would like to add a few comments to the ones that have gone before us. The comments that the others have made equally affect Towong Shire. Towong Shire is large in area, small in population. Market opportunities are fairly limited, so it tends to be traditional agriculture that drives the economy. The actual job losses from the shire have been estimated at approximately 54, a further 68 are predicted and total estimated losses are somewhere around \$17 million, representing about 17 per cent of the gross regional product of the shire.

The specific issues that arose from the fires, which need to be addressed to prevent further repercussions, were the communications problems in our area. In many places communications are limited to non-existent. During the fires themselves—the topography is steep and rugged, the population is sparse and, as a consequence, radio communication on secure channels is limited. Most of the agencies have their own channels and cross-communication between the field operators is not always possible. This can lead to situations where intentions can be misinterpreted as instructions pass from one group to another. For example, many of the brigades were interpreting ‘protecting the assets’ as protection of houses, and letting paddocks burn. In our shire, paddocks are the heart of the business.

In terms of disseminating information, throughout the fire we were running a call centre. Who, in today’s society, would believe that there was only one printer available in the shire—which we fortunately had—capable of printing A1 plans? So if maps came through, over the email or whatever, there was only the one printer in the shire which could do that. Similarly, mobile phones would not operate in most of the fire-affected areas and in those areas email is also so slow that for many people it is just tomorrow’s technology. The lack of communication can also lead to secondary problems where, with the main control centres being so remote from the area and especially from the fire front, the knowledge of local cause and effect conditions starts to diminish.

As far as individuals go, in the recovery, as we are all aware bushfires happen in the summer and consideration needs to be given to how vulnerable that makes individual property owners to the risk of a limited autumn break. Whilst this year is extreme, has affected the whole community and continues to do so, similar impacts can occur on a lesser scale in any year for individuals. In fighting the fires, people expended large amounts of energy, stock management was ignored, water supplies were consumed and reserves were heavily drawn on. There was also

considerable property damage done in defending the fire, which is not seen as any great impost by the casual observer. For example, gateposts are knocked by passing bulldozers; fire control breaks across paddocks eventually need to be reworked and resown, with the paddock out of production during that time; fences are cut, often in inappropriate places; and dam water levels are lowered. Following the event, negotiation over the extent of damage allowed in good faith can become an issue and can lead to feelings of property owners just having been taken advantage of. It is therefore imperative that the recovery is timely and effective in restoring individuals' lives to pre-fire conditions. As with the other councils, we had the recovery swing into action virtually straight away.

The recovery support from many of the agencies has been excellent. From a total perspective, however, the focus needs to be on individual situations and certainly, at the moment, with the likes of the follow-on with the drought, there is a tremendous mix through the community of how people are being affected and levels of assistance from groups such as Centrelink are only just being sorted out. Many simple things tend to be overlooked—for example, funding is available for dog-proof fencing, but this tends to be much more expensive than just normal fencing, which was all that a lot of property owners required.

CHAIR—Mr Nicholls, you are the environmental manager for Alpine and Mr Sharp said that you are now on flood alert.

Mr Nicholls—Yes; that is right.

CHAIR—What is the likely environmental impact, given that you now obviously have heavy rains on top of fairly large areas that have been severely burnt? The committee was able to get through a good part of the area a few weeks ago. Clearly, there were areas of very high intensity—very hot fires. Have you had a look at the likely impacts of that?

Mr Nicholls—Yes. We believe that there are significant impacts on the environment, mainly erosion issues associated with lack of cover now, particularly on the steep slopes in our area and the lack of sufficient ground soil—a very thin cover—to the rock. There have also been significant issues with water clarity. We have had a number of water controls placed on our major towns to try and limit and control the contamination of the water for drinking. It is widespread across all those environmental areas

CHAIR—You probably do not control the water supply, do you?

Mr Nicholls—We do not control it, but a number of measures have been introduced to try and improve our water quality. In particular, towns like Porepunkah have had notices quite often since then to boil their water and take measures to protect their water.

CHAIR—I am asking the three councils about the cost to council during the fires. Mr Costello said that all your out-of-pocket expenses have been reimbursed. What is the arrangement with the state government? Is it through the department or the Country Fire Authority, or both, that council provides equipment or employs subcontractors to provide equipment? Can you talk me through how the system works?

Mr Costello—When we established our centre, we became a resource centre. A lot of the ICCs—the incident control centres—which the DSE, CFA and Parks ran, would put through a request to us. We had a system in place where we recorded all requests. Thank God we had that system because we have had a couple of arguments about the bills at the end of the day. When we resourced something for them—fuel, food, water, vehicles, or whatever it was—we were able to record that. Ultimately, those sorts of costs were passed through to the CFA, who have met most of those costs. I think we were arguing about a couple of small ones. The costs that the council wears are basically the establishment and running of that operational centre, plus a lot of our recovery activities, which are not fully met.

I cannot put a figure on it. I can provide that to you after I have had a look back at work as to what we have actually spent and what we have recorded but, like most of the councils, we have not recorded a lot of our officer time. For instance, in the 10 days that we were involved very directly in the Indigo Shire, our council offices were virtually turned into a communications and relief centre. So we didn't do any work for quite a while. We employed extra people. A lot of volunteers came in. We operated our phone lines 24 hours a day. Telstra were very cooperative in establishing emergency lines and additional lines for us very quickly and at no cost to us. So there was a lot of assistance like that, where we didn't have to get reimbursed. But certainly a lot of our management costs and operating costs of a normal nature have to be met by the council. Ultimately we will declare those through the Victorian Grants Commission and we will receive some recompense for that; probably in about 18 months time when the Grants Commission catches up with the allocations through the federal allocations.

CHAIR—What about plant and equipment? Does the council operate its own plant—graders, bulldozers and that sort of thing?

Mr Costello—Yes, we do. Indigo Shire Council has a different arrangement from the other shires in that we run a business unit and everything is fully costed. These are some of the issues we are arguing with the CFA about. It is run as a totally separate organisation. We received an account from them for all their input and that was paid by the council. We have sought reimbursement from the CFA. Out of a bill of around \$200,000, we are arguing about \$40,000.

CHAIR—What about other subcontractors?

Mr Costello—No, all of those costs have been recognised and paid for by the CFA.

CHAIR—So they were happy to pay for the hire of a grader if you paid a subcontractor but they are arguing about you operating your equipment under a business unit?

Mr Costello—They are arguing about a few of those costs, yes.

CHAIR—Are other shires in a similar situation?

Mr Sharp—It is fairly similar for us. Our costs of operating the MECC and our evacuation centres and so forth were met by the shire. We have since sought, under the emergency management regulations of the state government, some compensation for that. The decisions that were made by the MECC—the Municipal Emergency Coordinating Committee—were funded directly. All those other costs where we have had damage to infrastructure such as bridges we

claim through the state government's funding arrangements. We have to pay the first \$10,000 and they paid anything after that. That is how it has been.

Mr Lenaghan—We are in a similar position. Probably the thing that had a significant impact is that some of our resources that were sent out, such as four-wheel drives or whatever, took a resource from the council which limited the amount of work that people who were not involved with the fires were then able to do.

Mr McARTHUR—Could I raise two issues with Towong Shire. In your submission you talk about the availability of water near the fire front. Other witnesses have reported to the committee that a number of the water points in other national parks have actually been filled in. Would you care to comment as to what you are recommending in terms of water points, their construction and their availability in national parks?

Mr Lenaghan—We are saying that suitable locations for storage need to be built into the overall fire protection plan for the shire. They would have access for fire trucks—and on larger ones, for helitankers—when they come in. Our shire is a series of valleys and most of the ridges are crown land, so it is a matter of identifying where they would be. We have not actually got a plan for specific locations.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you put the proposition to the National Parks that you might proceed with a plan of action?

Mr Lenaghan—Not at this juncture, no.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you aware that the National Parks has actually filled in some other dams in other locations?

Mr Lenaghan—No.

Mr McARTHUR—Do think you will get permission to put the dams in?

Mr Lenaghan—I doubt it. The problem we have with dams is that it is one thing having one and it is another thing being able to put something in it. From the legislation that is going through, it looks like we would have to buy the water to put in the dams. That is probably of more concern than the dam itself. One of the things we have some concern about is dams available for stock and domestic use. We access a lot of dams for roadworks and the like. This means that farmers would then have to register as a commercial enterprise. There is no gain in it for them, so I cannot see any reason why anyone would want to do that.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying to the committee that in a 30- to 40-inch rainfall area, you are not allowed to collect the water naturally?

Mr Lenaghan—That is right; only from the dams that are there at the moment.

Mr McARTHUR—So that would not be acceptable to Parks Victoria, even for firefighting purposes and the provision of water for wildlife. Is that what you are hearing?

Mr Lenaghan—I am not hearing that it is unacceptable to Parks; the controlling bodies of the water are limiting the supplies so that every drop has a dollar value and has to be purchased. That is what we are hearing.

Mr McARTHUR—Will you be pursuing it as a shire to put this proposition forward to the government?

Mr Lenaghan—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you done anything about it as yet?

Mr Lenaghan—No, I have not done anything about it as yet. We are expecting to see what sort of response there will be. It is a wider issue than just involving Towong Shire.

Mr Costello—Mr Chair, I can add to that. What we are really referring to is state government legislation whereby from 1 July this year irrigation dams on farms all have to be licensed. The main argument from the high country is that the rainfall falls up in the high country, but there is now an imposition on how you collect and store it. It is quite a political issue in this part of the country.

Mr McARTHUR—So you have the irony that you will not be able to collect it for firefighting purposes. Is that right? That is the interesting, unintended consequence of the legislation.

Mr Costello—I believe it is an unintended consequence. Technically, you cannot collect it for irrigation purposes—but, if you try to have a big dam, what are they going to do with you?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Where does the council stand on that issue?

Mr Costello—In our case at Indigo Shire, we supported the introduction of farm dam legislation in that there should be control of resources—water is a scarce resource that should be controlled. However, as Mr McArthur is pointing out, the unintended ramifications of some of this have not been recognised yet. I think there are aspects of the legislation that need to be revisited.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Were you aware of the local branch of the VFF that was pushing for a compromise to allow high country farmers to harvest three per cent of the water that falls on their property as opposed to harvesting all of it, which they had as a right since anyone could remember?

Mr Costello—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did council support that?

Mr Costello—We supported the right of farmers to collect a certain amount of rain that falls on the land. We did not try to put a measurement on that; it was beyond our technical ability.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Were any representations made to the state government on that?

Mr Costello—I could get you copies of those, if you wanted them.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes, please.

Mr Costello—One of our ratepayers was also party to an action that was unsuccessful in having the legislation stopped, so we are very much aware of those activities as well.

Mr McARTHUR—You made comments in your submission about the Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park and that there needs to be an improvement in the access tracks, fuel reduction burns, weed control, fence lines and fire breaks. I understand you had a fire there but that it is going to be an expanded national park. From a council point of view, do you hope there will be an improvement in these areas? Would you like to tell us why some of these areas are not too good at the moment?

Mr Costello—Again, council supported the creation of the Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park but, in doing so, we provided three pages of conditions, most of which were about management of the national park including appropriate firebreaks et cetera. We have been assured as a council all along that the sorts of management techniques we mentioned would be taken into account and there would be community based management advisory committees established et cetera. As yet we have not seen those come to fruition, other than the creation of the national park. I suppose the excuse given at this stage is that the fires have disrupted their normal program of introduction.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you hopeful that some attention will be given to these areas in the future?

Mr Costello—I am very hopeful. If there is not, we will be knocking on doors.

Mr McARTHUR—We had a witness this morning who talked about the problem of providing resources to look after the national park. Is your council, along with the state government, going to provide resources to maintain the national park?

Mr Costello—We do not provide resources to the national park—that should be a state and federal government action.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you aware of who actually owns the national parks?

Mr Costello—I suppose the people of Australia own the national parks.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No; who has responsibility for them?

Mr Costello—The federal government and the state government.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No; it is the state government.

Mr McARTHUR—You agreed with the formation of the park but you told the state government that you wanted these conditions looked at carefully. What would your council do to establish that some of these conditions you suggested were undertaken, in terms of management?

Mr Costello—Two of the main roles of the council are the advocacy role and the watchdog role. As some people act as watchdogs on us, we turn the tail and act as a watchdog on the people responsible for their activities. We will be watching very carefully. We have a lot of issues with the national park. The firewood is another big issue—I was nearly going to say that it was a burning issue. A couple of things we identified in our submissions related to the fire—firebreaks and access; and you have just heard from Peter about the water points—but there are other issues related to access to the forest areas. What that means—how it is controlled and how it is managed—is very important to us.

Mr McARTHUR—What level of community support from your ratepayers would you have for these points of view?

Mr Costello—We believe we have a fair degree of support. I say it is ‘fair’ but it is very hard to measure. There are some people who are totally opposed to the creation of additional national parks—that was certainly the case in relation to the Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park—but there are also a lot of people in our community who fully support it. I suggest that there is a balanced view in our community: yes, we like the environment we have, we like the national parks and we want to protect them, but they have to be accessible to the public and they also have to be looked after.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Sharp, recommendation 8 of your submission says:

That the range of protective works necessary to ensure safety of communities be assessed and, if required, implemented or maintained.

What do you think this would entail? How much would it cost and who would be paying for this? Have you given much thought to that?

Mr Sharp—We have not given a great deal of thought to that at all. I alluded to the sorts of works in my opening comments. There were a number of major works done around towns—particularly around Harrietville and places like that, which were heavily forested—to protect them during the fires and it would be remiss to let that vegetation regrow without an assessment of whether the extent of those firebreaks, and the scale of them, will be needed in the future. We need to have a look, in a very cold, objective way, at whether they should be retained. If they are to be retained, let us do something about it. But we have not done any further assessment of it.

Mr ORGAN—So the councils will have to prepare reports on asset protection zones and things like that, and work out some way to do detailed studies.

Mr Sharp—In consultation with the authorities such as Parks Victoria and DSE we will have to look at what is reasonable around our towns to make sure that the sort of threat that caused those sorts of firebreaks to be made is continued to be put at bay.

Mr ORGAN—And you see the councils having an important role to play in regard to that?

Mr Sharp—We certainly have a role.

Mr HAWKER—I would like to follow up on a couple of points. In the Alpine Shire's submission you mentioned the comments made at a public meeting recently:

New National Parks should not be considered until there are adequate resources to manage them.

I ask this question in the light of the earlier questions from Mr McArthur: do councils have a view that they will not support those unless they get a pretty good guarantee that that is going to happen? Is there more than one view on that?

Mr Sharp—As I said, we were responding to comments made at a public meeting. At this stage the shire has not formed a particular view about the management of national parks. We felt we were obliged to put forward the sorts of comments that were being made at a public meeting. We have not given it a great deal more thought at this stage.

Mr HAWKER—Did anyone else want to comment on that?

Mr Lenaghan—I do not know whether I am being a bit flippant but I know one party in our area—and it is a view that is quite common in the community, but only in a portion of the community—who looks at the fire management practices in a lot of these areas and points out that the *Elvis* helitanker has replaced the box of matches that her grandfather used to use to do the same sort of fire control.

Mr HAWKER—It is a bit more expensive.

Mr Lenaghan—This is the attitude that is coming through in a lot of the community: they just cannot understand why it is so difficult to do a lot of the fire prevention measures. On the other hand, we also get complaints about smoke and so forth at different times of year. It is a double-edged sword.

Mr HAWKER—You have had more smoke in the last six months than you have probably had in the last 60 years, haven't you?

Mr Lenaghan—There is always a lot of smoke around at certain times of the year. This year has been exceptionally bad, for sure.

Mr HAWKER—I just want to come back to the Indigo submission. You talk about the criticism about whether or not you should try to protect roadside vegetation and whether or not there should be firebreaks. I come from south-west Victoria where, following the 1979 and 1983 fires, which were fairly tragic—certainly, I think more lives were lost in 1983 than recently—we now see extensive roadside burning by the local brigades. When I say 'extensive' I am talking about hundreds of kilometres every year as a matter of course. This is done; it is fully agreed and supported. I know that we are talking about open country, not the sort of areas you are referring to. In the light of the experiences of this year, is it likely that council would reconsider moving that roadside vegetation back and controlling it so that you do have a decent firebreak?

Mr Costello—The council has actually discussed that in recent months. We have just completed a review of our roadside management plan, and that had community consultation as part of it. Basically, it endorsed what was happening, and that is trying to protect vegetation

corridors along the roadways because so much of it has been lost in the farm areas. At the moment the council has not progressed any further with adopting that review. It is still keen to look at some of the issues that have arisen since the fires. There is a school of thought that has been put to us by a number of farmers that there should be a 30-metre buffer on each side of the farm fence—on their own property and also on public land. That public land would obviously include a roadway. If we put 30-metre buffers on each side of the fence on a roadway, we would not have any vegetation along the roadways. So it is one of the environmental concerns that the council has to grapple with.

At this stage our philosophy is to continue with the dedicated roadside management plan that we have and the implementation of it, but I think that that will be varied in some instances. I have lived a lot of time in the western district and was involved in the Ash Wednesday fires there, so I know very much what you are talking about with the roadside clearance down there, where there is no vegetation; in fact, it is used for rolling up big bales of hay. There are various fire hazard reduction measures that are taken down there that we just do not take up here. Part of the natural beauty and the attraction of the north-east of Victoria is our native flora and fauna, and the council has been recognised with a lot of awards for trying to protect that. So we are grappling with this public safety issue as well as trying to protect our native flora and fauna.

Mr HAWKER—But part of that protection, presumably, is to keep bushfires to a minimum.

Mr Costello—Part of protection is burning off. If it is done in a controlled way, personally I do not see that it is a problem. The technical advisers need to grapple with that and ascertain whether they do enough or not.

Mr HAWKER—I turn back to a point that we were talking about a bit earlier. In your submission you also talk about ‘Hazard reduction and other strategies’ and you state:

The Federal Government needs to also provide a higher level of funds to protect the natural heritage—

and so on and yet, as has been pointed out, the state is the one that is expanding its area of parks. I am not quite sure why you say that the federal government has to give more money when the state is making those decisions.

Mr Costello—Technically, you are correct. But I thought that the federal government would have a moral responsibility also to protect the environment. The federal government has done a lot of other environmental protection activities in recent years. We have all been involved in various funding from the federal government directly, through National Heritage Trust funding et cetera. In the north-east I think that most of the councils have done very well out of both state and federal funding in recent years for a whole range of protection activities. We have had an argument through the North East Catchment Management Authority that they did not receive enough funds in the last two years. We will pursue that another day. But, at the end of the day, I believe that the three levels of government are responsible for protecting our environment. There are bigger arguments about how the cake is cut up, as you are alluding to.

Mr HAWKER—Following on from that point: if the federal government were to be involved more and if the federal government demanded a certain amount of hazard reduction, would you endorse the view that the states should agree to it?

Mr Costello—If it were done by negotiation and there were clearly enunciated and conditions agreed to, yes. I believe there should be some ties on funding. It should not be just a matter of: ‘Here are some funds. Go away and do what you like.’ If the federal government out of this inquiry, for instance, decided that there should be further hazard reduction, that there should be certain management techniques employed in our native forests or whatever, an easy way to instigate that would be to say, ‘Here are our guidelines and here is our money to go with it.’

Mr HAWKER—I think it is the other way around, isn’t it?

Mr Costello—I am optimistic, aren’t I?

Mr SCHULTZ—I am pleased to be here, finally. I would like to make an observation and then follow that up with questions. Members of the committee inspected a significant part of the alpine area. During that inspection, we found vast tracts of that area that had burned so hot that all seed stock had vaporised. Following some rain, we further observed that some regeneration was occurring around those areas but not within those areas. Would you like to make some comment on that? Mr Nicholls?

Mr Nicholls—I would comment only to agree with you. Our observation was that the intensity of the fire and the heat varied quite a lot, particularly on some of the mountain areas. We would concur with your observations.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would you agree that that intense heat was generated by the enormous amount of fuel built up on the ground?

Mr Nicholls—I think there is a variety of reasons. A contributing one would be the fuel, but conditions on the day, such as wind, topography and a number of other reasons also contributed in certain locations.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would I also be correct in saying that the only way we are going to regenerate those areas is to aerial seed them?

Mr Nicholls—Again, I am not an expert in that area, so I would defer that.

Mr SCHULTZ—I presume the notes that were in your submission are from the public meeting—the fire management and control meeting—of 7 April.

Mr Nicholls—That is correct.

Mr SCHULTZ—What groups of people attended that?

Mr Sharp—It was a general meeting that was open to the public.

Mr SCHULTZ—What about all the agencies involved in the process of fighting the fires?

Mr Sharp—They were in attendance as well. I think Parks Victoria and DSE were in attendance.

Mr SCHULTZ—I note in part of that submission that there is reference to waiting for permission from the DSE to fight the fires, and that was raised in the context of cooperation between the CFA and the DSE. How serious an issue was that?

Mr Nicholls—It was a large issue early in the fire, particularly.

Mr SCHULTZ—It was a large issue?

Mr Nicholls—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—To what extent did it create a problem for the containment, fighting or suppression of fires?

Mr Nicholls—I would have to say that this is hearsay from these people and the authorities themselves would be the best people to talk to, but our observations were that there were a number of communication issues, particularly early on in the event.

Mr SCHULTZ—That leads me to a couple more questions. Can anybody sitting at the table elaborate on the issue of the CFA being ordered out of the national parks? Why were they ordered out? Under what circumstances were they ordered out?

Mr Sharp—I am not aware of that.

Mr SCHULTZ—That is part of your submission. What about fire trails? Can anybody make any observations about fire trails, lack of fire trails or overgrown fire trails which created dangerous conditions for people going in there on a voluntary basis to fight fires?

Mr Nicholls—I would like to support that. We are aware of a number of fire trails which were not properly maintained. It is easy in hindsight. We also believe that we have had a history of fires in certain locations where, strategically, areas should be perhaps maintained to a higher standard—again, that is with the benefit of hindsight. Likewise, strategically you should look at some of your key assets to prevent it spreading to other areas of the national park or to towns and population centres. We believe there could be improvements to a strategic plan—trying to improve those containment lines or containment areas more so than containment lines.

Mr SCHULTZ—Are you aware of any circumstances where fires were allowed to burn for a considerable period of time before the resources that were available to call on to suppress the fire were called? As an example, fixed wing aircraft may have been available and/or ground crews may have been available to get to a fire in its early stages and suppress it.

Mr Sharp—Those sorts of comments were raised at the public meeting that we had in April and I think they are encapsulated in those proceedings that are presented to you. Beyond that, I think our position is that we are presenting that information to you so that you have an understanding of how the public is feeling. We make no authoritative judgment on that because we were not in a position to do so. We would put to you that you should ask those questions of the relevant authorities that control those activities. We are presenting that information that was conveyed to us by the public but we do not offer to be an authority on it.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would it surprise you to know that the issues raised by the general public which you have presented in your submission are a common theme in all of the evidence that we have taken so far?

Mr Nicholls—I would not be surprised.

Mr SCHULTZ—I also put to you that one of the common themes that we have listened to consistently as a committee investigating this is that local knowledge is ignored on a regular basis and that the administrative side of the monoliths that drive the government departments that have control of these fires is creating massive problems in terms of fires going longer and getting out of control and in terms of the early suppression of fires. Would that surprise you?

Mr Sharp—That would be consistent with some of the comments that we have outlined in the public meeting proceedings which are attached to our submission.

Mr SCHULTZ—It is a pretty distressing and frightening scenario when, following the 1939 fire and other fires that have occurred in the last four or five years in particular, that sort of mentality is still out there in some of these firefighting agencies, at the risk of people's lives and property.

Mr Costello—I can make a comment from my own involvement in the fires around the Beechworth area. The response from the airborne firefighting contingent when the fire started at Eldorado, for instance, was within 30 minutes of when we found out that the fire was going. We went out to Flat Rock Road to observe what was happening in the far distance, and immediately there were helicopters attacking that fire within that 30-minute time frame. I think the response there was incredible.

The other thing I was very impressed with when I was working in the emergency centre was that we had a fair deal of liaison with the ICC, the incident control centre. The one thing that surprised me which had never happened to me in an emergency management activity before is that we were told there was a group of gentlemen coming to visit us and they were strategic firefighters. That was a new term to me. I learned a lot of new terms over those days. These were gentlemen who came down and tried to map where they thought the fire might go. They looked at what assets were in the road of where that fire might go, and in particular I am talking about Beechworth township.

They mapped the whole town and looked at all the assets that they were very concerned about. For example, we do not have reticulated gas in Beechworth; we only have gas storage, so they mapped where all of that was. We have a gorge that runs through Beechworth which would have acted like a fire tunnel: a big fire would have roared through it, if it had got into it, so they mapped all that. They worked out where to place units strategically or where to send them very quickly if certain things happened. I must say, personally, I was very impressed with that strategic arm of firefighting, which I have not witnessed in other firefighting activity that I have been involved in. So there is the other side of the story that you are referring to, but certainly, anecdotally, we have heard a lot of criticism of the way on-ground activities were carried out. We were not directly involved in most of that, so it is unfair to comment, I think.

Mr SCHULTZ—Finally, did you hear any criticism with regard to the interstate volunteers, coming down to assist you to fight the fires, not being utilised?

Mr Costello—No, I did not hear that in the Beechworth ICC area.

Mr SCHULTZ—What about the issue of non-compatible equipment, where fire couplings could not be used on interstate vehicles and vice versa?

Mr Costello—I can give you an example where our own water tankers, which the shire owns, had different couplings to the CFA tankers, so you do not have to go interstate to have that problem. That is something that we analysed—we had a debriefing as soon as we were able to. There were a number of issues that we identified as a shire and we have already taken action to improve things. One was the radio communications that I think Towong Shire mentioned—the need to improve our own radio communications. Another was the need to improve our couplings. We need some sort of adapter in place so that if it is incompatible you have an adapter that you can quickly use. The other issue that we had was a very simple one: one of the resources that we were requested to provide a lot of in the early days was fuel. We did not have enough jerry cans, because guess what has been banned? You have to have little plastic jerry cans now; you cannot have the big steel ones. Luckily a lot of people still have them in their sheds, because that is where they came from.

Mr SCHULTZ—And finally, do you think, taking those matters into consideration, that is a pretty significant argument for a national standard for firefighting equipment and also in relation to communications systems?

Mr Costello—Again, I would certainly agree with you there. As an aside, I sat on a cross-border emergency management committee and seminar at Moama several years ago, where a large number of recommendations were made on cross-border emergency management issues, mainly to do with SES. A lot of those have not been implemented and this is eight to 10 years later, so I would welcome recommendations from your committee to look at some of these cross-border issues that you are referring to, because they have been around for a long time and do not seem to have been improved much.

Mr SCHULTZ—Why do you think they have not been implemented when they were raised previously, as a result of previous fires?

Mr Costello—The issue I am referring to was more to do with the SES, which I was involved in, where it was rules and regulations about who can dive in the Murray River, who has control in the Murray River when there is a search and rescue. There are a lot of issues like that: for example, on one side of the river you have one set of terminology; on the other side you have another set. But certainly the latest issue in firefighting you are referring to—having standardised couplings—is something that should be able to be redressed fairly easily. Again, there are some rules that we should have nationally and not state by state.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you very much.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I just want to take up the issue of communication, because it has been raised throughout this inquiry: the problems of communicating between agencies, between

agencies and the public, between local government bodies and the public et cetera. The representative from the Towong Shire indicated that there was some misinterpretation of instructions, where the protection of assets was deemed to be the protection of houses rather than hay sheds and stock and those sorts of things. Could you elaborate on that?

Mr Lenaghan—Again, as was reported to us, there were a number of properties where brigades were told they had to stay at the house, yet they could see how they could control the fire as it entered the property. But they had been ordered to stay where they were and not go and defend.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You commented that mobile phones would not operate, emails were too slow and that sort of thing.

Mr Lenaghan—Technology in our area is a big problem. A lot of people just give up on it, because the phone lines drop out before the message gets through. The height of the ridges and valleys means there is no mobile phone coverage in the Mitta Valley, which is a significant area. Telstra did come in and set up a mobile tower, which improved things during the course of the fire, but that has since gone.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—The tower has gone.

Mr Lenaghan—Yes. It was just a mobile tower.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Staying on the issue of communications, the Indigo Shire mentioned the role of the ABC in conveying information. How do you propose that commercial and public radios can be used to convey this information with degrees of accuracy? I think you referred to 'protocols that should be developed between the ABC, combating authority and council's communications public centre'. Would you explain how all this operates on the ground in an emergency?

Mr Costello—I will go back a step. In the establishment of our emergency management centre we are supposed to have a CFA liaison officer available in our MECC centre. That did not occur. The local policeman appointed at the time as the coordinator of our centre ended up making arrangements to have a police officer at the ICC, and that is how we got some of our communications on what was happening out on the ground; otherwise, we did not know.

The issue that we as a council had was that, at the time, we were asked to establish our council office and our phone numbers. We run a 1800 number to contact the council. That is where Telstra were very efficient and, with the flick of a switch, created that as a national access number, whereas usually it is only a local access number. We used that number as an information point, but we were not getting information quickly enough from the CFA and DSE to provide information as people rang up and requested it.

We all had the ABC switched on. We get pretty good reception for the ABC right across our region. There were number of private local stations, Wangaratta and Albury based, that were very good, but we just picked on the ABC here. The ABC got most of their information directly from the combating authorities, not from us. They would ring us up for comment, but that was more news than fact. In most cases they were able to access news but—and I do not know

whether it was due to their own hype on the spur of the moment—there were a few messages that came across that were inappropriate, including one where the term ‘evacuation’ was used when it should not have been. We had a run on one of our relief centres from an area called ‘south Beechworth’, and we who live there had never heard of ‘south Beechworth’ before. So terminologies were used by the radio stations that may have been inappropriate in a couple of instances. To give them their due credit, as soon as I rang and pointed out the issue they immediately corrected it. So they had very good response times.

We are suggesting that the combating authorities—and it does not matter whether it is for fire, flood or whatever—need to have a communications division that can access all radio stations, give them the same information and give it to them very quickly, and by that I mean instantaneous communications, rather than saying, ‘We’ll issue a press bulletin every 12 hours’, or something like that.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—They are good suggestions. Could you comment on the adequacy of resources provided in the regional and local recovery processes to support individuals in communities? You referred to the inordinate demand on counselling services in the traumatic times.

Mr Costello—I would like to defer to Ruth, because she is our recovery manager and she has been very active in the regional recovery processes.

Ms Tai—In recovery, it is also very beneficial for the community to take control, so how resources are used has to be tempered by the involvement that the community wants and is able to have. We were very fortunate that our communities in Indigo Shire took hold of that process. For example, some of the social activities undertaken were actually initiated and carried out by the communities. We had very little involvement in that. As far as more specialist services are concerned, there were a range of different services immediately implemented. The Department of Human Services were very quick in responding to that. We had some Department of Human Services personnel at our recovery centres fairly immediately—that is, the night that the fires started in Indigo Shire. There were then ongoing needs throughout the recovery process, and a range of other support needs have been funded, including financial counselling; generalist—which is personal—counselling; and community development officer positions. The only comment I make in regard to any inefficiencies is in the area of financial counselling. The funds provided were only sufficient to support volunteers in providing that across our shires. It was a proposal for a sum of funding for the three shires of Towong, Alpine and Indigo. That continues to be a need, and the situation is such that that funding has been seen to be insufficient as far as our opinion is concerned.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Sharp, what was the problem with the Centrelink procedures? How could those problems be overcome?

Mr Sharp—The problem that I referred to previously was that we had a particular and unique situation. I do not know if it was ever contemplated by the people who wrote the regulations that Centrelink works by. We had communities at Dinner Plain, Mount Hotham and Falls Creek in particular that were completely cut off. They were landlocked by the fires and their communications were cut off as well. So there was no way that they could access, either by telephone or physically, their Centrelink office to commence the process of getting Centrelink

benefits. Apparently, under their regulations, if you do not do that, you miss out for the period that you have not contacted them. For some two weeks—or whatever the case might have been—the people stranded there were unable to contact Centrelink and initiate the process of receiving benefits. The benefits are not retrospective so, until they were able to contact Centrelink, the intervening period was not supported by Centrelink benefits.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So you would support greater flexibility in that situation?

Mr Sharp—Absolutely. I think that it may be a situation where the writers of those regulations just did not contemplate the circumstances that prevailed. In the future, the regulations need to be adjusted so that you get retrospective payments.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I ask the representatives of Indigo and Alpine in particular about the comment made at the Mount Beauty fire management and control meeting—I guess it is the Alpine Shire there. Do you think that the perception that you were burnt out has been overcome?

Mr Sharp—No, not completely. Even within government circles, we still have people who are surprised how little Bright was burnt. We have undertaken major publicity and marketing campaigns to try and reverse that. When we even have government officials telling us how surprised they are at how little our shire or valleys were burnt, we know that we still have a lot of work to do.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Is that \$1.9 million state money?

Mr Sharp—That is right.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—How is your relationship with Tourism Victoria?

Mr Sharp—Quite strong.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You liaise with them regularly on the recovery marketing campaigns?

Mr Sharp—Yes. We have a committee established by the council called Alpine Region Tourism, which is our tourism and marketing arm of the shire. They have been liaising constantly with Tourism Victoria about getting those programs in place to try and change perceptions.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—In this particular report, you state:

- Concern that offers of assistance during the fires have not been acted upon.

What are we talking about there? Is this about the promises made by the federal minister Joe Hockey?

Mr Sharp—On which page was that?

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—It is on page 5. I think it was also referred to in the Indigo submission.

Mr Costello—Yes, I referred to that earlier.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—How much is involved there?

Mr Costello—What Mr Sharp alluded to is that the state government put up \$1.9 million. As I said, that has been a very active campaign. Indigo is certainly starting to see some results from it, with our visitation numbers climbing back up. People did think that everyone was burnt out, that there was too much smoke and that they should not go near the place et cetera, but that has certainly turned around since Easter. Originally, Mr Hockey came on that date that I mentioned earlier and suggested that, based on his experience with the New South Wales fires, certain packages could be put into place. There obviously was some kerfuffle between the federal government and the state government as to why the same sorts of arrangements were not put into place. At the end of the day, we are very happy with the state government's activity in overall promotion. They have done it as part of a package of promoting right across the region, in Gippsland as well as here in the north-east. As I said earlier, there is a meeting next Tuesday in Melbourne to further pursue the next stage of that activity. It will be targeting people to come for the September school holidays and on into the next spring and summer period.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—On page 13, under the heading 'Causes and risk factors contributing to the fires', you say:

From the Council's perspective the severe drought and the extent of our natural bushland, parks systems and weather conditions all contributed to the severity of the fire.

Did you have fires in the preceding season?

Mr Costello—I cannot recollect any outbreaks, no. Could I just make one observation—and you may have seen it in your travels: after the fires were over, we had many groups coming to look at the situation—government people, private people et cetera. I was on a bus tour where a group of people said, 'Look at that area. It is all burnt out.' It was all brown, but the fires were never near it. It was the effect of the drought. The trees looked as though they had been burnt, they were all brown, and that was caused by the severity of the drought. Local people who had lived here for years had not seen a drought where the trees had been so severely affected. I could take you to places now where the trees are dead and will not recover, and that is from the drought. That is why we talk about this combination of factors. We always have lightning strikes, we always have a small number of fires throughout the north-east region, and that is why the DSE crank up their firefighting crews in the summers. We have quite large firefighting bases here, and we are used to fires caused by lightning strikes and the type of environment we have. That is something we have to live with and manage. But the added issue this year was the severity of the drought.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Thank you.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Costello, you mention in your written submission that a major issue that has arisen is the loss of fencing along the boundaries of national parks, state forests

and private property. The state government actually owns this land and has jurisdiction over it. We cannot touch it, unfortunately. I would love to have the power to implement certain policies in national parks directly, but I do not. Has the council made representations to the state government about that issue?

Mr Costello—Yes, we have done that consistently right from the start, when we knew it would be a problem. We also gathered data from other places such as the shire of Mitchell that had had fires the year before. We knew there had been government assistance for fencing there.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Have you been disappointed with the response?

Mr Costello—Yes, we are disappointed. We understand that it is a philosophical policy decision, just like the policy you mentioned—

Ms PANOPOULOS—In what way is it philosophical?

Mr Costello—It is a policy decision that the state government does not contribute to boundary fencing. It is the same as the council's policy decision not to contribute to boundary fencing on a road. It is something that has been entrenched. It is the same entrenchment that you mentioned when you said that the federal government is not responsible for certain things too.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is not entrenchment; it is constitutional.

CHAIR—It is in the Constitution.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you persisting in making representations? I have not seen anything in the paper recently about what is happening in that respect.

Mr Costello—We have persisted with it, but the answer is always the same—they will not fund boundary fencing other than the dog-proof fencing.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am sure you know that a lot of people in the north-east, which includes the Indigo Shire, are suffering enormous financial costs. As was mentioned by a witness earlier, they will be carrying debts arising from these fires for the rest of their lives.

Mr Costello—We are very much aware of that. It is not just a Labor Party, Liberal Party or National Party issue; it is there and it always has been. The other tack that we have taken in conjunction with other groups—such as the VFF, fire groups, farming groups, Rotary clubs, service clubs et cetera—has been to go out and help with the fencing issue ourselves, because the state government is not going to do anything.

Ms PANOPOULOS—As a short-term recovery activity, you recommend the immediate restoration of assets and the improvement of fences and roads. Have you lobbied to repair damaged roads?

Mr Costello—Yes. We have repaired all the roads that were damaged and have been reimbursed for that. There is a little outstanding issue of a couple of timber bridges, which we are negotiating about at the moment. We are very happy with the level of assistance from the

state government in restoring other assets and things that were damaged. The issue of fencing has been the only thorn in everyone's side.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It is interesting that you say it is the only issue because in your written submission on page 13 under the heading 'Hazard reduction and other strategies', you say:

The State Government has made commitments to provide better Park Management when recently gazetting the expanded Chiltern Mount Pilot National Park.

You go on to say:

It certainly needs to be better than what has occurred in the past ...

That comment is rather mild compared to what has been said by some of the residents whose private property joins onto the Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park. To them it is an urgent issue. Does council see the creation and implementation of a management plan for this newly created national park as a priority?

Mr Costello—Yes, we certainly do. I referred earlier to the fact that, when we agreed to the proposals for the extension of the national park, we had a three-page attachment and said, 'Here are the conditions that we were agreeing under—that there needs to be management plans et cetera.' Some of the issues listed in our submission are taken straight from those items.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So that is an outstanding issue about which you have not received a satisfactory response yet?

Mr Costello—Yes. As I said earlier, the issue has been that we have not implemented all our management plans for the new national park because of the fire situation. You must remember that the national park was only created late last year.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you recall for how long the state government was preparing the draft report? I remember seeing the proposal to change the status of box-ironbark areas. It was quite thick, wasn't it?

Mr Costello—There have been several of them.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Over several years. I would have assumed that, in conjunction with planning such an extensive report to justify the creation of a national park, one would have implemented a management plan at the same time. That would seem logical to me.

Mr Costello—It is a very good theory, but it has not happened in practice.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No, it has not, unfortunately. As a medium-term solution, you suggest the provision of federal funding for fencing schemes. Are you aware of the special Work for the Dole project to repair fences in the north-east?

Mr Costello—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Has council tried to access that?

Ms Tai—The communication I have had with the people who are involved in the Work for the Dole scheme that is operating in Indigo Shire is that the workers will not re-erect the fences; they will clear the rubble from the fences in order for the farmers to then re-erect the fences. It is not necessarily the manpower that is stopping this, because we have been inundated with groups who are willing to come and volunteer their time; it is the financial aspect of the farmers generally not being able to afford the materials.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes. There are some outstanding examples that I would like to put on the record. We have had the greatest success using Work for the Dole in clearing and directing fencing. There are thousands of kilometres—and this does not propose to be a problem—and I am particularly proud of the 20 volunteers who have learnt additional skills. I think that they are a shining example of this particular aspect of Work for the Dole. Thank you for that, Ruth. Mr Costello, you also referred to the need for greater amounts of funding. You specifically referred to the federal government when you talked about environmental works, particularly in relation to Landcare groups et cetera. Are you aware how much Natural Heritage Trust funding that goes to Landcare groups and to the North East Catchment Management Authority was allocated to the north-east in the last financial year?

Mr Costello—No. I could not put a figure on it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It was \$3.95 million, and there was additional drought relief funding for Landcare groups. I would not necessarily have thought that you would have been aware of that figure, but there was a bit of publicity about it, so I thought that you may have known. Very recently—within the last two days—there have been extensive reports of a reduction in state government funding to Landcare groups of 30 per cent. Are you aware of that?

Mr Costello—No, I am not.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In the light of the importance you have placed on environmental restoration—and my personal commitment to that and the tens of millions of dollars in all sorts of related projects that have come into my electorate and the concern that I know you share with me—will you be lobbying the state government to restore that cut funding to Landcare groups?

Mr Costello—We will research what is going on with it. We have an environment officer who works very closely with the Landcare groups, so I can check with her to see what situation is and what the feeling of the groups out there is, and then we can take appropriate action.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Also on the tourism matter, are you aware that when Joe Hockey came to the electorate—and I was with him, because I invited him to come—he wanted to replicate the cooperative approach between the three levels of government that had been implemented in the Blue Mountains?

Mr Costello—Yes. That is what I was referring to before.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you aware that the responsibility and the power to implement regional tourism policy lies with the state government?

Mr Costello—I am aware of the powers of each. I am not going to get into the machinations of how it works in the background—

Ms PANOPOULOS—No. But you are aware that, basically, it is like primary schools: the state government runs them, but we contribute to them.

Mr Costello—I thought that, in a case like this where you have a major disaster, levels of government would have worked together to come up with—

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am just asking you whether you are aware of it. You are aware that that is why Tourism Victoria organises the tourism campaigns for Victoria?

Mr Costello—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you aware that Minister Hockey was not requested by the state government to join in a cooperative scheme?

Mr Costello—I am equally critical of the state—

Ms PANOPOULOS—No. Are you aware of that?

Mr Costello—I am not aware of the detail that went on in the background.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is interesting that you are not aware, because I think there have been at least three articles in the *Border Mail* and at least half a dozen radio interviews over the last four months where I have tried to explain that issue. So I thought that, if you are one of the few people who have not heard about it, I should inform you about it. That communication was very disappointing; I have no idea why the state government did not request the cooperation of Minister Hockey. Do you know how many businesses in the Indigo Shire received funding from the almost \$1 million of small business grants that were granted as cash grants to small businesses in Indi?

Mr Costello—No. I am not aware of the total number; I am aware that several have been granted and were gratefully received by those businesses.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you aware that there are several outstanding joint applications in the north-east for particular tourism funding projects from the federal government?

Mr Costello—Yes, I am.

Mr HAWKER—You had a public meeting in the Alpine Shire and a motion carried at that meeting was: ‘That areas of alpine ash and other millable timber killed by the recent fires in state forests and national parks be allowed to be salvaged,’ and there were moves to try to get the Mount Beauty mill open again. Has anything progressed from that?

Mr Sharp—No. We are actually putting that forward for consideration as part of this inquiry. At this stage the shire has taken a middle-ground line on it. There are some people for the milling of timber in the Alpine National Park, there are some people against it within the shire,

and the shire has not taken a firm position on it. What we have done is convey this forward as part of the submission.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence today and also for your submissions. They will be very useful to us as we progress this inquiry.

Proceedings suspended from 3.05 p.m. to 3.14 p.m.

BOX, Mr Robin, First Lieutenant and Deputy Group Officer, Moyhu Group of Fire Brigades, Carboor Rural Fire Brigade

BOX, Mrs Susan Marie, Secretary-Treasurer, Carboor Rural Fire Brigade

HOLMES, Mr Mervyn Frederick, Captain and Deputy Group Officer, Moyhu Group of Fire Brigades, Carboor Rural Fire Brigade

HICKS, Mr Jack, Captain, Dederang Fire Brigade

JOHNSON, Mr Ian Francis, First Lieutenant and Treasurer, Buffalo River Country Fire Association

MENZ, Mr Tony, Captain, Buffalo River Country Fire Association

REEVES, Mr David George, Captain, Mudgegonga Rural Fire Brigade

SMITH, Mr Mark, Noorongong Fire Brigade

CHAIR—Welcome this afternoon. I think you were all here earlier when I read the legal bit about evidence so I will not redo that. We have submissions from each of your fire brigades and we thank you for those. They have been authorised for publication, so they are on the public record and will be used as evidence in the inquiry. To start, would you like to make some opening remarks? As I said, you do not need to repeat what you have put in your submissions. Please proceed with opening remarks if there are certain things that you would like to highlight or additional information that you would like to provide before we have some questions. Is there somebody from Carboor who would like to say something in addition?

Mr Box—The only thing that we would like to highlight which was not highlighted in our submission is that, no matter what area you look at, in any of the points that tended to rise as a concern, you run into a liability. People being concerned about liability is seriously impeding the effectiveness of them doing their job. It does not matter whether it is the training, the fuel reduction burns, the departments or for people making decisions for control burns on the day.

CHAIR—Thanks. Buffalo River, have you got something you would like to add?

Mr Menz—I agree with Carboor about decision making, which is in our submission anyway. It seems to me that DSE controllers on the fire line were not trusted by ICC in at Ovens, because they would make decisions, call in to do something and they were told, 'Wait out and we'll get back to you.' It could be four, five, six hours before they ever got back to them and it was far too late to do anything. There was a breakdown in the chain of command somewhere.

CHAIR—Mudgegonga?

Mr Reeves—As far as public speaking goes, I make a good firefighter—I will wait for questions.

CHAIR—Noorongong?

Mr Smith—One of the major factors in our submission is the remoteness of the instant control centres. In our case, for the Razorback fire, it was over the other side of the Australian Great Dividing Range at Swifts Creek. That impacted severely on our ability early on to address the fire threat in our locality.

CHAIR—Dederang?

Mr Hicks—Yes, I would like to make a couple of comments on behalf of the Dederang Brigade. One is that our brigade has been actively involved in previous years in training—minimum skills. We have been a big advocator of fuel reduction burning, which we highlighted in our submission.

CHAIR—I will start with questions and whoever wants to can have a go at this. With regard to the role of the local brigades in fuel reduction burns and the approval for it, we have had various evidence in New South Wales about this and the difficulty of getting approvals for hazard reduction. Talk me through the situation here in Victoria of the practical role of the volunteer bushfire brigade in each area with respect to hazard reductions. Does somebody want to volunteer to start?

Mr Box—Our brigade has very little input on control burns at the moment. It is not because we do not want to; we are not encouraged. There is no active involvement from DSE to have local brigades involved in that sort of thing. That is probably the main point. For a whole lot of reasons we believe that there needs to be a lot more involvement.

With respect to the effectiveness of a fuel reduction burn on crown land that adjoins private property, the greatest benefit is gained by the adjoining land-holder. They have a lot at stake there, so they should have a say when it is being done and they should also share the risk of having it done. For instance, if the fences are burnt, it should not be the total responsibility of the DSE to have to replace them. That is a big burden on the DSE at the moment.

The other very important aspect of the controlled burns, apart from the environmental aspect, is as a training aid for fire control. With respect to most of our fire brigades, all of our training facilities and props tend to relate to fires in buildings and car fires. There is very little, if any, training done in a bushfire situation, as it is difficult to do this. A controlled burn, or any of the fuel reduction burns, can facilitate training, the fuel reduction aspect, the environmental aspect and also the interdepartmental working relationships—the relationships between the CFAs, the DSE and local government.

CHAIR—If there is an area within the region in which your brigade operates where, from your perspective, there is an unreasonable build-up of fuel, can you make representations to the department and suggest that some reductions should be done?

Mr Box—Yes, we have been doing that.

CHAIR—What is the process from that point? Do they say, ‘Thanks very much, we’ll just continue doing what we’re doing,’ or can you instigate some sort of formal process to arrive at a considered—

Mr Box—Yes, we have been doing that. We have recognised the risk for nearly 10 years, and nothing has yet been done. It has been listed; it tends to be listed to be done in a one-year, two-year or three-year time frame. You get very narrow windows of opportunity for that to be done, and it does not always occur in the year in which it was listed to be done, so it goes off the agenda until you lobby again. I attended a meeting with them yesterday and it is still on the agenda. But this has been going on for nearly 10 years. It is very frustrating.

CHAIR—If, for instance, it is acted upon and they do proceed to do some hazard reduction, is it done purely by the department or do they then come back and involve the bushfire brigade in that region?

Mr Box—At the moment it is done purely by the department. They like to have the assistance of the land-holders, but in order to get that and go through that procedure, it tends to make the process more difficult than if they do it off their own bat. In the past it was done totally by the volunteers. We got the okay from the department and we did it at the opportune moment. There was constant communication between the department and us as to how it was all going. But all the labour input was provided by the volunteers.

CHAIR—So the situation now is that they do not involve you if they do some hazard reduction, but if there is a wildfire they want you out there giving a hand.

Mr Box—Yes.

Mr Reeves—Years ago they would use us at the lower end of these fuel reduction burns. It usually takes place on crown land that adjoins farming land, and it was the CFA’s or the local brigade’s responsibility to meet the fires as they came off the hills down to the fences. There was an agreement between DSE and the local brigades that that was what would happen. It worked quite well. It was also a great training aid for us. It meant that we worked with these people and got to know them personally and knew their position. Over the last few years that has not happened. They barely notify us if any fuel reduction burning is to be done.

CHAIR—When did you notice quite a dramatic change in that policy?

Mr Hicks—Ten, 15 years.

Mr Reeves—I would say seven or eight years.

Mr Holmes—As far as the department is concerned, there is a lot of red tape that they have to go through to get permission to do the reduction burns. If it could be minimised, I think we would get a lot better response from them.

Mr HAWKER—Mr Hicks, one of the things you spoke about in your submission was grazing cattle on the high plains. Could you share with us your knowledge of the vegetation before grazing, during grazing and since grazing has been pretty well phased out?

Mr Hicks—Basically I cannot tell you about prior to grazing because, where I am involved, grazing has been there for 150 to 160 years. I can give you my observations from phase-out in 1991. Areas on Mount Nelse burnt extensively during the fire and burnt very hot in comparison to through the fence, where the cattle still graze, during and after the fire. We experienced a Mount Feathertop fire come across our grazing run, up out of the river. The fire went out when it hit the grasslands. The grassland on our cattle grazing run did not burn and, if it did burn, it did not burn hot. Following showers of rain it greened up again, so there is no erosion. Where the cattle grazing had been gone for 12 years was probably the worst scenario. There was prolific growth when the grazing ceased because it was in a grazing regime for 150 years prior to that. You saw the growth, same as a lawn—don't mow it; lock it up and it will grow wild and burn.

Mr HAWKER—What about the impact of a lack of grazing on weeds?

Mr Hicks—I do not believe cattle have a direct impact on weeds. With the weeds you talk about—blackberry, broom, or whatever it is in that area—cattle grazing probably would not have had a big impact on them until after the fire. As for the short new growth of those weeds, the cattle will graze them. Prior to the fire, the cattle would not go near them. They would not have been able to get into the area.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Box, you mentioned the liability problem. Could you expand on that and give us some examples of what that issue is at present?

Mr Box—It comes in from a whole lot of areas. Doing back-burns during the fire was one thing. The consequences of a back-burn getting out of control tended to make people not go ahead with them, when that should have been done and would certainly have been done in the past. It is very difficult for people to do fuel reduction burns adjoining private property because of the liability and responsibility that the departments wear, should it get out into private property. In regard to doing fire training as part of controlled burns, nobody wants to put the responsibility on somebody's shoulder to say, 'Yes, you can go ahead and do it.' Nobody wants to do that, because of the liability. The coroner's findings in the Linton fire have made everybody very nervous of even approaching. That has affected the effectiveness of brigades getting in and doing their job. We tend to be told, 'If in doubt, get out.' We have better resources, much more expensive equipment and more training and yet our ability to get water onto a fire has deteriorated because people are worried about the liability. If you say, 'Go in and do it' and something happens, they do not want it on their neck.

Mr ORGAN—Have other members of the crews faced similar problems with the new environment—financial liabilities?

Mr Menz—I agree wholeheartedly that the Linton inquiry has definitely put the wind into everybody. Unfortunately, the way the law operates today, if you do something and it goes wrong, you know you are going to cop it—so you don't do it. People have got the wind up. As far as fuel reduction burning is concerned, I can only speak for our valley. All the eastern side of our valley is basically crown and national park, which we cannot go into to do any burning. The western side of our valley is basically 80 per cent Hancock's pines and some crown. We cannot do any fuel reduction burns there.

I have applied to have a couple of ridges burnt out this year that were not burnt—there were not many of them left on the east side of our valley, but there were a couple. I have applied to DSE to have them burnt out, which could be next year or could be in two years, possibly depending on how much pressure we keep on them. If we can get them out of the road, we will have a clean sweep for a few years anyway. And they do seem to want to work with you. Let's face it, this fire was bigger than anybody could have expected. It was not a fire in the Ovens Valley and the Buffalo Valley; it was a fire from Gippsland to the top end of New South Wales. It just got too big; the resources were not there to combat it. We did our best and probably, at the end of the day, we did all right, because there were not many lives lost—Canberra was the only place that lost a few lives—and buildings and so on: the loss was a minimum.

Mr ORGAN—There is a real concern out there about liability and that is not necessarily going to go away overnight.

Mr Menz—There is.

Mr ORGAN—I am wondering how you see a way forward.

Mr Menz—There is a major concern with liability and it does not only concern CFA fire brigade members; it concerns the public with their own properties and between their fence and the national park or their fence and crown land—they are concerned.

Mr Reeves—The CFA policy on liability is, as I understand, if you act in good faith you are then covered by insurance. That is the area which can be interpreted in as many ways as there are firefighters, I would think—a bit of a grey area, but that is the terminology that is used.

Mr Holmes—As regards the liability, strike team leaders have five trucks and many a time you hear of those trucks parked out on asphalt watching the farmers putting out their own fires with slip-on units. They make those decisions because of the liability. They have at the back of their mind, 'If I take those five trucks in there and something goes wrong, I'm at fault.' There is a fine line between safety and getting water on fire. With firefighting you are fighting an unknown enemy. It is an unpredictable enemy. And that is why we had a lot of trouble this year with the strike team leaders with that litigation in the back of their brain, that 'I may be at fault.'

Mr SCHULTZ—That was not an issue years ago, though, was it?

Mr Holmes—No. You made a decision; you carried it out. You will always make mistakes; we are not all perfect. Someone will make mistakes somewhere. But every person that is on a truck has had training; they know the risks—what could happen—before they leave home. Five years ago it was not a problem. Since the Linton inquiry, everyone is so frightened to make a decision that we are not getting water on fire quick enough.

Mr Hicks—I think this is where local knowledge comes into it. I think we have talked about the strike teams and about the fuel reduction, but I can give you an example in the Dederang brigade on the first day of fires, the 8th. We had two lightning strikes that the Dederang brigade fought and put out. We put them out because they were in an area where I, as captain, could safely send crews. We knew it had been fuel reduced and it was quite safe for them to go in there and attack those fires.

CHAIR—Is that private land?

Mr Hicks—No, that is on the crown land, and our brigade has always had a problem—

CHAIR—National park or forestry?

Mr Hicks—Crown land.

CHAIR—Just straight crown land?

Mr Hicks—Crown land that had been fuel reduced within the last four or five years. Going in there with crews was not a problem to me, litigation was not even considered. Whether it be life or whatever it was, it was safe; it was a safe day. That is the difference from the strike teams that come in and sit on the road—that is where the local knowledge should be put with them and utilised. If they are not prepared to go with the local knowledge then we are going to have to look at how they are being deployed there, because that is the situation.

Mr SCHULTZ—Litigation is almost a disincentive because of the fear that flows on from litigation. It is almost a disincentive for people to get in and suppress the fire as quickly as they used to.

Mr Hicks—The first thing I saw of it was when we were heading into the Feathertop fire. The DSE and Parks crews in that area would not go near it because of the situation. They were paid firies. We were local fellows with local crews—Falls Creek, Dederang—with gear going in there, perfectly safe, with a cattleman as a guide. They are going out saying, ‘Where are you guys going? You can’t do anything in there. Where are you going?’ The last thing they told us was, ‘Don’t do anything.’

CHAIR—You ignored them?

Mr Hicks—We went and did what we could.

CHAIR—The fire went out.

Mr Hicks—We went and did what we could—it was commonsense.

Mr Johnson—We were talking about DSE and National Parks. The Buffalo fire was a couple of strikes up what we call Sandy Creek and Anderson’s Peak. Our brigade got to the Sandy Creek fire within 10 minutes. DSE were there within 15 minutes with a small dozer. They had to wait approximately one hour to get permission from National Parks—because this fire was in the National Parks—to take their dozer in to make an access road for us to get in and put the fire out. It took an hour for them to get permission. In the Buffalo River submission we say that DSE should be in control of all fires, whether they are on National Park or crown land. But what happened—and I am only talking about the Buffalo River side—was that DSE, National Parks, CFA and Primary Industries were all wanting to control this fire, plus the Hancock’s to a degree. So you virtually had four government departments all wanting to control this lovely, big fire.

Mr Holmes—It was the same at Mount Feathertop; the volunteers were wanting to put it out.

Mr Johnson—All these government departments could not work together. If one has to wait an hour to get permission from the other one, what is going on? All the CFA volunteers want to do is get in, put the fire out and go home. It cost most of us one month's work. We got nothing done for a month, but we join the CFA to put fires out and—like some of the others have said—not to get tied up in all the bureaucracy that goes on. There seemed to be a lot of bitching between the government departments.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you for still being members of the CFA after what you have been through. I particularly want to ask the Carboor brigade questions, but any representatives from the other brigades can comment. The very detailed written submission that you have put in makes for some very depressing reading. There was one instance where, out of 15½ hours away from home, only three hours were spent fighting the fire, and there was a description of how time was wasted in between. I have heard a lot of these stories anecdotally right across the north-east, and we are hearing a lot of them in other parts of Australia as well. What impact did it immediately have, and what impact is it continuing to have, on the members of the local brigades? Will it mean that next time some of them will not help out or will we end up having unofficial vigilante brigades? What is happening?

Mr Box—The initial impact was that they would not bother going if they were asked again, but we have been through this sort of thing before. The reality is that, if there is a fire, we will all still attend.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is what decent people usually do.

Mr Reeves—The other snag with that, of course, is the same people will not go to training. They will be there and they will do their utmost best when the smoke goes up. But until then, they are not interested. I cannot blame them. The frustrations some of those fellows were feeling was right up there.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is why I said I am amazed that we still have so many volunteer firefighters right across the country still putting in their free time to come and speak to us and to be members of the brigades after what they have been through and, in a lot of instances, how they have been treated.

Mr Holmes—The hierarchy of the CFA have to be prepared to listen to local knowledge and local people on the ground. We have to have enough local people on the ground on an ongoing basis. You have referred to a case where there was only three hours work out of 15½ hours away from home. When you get an urgent call to go to a fire, it should be urgent. The call that Beechworth was under risk came at 10 minutes to 12 on Wednesday night. We could have had our crew at Beechworth in 20 to 25 minutes but, because of the organisation and going through too many channels, it took about five hours before we got there. This has got to be overcome. Perhaps we as CFA members have got to squawk louder at our peers. Yes, they have to listen to local knowledge. That cannot be stressed enough.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Generally speaking, when was this general shift away from the autonomy that the brigades had and the use of their local knowledge to what exists today?

Mr Hicks—Sophie, I would say probably since the first time we sent crews to Sydney—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Which was when?

Mr Holmes—That was in 1994.

Mr Hicks—and following that the time we saw DSE crews go to America. We have seen this general trend and the way it is all happening since then.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Okay, thank you. In the Buffalo submission it says that strike teams need to be changed on the fire front in daylight hours. Can you expand on that?

Mr Menz—Actually, by the end of the day, we finished up getting them to change on the fire line, but it was only through some good strike team leaders and a couple of sector commanders. You cannot switch a fire off at seven o'clock in the evening and start it back up at 10 o'clock. What was happening was that the strike teams were going off for their change-over and they were going back to the ICC in Ovens and it was three hours before they came back onto the fire line. Our argument is that strike team leaders and sector commanders should be briefed two to three hours before the change-over so that they are briefed in daylight. When they come onto the line, their change-over crews come onto the line and change over on the line. You cannot drive off for three hours and then come back expecting a fire to be waiting for you. It just does not happen. You cannot turn a fire off. You cannot have 15 trucks on a fire line and 12 of them driving away and not giving you notice—'It is seven o'clock boys; it's change-over time; we're gone'—no matter what the fire is doing.

Mr Johnson—To interrupt Tony, what was happening was that the trucks would go from the fire line back to Ovens, everybody would have tea and three hours later the next crew would come to the fire line. So you would haul the trucks and everybody away for two or three hours while the fire was still roaring. It should be just a switch-over at the fire.

Mr Menz—We are not knocking those strike team crews; we would not knock them for one minute—they did a good job. We found that they came in and did what was asked of them. Their leaders would come in and say, 'This is your territory. Tell us what you want us to do,' you would tell them and they would do it. I have heard a lot of flak about the strike teams. It would not be coming out of our brigade because, as far as we are concerned, they did a good job.

Mr Hicks—The change-over period in our experience is that DSE, National Parks and all those paid firies were changing over on the breakfast-dinner mentality—they would have their meals and then they would come out. The meal times were included in the work times, which I disagreed with. I thought their time should start when they turned up to get on the tanker or get on the fire line. Having their breakfast and what they did first thing in the morning—cleaning their teeth—was really in their own time, but that was all included. That was all right, but the CFA was trying to change their crews at the same time. After a few days, we came to realise that it was just no good us heading back to the control grounds with the change-over. We just had to stop there and guard the lines, because everyone was mass exiting and there was no-one left on the lines. We continually saw these spot-overs—we call them 'slop-overs'—and they just kept saying, 'There's another new house!' or 'Another new boat!' or 'Another new car!' It was just a wrong mentality.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Can you please explain what you mean by that?

Mr Hicks—More money. You got paid firies there working on the line, and if we take in another 6,000 hectares we are going to be there for another week. I suppose it was only said in jest, but a lot of our brigade members took it to heart pretty bad because quite a few of them were paying people to milk their cows or do their work at home and turning up in good faith and coming back to us with these stories. After the third day, personally I would not go back on the change of crews, I would always stop on the fire line until the new crews arrived.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So the brigade stayed and held the fort while they went off and had dinner.

Mr Hicks—Yes. What was happening then was that we were getting the strap when we got back because our T cards were not in order, but who cared? We didn't. We held the fire lines.

Mr Smith—Further to that, we were in the situation in the early days of the Razorback fire up in the top end of the Mitta Valley where we basically bored our way into the initial strike team that went in to start a back-burning campaign. We were supported by eight NRE units from over on the Gippsland sides because the ICC was at that stage at Swifts Creek. That is fine. We probably had about a kilometre and a half of back-burning going during the night under fairly adverse conditions. At seven o'clock the following morning those eight units from Swifts Creek started up and left the fire ground. I made a request of an NRE person as to where their replacements were. I found out about 20 minutes later that their replacements were being briefed on the Omeo football ground some 2½ hours from where we currently were. This is two hours after the fire crews left the fire scene at 7 a.m. You did not have to be a rocket scientist to work out that if our presence had not remained on that line that particular day until somewhere around the hour when we were relieved by NRE personnel from Swifts Creek there would have been a problem. The only thing we would have achieved by opening that back-burn on 14 January would have been to promote the fire into Dartmouth and Mitta by about a week and a half.

Mr McARTHUR—Mr Hicks, could I go back to your points about the initial attack on the wildfires, that they must be attacked immediately, a control centre set up for each fire, local people consulted at all times and the fire managed on its merits. Could you advise the committee about the comparison between an attack on private land and a vigorous approach to fire suppression compared to those lightning strikes on parks and public land?

Mr Hicks—Knowing the land, I do not see that there is any difference. If we have got a lightning strike, its initial stages is the only time to attack it. I believe it is to my benefit as a brigade captain to know my area like the back of my hand. I have lived there all my life. I can safely say I can send crews some places and other places I will tell them not to go because of the situation. If you are not going to attack those fires in the bush or out in the grasslands before they build up heat and get going—

Mr McARTHUR—Why would there be an attitude of mind not to attack the fire vigorously in the first instance when it is first located?

Mr Hicks—We saw that in the fires in the parks on Feathertop and Mount Arthur when they did not go in initially. They might have done a flyover and looked at them and said, 'We haven't got the personnel to do it.' Who knows what the reasons are? We can surmise that they probably could not have got the personnel to go in there because of the state of the bush or they might not

have had the experienced personnel and they were not prepared to approach the neighbouring brigades.

Mr McARTHUR—So in your area you are happy to go to all parts of the terrain because of your local knowledge.

Mr Hicks—On the day we put out the two fires in the neighbouring crown land beside Dederang fire brigade. DSE came and assisted us on one. We had it all worked out when they got there but we utilised whatever resources they brought. They brought a bulldozer with them, which I suggested that they send on to one of the park fires. They told me they could not because it had to go back to Myrtleford to be decontaminated. It just goes on and on and on. That bulldozer did go back to Myrtleford and it got back to Mount Beauty or wherever it went the next morning.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think a big number of the 55 fires that were reported to have been burning could have been extinguished had there been a more positive approach to the early lightning strikes?

Mr Hicks—I think it is a multiple thing. Firstly, DSE and Parks—and I will talk about them both; DSE should be the fire agency—are working on a budget, and we have seen the demise of that budget having regard to their equipment and their crews over the last 10 years. It has been whittled down to basically nothing in our area. In the Kiewa Valley we do not even have a bulldozer positioned there; we have to wait for bulldozers to come from neighbouring valleys. So basically, if they are not prepared to ask the neighbouring brigades to come and assist, which they have not been doing in recent years, I do not believe they have a hope. In Dederang's case we went in and suppressed two fires—two fires which would have burnt on up the valley and made the fire even bigger again. And at Towong there was one fire. There were 56 fires—or whatever number was supposed to be around—but there were enough brigades to attack each fire individually. Why throw them all into a big barrel and say, 'Here you are, boys; you have this great big picture,' and frighten everyone away? Why not say, 'Dave, you go and do that fire,' and to someone else, 'You go and do that that fire and come back when it is out'?

Mr McARTHUR—That is how we used to do it. How come that did not happen on this occasion?

Mr Hicks—Hierarchy.

Mr Holmes—We were blocked. There was too much red tape.

Mr Hicks—Dederang was not blocked, because I would not be blocked. You would switch the radio off before you got blocked to put out the fire at your back fence. You would not wait until it came inside the fence.

Mr McARTHUR—You are saying you were blocked. Who blocked you? Are you saying you could have put out those 50 fires initially if you had been allowed to approach them in the way in which you used to do traditionally?

Mr Hicks—Yes, I believe we could have. After we put out the Mount Jack fires at Dederang I personally approached Ovens ICC to send a crew into the Feathertop fire, which we did on the second day. It had gained a bit of ground by then. If we were going to be involved and we realised there was no-one there, we would have been in there on the first day. We never realised there was no-one in there so in there we went and we hit obstacles all the way.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are telling the committee that, if it had been left to the traditional CFA volunteers who had been handling this lightning prone country, you could have made a very big impact in those smaller fires that were initially kicked off by lightning strikes?

Mr Hicks—I think to be positive about that you would have to go back 10 years and get the fuel reduction back in order. We were very fortunate in that Dederang area that we have been big pushers for fuel reduction. I have got into a fair bit of trouble over fuel reduction. At every meeting I have been to, whether it be municipal council meetings or whatever it is, I have always fronted DSE and demanded we do fuel reduction burning. I have always got a little bit out of them. Quite a number of times fuel reduction burning would be done on a rainy day and when I went back to the meetings for the following season they would say, 'It is burnt,' and we would have quite an argument about that.

The neighbouring brigades probably could have put these fires out but on the other hand it probably was not safe for them to go to some of those fires because of the state of the bush and the access tracks. Where were the safe places for them to withdraw their crews to? They are just nonexistent anymore. If you went back to the old days when we had the SEC and the old forestry commission—and I was there with my father as a little fellow; I was probably too young to even be with fire crews—we had all that worked out and we knew where all that was. It is not there now. The fire access tracks are only a third of the width and are overgrown if they are open at all. That is the crux of the matter.

Mr McARTHUR—That was my next question. You would be recommending to the committee that these fire access tracks be maintained, be looked at prior to the summer season and be reviewed in terms of their capability and access. Is that what you are saying to the committee?

Mr Hicks—That is what I am saying. Really we have to get the old forestry maps and the old SEC maps out and see where all those strategic fire points were and where they had the ridges burnt. They are still all there; we just have to get them back out again. Parks will not like us doing it, but it has to happen.

Mr McARTHUR—Why aren't those tracks being maintained? What is the rationale for that?

Mr Hicks—Parks lock them up. You are not allowed to have them open. You have to lock them up to keep the people out.

Mr McARTHUR—So what happens when the fire turns up if the tracks are locked up?

Mr Hicks—Parks probably think that fire is natural and we should let it go.

Mr SCHULTZ—Before I ask a question I would like to quote three paragraphs, one from the letter that was submission No. 264 from the Carboor Rural Fire Brigade. The second last paragraph says:

We firmly believe that those volunteers such as ourselves now need to be listened to (our brigade has 19 out of 50 members with over 25 years active experience each). Rather than a group of over educated inexperienced people who seem to be the ones who are in control of situations such as occurred this year. Fire fighting happens at the fire front not in an office.

The second and third quotes I would like to put on record are from your possible solutions. Page 2 of that five-page submission says:

Firefighters need to be allowed to attack a fire in the early stages and be able to take a calculated risk and endeavour to extinguish the fire as quickly as possible, safety being respected. The decision to act needs to be made on the fire ground not away from the fire at an incident control centre, who cannot see what is going on. Air support authorization needs to be much quicker and easier to access.

Finally, the last paragraph of that five-page commentary says:

It is time for the CFA to get back to basics, which is that of putting out fires and protecting the community from the threat of fire. Too much time is spent on procedure; the chain of command has become too long and has some weak links. We need to remember actions speak louder than words and the ongoing highest priority needs to be given to the firefight.

On those comments: in the beginning of your possible solutions on page 1 you refer to a number of incidents that occurred. The one I want to refer you to is the first one about a crew you put together following an urgent call at 11.45 p.m. on 22 January 2003:

During the 15½ hours they were away from home they put in 3 hours fire fighting time, for an URGENT call out.

Can you describe to the committee what occurred during the 12 hours—where your volunteer time and the energy you had ready to commit to the community to put that fire out were utilised.

Mr Holmes—I will pass that on to Robin. He was the leader of that brigade.

Mr Box—I was actually at that incident. We ate food, laid on the lawn, went to sleep and tried to find something to do. That answers your question. We got incredibly frustrated.

Mr SCHULTZ—So I panic and call you out—

Mr Holmes—I got that call at quarter to 12 from our RO on site at Beechworth. The conditions at that stage were atrocious—there was an enormous wind, it was about 2½ kilometres off Beechworth and it looked like getting into Beechworth. The call came through and all the strike teams, to put it in the words given to me, were knackered and required some urgent crews. The call was urgent: ‘Get there as quick as possible, otherwise we are going to lose Beechworth.’ We were part of a strike team that went from the Myola group. That is what happened.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I sum that up with your words on the third-last paragraph on page 4: ‘Incident management was bloody pathetic.’ Is that how you would describe that and other incidents?

Mr Holmes—Exactly. Decisions were being made away from the fire at the incident control centre at Benalla, not on the fire ground. When these fellows arrived there was still fire to be put out, even though they were late getting there, but it was red tape.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I ask the panel to comment on a couple of points made by the Mudgegonga Rural Fire Brigade in submission No. 39. I refer you to four points that you raised, and you might like to comment on those four points individually or collectively. The first point is:

Strike teams were ‘wasted’ by not being fully deployed for the life of the fires in this area, particularly for ‘spot’ fires after backburns.

The second point is:

CFA Strike Teams should be kept separate from DSE operations management. They would be fully utilised and looked after under the control of the local Group Officer and/or Deputy Group Officers.

The third point is:

Protective clothing, such as helmets and overalls, were in short supply, and in a lot of instances were changed over {warm and sweaty} to the next crew and worn continuously. Not very hygienic for those involved.

The fourth point is:

There were a lot of unnecessary delays in putting decisions into action, and quite a few occasions when nothing happened at all, causing immense frustration.

Would you like to make some comment on those four points, either individually or collectively?

Mr Reeves—The call for strike teams was made out Buffalo River way at one stage by the Myrtleford captain. He was out there on his own, in his own vehicle and on his own time—he had already spent 12 hours on a shift—and he said, ‘This is getting away here. We need some assistance this morning.’ Four hours later came the reply from the ICC, ‘No, you can’t have anybody.’ During that time, of course, the fire was well gone and had become a bigger problem. He was the only one out there at Buffalo Creek, there was nobody else in the district and that was the reply he received four hours afterwards.

As far as the overalls are concerned, we were rushing out there and trying to change over on the fire line by this stage. We were going out there, grabbing as many overalls as we could from the truck, bringing them home, washing them and taking them back. Blokes were turning up without overalls, because the overalls that we had were on the truck. Some of these overalls were no longer orange. They were black and wet and being taken off one fellow and put on the next fellow right there on the truck and then being worn for another 12 hours.

Mr Johnson—To put this in a nutshell, the people controlling the fire at the incident control centre—at Ovens, in our particular case—would not listen to the people they sent out to the fire. Trained sector commanders, strike team leaders and CFA brigade captains were sent out to put out the fire, but the people sitting back in the office would not take any notice of them. This happened continually throughout the fire, and I imagine it happened in all the other areas. If there was a captain or a lieutenant of a brigade out there—or even the DSE fellows whom we respected, as they were very good—their bosses would not listen to them. They were the fellows on the fire ground trying to put out the fire, and when they said, ‘This is what we need, not tomorrow but now,’ their bosses said, ‘We’ll get back to you.’ This happened continually. I know at one stage we waited eight hours or more to get a response. There was one instance—and I do not want to keep harping on things—when I requested an ambulance because we had one fellow with heat exhaustion. They said, ‘We’ll look into it for you.’ I am sorry, but I went off the deep end and I had it there within 10 minutes. I said, ‘Don’t effing look into it. I want it here now.’ So, in an emergency, the response was still, ‘We’ll look into it for you.’ That is not good enough.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I just finish my comment to you guys by saying not to be discouraged from what you are doing. The community appreciates you and the courage it has taken for you, and people like you right around this country, to come and give evidence to this committee.

Mr Johnson—Thank you.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Just picking up on that point, Mr Johnson: you had responsible people on the ground who, in some cases, would have known the people at the control centre—obviously, you would have worked with those people before—so why do you think your views were not taken into account?

Mr Johnson—Because you are just a local farmer. What the hell would you know about it? This fire in our area went through in exactly the same position and we put it out on exactly the same fire breaks 20 years ago—and it will happen again in 10 or 20 years, because Mount Buffalo, being mainly rock, gets hit by lightning strikes.

You have to listen to the local knowledge. I do not know whether you should blame the individuals that they brought in but somebody coming from Geelong or Warrnambool as a strike team leader or an incident control person would not understand how fires burn in the mountains. I will give you another example, that of maps. We were trying to indicate where the fire was and they had a map of Australia and were trying to draw a fire break on it. You might laugh at that, but that is about how it was. I spent each evening photocopying and blowing up a section of about 5 kilometres on the map. I said, ‘This is where the fire is.’ They said, ‘Gee, that’s good; can I have one of them?’ I did about 480 copies of them. So the people sitting at the control centres did not have practical knowledge in the organisation of putting out fires.

Mr SCHULTZ—As a volunteer you paid for that out of your own pocket.

Mr Johnson—When you join as a volunteer, you know that you will be putting your time in. We are not worrying about any of that; that is why we are volunteers. I assume the governments, state and federal, realise that if they had to pay volunteers they would all be broke. So they have to listen to volunteers because if they lose them, God help us when the fire season is on.

Mr Hicks—I do not believe you lose volunteers after these fires, because in our area I saw lots and lots of orange overalls and I saw a lot of minimum skilled and well-trained firefighters out on the ground. And since the fires, as a captain, I have had many requests from members of our very strong brigade to further their experience. They want to have more minimum skills. The minimum skills trainers are loaded up so much now that they cannot keep up with it. Ms Panopoulos, I felt before that you were implying that we were sick of it and ready to pack up our traps and go. We are keener and stronger than ever, and unless we get some pretty straight directions from the state and federal governments after this we will probably be starting to run our own ships by the time the next lot of fires go up. So we are going to have to pull the whole show together and get some really good guidelines to get us working as a main fire suppression agency. Otherwise you will see us out there putting the fires out—but other people might not quite know what we are doing.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I refer to the Caboor submission. You make the point on page 3:

Information from the fire ground did not seem to get through to the incident controller.

Presumably you were pumping that information through. Was it just not being received, or was there no avenue at the incident control centre through which to get that information and act on it in a helpful way?

Mr Hicks—I can give an example of that. On the first day the Gluepot fire, between Dederang and Tawonga, was not even registered with DSE as a fire. They put a helicopter over it but did not even give it a fire number. At the Feathertop fire we saw—and we screamed for maps—situation reports we had given them the night before and they had not even bothered to compile them. Two days later we saw maps coming out using our situation report from two nights prior—because we were at the Feathertop fire for four nights. For three nights we asked for a bulldozer to come to the Feathertop fire to assist us. We were not allowed bulldozers in the park.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—In the Carboor submission you mentioned the use of the Army and heavy equipment, and the need for skilled people in that instance. Could you just elaborate on that, please?

Mr Holmes—I was involved in that. In that instance we had to put in containment lines to save the Rose River if the fire jumped out of Dandongdale. They issued us with Army gear—two D3s—but in really rocky areas they are only marginally better than rake-hoes. I do not want to degrade the operators on them but they were very inexperienced. I had one there for about five hours because I needed a few trees knocked out of the road. He said, 'Well, that's the first tree I've ever knocked over.' We were not allowed to put them near the fire ground. If a fire started anywhere near where we were putting those containment lines we had to pack them up and move them out. They were not allowed near the fire ground. They have gear and at the time it was gratefully appreciated, but we need guys on them that understand the situation they are in. They were in very steep going and it is a dangerous operation.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I will pick up on the point that my esteemed colleague the member for Corangamite mentioned, and that is the notion of an initial attack. It comes through

in various shapes and forms in the submissions. On page 3 of the Carboor submission you make reference to that. You say:

With the use of back burning, dozer trails and early air support there should have been rapid total extinguishment of the lightning strikes.

Mr Hicks makes a point about initial attack:

Crews need hand tools & quick attack units to go straight to the fire. Aerial attack is needed on standby 24hrs a day ... to spot fires, water bomb & back up ground crews when needed.

In your experience, how has the use of aerial assets assisted your efforts on the ground? Do you have enough of them?

Mr Johnson—The aerial attacks are good. The fires that started everywhere on the 8th in the morning were so big that there was not enough equipment to put them out. You could not budget for enough aeroplanes and bulldozers to all be there at the one time. We are not blaming anybody for that. I think we requested a helicopter but they were down—

Mr Menz—We requested them a couple of times.

Mr Johnson—They were somewhere more important, because all that was burning up our way was bush, which is fair enough because you want to save the towns, cities or houses before the bush. The whole fire was so big that the firefighting equipment and personnel were not there; it took a while to get everybody organised. It is not as though we are a fully trained army on call 24 hours a day.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I understand.

Mr SCHULTZ—The fires were small initially.

Mr Johnson—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—That is when the aircraft should have been called in.

Mr Johnson—I agree, but how do you pull in 55 helicopters, one for each fire? They are not there. It was an unusual year because it was so dry, and then we had all the lightning strikes. If they had had three lightning strikes there would have been no problem. It needs to be remembered that this fire was a very unusual fire in its size and the number of strikes. There is a lot a criticism. We hear a lot of it up our way. It was just an exceptional circumstance and no planning before, after or during could have solved the problem.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Your assessment of the conditions and state of the forest before the season was a pretty pessimistic one?

Mr Johnson—It was extreme. It only needed lightning strikes. We did not get one; I heard we got 77. I do not know what your figures say.

Mr Menz—We had nine in the area on that morning of the 8th. There is a case for fuel reduction burning.

Mr Johnson—Yes, for sure.

Mr Menz—Most of the fires lit up in the Ovens Valley came from our fire over on the western side of Mount Buffalo. Every afternoon when it blew up in the heat and we got into a crown fire situation, because there was so much fuel there, it went straight over the top of Buffalo and lit up fires down in the Ovens Valley. I think 1974 was the last time that that mountain burnt completely. If we had had even 10 years of fuel on the ground, we would not have had those crown fires that sent it over the top into the Ovens Valley. It comes back to fuel reduction.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Getting back to the issue of aerial assets and the initial attack and suppression of fires, are you aware that Australia's fire chiefs in August predicted a horrendous season and indicated that a variety of aerial assets would be required in the forthcoming season to combat fires and assist crews on the ground? Were you aware of that particular report?

Mr Menz—Yes, I am aware of that.

Mr Holmes—With aerial support there is a lot of red tape involved in actually getting them lifted off the ground. That does take time. I believe that if some of that could be short-circuited it would be very much appreciated. I will take you to an instance. When the Eldorado fire started up, the crane helicopter was working on the Warby Ranges and that fire was contained and he was not allowed to move. He had a load of water; he was not allowed to go. He would have been there in probably 60 seconds; he was not allowed to move until he got authorisation.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—In that report the fire chief indicated that a variety of aircraft would be required—not just the helicopters but fixed wing, small aircraft and whatever. That particular report was dismissed by a politician as a 'wish list' of assets. What is your comment on that?

Mr Menz—Let us face it: we could have used them. By the same token I do not know that the country can afford to have 60 firefighting aircraft sitting on the ground for four months in case we get a fire.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—What about seven? That is what the fire chief said. Seven for the forthcoming season, and I think 11 over the longer term.

Mr Menz—Not enough. Is that for Victoria or the north-east or what?

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—No, that is for the whole of Australia, to be used in conjunction with existing aerial resources. I am talking about additional aircraft.

Mr Menz—It depends on the aircraft, what they carry and what they can do. There are certain jobs for certain aircraft. These Elvises are great things if they can get water. They are not much good if they cannot get to somewhere where they can fill up. The 1,300 litre Sky helicopters based around here are great things but carry only a bucketful of water.

Mr SCHULTZ—A bambi bucket with 300 litres is not as effective as a Dromeda air tractor with 2,000 litres.

Mr Menz—The whole fire that went from the north-east of Buffalo to the other side of Katherine station getting up near the wilderness was started from the fire on Anderson's Peak. If we had had two good helicopters on the first or even the second day when it was creeping down the hill and got that out, it would have saved the whole of that area.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would a section 44 be the instrument that triggers the additional equipment such as the aircraft? What I am saying is that it would appear from the evidence we have received that the resources we are talking about, like aircraft, are not utilised to the extent that they should be until such time as a section 44 is called. Is that correct?

Mr Menz—It possibly is. Section 44 is New South Wales legislation.

Mr SCHULTZ—What is the similar legislation down here?

Mr Menz—The thing is that we had two fires: one in Sandy Creek, which is the first one we went to, and one at Buffalo Creek. They were rounded up by CFA and DSE men and put out. It was the one from Anderson's Peak that you could not drive or walk into that destroyed the whole mountain. I tell you, in places it did destroy it.

Mr Holmes—A small helicopter with a bucket of water is probably all that was needed at Anderson's Peak at the three-hour mark. It appeared from about five kilometres away to be no bigger than a campfire.

Mr Menz—Then again, you sit down and look at that, and then sit down in Ovens ICC and they have 58 fires going. Where the hell are we going to go? We have not got the manpower to do anything.

Mr Box—I think what you are alluding to there is that if the helicopters we saw flying over towards the end of it had been used in the first three days those fires would not have gone much more than a week.

CHAIR—Ultimately there were quite substantial aerial resources in the region but they were not there in the first few days.

Mr Box—I do not know whether they were in the region but they were rounded up later. If it is only a small fire, it is like using a sledgehammer to kill a meat ant, but in hindsight that is what should have been done. If there is going to be a lesson learnt out of this, that is what needs to be done—throw all resources at it, then get home and get on with your work. Do not wait until it costs the country a fortune in lost assets, people's time and running the exercise. It should be done quickly with everything you have, and then you go back home.

Mr Smith—The aerial attack side of firefighting is a very touchy subject. During these current fires we had a very low inversion layer of smoke and what have you on many days. An aerial attack under those circumstances is all but impossible. We were even having problems getting any decent imaging through there in the evening. Even though I go with my colleagues

along the lines of, yes, more aerial resources would be terrific, they are not the be-all and end-all of firefighting in this terrain that we have here.

CHAIR—I thank all of you for not only your written submissions but the evidence here today. I think that that on the ground, practical experience and evidence are vital for this committee to put forward an appropriate report when it is all finished. I sincerely thank you for your time.

Mr Reeves—Thank you for the opportunity too. It was much appreciated.

Proceedings suspended from 4.21 p.m. to 4.39 p.m.

BENNETT, Mr Bob (Private capacity)

CARVER, Mr Les (Private capacity)

CLARKSON, Mrs Belinda (Private capacity)

JACK, Ms Sue (Private capacity)

McDONALD, Mrs Carol Margaret (Private capacity)

McDONALD, Ms Mary Ellen, Member, Nillumbik Ratepayers Association

McDONALD, Mr Robert Arthur Charles, (Private capacity)

SKEHAN, Mr Monty (Private capacity)

STEWART, Ms Christine Isabel, Vice-President, Albury Wodonga Regional Tourism Forum Inc.

TITTERINGTON, Mr John Paul (Private capacity)

WALDRON, Ms Nina (Private capacity)

WALPOLE, Mr Thomas Richard (Private capacity)

WHITSED, Mr Allan (Keith), OAM (Private capacity)

CHAIR—We will now have the part of the inquiry where we give additional people an opportunity to put some information to the committee. We have 13 people who have something to say, so I am going to have to limit each person to about three minutes. We will call each person to come forward, they will make their remarks and at the end we will determine, depending on the time, whether committee members will ask any particular person a question. But in the first instance we need to give each person the opportunity to provide their input.

Mr Walpole—I live in Whorouly South. I put in a submission to the federal inquiry because I believe that the federal government has a jurisdiction under the Constitution to interfere with state matters concerning water and bushfires. My experience of fires has been in the Whorouly fire brigade. I have my 50-year accreditation. Four years ago I was virtually told that I was no longer acceptable because of my age and because I could not complete the written exam that I was forced to do, probably because when I came to explain the fire triangle I wrote Pythagoras, rhomboid and the other Greek that was into mathematics. After that I never went back.

The first part of my submission to the inquiry was that I had no faith in the CFA anymore. I doubted their ability to put out a major fire unless they had full control of it. For four years before I retired from the brigade I had noted that the interference by authorities had lessened the capabilities of the brigade, because they were restricting what I regarded as the first strike

potential of the fire brigade. In the olden days, if we saw a puff of smoke, we would go and put it out.

My first experience on a tanker was a local truck with a 90-gallon tank, with a hand pump on it. Because I was the strongest looking I was put on the hand pump, and the weakest looking bloke was put on the ground with the hose. C.C. Johnson, who was the captain, said, 'Don't run away from it, boy,' and put the truck up a gear. He had to be towed along behind the truck trying to put out the fire, and we put it out. My next experience was a swing saw tipped over in the bush. We had a running fire in the bush. We got to it and we got around it with rakes and mattocks. C.C. Johnson said, 'Tomorrow we'll clean it up, but five of you will stay here tonight and you will make sure that fire does not get away.' That is the training I have had.

I have had 70 years of experience travelling over the mountains. I have been a competition skier on the mountains in winter, and I have seen the damage that the 1939 fires did. My father took me up there at Easter 1939 to see if there were any fish left in the Cobungra. The Cobungra was still running a little bit black. But on the way back, when we got to Harrierville, the rain that had started when we were up there had flooded the river, so the run-off was extremely fast. After the fires, the heavy rain brought the ash down, and the rivers ran black for a fortnight. This ash and charcoal in the river actually contaminated a lot of the sand in the river itself.

I have been studying long-range meteorology for 40 years. I have found that there is a fire cycle that is connected to the solar cycle, which is measured in sunspots, which have been recorded in Switzerland for 240 years. The fire cycle is a 90-year cycle. Whenever there is a change in the sunspot activity, there is an 11-year cycle that expands the atmosphere on the earth and moves the storm tracks further north or south. The most dangerous period appears to be about halfway through the cycle, which coincides with the years 1852 and 1939. So I predict that the period 2025 to 2035 will pose the worst fire threat that we will ever have, because the global warming pattern will be right in the middle of the maximum period of global warming at that time. Therefore, if you cannot put out lightning strikes or small bushfires or grassfires when they occur, you are going to have a conflagration in this state that could burn out the whole state. In my submission I said that if there was one lightning strike at Halls Gap you could lose the whole state of Victoria. It almost happened in 1852. I believe it could well happen again in, say, 2027.

CHAIR—Mr Walpole, I am going to have to ask you to wind up.

Mr Walpole—Okay. The rabbit plagues which occurred until the fifties reduced the amount of available fuel. Now, with the increase in carbon dioxide levels over the past 20 to 30 years, there has been an enormous acceleration of growth in the alpine understorey. Anybody who has gone to the Omeo calf sales over the last four or five years will have gone up CRB Hill. You used to be able to look over the chasm of the upper Ovens River. Now you cannot see over the top of it. I will wind up my remarks at that point.

CHAIR—Thanks very much. We appreciate that.

Mr Walpole—No questions?

CHAIR—If you would like to hang around until the end of proceedings, I want to give everybody the opportunity to have their say first. We will see how we go from there. My

colleagues will yell out if they want to ask questions at the end of the proceedings. We will now hear from Mr Paul Titterington.

Mr Titterington—I am a CFA volunteer and I live at Yackandandah. I am also a controller for the State Emergency Service in our small town. I will compare aspects of the CFA and the SES and discuss areas that could be improved. I will not talk about fire reduction, fences or whatever; I will talk about the training given to volunteers. When a fire is imminent or there is some other emergency, these people go out and put their lives on the line, so they need to have proper training. I am talking purely about the training aspect. I am not here to complain about what went right and what went wrong. I will refer to a couple of aspects of how training could be improved and I will also refer to the facilities that the brigade and the SES have.

The maps that we have were drawn up in 1977. That makes them 26 years out of date. We need somebody to produce maps which show all the trails and hand them out to the volunteers so that we can undertake that part of the work. The SES is about 25 years old. They generally meet weekly. We do about an hour and a half of training a week. There is usually a unit in most towns, of which there are 20-plus in the north-east. We offer courses in occupational health and safety, accident approach, first aid, accredited chainsaw use, boating, search and rescue, road accident rescue, a four-wheel driver operator course, the training of small groups, workplace assessor, protection at a scene, line search et cetera. We are extensively trained and we have been given the opportunity to do a proper, nationally accredited course through TAFE, and seven out of our 12 at Yackandandah have done certificate II training.

I am not here to collect certificates. What I am trying to say is: when we want a four-wheel drive course, we are given it; when we want a chainsaw course, we are asked for names which we then submit. In comparison to the CFA, who have been around for more than 65 years, we do not have provided chainsaws in our fire appliances. As yet, we do not have any chainsaw courses, unless people have done them privately. We found that our SES role was to go and cut trees for the CFA. This was a huge problem in the fires. When SES crew roll up, they sign in—they print their name. We have hours of duty, so we can swap people over. It is nice when it is a small incident and difficult when it is a bit bigger.

All our training is nationally accredited through TAFE, which means that it is transparent. When we meet another SES unit on the fire ground or at a car or boating accident we know which qualifications they have. I have been in the CFA for 12 years and the SES for about 14 years. I am on the committee for the municipal emergency management planning for the Indigo Shire. It is brilliant to have a shire plan to combat these disasters and have refuge centres available in times of emergency.

I would like for the committee to actually look at the CFA and the SES to compare their individual training and records. All SES members have a photo ID card. I have never had a photo or any ID card from the CFA. If I am stuck in a line in a car because the town is blocked off, I cannot prove that I am from the CFA, as I have no ID. That is a simple procedure to put in place. I do not believe that IDs are perfect but, if we were called to Sydney to do some antiterrorist work, we would need photo ID so that we could prove who we are and have some credibility. I cannot get that through the CFA.

I will finish on one point: if you want to drive a forklift, you have to have a forklift ticket; if you want to drive a medium rigid CFA truck, you have to have a medium rigid ticket; if you want to drive a four-wheel drive CFA appliance in the bush with seven people, there is no four-wheel drive accreditation to drive behind the wheel. The CFA have a lot of money—I believe \$150 million in PR. I would like to see chainsaws and proper training.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that submission. We will now hear from Mr Whitsed.

Mr Whitsed—I live in Corryong. I have a dairy farm in the Biggara Valley on the New South Wales side of the border and I have another property known as Bunroy in the upper reaches of the Murray River. Bunroy is the last property and then there is about 30 kilometres of bush through to the Tom Groggin property that was mentioned earlier this morning. It is an isolated property. We talk about fences being destroyed; I do not have any boundary fences. I join crown land and national parks, but there are no boundary fences. The cattle do not go away. The property is some 1,200 acres and about 600 of them were cleared.

When these fires started, the first that I knew about them was the day of the bad lightning strikes. I was out looking that day and there were none on the property. The smoke arrived, but there were no fires on the property. I hung around for quite a while, but could not find any. There was quite a bit of smoke around and I came back towards Corryong. There had been three or four fires around that had been put out by the local farmers and the CFA. When I got back to Corryong, there was a big one on Mount Mittamatite to the north of Corryong with smoke going up from it like a volcano.

That was fairly late in the afternoon—those long afternoons in January—and I decided, since I am a bit past being in the fire crew myself, to go down to the youth club to see what was going on. There were seven local tankers and men everywhere dressed in overalls. I knew 95 per cent of the blokes, all locals, and here they were sitting at desks, filling in cards. This was at sundown, and I said, ‘Who is up at the fire?’ And I was told, ‘No-one has gone there yet.’ The lightning would have struck about midday. The road up on to the top of the mountain was only half an hour’s drive away, and no-one was up there. Yes, they had despatched a bulldozer from one of the farms to go to it. I just could not believe it.

Our local Biggara captain was there, sitting at a table, helping to fill in these tea cards or whatever they call them. He is big enough and brave enough to have gone up and put the fire out on his own and here he was pushing a pen at the desk. There is no way that fire should have got going; they should have had 50 men up there with rake-hoes. Sure, it was rather rough country and it was too rough for the dozers to get to it that night in the dark, but it was unbelievable that all these good, willing blokes were standing around five or six hours after the fire had first gone up.

My property at Bunroy ended up being declared black. The ICI or ICC, or whatever they call themselves in the office—I never saw so many shiny shirts in my life as in that office in Corryong—declared that it was black, too dangerous to go to. We sat it out—me, two sons and a mate who was one of the bosses in the local CFA and does a fair bit of work for us. He could see that we were in trouble out there. He, I and two boys were there for eight days and there was no way they would give us any help whatsoever. We never saw a tanker. We had fires come from three different directions to that property. Every time we rang up we were told: ‘No, it is

declared black; you will get no help from us.’ They sent a helicopter out to get me and could not find me; I was away on the horse getting the cattle into a small paddock. The next day two police arrived to pick me up and take me away. I politely told them where to go.

CHAIR—I have to ask you to wind up, I am sorry, Mr Whitsed.

Mr Whitsed—We lost half the ground. What an experience! Thank you, Sophie, for pushing for this inquiry, and I thank you folks for listening to us.

CHAIR—Thank you for your experiences. It is all useful.

Mr Whitsed—I am sure you can do something about it.

CHAIR—Thanks very much. Mr Robert McDonald, please proceed.

Mr McDonald—I am a first lieutenant in the Bowser Rural Fire Brigade. I have been fighting bushfires for 49 years and I have held various positions, all in a voluntary capacity, with the Country Fire Authority. First of all, I have put a submission in but I am not speaking on the submission today. I will make some comments and observations about private equipment and minimum skills that the CFA now demands. It is frowning upon the use of private equipment. I draw your attention to the fact that private equipment has successfully put out all the lightning strikes and all the fires that are not the subject of this inquiry.

In the Indigo Valley, I personally put out a fire the night before in the Warby Ranges. I was present the next day, carting water up the Warby Ranges. We had a helicopter hovering overhead with a full bucket of water when I personally saw the Eldorado fire go up—simply a campfire, a small plume of smoke. I immediately tried to have that helicopter diverted to the Eldorado fire, knowing that a teaspoon of water at the right time is sufficient to put out a fire. That helicopter was approximately four minutes away in flying time to Eldorado, and he could have refilled from the dredge hole at Eldorado. That did not occur.

I move on. I returned home that afternoon, got a full fresh crew, refurbished the Bowser tanker and indicated our willingness to immediately proceed to the Indigo Valley, to the Eldorado fire. The brigade truck was never committed to that fire, and four other CFA tankers were never committed. They were all sitting around, fully crewed and ready to go to the fire. A lot of people then manned private equipment, driving past the CFA tankers and proceeding to the Indigo Valley area and fighting the fire later that night, along with New South Wales bush fire brigades. I might add that New South Wales committed all their equipment from Cowra to Albury, and all the way through to Wagga, while the CFA equipment was still sitting at home, fully crewed but never committed. No-one in the Country Fire Authority has been able to answer my questions as to why that occurred.

A question was asked this morning about whether there has been a culture change since Linton; the answer is yes, the Country Fire Authority has introduced safety first. I am not against safety first but, with my experience, I know that you need to get in quickly with all the equipment, fight the fire and put it out quickly to avoid what we are here today for. The term ‘asset protection’ came up this morning. Asset protection now seems to refer only to houses. If you are a farmer, as I am, ‘assets’ covers everything—your fencing, your land, your grass.

The weather during these recent fires was relatively mild for a period of 2½ months, with the exception of perhaps three to four days. It was nothing like the weather we experienced prior to Christmas and New Year, or Ash Wednesday or on other occasions of extreme weather. I simply pass that comment.

Turning to roadside management, we had a representative from one of the shires here who mentioned that he did not know of any fires, when he was asked a question by the panel. I certainly know of plenty of fires that I have put out in his shire area. I also clearly remember when the Hume Highway was burnt from Wodonga stretching towards Melbourne, the Melbourne-Sydney rail line was burnt and there was a ploughed firebreak up both sides of the Hume Highway. That is not the case anymore, nor is it the case in the shires. The emphasis has been on saving all the timber, leaving it on the ground, so you cannot plough a firebreak.

I refer to the question of the standardisation of couplings. I personally brought this matter up 25 years ago, through the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association. In turn, it went to ARFAC, the national body. I would suggest that you could have some effect here on the standardisation of couplings, because ARFAC is a national body not a state body. At the same time, a lot of shires and CFA groups have standardised camlock couplings so that you can get water out of milk tankers or water tankers. That was not the case in the Indigo Valley area; however, you can overcome that if you are trained and you know how to do it.

CHAIR—Perhaps you could finalise, Mr McDonald.

Mr McDonald—Regarding minimum skills, there are a lot of farmers and grain growers out there who successfully burn under the permit system thousands of acres each year during the summer fire danger period. These people's skills, because they already know how to handle fires, should be recognised. They are our best experienced firefighters. In summary, I would stress, if you have not already read them, read Judge Stretton's report and the Barber report. If the recommendations of those reports had been implemented, we would not all be sitting here today. Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr McDonald. The committee welcomes Ms Mary McDonald.

Ms M. McDonald—I am a member of the Nillumbik Ratepayers Association. Thank you for letting me speak today. I am here to try and avoid the disaster that happened up here. Nillumbik is on the urban fringe and is part of the metropolitan area of Melbourne. It houses most of its 60,000 residents in the southern urban end which includes Eltham and Diamond Creek. Sixty-seven per cent of the shire is covered by an environmental significance overlay, which requires a permit for any activity. Cloven-footed animals are banned in many areas. Local law 5(20)(f) prohibits clearing, mowing native grasses or clearing deadwood or sticks from nature strips, roadsides and the 850 hectares of council reserves, most of which have not been touched for over 30 years and ground fuels are at dangerous levels. This is people habitat. Landowners are prosecuted vigorously for any infringement.

Proposed amendment C12, which covers neighbourhood character, requires, for example, that five to six locally indigenous fire-dependent trees per quarter-acre block must be planted to form a canopy over the houses. In bush and semibush, the requirement is one substantial tree per 50 to 100 square metres. The environment officer accompanies the fire officer on inspections. We are

surrounded by state and national parks that are also not maintained. Added to this, there are many unmade, windy, narrow, dead-end roads which are tree covered. The CFA, very sensibly, will not enter these areas. The ratepayers association has recently obtained two reports from suitably qualified experts. David Packham in his report commented that Nillumbik is truly living on borrowed time. The other report—and I would like to table both of them—is from Rod Incoll, a former executive of the CFA.

The drought has ensured that water is scarce. The dams are still very low. We are moving to stage 2 water restrictions, keeping in mind that most of the shire is urban and is on town water. I saw what happened in Canberra, as I went to visit someone there. Looking at Canberra, I saw fairly clear hills. Canberra proudly claims to have planted over one million trees since 1927. Nillumbik would easily exceed Canberra for tree cover. All you can see when you look over Nillumbik is trees. I fear Canberra will look like a campfire compared to Nillumbik unless we stop the insanity in our local planning.

We want to save our lives and property, but after years of campaigning I am becoming quite disheartened. Our municipal fire prevention plan lists Heidelberg-King Lake Road as a major firebreak road, yet this is a significant roadside area. It is a disaster waiting to happen. Mr Packham on his inspection said that when a fire starts a controller will look at a map and say to the CFA, 'It's okay. Go in,' and they will be incinerated. Due to the necessity of removing a tree from the roadside, a fire truck on this road has already had to reverse 12 kilometres down the mountain because there was no turnaround.

I will conclude there because I know time is short. Thank you for allowing me to speak. I would really like to table those two reports. They are at the printer and have only just been completed, so I will send them.

CHAIR—We will accept those reports as exhibits.

Mrs Clarkson—I am a councillor with the Nillumbik Shire Council. I am here to point out my opinions and experiences, not the views of the council. Yesterday I attended an education session specifically on the behaviour of fire with my fellow councillors and our senior managers of environment, planning and infrastructure. I was gobsmacked and annoyed when, as a group, we were advised by a CFA officer that wood does not burn. The statement was repeated with the regional CFA manager present and was not contradicted. We are aware that the fine fuels are the worst threat, but trees do burn and so do people. I do not think St Joan of Arc would agree with that statement. A fellow councillor pressed the issue and suggested that, if wood did not burn, the contents—eucalyptus oil—definitely did burn. In the end we received agreement.

It was pointed out how important fuel reduction measures and large firebreaks are. The topography can also add to the speed and the spread of fire. We were also advised that using the term 'explode' to describing fire was not accurate and that 'volatility' should be used to describe it. My understanding was that we were being given this advice so that people's fears would not shock the public. I believe the TAC use shock tactics all the time because they work.

I have given a short written submission to this national inquiry. Nillumbik Shire Council is on the urban fringe of Melbourne. It has recently been legislated as a 'green wedge'; the lungs of Melbourne. My concern is the continued requirement to plant trees indigenous to the shire in and

around urban living. Together with the Californian hills, this area is recognised by the CFA as one of the most extreme bushfire prone areas in the world. We were lucky this year but have had loss of life, property and stock in years gone by. Over the last 20 years the population has grown and with the new homes, owners are required to plant locally indigenous, fire-dependent trees. This is downtown suburbia. We have all witnessed what happened in Canberra and the north-east of Melbourne. Regularly I have witnessed a culture where trees, flora, fauna and visual appearances have a higher priority than human safety. I believe planning where families are going to be living should allow them to plant to provide for their own family's safety. Unfortunately, only I and one other councillor have an agricultural background in our shire.

At the time of the fires in the north-east, one of my fellow councillors advised me that what had happened in the north-east and in Canberra could never happen in Nillumbik—and he is actually in the CFA. I also learnt yesterday that the fire's intensity increases from 3 to 5 p.m. and continues through to 11 p.m.—5 p.m. is not knock off time. I also learnt that commonsense is not so common. I believe Nillumbik is not just sitting on a time bomb, but the bomb is ticking.

The CFA on the ground have my full support. My husband is a CFA volunteer and he has committed a lot of time up here volunteering. It is the direction from the top that I am concerned about. I believe alarm bells are ringing loud and clear from Nillumbik. I only hope that they do not fall on deaf ears. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. In closing, I pray that history does not repeat itself. Fire is unpredictable, and we should be prepared.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your thoughts. I welcome Sue Jack to the table. Please make an opening statement.

Ms Jack—We have a horticultural mixed farming business in the Indigo Valley. We have five kilometres of what is now national park. Half of that area is a reference area where you are not even supposed to take a truck if there is a fire. No one goes in there; there is no access to it. This is of considerable concern to us. The fire came within a kilometre and a half of us. We had black leaves and burning bark. The Hume region came to our rescue, which was fantastic. The private units in the area were magnificent and the CFA was excellent.

What I would like to see come out of this area relates to human safety. I think human safety is very important. I do not know whether you are aware of the Watchbox Road, which funnels straight down into the forest. It would have actually spread the fire. There is no area there where people can turn. It was a disaster waiting to happen, and it did happen. I would like to see these committees that I hear are looking at these things to at least include people who are actually involved. If there is a committee looking into the management of the national park, I think people who back onto or adjoin a national park should have some say. If there is a roadside management plan being formed, the people on that roadside should have a say. It has got to be about people as well as about leaving all the wood there for the little critters to live under. We have seen what happened this time.

I would like to see a clearance boundary between the national park and us. I would like to be able to clear the vegetation on my side of the area without being forced to plant X amount of trees, give up some of my farm or put a covenant on the land. It was very isolating sitting there, waiting for the fire to come, with this great red ball hurling at us. We were fortunate. We had a

spot fire and the wind changed, probably 15 minutes before it hit our place. We were sitting there with big smiles on our faces, the wind changed and then we saw it race down the hill and wipe out all our neighbours. It brought us back to earth pretty quickly. We were very lucky.

I want to see outcomes from this inquiry. What happened has happened. I spoke to someone from Parks Victoria just yesterday. I think it is a good time to do so because they are willing to listen to your concerns. I said, 'Where were the helicopters?' He said, 'They came, they had a look and they went away.' We have heard conflicting views today on what actually happened. I know they were not there. We wanted them and they were not there. If it could have been put out in an early instance, there would not have been such devastation. I see the farmers that were burnt out battling to get their fences up. If I were the shire CEO, the mayor or whatever I would be saying, 'Get in there, plough their fence lines and clear their fence lines. Don't stand around waiting for people to agree, help these people.' There is none of that happening. I do not see it happening. If it is, I would like to know where it is happening.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your thoughts. I now welcome Mr Carver to the table. Please give your three-minute statement.

Mr Carver—I am a dairy farmer from Tallangatta Valley. I was involved in these fires from the first day. I did 33 days straight firefighting, in all sorts of capacities. We would milk our cows in the morning and be on the fire scene by about nine o'clock. I would probably stay there until dark or after dark each day. One thing I would like to bring up in this inquiry today is the fact that on three occasions I witnessed DNRE fire patrol groups—or strike teams, whatever you want to call them—up and leave the fire when it was probably at its worst. On the first occasion they were working on a bulldozed fire break about 400 to 500 metres back into crown land from private property. At about half past five or six o'clock they lit a new section of back-burn, probably 200 metres, and then they packed up and went home. If it were not for the local farmer being up there with them and seeing what happened, the fire would have probably burnt him out. The farmer and a friend of his came around to where I was working, about seven kilometres away on the other end of the same fire, and asked us if we could give them a couple of tankers to go around and put this fire out. We sent the two tankers and the Tallangatta group officers sent more tankers in from as far away as Mitta Mitta to try to hold the fire. They eventually got a private bulldozer to put a break around his boundary and they back-burnt off that and saved it. I believe there were three crews involved in that incident.

Three days later, the same thing happened again. Three or four crews had been working on a back-burn on a ridge top in the Rogers Creek area all day. It was a very difficult back-burn; they could not light big areas because it was too hot. They had about 200 metres to go to complete this burn, and the fire roared up the hill at them from where I was working with another CFA crew down in the gully. The fire jumped the break at the top of the hill and got on the wrong side of the break. Had it been let go, it would have threatened another five farms the following day when the westerly wind got into it. I happened to leave the gully I was working in and I rode a motorbike out into clear country. I cannot remember why I went out—but, when I did, down the hill and out of the bush came four DNRE vehicles. I asked them, 'Where are you fellows going?' and they said, 'We are knocking off; we are going home.' This fire was out of control; it had jumped the break they had been working on all day. I talked them into going back in. I said to them, 'You have worked on it all day. We have battled it all day; how about going back and giving it another shot with the CFA tankers.' We sent three CFA tankers in. The three DNRE

crews turned around and went back in at my request and worked on that fire into the late hours—I do not know what time they left, because I went home, but I imagine it would have been 10 o'clock that night before they got it under control. They did a mighty job, and they put it out.

On the third incident, we had five strike team tankers working on a back-burn where we were trying to control the Mitta Mitta-Dartmouth fire, which was threatening our valley from the opposite side. This was in week four. We had worked all day on a three-kilometre back-burn. At about six or seven o'clock we were relieved by five CFA tankers, crewed by South Australian crews under the control of DNRE—we had no control over them; they seemed to be very difficult to get hold of. We spent three days trying to get these crews to help us do a back-burn. They were under the control of the ICC or DNRE—we do not know who—and we could not have any access to them. They were very difficult to do anything with: we could not talk to them and they would not listen to us—we were just the local farmers. Anyway, we all went home to tea. These five tankers were put onto this three-kilometre back-burn. We were told when we left that they would not be there until about half past ten at night. We came back at a quarter to nine; the fire was hot and there was nobody on that three-kilometre stretch of fire. That is really all I wanted to say.

CHAIR—I welcome Monty Skehan to the table. Please proceed with your opening statement.

Mr Skehan—I am presently homeless and unemployed. I have provided a submission to the committee. My property is situated inside the Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park, about five kilometres north-east of Mount Pilot in the Indigo Valley. It was totally obliterated by the Eldorado complex fire on 21 January this year. I lost my home, sheds, tools, machinery and about 12 kilometres of fencing; therefore, my business and income. Fortunately, my cattle were away on agistment, as I was trying to conserve my pastures to get through the drought. They consequently had to be sold into a depressed market. The fire itself was a disaster, but the aftermath has been horrendous. To this day I have not received any cooperation from the DSE or DPI concerning the clearing of my boundaries where my fences once stood. As my area is not a designated wild dog area there is no fencing assistance available. When the new national park was gazetted, I contacted the local ranger regarding pest plant and animal control. I was told that nothing had changed, then in the next breath I was told I could no longer continue this work outside my boundary, which I had been doing for six years with their blessing and chemicals.

At a later meeting with two rangers at my property it was revealed that there was no strategic management plan for the new park and that everyone would be given an opportunity to have some input in the next couple of years. I asked about an interim management plan on a 100-metre strip around my boundaries and I was laughed at. I inquired about clearing the trees overhanging my fences, and I was told that I would have to pay a royalty. But when they fell down naturally, damaging my fences, they became my responsibility.

I would like to reiterate what Bob Richardson said this morning about the present state of the forests. In my area pre settlement, there were about 20 to 30 trees per hectare. They were mainly large trees or habitat trees. Now there are hundreds, if not thousands, of trees per hectare and the forest is choking itself to death. It has become a haven for pest plants and animals, not a habitat for native and endangered species.

Buffer zones are definitely needed between parks and private land. On my three-kilometre boundary I would estimate that, on average, I have to clear up to 20 to 30 trees, or large limbs, each year so that I could repair my fence that was damaged when the trees fell. All the boundary trees lean over the fence at a 30-degree or greater angle as they seek the sun through the overcrowded forest. I would suggest that there should be a 20-metre to 30-metre cleared break to protect fencing and property and to allow access, then thinning for a further hundred metres with firewood salvaging of fallen timber for a further 250 metres into the forest area.

Finally, I would like to add that, at a meeting with a manager of community safety from the CFA, it was confirmed to me that all the fires in the Beechworth area were deliberately lit—a fact that the Bracks state government refuses to acknowledge. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Skehan. I welcome Mr Bob Bennett to the table. Please proceed with your statement.

Mr Bennett—I am a CFA volunteer, but I am also group communications officer for the Pilot group, which is based in the area where the Eldorado and Stanley fires happened. Because I am involved with communications I am involved with the management team, and it is that which I wish to speak about today.

We were called in very early on when the Eldorado fire started, and I felt we were managing quite well because we were all locals—we had local knowledge—and we knew fire behaviour. Not long after that, the team arrived from outside—mostly from Melbourne—and took over completely. We were elbowed aside and not consulted from there on; they were going to run the fire their way. All they were interested in was getting their paperwork up to date rather than deploying strike teams which began arriving. They had those strike teams sitting around and doing nothing while they fiddled around with their paperwork.

About two months before the fire season, the CFA sent me down to Halls Gap for a combined seminar with DSE on communications and fire management. I came back very excited about those three days because I was given to understand that cooperation between DSE, CFA and fire management would run by the book. If it is run by the book it works very well. However, two months later we were in this fire situation, and I became involved from day one. I was sourcing strike teams to go up to the Corryong area almost every day. When those strike teams came back I got feedback from them, and I can confirm that a lot of the comments you have heard today from other CFA volunteers are absolutely correct and I have no doubt about the others.

The mismanagement up there was the same as the mismanagement right across the whole fire ground. I spent some time in the Buffalo area at Myrtleford on communications there, and exactly the same thing happened. Outsiders came in and took over. They elbowed the locals aside, took no account of their opinions or local knowledge and went their own merry way. Not long after that, the fires happened in my own backyard—namely the Stanley and Eldorado fires—and basically the same thing happened there. We got things up and running but were elbowed aside.

One thing I should comment on is the use of aircraft. I do not know about the first chopper that could have been sent from the Warby Ranges, but I know that, once the Eldorado fire was up and running very well, two choppers were sent in there. They dropped a couple of loads of

water and disappeared because they had absolutely no effect on the fire. It was too late to use them.

It came to pass that we were basically being ordered around as to what to do with our Eldorado and Stanley fires, and I said, 'Enough's enough; I'm going to go back to my own place'—I had better communications equipment there than they had in Beechworth—and operate on the channels that I know will work.' Basically I worked from there for the duration of those fires. I did not lose communication with any of the people I was working with, whereas elsewhere in that area, where the ICC was working, they lost communications or did not have them in the first place. I put my own communications plan together, and it worked. I was asked by the ICC in Beechworth why I was not using theirs and I said that it did not work. They said that they would send out a new one but by the time it arrived it was three days old and it was not appropriate for the fire at that time.

Overall, the reasons all the fires did not go a lot further was because of the heroic efforts of the volunteers and not because of the management teams—the ICCs. I am sorry to say that. Both the NRE and the CFA are very culpable for what happened there and I would like something to happen with regard to that. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your information. We will now hear from Ms Stewart.

Ms Stewart—Our organisation has over 100 tourism operators, many of which are based in north-east Victoria. We are an independent group. I was involved in setting up the organisation six years ago. We survive on member subscriptions, sponsorship and the occasional grant.

When the bushfires started in early January, a lot of our accommodation providers had all their accommodation cancelled. And later, when we had the Beechworth fires on 21 January, I saw the situation worsen. Our organisation did a survey of our members and a lot of members responded. We asked them how much money they had lost and how much they had received the year before. If they did not respond to the survey we gave them the opportunity to come to a public meeting on 25 February, and 60 people attended. We are very involved in providing cost-effective marketing to our operators because state government campaigns are extremely expensive. An ad the size of a business card in Tourism Victoria magazines costs about \$600. We have had an extensive coach campaign operating for a year: 15 one-day tours from motels in Albury-Wodonga out to the shires that were affected by the fires—Alpine, Indigo and Towong.

We have been very disappointed by the response from Tourism Victoria. There has been a lack of leadership and there was not one public meeting held for the industry. Everyone on the bushfire recovery team they put together was appointed; there was no opportunity for industry operators to be part of that committee. I sent them an email on 7 March asking what was happening. It took them until 26 March to send me a response which really said nothing. We question their strategy about the use of the \$1.9 million. We would have liked the industry to have had the opportunity to speak at public meetings and say how they would have liked that \$2 million dispensed. I found it quite inappropriate that in the *Border Mail* two months ago they were encouraging everyone to go to Melbourne and discover Melbourne while we were here trying to keep the industry alive, keep people in the area, and encourage people to come back and visit local tourism businesses. There were also ads doing the same thing.

We were very pleased with what Minister Hockey put together in this cash grant for small business and we encouraged our people to apply. It was a very good application form—an easy one for stressed tourism operators to complete—and I am pleased to say that everyone that I know who put in for that cash grant received it. I think it gave people a boost of personal confidence to get a cheque in the mail to help them with some of the losses that they experienced during the bushfire. It is a fair and equitable way to give people the cash and, because it is Commonwealth money, it is cross-border. I would like to know how Tourism New South Wales responded to the bushfires and the drought situation, particularly in the southern Riverina where we have a lot of operators.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your input. We will now hear from Ms Waldron.

Ms Waldron—I am a land-holder from the Beechworth area. I would like to speak about protection of assets. I own a grazing property, five kilometres from Beechworth, which has national park on three sides. There is no house on the property. It was 500 metres from the edge of the Eldorado fire. John Costello from the Indigo Shire spoke of the strategic fire planning to protect assets—that is, the town of Beechworth. To do this, containment lines were put through private land which was to be sacrificed to save the town. The fire was to be left to burn in the bush and action taken only to protect houses.

My property at the time the Eldorado fire started was being used as a safe haven for over 30 horses from the Mount Buffalo Chalet and Freeburgh Trail Rides. The horses are valuable business assets. Within one hour of the fire starting I told police and fire crews that the horses were there and was told that only dwellings would be protected. A DSE ranger came onto the property at my request and told me to get the horses out as soon as possible as no crews could be allocated to protect them. This left me and three children on horseback to drive the horses out as everyone else was fighting fires. Consequently, if the fire had come we would have saved ourselves and lost the horses. Decisions were made in an office regarding how to protect the town. They did not care what assets were on properties—that is, fences, grass, cattle and horses—which are people's livelihood. These were not considered.

In the Indigo Shire no fires were started by lightning and it was a clear day with a hot wind. Neighbours who did get burnt out, along with the entire Woolshed Valley, tell me that over 20 years ago they were stopped from grazing cattle along Reedy Creek to Eldorado. The fuel build-up since then created the most intense fire. I still have a huge area of unburnt country with a heavy fuel load on my boundary of several kilometres which I am not allowed to graze and on which many of the fire trails have been blocked off with logs and branches.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that input. We will now hear from Mrs Carol McDonald.

Mrs C. McDonald—I live in Woolshed Road, Beechworth. We are among the few people who did not have a fire tender. We stood for five hours, my husband and I, side by side, with nobody to help us. When the fire started we came home and we did all the right things. The helicopter came in and dumped water and did all the right things and we thought, yes, it was going to be wonderful. All the tenders came in and by four o'clock the fire chief from Eldorado came to see us and asked, 'Are you going or staying?' We said we were staying. He said, 'I am sorry, I have no tender for you,' and he left us there to burn.

I really have no recollection of how long it took—about five hours or so. It is an area that is easy to defend if you have got people but we did not have people to run from one side of the house to the other, backwards and forwards. It was just hopeless. By about three o'clock in the morning we went down the road to see how our neighbour was going, and they had a fire tanker. They had three! They said, 'Your house is still standing? We thought you had burnt to the ground four hours ago,' and they just left us there. For some reason or another they could not sort out the resources. Some people in the valley had seven tenders; most of them had at least two; some had three. I can appreciate where they put the main tenders because they back right onto the national park, but the fire hit us and I have never seen anything like it. I can remember standing on the roof of the house at about 7.30 p.m. and we were completely surrounded by a wall of flame. And this was a grassfire! The ash on the ground the next morning was up over my ankles and the grass has still not grown back. I had never seen anything like it, and people just left us for dead. We were offered no assistance. The only people who came near us were the VFF and they asked us what we had lost. We live on 8½ acres—we are only little people. I have got two cows. It is the same problem with two cows as with 200 cows. I still have no grass, no water and no fences. Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Thank you for sharing that experience with us. Do any of my colleagues have questions?

Mr ORGAN—Mr Bennett, have you made a submission as such to the committee?

Mr Bennett—No, I have not. I have put all my thoughts in the form of a submission to the CFA. I have requested some information on the outcomes of that and I am still waiting.

Mr ORGAN—I was wondering if you could forward some of that information on to this committee—

Mr Bennett—Yes, I could do that.

Mr ORGAN—because I think the area of communications is something that we are really interested in.

Mr Bennett—Sure, will do.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mary McDonald, I am interested to know what changes need to be made in your shire. You did not go into that area.

Ms M. McDonald—The reports that I plan to present have recommendations with them. But it is really local government—it is out of control in Nillumbik anyway. We call it Nazi Nillumbik because it is so frightening. They prosecute people and people are losing their properties. If they remove trees, it is \$10,000 a tree. One lady was prosecuted in the VCAT and it cost her \$40,000. She removed five pine trees and burgen, which under the planning scheme is a native tea-tree that is exempt. You are allowed to remove it. It is highly flammable. She removed it and was prosecuted. She lost, unfortunately, because she has an environmental significance overlay on her property and she required a permit to do it. She barely kept her property. She is working two jobs and she lost her marriage.

Another man put in a permit for a dam. He got the permit for the dam and removed the 10 trees that were on the site nominated and he was charged \$10,000 a tree. They said, 'You should have got a permit to remove the trees.' That is what we are up against.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So you have canvassed these things in the two reports and you have made recommendations there specifically with regard to your shire?

Ms M. McDonald—We haven't, but David Packham has made recommendations in his report. I would put in a submission to this inquiry, but I do not know that the ratepayers association did. Is it too late for them to add one?

CHAIR—No. We will still accept that.

Ms M. McDonald—Okay. Perhaps they can put it in with the report.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I would be interested to receive that.

CHAIR—That would be good.

Ms M. McDonald—Thank you very much. Up here is sparsely populated, and I feel for these people. In Nillumbik there are 60,000 residents and a lot of them are totally unaware of the danger they are in as they have moved from the city. The CFA have roadside meetings and say, 'Stay and fight to save your property,' but they do not understand that the tap will not turn on to gush water out of their plastic hose. They need a pump and a reserve system.

CHAIR—Mr Titterington, were the maps that you referred to that were from 1977 part of the 1:100,000 series?

Mr Titterington—1:25,000, which is by National Mapping from memory. I have tried to find the latest updates of any source. I have been to the shire for a grant to see if we could use a laptop and actually do our own, but that is a desperate move. Someone needs to supply them.

CHAIR—It is an issue that has come up previously, and I just wanted to clarify that because it would be useful later on for us. Thank you all very much for that additional input. It was extremely useful and we really appreciate the personal experiences that you have been able to provide to the committee as well.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 5.50 p.m.