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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

FRIDAY, 25 JULY 2003

WODONGA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES
Friday, 25 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 9.01 a.m.

ADDINSALL, Mr Bruce William, Representative, Alpine Conservation and Access Group

HICKS, Mr Jack, Representative, Alpine Conservation and Access Group

MAPLEY, Mr Barry John, Fire Captain, Ovens Eurobin CFA

ROBERTS, Mr Anthony John, Representative, Alpine Conservation and Access Group

ROBINSON, Mr Neville, Committee Member, Alpine Conservation and Access Group

CHAIR—Ladies and gentlemen, I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the eighth one of this inquiry following the first day hearing here in Wodonga yesterday. Next week the committee will also be holding hearings in Omeo, Buchan, Ballarat and Hobart. A visit to Western Australia will then bring the main part of public evidence gathering to a conclusion. First up this morning I call the representatives of the Alpine Access and Conservation Group. Would you please each state the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Robinson—I am a retired fire officer from the Ovens Valley who has 30 years experience in fire prevention and fire control.

Mr Hicks—I am Vice-president and Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria representative.

Mr Roberts—I am President of the Mount Beauty and District Chamber of Commerce.

Mr Addinsall—I am a member of ACAG committee and am also representing the Victorian Association of Forest Industries on that committee.

CHAIR—Welcome this morning. 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 parliament. We have your submission, which we thank you for. That submission has been authorised for publication and forms part of the evidence that the committee will use. Would you like to start with a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mr Roberts—Initially, I would like to give a little bit of background as to the formation of the group. ACAG—the Alpine Conservation Access Group—grew directly out of the concern over the management of the 2003 bushfires and indirectly out of the longstanding concern over the general management of our public lands. The group is made up of individuals from the Kiewa and Ovens Valleys representing a wide range of interests and organisations, including members from the Victorian Farmers Federation, the Country Fire Authority, Mount Beauty and District Chamber of Commerce, the Mountain Cattlemens Association, Victorian Association of Forest

Industries, public lands council, Bush Users Group, Timber Communities Australia and Australian Deer Association. I have a list of the membership with me today to leave with you.

As a result of the dissatisfaction expressed by the public during the fires in January and February of this year, the Alpine shire called a public meeting. They have made a detailed separate submission. ACAG was formed out of that meeting. We represent a wide variety of organisations and therefore our objectives are broad, but we have a mission statement which I would like to read. Again, I have a copy that I can leave with you. Our mission statement is as follows:

1. To support the sustainable management of public land.
2. To preserve the traditional, cultural, precedential and existing rights of all people to recreational and commercial use of public land throughout Victoria.
3. To ensure an effective fire prevention policy to minimize bushfire risk (ie. fuel reduction burning, grazing, and logging.)
4. To maintain and promote access for management, commercial, public and recreational use in national parks and public land.
5. To promote effective control methods of feral pests, plants and animals in national parks and public land.
6. To promote local input into initial fire control and suppression, and the rehabilitation of fire control lines.
7. To promote the inclusion of local input into future national park and public land management plans.
8. To promote commercial and recreational tourism.

Personally, my involvement with ACAG is as a representative of the Mount Beauty and District Chamber of Commerce and hence my major input is related to business and specifically to tourism. I would like to very quickly read from the submission that we made. Again, this highlights our concerns over tourism. It states:

Prior to the bushfires of January and February this year our community had grave concerns about the National Parks in the North east of Victoria. Our two major concerns are the *very limited access that is allowed to our National Parks* (in particular the Alpine National Park) and the *very limited management capacity* of local Parks staff.

We believe these factors are caused by firstly *under funding* and secondly the “lock up the parks” mentality that has developed in recent years.

The poor management of the Parks has resulted in them being *infected by exotic flora and fauna*. Another result of poor funding, hence lack of maintenance, has been the *build up of debris (due to lack of regular fuel reduction burns) on the forest floor* that resulted in the uncontrolled spread of the recent fires.

Our region is heavily dependent on tourism and the very restricted access our visitors are allowed to the Park does not help us promote the major tourism attraction of the North East—the Alpine National Park. We all acknowledge that any access has to be carefully controlled and monitored to ensure the sustainability of the Parks.

Probably the most concerning aspect of this whole issue is the way that *Parks management shows no willingness* to listen to the views and concerns of the general public. There are families that have lived in our region for five generations who have seen the deterioration of our great Parks and volunteered their experience and advice only to be totally ignored.

The current management practices exercised in our parks need to be totally reviewed.

CHAIR—Has anybody else got anything they want to raise at this point? Are there any particular matters that you want to highlight before we go to questions? I should have said that we have had provided to us, just today, addendums to your submission, which comprise a number of letters, press releases, articles, copies of photographs and other things, so the committee also has that information. Mr Hicks, you are representing some of the grazing people as well: is that right?

Mr Hicks—That is correct.

CHAIR—I do not know whether you have seen it but in the submission by the CSIRO, and in evidence to the committee, they commented that they did not believe that grazing would necessarily contribute to the reduction of fuel load, mainly because where grazing is generally carried out it is on wetter land that would not support intense fires. Have you got any comments that you would like to make on that assertion by the CSIRO?

Mr Hicks—Like all scientific work, it is ongoing, and to have a straight conclusion from that is very unlikely. What I can tell you is that cattle grazing definitely does reduce the fuel load, as proved on the Bogong High Plains. There is no way we can have cattle graze all the bush, so we can forget about that, but wherever the cattle did graze this summer—back when the fires came out of the scrub—the fires did not burn hot. The animals, trees and everything are still alive on the grazed area of the Bogong High Plains; whereas where grazing had been withdrawn it is burnt black. That is where the erosion is occurring right now. The bog communities and areas where the cattle grazed did burn, but it was a cold burn and it did not destroy the vegetation. It has grown back again already, before the snow came. So it does have a significant effect from grazing. I believe the CSIRO will go back now and probably include this in their studies on from here. The fact is that CSIRO did not do studies straight after 1939. There has not been a wildfire in a grazed area of the Bogong High Plains since then, so I think they are going to learn a lot from the grazing of the alpine area.

CHAIR—Are you aware of any specific research that they have done previously in those regions on the effect of grazing with respect to fire?

Mr Hicks—Yes, I am, and I have been involved by going and talking to these people who have been doing the research. The best I can get out of a number of those people who have been doing the research is that the cattle have got to go. They went there as botanists and whatever, and the mentality they have they went there with. I believe that they are that entrenched in their agenda that they cannot see the green past the black, so to speak.

CHAIR—Mr Barry Mapley has joined us. Mr Mapley, is there anything you would like to tell the committee about the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Mapley—I am captain of the Ovens Eurobin fire brigade. I am sort of out of my depth here with these fellows, but their fire was my fire. I have had 28 years as first lieutenant and six years as captain in my area. I put a submission into the inquiry but I did not get an invitation to appear yesterday with our other captains. I have been invited to go to Benambra, Buchan and Omeo, but there is too much snow up there for next week, so I would like to say my piece here this morning, if that is all right.

CHAIR—Sure. We will come back to you. Could I ask Tony Roberts, from a tourism point of view: where do you think the region is at now in recovery from the effects of the fires?

Mr Roberts—Recovery is progressing quite well. As a business person and a tourism operator in the area, my concern is the access to the park. Management is one concern, but even prior to the fires—in fact, since the fires, probably—access has improved a little bit, which I will touch on in a minute. Our concern is that we live in what we regard as a very beautiful valley and we are trying to attract tourists to come to that area. One of the greatest resources we have is the Alpine National Park, yet we are very restricted in our ability to provide tourists access to that area. We have made approaches to Parks on this, and generally we find their response has not been very encouraging. I would have to say, though, that since the fire there is a noticeable improvement: they are now listening, and I would like to think that that will continue and improve, because there have been several benefits from the fires. One benefit is that tracks in the park had been overgrown and lost, and now they are obvious because the fires have been through. So there are a lot of opportunities now to develop tracks to waterfalls, for example, and to various features within the park that did not present themselves before.

If we can form partnerships between the business community, the community in general and Parks to develop access to these areas, that will be terrific. That is really our concern. Yes, the recovery from the fires is on track, but our interest in the ACAG group is access to the park, and that is really something that was not a result of the fires; it was around long before the fires. So that is our major concern.

Mr HAWKER—Mr Robinson, you said that you had been a lifetime forester; is that right?

Mr Robinson—Yes.

Mr HAWKER—Could you quickly give us your assessment of the state of the parks today compared to when you first started as a forester?

Mr Robinson—As I said, I am from over in the Ovens Valley and I am most familiar with what happened on Mount Buffalo. When the fires first started there, I thought there was no problem whatsoever, because I had seen the situation three or four times on Mount Buffalo and on the surrounding alpine area with lightning strikes. As I have pointed out in my submission, there were 54 lightning strikes in 1978 between Mansfield and Corryong, which were controlled and put out by the old Forest Commission, sawmiller crews and the CFA.

It became very apparent after the seventh day as the weather changed—after the fire had been on the western side of Mount Buffalo for seven days—that they still had not controlled those two lightning strikes and that the fire had been growing in size. The weather blew in and blew the fire onto the eastern side. Being a resident of Porepunkah, I had a front seat view of what was

happening. That is when I first became concerned and became involved with the Porepunkah Fire Brigade, which I am a member of.

I was very concerned that the traditional ways of putting a fire out were completely ignored. I will run through the traditional way just so you understand. I was Operations Area Supervisor for Bright for seven years and it was my responsibility to be controller of a fire in a small situation. When this fire on Buffalo broke out, I was amazed that there was no sort of system working. The rules have changed somewhere in the last 10 years—from the time I retired. Prior to 10 years ago, when you had a multiple fire situation which involved the then DRNE and the CFA, the group officer would come into the office alongside me or the district forester—whoever was there—and take control of all the strike forces and the tankers on the CFA side. The DRNE would manage their plant, equipment and men and crew on their side. The group officer would then delegate authority down the line to his captains, who were out on the fire line. From there he would get information back from them and they would act on it immediately as to steps to control certain fires or areas.

I was astounded at what happened this year. As I said, the rules have changed. Tankers were sitting out on the bitumen. There were 25 tankers in the Buckland's, sitting on the bitumen watching the fire grow. Spot fires were not attacked aggressively. There was no night-time attack on fires when night-time is the only time that you can control big fires. This situation went on. When I became involved with the CFA I had a responsibility for a couple of nights in the Buckland and Ovens Valley. To my amazement, the strike force teams would not take any orders from anybody on the line. I could not understand it. I was dumbstruck. It turned out to be, as you all heard yesterday, that the fires were being controlled from 30 or 40 kilometres away—sometimes further—and those strike force teams and the DRNE teams would not take orders from anybody on the line.

I have seen farmers battling to control a fire while there were five tankers 100 metres away with the crews sitting and watching them. The farmers were running out of water from their pig tanks and small units, and when they asked for help the reply was, 'No. We can't go in there. It's too hot.' And 'too hot' these days means flames over a metre high, which is ridiculous. I could not understand it but that was the situation, and it was repeated time and time again.

When that fire jumped onto the east side of Mount Buffalo, it was an easy proposition to control. There is a spur known as Goldie Spur to the southern end of Mount Buffalo where an SEC high tension line runs over the top. On either side of that spur there are favourable spurs for a dozer line firebreak to be put down for fuel reduction burning. Local foresters with years of experience in the north-east and CFA group captains and captains of fire brigades, who have had multiple experiences with fires that come over and around Mount Buffalo, pleaded with the incident control centre to do back-burning.

If I may go back a bit, at the start of these fires when the local DSE bloke and the local group officers and captains were saddled with the responsibility of putting fires out, that happened. They put out many of these lightning strikes. But then, as always happens—and I am not saying it should not happen; it should happen—as the teams roll in and everything gets more intense, you upgrade from level 1 to level 2 and then to the level 3. Everybody from the Ovens Valley to Corryong will tell you that from the time level 1 was overtaken by level 2, they were completely discarded. Those blokes with the local knowledge were put out on the fire line with crews.

With level 3 the situation became a damned sight worse. Whereas you wanted equipment and tankers to be lined up on a fire line, the situation was that you would call the centre and three and four hours would go past, and the fire had gone. It is the worse thing that can happen on a fire line. If people have got support and know everybody is behind them, they have a go. But if they feel deserted, I tell you what, it is hard on morale. That is what happened. I can tell you now that the Mount Buffalo fire and the damage caused by it down in the tea trees and the ash regrowth should never have happened. There is no way it should have happened.

On a Friday night when the fires jumped onto the eastern side, they acted and put the dozer down the spurs that I referred to a while ago. On a Saturday they put these fire trails down. We thought: 'Oh beaut, they'll back-burn off them.' There was no action taken. The weather calmed down, the days were cool, and there was no wind of a night-time. In fact, there was a southerly drift in the air, as you get in those valleys when the cool air replaces the hot. You get it from the higher country, which brings it in from the south. This was all in our favour. Three days and three nights went past and these people sat on their hands. They ignored us. They had a holier than thou attitude that they knew the lot. I am still stuck for words to explain the situation.

One thing I would like to emphasise to you is that, if the present situation is not changed and we get fires again in 10 or 15 years—and we will get them; it happens; in my 30 years on the job, we have got them every 15 and 20 years—a hell a lot of people will lose their lives through this system. The only thing that saved Porepunkah and Bright were the local farmers and CFA crews. They were the only ones who saved it, because the strike force teams were given orders not to go into areas.

I have nothing against them. All those on the fire front deserve medals, but I tell you what: that does not apply to whoever was in the control centres. What astounds me more is that since the Linton episode, which brought in all this caution about fire edges, the superiors in DNRE and CFA have brought in rules that stop people from putting out fires. That is exactly what has happened.

CHAIR—We will have to stop there. There are a lot of questions that people want to ask.

Mr Robinson—Sorry: I get warmed up on this subject.

CHAIR—Yes, understandably, and we thank you for relating your first-hand experience. That was very good.

Mr SCHULTZ—I want to ask a few questions with regard to comments about the poor management of the parks and access. Can anybody expand on the comments about the poor management of the parks? What do you mean by poor management of the parks?

Mr Roberts—I can touch briefly on that. The build-up of fire material is a major factor, and the CFA guys can talk with more authority on that. The spread of feral animals and plants in the park is also a major concern. In our area blackberries are running rife in all the valleys. I understand that the local guys are aware of it and they do their best, but they are very sadly underresourced. To fix the issue of feral plants and animals, there really just needs to be an injection of cash. Underresourcing is a major problem for the parks. They would be the two issues that I would raise.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you very much. Can I just ask somebody to give some insight into the denial of access. As a result of that, what type of tourism activity has been banned and what reasons have been given—by, I presume, the National Parks people—for those bans?

Mr Roberts—I will tackle that one as well. We are constantly talking with them about trying to open walking tracks into the park. I understand that since the fires there is obviously a safety issue—and it is insurance related—so a very large majority of the tracks are currently closed, but Parks are working to get them opened. We have a commitment from them that by spring all of the existing previously available tracks will be open. We are hoping that they will be able to achieve that. But those tracks are fairly limited. There are cattlemen's huts in the area that are very significant tourist attractions for us. We have folks that come long distances to come and stay in our valley and they wish to see those. To have access to those again is going to be important.

There are lots of other areas we have approached Parks about over the years to try and get access to. In the past that has fallen very largely on deaf ears. We find it very hard to have good meetings and good partnerships with them. Since the fires—as I mentioned before—there has definitely been a willingness to listen more. That has yet to be turned into action and results, but I would have to say that the response from them since the fires has actually been quite a bit better. The chamber has had several productive meetings, sitting down talking to senior staff—local people—about areas we want to open access to. We are disappointed, as I am sure they probably are, that the Alpine National Park is a unique national park in Victoria and Australia but there is very little we can show off. It is only the adventurous bushwalker who will get out and find the dramatic views and the spectacular scenery. Those are just not available to the average tourist with leather-soled shoes. The case we have taken to them is that we need good quality, safe walking tracks to be able to get the 'average tourist', if you like, into those sorts of areas. In the past, those requests have not been acknowledged. There are signs that that is changing for the better but, again, I think this is going to be a funding issue, as it always has been. Basically, their major problem is underfunding.

Mr SCHULTZ—Is the ban compounded by National Parks declaring wilderness areas? Is there an ongoing program to declare more and more of the national parks wilderness areas?

Mr Roberts—That is part of the issue. There are areas that they wish to lock up and areas that probably need locking up—significant national assets that need to be protected for future generations, but as in all things there is a balance, where areas can be made available to the public and to tourists and for grazing and other uses. But over the last 20 years there has been an attitude, I would suggest, of 'Lock up the parks,' and I think that needs to be closely looked at. It is a national resource that we should all have access to. Nobody would suggest that there should be totally open access. It needs to be managed correctly—tourist access needs to be sustainable so that damage is not done and you need to have boardwalks and things like that. Again, this all comes back to money.

Mr SCHULTZ—I have a couple of questions for Mr Robinson, particularly in relation to what appears to be a mentality of allowing the fires to burn and get out of control—in other words, there are no efforts to suppress the fires in their early stages. The description you gave is reminiscent of similar stories that we have heard before, where you could almost describe it as being deliberate or bordering on criminal negligence or incompetence by state authorities in

control of fires. Would that be a pretty fair overview or assessment of what you were trying to describe to the committee a few minutes ago?

Mr Robinson—It would be—mainly the incompetence I would go along with. At the time all this was happening there were supposedly people at the control centre who had experience with fires, but their experience was with only one, two or three fires, and they were not big fires, and I think they were overwhelmed by the situation. Further to that, I have had contact with senior officers in DSE, and they could not understand why Goldie spur was not back-burned. They were going to look into it, but I have not spoken to them since. A lot of things went on, such as National Parks turning dozers away from putting in fire lines because their blades were too wide. The mentality is indescribable.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would you say that it would appear that the philosophy of the parks people and the state agencies, with regard to locking people out of our national parks in particular, has resulted in a more intense unrecoverable destruction of our biodiversity than would otherwise have occurred before this mentality became evident within government agencies such as National Parks?

Mr Robinson—Yes. The main reason I say yes to that is that in the areas turned over to National Parks the fire access tracks—which were traditionally put in in those areas—have been left to grow over. In future, if nothing is done about this, instead of a vehicle going in with a crew to put a fire out you are going to have to follow a dozer, which will have to go in to clear the roads first. So, yes, the mentality of closing people out and closing tracks—

Mr McARTHUR—How long does it take to follow the dozer to get into a spot fire?

Mr Robinson—For argument's sake, if you were in Mount Beauty and there was a spot fire on Bogong, say, and the tracks were blocked and you could not get in and you had to get a dozer in, a minimum of two hours would be gone. You would have to load him and then he would have to walk up and get in. I would say that you would be delaying attacking the fire for at least a day.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Mapley, you joined the table, and you are speaking at this session because you were due to speak at Omeo but it is more convenient for you to speak here. Would you like an opportunity to briefly outline your experiences and speak to your submission?

Mr Mapley—I have put something together here, but a lot of it was covered yesterday and by this group here today. The CFA has been in existence for over 60 years and is one of the best firefighting organisations in the world. In relation to the 2003 bushfires in north-eastern Victoria, a running fire, especially in mountain country such as areas surrounding Mount Buffalo National Park, cannot be controlled from a map of a local area from 100 kilometres away. Some of it was controlled from Benalla.

We talked about 12-hour shifts on crews. My crew did not fill in a tea card; they changed over on the line every time. They did their full 12 hours. After a week or 10 days of a fire like this, crews get so exhausted they are not safe on the fire ground. With a small fire you can do six or seven hours flat out, but on fires like this we were fighting a fire or blacking out, which is hard work. On blacking out you are on rake hoes, you are rolling logs, you are in trees, you are chainsawing—

CHAIR—For the record and for people who read this, could you explain what you mean by blacking out?

Mr Mapley—Once the fire has gone through, you take normally about a 10-metre strip alongside your burning-out area from your fire line and you completely black it out: turn over stumps and logs, full trees or whatever. As soon as you have done that you return and go in another 30 or 40 metres, and you keep going in—probably 100 metres—because when the wind comes up it will throw out over again and you lose your fire. That has to be done, and that is hard, really slogging work. Our brigade is only a small brigade. We did that for probably three to four weeks; I could not even tell you what day it was sometimes. Our crews got to the stage where they could hardly stand up. We could not man the truck. We had other crews come in from other areas to man our truck at night sometimes. The frightening part was that sometimes the worst part of the fire is at six or seven o'clock at night and we had no-one on the fire line but those local crews. You might have three or four NRE small units there and a couple of others. They all knock off, as was emphasised yesterday.

Coming back to the administration, I had three stints in Sydney and I fought fires in the Northern Territory, and I have seen the three big bushfires on Mount Buffalo, as Neville has. The fire was predictable because we did not have any Ash Wednesday type of weather. Had we had that, we would still be picking up bodies. I will not blame the administration of one of the three departments, Parks, NRE and CFA, but we have to blame the lot of them. On my few hours off I was to designate someone to take my place. I put in our ex-captain of 26 years. He has had more experience than me. He is nearly 70, but the grey hair and the bald top are very handy on the fire line because they have seen it all before. He was told that he was not wanted by a strike team leader, that they were running the fire. I can personally say—because it happened to me; it is not second-hand—that that captain came to me and said, 'I'll go on the hose, I'll go on the truck, but I won't take any more responsibility. I won't be talked to like that when we know the area.' He grew up in the area and is nearly 70 years old. I grew up in the area. We know every tree and every stump in those valleys and we know what the fires will do.

I got a letter last night and it is a joke. CFA want us to nominate people out of our brigade to be strike team leaders and be trained up. I would be hung if I presented that at my brigade after what happened here this year. What worries me is that we have done training. That is the book that we have to do training; we have to pass that now. Yesterday that fellow from Mudgegonga mentioned that there were no overalls, no hats and no boots. In the next 12 months we have all got to be minimum skill trained, and the only way you can get the clothes now is to pass your minimum skills. That came in first with this fire, and within three days we could not man our trucks. So they said, 'If you have been registered and the captain says that you are confident, you can go.' That is why he never had enough clothes. We have got 12 months to do this. I have done this and I have not got one in my brigade over 40 years old that has done it other than myself.

Mr Hicks mentioned yesterday that he has had a lot of new brigade members coming in. We have, but when we are asked for a strike team to go to Mr McArthur's area or to Sydney next year I do not think I will have anyone with enough experience. Those young fellows will go, but we do not want all of them. We want fellows who are genuine, like those who came up to us this year and stood on the highways and the roads, frustrated, because they watched farmers and the local teams getting cooked—and they were sitting on the road! They came from all over this

state and they were frustrated. I saw one team that had not wet a hose in three days, and they watched us get burnt out.

If the CFA is going to handle things like that—and it was mentioned yesterday—I think it will come back that we start off with the old brigades, like the old bushfire brigade used to be in New South Wales, and we will have all sorts of old trucks and rubbish chasing things around. We have the best equipment in the country. As I said, I went to Sydney three times and I have been to the Territory. I ended up fighting fires on holidays, but anyway I learnt something up there too. If this goes on, we will lose our best firemen and we will lose a few grey-haired ones who know what the fire does.

Neville and I probably cannot chase a hose all day, but by gee, if you have one of those fellows on the truck, he can say, 'Listen boys, this is going to do this, because I've seen it do it before. Let's get out of here' or 'We can tackle it.' In the 24 or 25 days that I was in Bright and Porepunkah—and, as Neville said, we saved them—I requested back-burning on numerous occasions. Not once was I given permission in time. I got permission in 15 hours for one. I wanted permission at six o'clock in the afternoon. At about 12 o'clock the next day they said, 'You can back-burn.' I said, 'We can't back-burn it today. We're going to lose it.' My property was burnt out, and three other properties alongside were burnt out, running in open country. Two nights before you could have back-burnt six kilometres with a wet bag, without even a fire truck, but we were not allowed to. The only back-burning that was done was done illegally by me, but you had to do it when the fire was very close, because otherwise you would have a policeman tapping on your shoulder asking, 'How did that fire get away?'

Mr SCHULTZ—Could I ask a question to clarify something. Did I hear you correctly when you said that the people who took up the training course were issued with clothing and equipment and those who were not trained were not able to access that equipment?

Mr Mapley—Up until nearly 12 months ago there seemed to be plenty of money floating around in Victoria for overalls, boots and whatever, but a lot of them did not fit us anyway. You put on a set of overalls and you might as well have had a tent. In the last six or 12 months—Mr Hicks can probably bring you up to date—it has changed: if we get new members now, until they pass the training course, which is that book—

Mr SCHULTZ—Does that cover people who have been volunteers for 25 or 30 years but have not had that training?

Mr Mapley—If you have not done that training, you are not eligible. My captain is not going to do the training.

Mr Hicks—The situation is a little bit to the contrary. From our group's experience, I was always into training a bit, and our brigade has always followed us. There were more overalls in our area than our crews could wear. Before the fires, the mentality was, 'If you're going into the crown, always send minimum skills accredited firies.' In our brigade we got a bit of leniency. We called them 'rookies', and we were allowed to send a couple of rookies too. It was all to do with what went on within the brigades and how the brigades negotiated in the lead-up to these fires, following the Linton inquiry.

As far as not having overalls unless you have done training is concerned, that is not the way it is. That might have been the way you construed it, but that is not the way it is. There have been overalls in these regional stores; it is just a matter of people putting their hands up, becoming active and getting them. You can understand that the CFA is not just going to hand out overalls willy-nilly to everyone who comes off the street. CFA do not want to see them go down the road and be used as rags, building clothes or whatever. You can understand that point of view. I believe that the situation with the overalls is in hand now. It might have been a problem right at the start of the fire, as everyone understood, but by the second week of the fire overalls et cetera were not a problem.

On training, if we are going to stand beside DSE—and whatever other fire crews come from or go to New South Wales—we have to have a minimum skills thing. I believe it is a good thing. It is up to the people whether they do it. There is no-one in my fire brigade that has been denied access to the fire because they had not done minimum skills. They all went. They all put in their bit and if they came home frustrated, so be it. But they all went and they all lined up next time to go. That is that.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like to raise the issue of the outcome of the Linton fire inquiry. For the record, the Linton fire inquiry was an investigation into the death of four people at Linton in Western Victoria. Some of the evidence that you have put forward indicates that, emanating from that inquiry, the CFA are now adopting a very cautious policy of not attacking a fire that is more than one metre high. I just draw the comparison between that attitude, which may have emanated from Linton, and the attitude of Parks that was, ‘Let the lightning strikes burn. It will be okay.’ Evidence that we have heard before this committee is that in Canberra, Cooma and here, those lightning strikes were allowed to burn. Would you just advise the committee as to how you think those two attitudes are now prevalent in the firefighting service as evidenced in this last round of fires?

Mr Hicks—There is no doubt that after the Linton inquiry that all us brigades—and I would say DSE, Parks; whoever is on the fire lines—were trained and instructed differently. I personally do not have a problem with that, because you cannot expect to send people into fires to die. We have never been like that. We have always known our areas. Going back to local knowledge and access tracks, we have always had our access tracks open wherever we went to fight a fire. We have had fall-back positions so that we could pull our crews out if it did blow up. These are all things that local fire controllers know and have in the back of their mind.

With respect to Parks and this lock-up mentality—and the question you asked about allowing the fires to burn—we captains and the controllers have got to have serious reservations about going full speed into these fires. For instance, how far is it to get back out? Is the helicopter—the Erickson—going to be able to get there and support us? Is it in the area? If we cannot get the answers, we cannot go in there.

Again, fuel reduction; make it safe, keep the tracks all open so you can get into the areas. They can have wilderness areas but the access tracks in the wilderness areas have got to be kept open so that we can go in and put the fires out. Otherwise, do not put the fires out at all every year in the wilderness areas. Let them burn like the Aboriginals did so that they do not get hot and come out and burn the rest of us.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the access tracks you mention in your report here? What would you be recommending in terms of the access tracks—that they are maintained and checked every year before the fire season?

Mr Hicks—All those maps are still available from 10 or 15 years ago. They are still here. Get those maps out and get those old foresters while they are still around—my late father would be one, but I cannot bring him back—and open up them tracks. Taking you back to the wilderness mentality, wilderness is good, national parks are good, but you have got to have a line down the middle. You cannot just lock up thousands upon thousands of acres. You can have a patch out on a spur or something, or a ridge or an area that can be wilderness, but still maintain your access around it so that you can go in there and put ground crews in and put it out. Otherwise, like I said, let it go back and continually be struck by lightning and burn. Get the Aboriginals to come and light it.

Mr McARTHUR—What does your group think about the evidence that we have heard that some of these tracks have been ripped up and that boulders have been put in the way to make sure the tracks are not used? What is your reaction to that bit of evidence?

Mr Hicks—I am appalled by it and the committee is appalled by it. Since the fires we have seen regeneration work being done and a lot of that work has been headed by senior Parks staff who have got their own ideas about how this should be done. They have gone in—and we have got photographs of it, we have taken politicians there to show them where they have spent millions of dollars revegetating very good breaks that were put in. Sure, the breaks are too wide, but these breaks should be allowed to stay there. I am sure they should have work done on them, but they should not just be barred up with big bulldozer trenches to stop anyone from possibly going along them—that is just totally wrong.

Mr McARTHUR—What would happen next year if you had another fire—with those tracks being ripped up and barred?

Mr Hicks—Neville summed that up pretty well. It is going to be longer—instead of being 24 hours it will probably be 48 hours. As far as our CFA crews ripping in there and putting it out for them, there is no hope. And I do not think they want us to.

Mr McARTHUR—They do not want you to go into the parks?

Mr Hicks—They might have appreciated us there towards the end of the fires, but at the start of the fires they did not want us in there.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the day before the fire: were you allowed in the parks then?

Mr Hicks—We were not welcome.

Mr McARTHUR—What about two days after the fires started?

Mr Hicks—You would have to go 10.

Mr McARTHUR—It was a bit better then?

Mr Hicks—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—So 10 days after the fire?

Mr Hicks—Yes, because it was the third day when we wanted to go to the Feathertop fire and we were not given much encouragement. We were hindered, if anything.

Mr McARTHUR—So the Parks were not really encouraging you in the early part of the fire to help them. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Hicks—That is what I am saying—in no way.

Mr Mapley—It was about seven days, in our area, before we were allowed in the park. But the fire had already gone by then. It was too late.

Mr McARTHUR—It was too late after seven days and the fire had gone away and become a big fire.

Mr Mapley—Yes.

Mr Hicks—We got permission to go to the Feathertop fire on the third night. We had finally got permission to put CFA crews in there because Falls Creek was concerned that the fire was going to come straight at them. So we took a small team into Falls Creek and Dederang with quick fills and a local cattleman who knew the area. We were told, by Parks coming out, that there was no-one stopping in there in the night, and there was nothing to do. When we got in there, the fire had already jumped the track that they were presumably using to control it. The fire was already over that. We put it out and held there that night. We asked for bulldozers but for four days a bulldozer never came. We asked them what they were doing, and they said they were rake-hoeing the Diamantina walking track. I said, ‘Are you back-burning off it?’ We had a southerly wind blowing every night. Neville touched on the convection layers that you find in these alpine areas—all these fellows knew nothing about them. Every night the wind blew from the south, and it blew cold. Here is a Parks Victoria crew rake-hoeing the Diamantina walking track and not back-burning off it. And it was only about half a kilometre to the fire face.

So what happens when the weather changes two days later and the fire eventually gets to the Diamantina walking track? It was, ‘Out of here, it’s not safe. Let’s go.’ When I was a young fellow on fire lines, we were taught how to put in containment lines—whether it be a bulldozer or a rake-hoe or whatever you had—and how you immediately back-burn off it with your fire torches while the ground is still damp. As the crews walked along, the fellow that was knocked up from the rake-hoe, or whatever, walked back and did a check for you, and you kept working along. You would do a couple of kilometres every night. The Diamantina walking track, where they were working, is only about three and a half kilometres, and they worked there for two days. It was a hell of a job to rake it and cut every branch off every tree from top to bottom, and they never lit a match.

Mr McARTHUR—So it was not really a containment line at all.

Mr Hicks—If they had told me what they were doing when they first walked in there, I would have said, ‘You might as well go down and sit by the river and put your feet in the water and keep cool—you are wasting your time.’ It was just a joke. They did not have experience in the alpine area with the convection layers. It is the same now—they will not even entertain taking logs out because the bulldozers are going to leave tracks. What is going to happen with those logs as they fall in the next forty years? It is never going to be safe for someone to go in there. It is a case of lock it up and keep people out. It is a big picture.

Mr Robinson—It was a pretty narrow-minded view to close the tracks since the fires. A lot of tracks and breaks were put in to try and contain fires. Everybody knows that fuel reduction burning exercises have got to increase. These breaks which were put in have now been completely closed. They should have been left there so they could be quickly maintained as fuel reduction burning boundary lines so that you could do a mosaic across the areas requiring fuel reduction burning. That has not happened.

My final comment relates to the system of attack on fires. It has got to revert back to the old tried and true and proven method because—as I explained a while ago—if it does not, fires will not be put out and will become worse. As Barry and Jack have said, the enthusiasm is still there in the CFA, but if there is a fire up in the Big Desert or somewhere else, they are going to want to find strike crew teams and leaders with experience.

Mr Mapley—In the back of our minds—all the captains and everybody, like Neville Robinson—every day was, ‘If we get an Ash Wednesday day of 100 degrees with a 60 or 70 mile an hour wind, we are going to be picking up bodies right to the coast.’ We didn’t get one of those days. We were thanked and told we had done a good job, but we were dead lucky. In the 60 days that the fire was running we did not get one of those days. If we had, nothing would have stopped a fire like that.

Mr McARTHUR—You only had two bad days, I understand; is that right?

Mr Mapley—The day that I got burnt out we had a 55-kilometre an hour wind. That was one of the worst days I saw. They had a few bad days on the plains but we didn’t have an Ash Wednesday day. We had flames coming out of the bush 100 feet over the trees in our place and 55-kilometre an hour winds. You just cannot stop those fires. You back off and try to steer them out into the open country. Had we had one or two of those bad days, like Sydney or Canberra had, or the Ash Wednesday day, you would have been picking up bodies for the next three months.

Mr McARTHUR—Just to get it on the record, you didn’t have a bad day like 1939, or Ash Wednesday. In fact, the weather conditions were very benign, relatively speaking. So the fire burnt for 50 days, with two not so good days, but otherwise the wind conditions were quite helpful to firefighting.

Mr Mapley—Yes. I think if you went back on record you would not find 60 days where you didn’t have some really bad days. It was in the back of our minds every day. We had seen these fires creeping down, and we couldn’t back-burn to put them out. They crept out of the bush. They crept everywhere. We couldn’t put them out to get away or make them safe. That was in the back of our minds. I think Jack and all of them will say the same thing: the fear was always

there that one or two of those days would come along. We would probably have been safe in our valley because we have irrigation from the big river.

Mr McARTHUR—You are telling us that you have burnt 1.4 million hectares and, ironically enough, the weather conditions were quite reasonable.

Mr Mapley—That's right.

Mr Addinsall—I am representing the industry on the committee. I would like to make a couple of points specific to the industry. We believe that the fire kill resource from the fires should be utilised to the maximum. I personally—and the members of the committee all agree strongly—believe that the resource in the parks should also be utilised because otherwise it will be wasted. A significant resource of high quality alpine ash exists within the parks that we see as being a wasted resource if it is not utilised. I believe, and the committee believes, that the forest industries are largely an unrecognised and undervalued firefighting resource. In the north-east, for instance, 20 years ago we had 17-odd sawmills operating. Each of those sawmills had a forestry crew. Each of those forestry crews would have had a bulldozer. Each of those crews would have been working in the forest. They would have been working during the peak of the fire season and they would have been available and ready to attack any fires that cropped up during the fire season.

We have now largely lost that resource and, instead of having 17-odd sawmills in the north-east, we only have about four. The resources have been greatly diminished. That needs to be recognised. To replace those resources will require significant taxpayer funds. There is a strong argument for the industry to be fully recognised as a valuable contributor to firefighting. It is going to be difficult to acquire similar sorts of resources in the north-east to match the ones that were there 20 years ago within the industry. That needs to be recognised. If it is going to be replaced in some way, shape or form then it has to be resourced.

Not only has the forest industry itself been greatly diminished over the last 20 years but the forestry service has too. Twenty years ago we would have had something like 150-odd forestry personnel in the north-east—the majority of them experienced firefighters. That number has been greatly diminished; we are now down to probably less than 40 within the same area. Those resources are critical in attacking fires and they are no longer there. That has to be addressed.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence this morning and your various submissions as well. They have been very useful for our hearings and will be very useful for our deliberations and recommendations for the report.

[10.02 a.m.]

ROBINSON, Dr John Mark, Medical Director, North-East Victorian Division of General Practice

CHAIR—Welcome. I think that you were here earlier when I read the statement relating to evidence, so I will not reread that. We have your submission from the division and we thank you for that. It has been authorised for publication and is now part of the evidence. Would you like to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to some questions?

Dr Robinson—I am a rural general practitioner based in Mount Beauty. I think that we, as general practitioners, learned a lot from the fires. We are not a combating authority for fire, but in times when there have been big fires in the past, we did not have general practice organised as we currently do with divisions. Comments were made by the Canberra Division of General Practice about their role in the disaster with the fire there. Our division had a similar feeling that it was very useful to have the divisions of general practice in a cohesive format. In some ways, a lot of our disaster plans within the community do not look to general practice as an organised group. Something that I thought could be learnt from the fire was that we could look at our disaster plans and perhaps place the divisions of general practice as a contact point.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could you explain the psychological effects that accompany these sorts of disasters? Have any of your members, as opposed to the community, suffered in this respect?

Dr Robinson—Of the 112 general practitioners in our division, 30 of those general practitioners were directly impacted upon by the fire. In my role as medical director, I get around the troops and find out how they are coping with things. I certainly believe that a number of our doctors were very frightened and very stressed and set back in their work activity. We have been able to obtain locum resource to allow them to have appropriate leave, whereas perhaps, if the fire had not been there, they may not have needed that leave. I do not wish to give away confidential information, but I know of one or two doctors who have had to seek some help after the fires about what they dealt with.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I turn to the four points that you make, and the four very good suggestions. No. 1 says:

The potential role of local Divisions of general practice in support to disaster affected communities needs to be recognised and promulgated in Regional and Municipal disaster planning.

Could you just expand on that role as you see it—what your organisation can bring to this situation? You are not a combating organisation, but you are a community support organisation.

Dr Robinson—As a community support organisation, I suppose most of us had the role of caring for firefighters who were injured, smoke affected or dehydrated, had gastro or foreign bodies in their ears and eyes—whatever had happened to them. But, being residents of the areas affected by the fires, our houses and our own families were also at risk. So there were times

when our members felt that they were in trouble—between providing local services out of their local hospital and going home and making sure that their kids and house were okay. Therefore, the division was able to mobilise spare general practitioners—from, say, Yarrawonga or other parts of the division which the fires were not affecting—to come and man situations. The area where this occurred most successfully was in Bright. Some of the doctors in Bright were housed out in Wandiligong, and their houses were encircled by fire. They were very frightened, so we brought in some general practitioners from Yarrawonga to sit in the hospital in Bright and provide normal general practice access and health services. That was the main area where that occurred.

The state medical displan, as it exists in Victoria, has a network of general practitioners. This involved me in the Mount Beauty area, Dr McCallum in Bright, Dr Barkus in Corryong and a coordinating GP, Dr Paul Kelly, in Benalla. We had very close and frequent telephone contact, to make plans about things like where we would put the 20 people in the nursing home at Mount Beauty, if Mount Beauty was threatened. So there was a lot of background thinking. Fortunately, we did not have to use any of it, but we were planning and had plans.

The problem I see is that there is no formal link between the division and the combating and government authorities. In fact, that was evidenced after the fires had completed. The shire of Bright CEO, Doug Sharp, contacted me and said, 'I think you'd better come along to the post-fire recovery meeting.' I contacted the office of the regional director of the Department of Human Services, and I was declined any attendance at those meetings for some two months. I really felt, in the aftermath of this fire, that if we were going to put in services—pump up psychological services to the communities affected—general practice would have been a valuable resource.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Why were you not included?

Dr Robinson—I do not know.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Who did you make inquiries of to be included?

Dr Robinson—I made direct inquiries to the regional director on his mobile telephone.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Who is that?

Dr Robinson—Dr Tom Keating.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did he ever provide an oral response?

Dr Robinson—We had the ping-pong crisscross of telephone calls, and we at the division eventually received a written invitation, but I did not ever actually talk to him.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Just on the issue of the relationship of your members with, say, the CFA at a local level, do you see a potential there to perhaps brief crews on the likely medical effects of engaging a fire? Obviously, there are dangers to health involved in combating fire.

Dr Robinson—That is a very interesting question. The Country Fire Authority in Victoria has a very well-organised and well-established trauma counselling arrangement. I was aware of this before the fire, because one of the issues the division of general practice has been looking at is counselling our doctors after they have been involved in traumatic incidents in their towns and in the process of doing that we came in contact with a group of people who were already tendered to the CFA to provide these trauma services to the CFA. In fact during the fires—at two o'clock one morning in the Mount Beauty Hospital—I met these people. They were circulating amongst the fires then, and it was pleasing to see that.

I think that in most small towns—and I speak best of the town I know, Mount Beauty—the CFA has a pretty good rapport with the local doctors. We are frequently called upon out of season to provide it with educational resource help, and of course during the fires we work side by side if someone is injured. I do not think that is a problem area; I think we have a good rapport with them. But sometimes their community disaster plans just take it for granted that health and medical resources will be there. This fire, in which doctors' homes were threatened, changed that, and I think that we need to look at the plans and possibly rewrite them so that health services are accessed perhaps via the local division of general practice. This could apply right around the country. I think it could apply in Western Australia and in parts of Queensland, where we could have the same thing happening.

Mr ORGAN—Following on from your comment, are you saying that regional health services are actively involved in these disaster management programs and you feel that general practitioners are not involved, or are you saying that both regional health services and general practitioners are not involved as they should be in disaster management plans?

Dr Robinson—I feel those links that exist with state funded regional health services could include general practitioners, who are to a large extent Commonwealth funded. We are virtually employees, Medicare being the main way we are reimbursed. There has always been a traditional attitude of, 'You are funded by the Commonwealth and we are funded by the state, so we will not communicate quite as well with you.' I feel that that is an area this current government is working on. I know from other roles I have had within the division that we are working very hard to improve the integration of Commonwealth and state funded health issues. Certainly during the fires we had regional health organising refuges in towns and then they would realise, 'We don't know which people might need to be rounded up and put in the refuges,' so they had to contact the local general practitioners. If there were a more formal arrangement—if our telephone numbers appeared in their plan—then that would all flow a bit more smoothly than it did. They suddenly thought, 'We're going to set up a refuge centre in this town, but who are we going to put in it? We don't know who the nine wheelchair bound people in this town are,' and then they had to flick through the phone book to find a contact point. I feel there could be an improvement on that.

Mr ORGAN—Do you think the regional health services dealt well with the emergency, in regard to providing ambulances and hospital treatment and so on?

Dr Robinson—Extremely well—and life did still go on. Kids fell off bikes and injured their heads and had to be flown to Melbourne, and all sorts of other stuff still occurred during the fires. I recall one unconscious young gentleman in Mount Beauty who we would normally have obtained a helicopter for and sent to Melbourne. Because of the smoke, the nearest we could get

the helicopter to was, I think, Wangaratta. So we had to transfer this very ill patient, but the services pulled together magnificently. Most of us, as general practitioners, remained on heightened alert. Most doctors stayed on duty even if it was their day off, and certainly people did not have holidays. If they were going away they postponed their plans, just to remain in the area, conscious that there could be a bigger call—which fortunately did not come.

Mr ORGAN—Finally, has there been a major financial impact on general practice businesses as a result of this?

Dr Robinson—Yes, there certainly has been a significant impact. As a general practitioner working in the town of Mount Beauty, my practice suffered a reduction of \$20,000 for the month of January and a similar amount for February, based on the figures for previous years. It has gradually been improving since then. We were very grateful for the granting process that followed from the Commonwealth, and we were able to get some appreciable funds—certainly not those sorts of figures, but I think it was more the fact that someone cared about us that made some point.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you.

Mr SCHULTZ—Dr Robinson, can I at the outset—I know I can speak on behalf of my committee—compliment the North East Victorian Division of General Practice for the contribution that they made during the very traumatic fire period and that they continue to make to the communities they service. I think, quite frankly, that the role of GPs is underrated in terms of what they contribute during times of disaster in their communities. Can I ask you about the feedback you may have had from the GPs in your general practice division about the type of stress you are dealing with in people who either fought in the fires or were affected by the fires. In particular, can you give this committee any insight into the frustrations or the concerns that were expressed to you by people affected by and fighting in the fires? I know you have got to keep what is said between doctor and patient confidential, but please give us an insight into that in general terms.

Dr Robinson—There are two issues for a GP in this situation. The first one is, of course, firefighters. We have a mixture of aged men with a lot of experience, some of who were sitting here before, and we have a lot of younger men—youth—from the community. In fighting the fires, they get twigs in their eyes and we have the normal minor medical problems. Then occasionally we have situations where vehicles will be exposed to large walls of flame and may even be buried in the fire. At times we were called to see people in the fire group who had chest pains consistent with minor heart attacks. We have a lot of volunteers fighting the fire. Sometimes these people have illnesses and are maybe not as fit as they would like. So I saw a number of those sorts of situations.

The second issue is that the fire itself impacts on the general community—the community that remains, that is. I estimate that in my Mount Beauty/Falls Creek/Tawonga area more than half of my normal clients evacuated. With the ABC saying, ‘Enact your fire plan now,’ there was a massive clear-out from the town. A lot of people came and retrieved their old relatives; families decided they would move down here to Wodonga or across the river—staying in caravan parks and other accommodation. Nevertheless, half the community were stuck there under that cloud of smoke and fear, not knowing what was happening. The impact on the community was quite

significant. A number of young adolescents who were already in care and having, possibly, treatment with antidepressant medication and other counselling suffered considerably from that stress. In fact, it was good to still have a small hospital facility. I recall admitting two or three young people to that hospital with virtually psychotic illness. That sort of stress came about from what the community was feeling.

We are now seeing—and I have spent the last two months working in Falls Creek—a very impacted community. In small groups of people, like the small community at Falls Creek, I can now identify two or three people who I think have definite post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of those come from within the combating authorities—police and fire—and some are just the lodge and community people who got very frightened. So I think we have our work cut out for us in identifying post-traumatic stress disorder. We need to make sure our general practitioner members are aware—and we have tried to do this—of the signs of these disorders, and we may need to have additional support from psychology and other ancillary health services. So I see the fires as having the direct effect of affecting those people combating it—the firemen—and then we have the community, who were not combating it but who were just as terrified and frightened. It became evident during the fire that the most vulnerable people in those communities were being affected by the stress.

CHAIR—Thank you. I think you have raised a very pertinent aspect that needs to be looked at in this overall issue. It is easy to be distracted with the straight, at the fire face aspects. The role of GPs and the divisions is an important one that should be considered along with everything else we are looking at in this inquiry.

Dr Robinson—Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 10.21 a.m. to 10.38 a.m.

CURTIS, Mr Norman Peter (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Curtis. I understand you are appearing in a private capacity.

Mr Curtis—I am appearing here as a researcher in ecology and as a person who has been associated with land care since the early nineties—and actively associated with the Wangaratta Urban Landcare 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. Consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. Mr Curtis, we have received your submission and we thank you for that. It has been authorised for publication and therefore it forms part of the evidence. Would you like to make some brief opening remarks before we proceed to questions?

Mr Curtis—Yes. Regarding item No. 5, I mentioned that my thesis had been completed; it has now been passed by the three examiners, so I have completed that research thesis. Currently, there is very little known about the ecology, particularly the fire ecology, of many Australian plants. An important part of a plant's ecology is the primary juvenile period—and I have spelt out a definition of that in a later expansion of my submission. I have had experience with hazard reduction burning since commencing my study, particularly in the Warby Range State Park. I think we should take into account that many bushfires have resulted from poorly controlled prescribed burning.

I would like to stress the fact that many of the housing developments—and this applies in north-eastern Victoria as well as around Canberra—have been allowed to occur close to pine plantations, which in themselves are an extremely great fire hazard. I have made suggestions that those things should be taken into account with respect to state planning, particularly local municipal planning. In the Warby Range State Park you have a lot of development where people have chosen to build in the midst of the bushland. Quite often they do not worry about taking any fire precautions or any fire preventative measures.

I feel that there would be more benefit from this inquiry and its results, if it were taken into account with the state inquiries that are going on. The only way that probably some of the measures that will come out of this inquiry will be effective will be through cooperation with the states. I think that is something that does need to be borne in mind, because although I am not a lawyer I think there are some constitutional restrictions on what the Commonwealth can dictate or compel the states to do, particularly in the way they manage their parks.

I have gone on to point out the areas where I think the Commonwealth can help with some of those measures—providing more funding to increase the staff at universities, particularly research students in ecology, and providing money for the fire section of the CSIRO. With more funding I think they could develop better materials to use in home building. They certainly produced and published a lot of research information on fire and fire ecology, and that publication was stopped because of their financial situation.

There are two other major factors. There needs to be some consideration given to the abnormal weather pattern that we have had over the last three years—three years of drought and then this proliferation of electrical storms across the north-east. I think there were something like 80 strikes, and all but 10 of those were controlled. With the advent of firefighting equipment, particularly the helicopters, if there had been more available here straight after the series of lightning strikes perhaps there would not have been as many fires that got out of control. I think that disaster control should be an integrated situation between the states and the Commonwealth. As you saw in my submission, I have developed each of those points.

CHAIR—Thank you for those opening comments. You mentioned funding to the CSIRO. Just now in your statement, you made some comment that funding had been reduced or taken away—something like that. Are you aware of the cooperative research centre program?

Mr Curtis—No, I am not.

CHAIR—There are something in the order of 15 or 20 CRCs in various areas around Australia. One of the new ones—it was funded from July this year—is a CRC on bushfire.

Mr Curtis—I am glad to hear it.

CHAIR—I thought I would let you know that. The CSIRO is clearly one of the key contributors, along with a number of universities and other organisations, to that particular Cooperative Research Centre. You also mentioned that the committee might take advice from fire ecologists, and you mentioned a number of people. Are you aware of the work that CSIRO scientist Phil Cheney has conducted in this area?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you got any comments about his many published papers into fire ecology?

Mr Curtis—No.

CHAIR—You have no comment on that?

Mr Curtis—No.

Mr ORGAN—You have raised quite a lot of issues in your submission. The two issues that I want to focus on are your research into fire ecology and also the pine plantation aspect. We have had a lot of comments that the parks have been destroyed, the ecology has been destroyed and there have been major impacts. What is your assessment of the damage that has been done and of the regenerative powers and so forth of the environment? Can you give a quick comment, based on your research into fire ecology and mycology, specifically with regard to the recent bushfires we have had. I know it is a very broad question and there is no simple, easy answer. But do you have any specific comments to make?

Mr Curtis—This disaster was really a normal situation that occurred. We had one in 1939. I think the point that needs to be taken into account is that, if there is a pattern of continual prescribed burning over an area and the ecology of the plants and indeed the animals and the

insect life—we are all part of the ecosystem—is not taken into account, the continued burning could lessen the numbers and eventually eradicate the species. That is supported by comments by Dr Gill, who I have referred to. Gill and Bradstock is the reference I have used. This gets back to the point I made about the primary juvenile period of a plant: that is the time from when a plant seeds to when it becomes a seedling and then grows and then produces fruits and seeds itself. If a fire occurs within the time of the primary juvenile period, the progeny will not have a chance of seeding. They will be destroyed in the fire. If that is continued, the seed bank of that particular plant species will eventually diminish and there will be none left. So in a particular area where that is done—and it could be perhaps a large ecosystem or a smaller one—it will affect it.

Mr ORGAN—I have a question about the pines.

Mr Curtis—Referring to the pines, my understanding is that in Canberra a suburb—I am sorry, I cannot remember the name of it—was built very close to a pine plantation. There was a fire in that particular plantation prior to the major fire, and it still burnt. My understanding with pine plantations is that they cannot do fuel reduction burning in them, because it affects the production of the wood.

Mr ORGAN—Was that part of your research?

Mr Curtis—No. I got that from talking to people like Dr Gill.

Mr McARTHUR—I note that this committee has received 450 submissions from people interested in this matter and they overwhelmingly support the concept of fuel reduction burning. I notice that you say in your submission:

The recent fires in NSW, ACT and Victoria have promoted a flood of public comments based on emotional rather than environmental issues, saying that there should be more prescribed burning in National and State Parks because of a build up of fuel loads.

I am interested in your reaction to the fact that the Auditor-General of Victoria has produced a report saying that the department has not managed to keep up with their prescribed burning criteria. Also, in Canberra all the evidence that I heard indicated that the lack of fuel reduction burning was a contributing factor to that disastrous outcome. You say that calling for more prescribed burning is emotional: could you give us your response to the overwhelming set of evidence that has been put before this committee?

Mr Curtis—Perhaps the word ‘emotional’ was not well chosen. I mentioned earlier that in north-eastern Victoria and probably through the rest of Victoria the three years prior to the fires were years of low rainfall—and the autumn was very dry. In this area prescribed burning is carried out in the autumn, and you have a very narrow window when you get the autumn rain break between the end of the dry summer period and the advent of the winter rains. In the Warby Range State Park, with which I am very familiar, it was just too dry to burn. I made reference to a fire down in central Victoria when prescribed burning was carried out this year in the autumn and it got away and became a major fire.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying that you are against prescribed burning? Let us be clear.

Mr Curtis—No; I have not said anything like that in my submission.

Mr McARTHUR—I just read exactly what you said; you were implying that it was an emotional issue. Judge Stretton in 1939 strongly recommended prescribed burning—after the '39 fires. The tenor of your thesis is that prescribed burning should be challenged.

Mr Curtis—No, I am saying that it should be carried out in an environmental manner, sir.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you like to help the committee with what you mean by that?

Mr Curtis—It should be done while taking into account the ecology of the plants. I have just spoken about one major part of their ecology. Very little is known of the ecology of many species—particularly pea and wattle species, and others.

Mr McARTHUR—What do you think of the ecological disaster that has taken place here, with 1.4 million hectares burned in the recent fires? What do you think of that disaster?

Mr Curtis—That is a natural part of Australia's ecology. The plants have evolved, going through a series of major fires. But when you start talking about burning on a regular basis—which may be every four years or every six years—you have to look at the particular ecology in that ecosystem.

Mr McARTHUR—I just repeat again that the overwhelming number of submissions to this committee support fuel reduction burning, both from an ecological point of view and from a practical fire suppression point of view. Would you care to respond to the large number of people who have that point of view, backed up by a scientific basis going back 50 years?

Mr Curtis—You have still got to look at it in specific areas.

Mr HAWKER—Surely when you talk about the ecological system, you would be as aware, as everyone in this room is, that the Aboriginal community have been doing systematic burning of these regions for thousand of years. So the plants have developed in the system that we are referring to and that Mr McArthur has just been asking about.

Mr Curtis—We had major fires well before the Aborigines came here 60,000 years ago. We have had volcanic activity, and I would imagine that we have always had electrical activity. Australian plants have developed in a fire ecology in most areas. The Aborigines, to my knowledge, used fire to provide access between different areas to make their travelling easier and to attract game, regenerating grass and foliage. But in Victoria we have not any definite information on how they did it.

Mr HAWKER—Could I contradict you on that. A book was published about four or five years ago by the State Department of Aboriginal Affairs on Gariwerd, as they call it, which is also known as the Grampians. It describes in some detail how it was done by the Aboriginal communities and how the early European settlers admired it. They spoke in quite positive terms about how the local Indigenous community managed the Grampians forest. So there is some evidence there.

You talked about how things might have been had there been more helicopters. As you would be aware, the United States have considerable resources when it comes to fighting fires. At one stage they went down the path of saying, 'If we just had more resources—more helicopters, more tankers and more everything—we would solve the problem.' Yet, following the disaster in the Yellowstone reserve, where some two million acres were burnt, they have come to the conclusion that control burning is the only way that they will be able to stop another disaster. We had 1.4 million hectares burnt out; they had two million acres burnt out. They have come to that conclusion. Don't you think there might be some evidence to support the need for control burning?

Mr Curtis—As I said, I am not opposed to control burning.

Mr HAWKER—In your submission an example is cited of one fire getting away and burning 1,000 hectares—and, yes, that is probably unfortunate. We have just had a 1.4 million-hectare fire, and you are criticising control burning.

Mr Curtis—I do not think so.

Mr HAWKER—You say that many bushfires have resulted from poorly controlled prescribed burning.

Mr Curtis—That is a fact. You have got to find better means of ensuring that, if there is control burning, the fires stay where they are meant to burn. That could come back to insufficient state funding—

Mr HAWKER—Do you think that might be the problem?

Mr Curtis—It could be a problem. There could be other problems as well.

Mr HAWKER—Such as?

Mr Curtis—If they are short staffed and only have a certain amount of allocated money to cover burning—and I have seen this in the Warby Range where they have had to cover a large area—when it comes to knock-off time, they have not got the funding to keep personnel patrolling. That could be one problem. This could be something that could be coming out of state inquiry.

Mr HAWKER—What about this recent fire? We are dealing with it on the spot now.

Mr Curtis—No, the Victorian state government inquiry.

Mr HAWKER—Mr McArthur pointed out to you that the state auditor has already had some words to say about that in a report that has been made public.

Mr Curtis—Yes, but their inquiry is still an ongoing inquiry.

Mr HAWKER—But the auditor has already reported on part of it.

Mr Curtis—Right. I am not aware of his comments.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—We had this situation of extreme climatic conditions and significant fuel loads in the forest, and this led to a very intense burn, from all the evidence that has been received. In your view, as a fire ecologist, does this pose a greater threat to the biodiversity of an area—I am talking about a single burn with extreme intensity—as opposed to what my colleagues have alluded to as being mosaic burns in the right environmental conditions that effectively reduce fuel loads?

Mr Curtis—It gets back to knowing—

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I know it is a difficult question, because each area has a different ecology and a different number of plant and animal species et cetera. I acknowledge that. But I am interested in your views—as you are somebody who has studied this—on the impact of extreme and intense fire episodes on biodiversity. If we were to have a string of situations where, instead of having an intense burn like we had in 1939 or 2003, we had them in 2002, 2003 and 2005—that sort of scenario—what impact do you think that would have on the ecology of areas?

Mr Curtis—A series of intense fires?

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Yes.

Mr Curtis—It would wipe out a lot of species, particularly those that have got a longer type of primary juvenile period. Under those conditions, a plant that takes two years or longer to seed would be one of those species that would be lost. I do not know what a continual burning like that would do to eucalypts. It would probably kill the majority of them.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You have been studying fire ecology and mycology, and completing a PhD?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And that PhD is based on the study of a particular plant—the grasstree?

Mr Curtis—That is true.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Your research has been limited to that plant?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In your written submission you have made statements, and the evidence that you have used to support your case has come from other studies—for example, Gill and Bradstock?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I will repeat one of the statements: ‘If burning takes place during the primary juvenile period and the plant dies no seeds are produced.’ Your supporting evidence for that is the work of other academics—Gill and Bradstock?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—So you have not actually conducted any studies of your own to support that statement?

Mr Curtis—No. Science does not work like that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is all right. I am just trying to clarify—not being a scientist myself—to help me understand it a bit better. You made another statement that many bushfires have resulted from poorly controlled prescribed burning—and for that you have relied on Benson 1994?

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You have not actually conducted any studies yourself on the impact of controlled burning?

Mr Curtis—Yes, I have—in the Warby Ranges.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Other than in relation to the grasstree. We established early on that your PhD from 1991 to 2003 was to study the fire ecology of the grasstree in the Warby Ranges in north-east Victoria—and you are probably an expert on that particular topic. In relation to the ecology specifically of the Warby Ranges, which are in my electorate, the other day a forester who had worked in the Warby Ranges for a couple of decades came to see me because he was rather concerned about the ecology of the Warby Ranges as well. His particular concern was weeds, particularly mistletoe. Knowing your obvious interest—or what appears to be an obvious interest—in ecology, as you have focused on the Warby Ranges in my electorate could you tell us whether you have conducted any studies into the severe changes to the ecology of the Warby Ranges due to the proliferation of weeds, particularly mistletoe?

Mr Curtis—No, but I have seen mistletoe particularly in the Killawarra forest, which is now part of the Warby Range State Park.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I suppose what I am saying is that a lot of things affect the ecology, and the ecology of a particular region never stands still; it is always dynamic. There seems to be a disproportionate emphasis on some issues, but the issue of weeds and feral animals and their impact on native flora and fauna has not had adequate attention. I would appreciate it if you, as an academic in this field and this small part of the north-east, were able to alert me to any studies in that regard.

Mr Curtis—Weeds are an unfortunate invader. Once you get the gaps that are produced by the fires, you will get the weeds. That is all part of fire control.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did you just say that weeds have invaded areas after fires?

Mr Curtis—They will come in, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you have any evidence for that? Have you studied that?

Mr Curtis—It is not part of the study.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is your belief?

Mr Curtis—You can see this if you go out to the Warby Ranges.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Have you actually spoken to any of the locals in the Warby Ranges with regard to the management of weeds over the last few decades and the proportion of weed infestation in the Warby Ranges, say, 20 years ago compared to now?

Mr Curtis—No, but I have been associated with the Warby Range Landcare group. It gets back to the departmental management of weeds.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Just like you, I have not studied the impact and infestation of weeds in the Warby Ranges, but my lay opinion on weeds—just like your lay opinion—is that there has been a greater impact on flora and fauna from weeds than from any other factor, particularly controlled burning.

Mr Curtis—I am not aware of any research that has specifically looked at the succession of weeds after burning.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am not talking about after burning, but generally speaking. Anyway, we will continue searching for that, and maybe some scientist who reads the transcript of this inquiry will be absolutely inspired to provide that much needed research.

Mr Curtis—More money would fix weed problems in any area.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Because of your particular focus on ecology and the impact of fire, have you had an opportunity to travel right through the Alps across to Omeo?

Mr Curtis—No, but I have seen the effect of this recent fire around the lakes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—This committee actually travelled on that road, and it is a lunar landscape.

Mr Curtis—I have seen Mount Buffalo. I have been rather inhibited in travelling since I had open heart surgery a few months ago. It is something to look at in the future.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It is, and the reason I mention it is because of your general interest and your focus on the impact of controlled burning even though you have not formally studied it—as anyone else who is a member of the public is entitled to give evidence to this committee. It is

your opinion. I suggest it would be worth while to take that trip because the impact of the fire going across the Alps and down to Omeo—where asphalt has melted and plants have been singed—is really quite devastating. I will just briefly touch on what two of my colleagues have already raised. We have received information from locals whose families have lived in the area for generations. They have described the severity of the fire, due to fuel build-up and lack of fuel reduction, as very powerful. As you know, the fires raged for weeks in this part of the world. By the time they rolled down to Omeo, the fuel they collected along the way was pretty powerful and the impact was devastating. I suggest it is something to look at.

Mr Curtis—I have observed the effect of prescribed burning in the Warby Range. The area that I studied was a prescribed burn area. Before I started my studies, *Xanthorrhoeas* was considered to be a fire-tolerant species. I have proved that, in that area, it is not. Colleagues have been looking at the same species in the Bendigo area, and they are getting quite a high mortality rate. In 1990, according to all the research, it was supposed to be a fire-tolerant species.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you for that. I have one final question. You are aware of the research that Phil Cheney has conducted and you are aware of his extensive qualifications.

Mr Curtis—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you agree with his conclusions on prescribed burning?

Mr Curtis—Provided they are done in an ecological manner.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I have not read all his works, but I have read a significant part of them. What they advocate is prescribed burning done in a manner that maximises the survival of ecological diversity.

Mr Curtis—That is right. But it comes back to the fact that if you do not know the ecology of the plants it makes it rather difficult.

CHAIR—You just mentioned the species that you have been studying. You have now determined that it is not as fire tolerant as was originally understood. Are you referring there to fire tolerance during a cool burn or a hot burn?

Mr Curtis—There were no details kept of that particular burn. I commenced my study after that burn, but I was able to compare the mortality of the *Xanthorrhoeas* with a site that I could prove had not been burnt for 100 years. So I had that comparison of burning as against non-burning.

CHAIR—But your work has not gone to the extent of looking at the intensity of the fire. For instance, plenty of the evidence that has been put forward with respect to prescribed burning talks about cool burns, where the fire tends to just trickle through the forest and clean up a lot of the rubbish on the ground et cetera. That is one extreme. The other extreme that we saw down towards Omeo, as Sophie Panopoulos mentioned before, is where the soil is almost vaporised, as well as everything around it. Your study has not really looked at those varying degrees, so perhaps some of the previous conclusions about the fire tolerance of this particular plant could have been in relation to the normal cold burns—which many people have given evidence

about—that used to occur on a fairly regular basis 10 or 20 years ago but do not seem to have occurred anywhere near as regularly in more recent years.

Mr Curtis—The temperature of the burning does have a major effect on the breaking of a dormant seed—any hard-coated seed. If it is too cold, you are not getting the penetration through to the soil depth where the seed bed would be. If it is a very hot fire, you will get the penetration down deeper into the seed bed and there will be more chance of a particular species germinating. The so-called cool burns, although they will reduce the fuel, might not have the most desirable ecological effect.

CHAIR—But the extent of your work has not really determined where those cut-off points are. Surely you are not suggesting that, where the soil is just dust, the intensity that we saw in some of the fires could in fact have been a lot better than a cooler burn. Presumably there would be degrees at which point the heat might be needed to crack the seed but, beyond that, it would not only crack the seed but it would probably vaporise it.

Mr Curtis—Yes, that would be more at the surface. But, as I mentioned before, we have a deeper bed and the heat penetration through the soil would get down to the older seeds.

CHAIR—But certainly your work has not gone to the extent of determining those different levels of fire intensity.

Mr Curtis—No, and that is the point: there needs to be a lot more research.

Mr SCHULTZ—From the evidence that you have given the committee so far, you have pointed out that you are not against hazard reduction or controlled burns to reduce fuel. As an example, when you use the Warby Range state park, you are concerned about agencies, such as Parks Victoria, burning at the wrong time and in the wrong environment, and the damage that does. Is that correct?

Mr Curtis—Not specifically at the wrong time. As I said, any prescribed burning in the Warbies has been done in the autumn. I was not involved in that particular 1991 fire, and I had no information on it, but I have been out and seen the fuel reduction burning that they have done since the 1991 fire. My results came out through a master's preliminary thesis that I did. They are now protecting the grasstrees; they are raking around and isolating the communities. That was a major step forward in protecting an area. It is only when the fires have been on steeper terrain that there has been mortality of the grasstrees through prescribed burning. I have seen in the studies that a lot of habitat trees are also burnt. There is one particular site, the Spot Mill site, where I consider that, due to the time frame and their equipment, they probably did it too quickly. There are a lot of habitat trees, not just *Xanthorrhoeas*, and that is also an important thing that has to be taken into consideration.

Mr SCHULTZ—I will put something to you. Leaving aside the 450-odd submissions we have got from right around the countryside, which are telling this committee a similar story so far, some of the verbal evidence that we have had is from volunteers who have been involved in bushfire fighting in different capacities and brigades for decades. Many of the brigades have within their ranks hundreds of years of practical service in bushfire fighting. They have been telling us that the sensible thing to do for fuel reduction is to slow burn, or cold burn, downhill

during the right times of the year in a controlled environment—rather than uphill at questionable times of the year. That is simply because they believe that a slow cold burn downhill protects the flora and fauna to the extent that the fire is not likely to get out of control, as distinct from an uphill burn, which in many instances—and you have quoted an example of it—does get out of control and create more fire. Would you believe that that sort of sensible approach by volunteers is the right way to go to protect the ecology, particularly our native flora and fauna?

Mr Curtis—It is certainly better than lighting fires at the bottom of a hill. Quite often they light in strips. If that is on a slope, you will find that where the two fire fronts meet you will get an intensification of the temperatures.

Mr SCHULTZ—You might be interested to know that members of this committee undertook a very intensive inspection of the alpine areas and were astounded at what we were told then, and have been told since, by the volunteers: that the fuel on the ground had been allowed to build up to the extent that the fires that occurred in January were so hot and so intense that the heat vaporised all seed stock that was available beneath the surface to regenerate native flora. Even after rain now the evidence is quite stark—there is no regeneration of native flora stock at all. Would you be surprised to know that those inspections have outlined to us those concerns in a practical sense?

Mr Curtis—It has to be a practical concern to everyone.

Mr SCHULTZ—Have you inspected the fire devastated areas at all?

Mr Curtis—No. I mentioned that. I have been to Mount Buffalo. I had a coronary attack in March and, from then onwards, have not been able to travel around.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I suggest to you that, when it is convenient to you, you take on board my suggestion to do that, because what you will see will illustrate to you very starkly the concerns about the need for appropriate ecologically sustainable controlled burns in our native forests and national parks?

Mr Curtis—That can only really come through the cooperation of the states.

Mr SCHULTZ—No, I am just saying: can I suggest you that you might personally visit that to—

Mr Curtis—As an ecologist I will be—

Mr SCHULTZ—get an overview of just how much damage has been done because of the philosophical approach by people—in the parks area, particularly—right throughout this country?

Mr ORGAN—Can I suggest that it would be in the best interests of this committee if we gave the presenters here the opportunity to present their information, rather than members of the committee basically taking over and presenting their view instead of eliciting as much information as possible from all the members of the public who are coming here to this committee? I would just like to put on the record that I think that we are here to listen and get as

much information out of people as possible—from all broad areas of the community—regardless of which view they wish to represent. It is not up to members of the committee necessarily to present their views at any stage.

CHAIR—Your point is taken. I think that all the witnesses have had a very good opportunity to put their views. It becomes a difficult area when members want to put—you might deem them to be their views—views that other witnesses have put to the committee to other witnesses for a reaction, which I suspect becomes that grey area that you have just mentioned.

Mr SCHULTZ—As a former state member of parliament and a federal member of parliament who has seen the devastation from fire after fire over three decades, I am anxious to ensure not only that the truth is portrayed in this hearing and put there for public scrutiny at a later date but also that people who come into this inquiry to give evidence are also given the opportunity—through a suggestion from a member of the committee or otherwise—to have a look at just how much damage has been done by these fires.

CHAIR—Mr Curtis, do you want to respond to any of that?

Mr Curtis—I think that this last fire was an exceptional thing. I did make a suggestion in my submission—and there have been no questions from the committee about it—that it could be an effect of global warming. If that is so—and there is evidence of global warming; I quoted one instance in my submission—this needs to be taken into account. If these vast numbers of thunderstorms are going to be a continual impact, I think that it has to be looked at.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You are right. Although you have raised global warming, we have established that your credentials relate specifically to the Warby Ranges and to one particular plant. Perhaps the committee will seek expert evidence from meteorologists and weather experts. Thank you for that suggestion.

Mr Curtis—I hope that you do, because I have put—

Mr ORGAN—We have established that Mr Curtis has wide-ranging experience in a number of areas, of which he has some specific experience in the area of fire ecology in his research. I would not suggest that that is the only amount of experience that this person before us has with regard to this issue. I take exception to that suggestion.

Mr Curtis—You do a lot of very wide reading as part of your preparation for a major thesis like that, and it is through dealing with that and keeping up with current papers—

Ms PANOPOULOS—But you are not a weather expert, are you?

Mr Curtis—I am an ecologist and, with all due respect to you, you are not an ecologist.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mr Chair, we have had a lot of evidence here from a variety of people who have claimed to be experts in a whole lot of areas. I trust their local knowledge and I trust their point of view. But if we are going to get down to pinning witnesses down on what sort of expertise they bring to a particular point they make I suggest we rule out most of the witnesses we have had at this inquiry.

CHAIR—That is going a little bit too far. Mr Curtis, we have your evidence that you have put forward in a variety of areas, and that becomes part of all of the evidence that we have got from a variety of people. Questions have not been asked by my colleagues on the global warming aspect, but it is an issue that has been raised by other witnesses in other hearings, and we have also taken evidence from people about the actual weather conditions during the fires. Certainly all of that information forms part of the evidence that the committee will be considering. I thank you once again for your evidence today and the submission that you have provided.

Mr Curtis—I hope I have made some contribution.

[11.33 a.m.]

BETTLES, Mr Brian John (Private capacity)

EVANS, Mr Ronald James (Private capacity)

FRASER, Mr Brian Andrew (Private capacity)

PATON, Mr Mac (Private capacity)

PATON, Mr Simon Fraser (Private capacity)

SCALES, Mr John Colin (Private capacity)

SCALES, Mrs Robyn Christine (Private capacity)

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

Mr S. Paton—I am a beef farmer from the top end of Callaghans Creek, which is underneath Dartmouth Dam. I also run a ski shop in Tawonga South, where I live for six months of the year, and I live six months in the bush.

Mr M. Paton—I am a farmer from the Mitta Valley.

Mr Fraser—I am a farmer from Tallangatta Valley.

Mr Scales—I am a farmer from Dartmouth.

Mrs Scales—I am a farmer from Dartmouth.

Mr Evans—I am a mechanic from Bethanga.

Mr Bettles—I am a timber trainer with Wodonga TAFE.

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 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. The committee has received each of your submissions, and they are on the public record and form part of the evidence. Would one or some of you like to make some opening remarks? And, because we have so many people, could you keep those remarks as brief as you can? We do not need your submissions to be retold, because they are already part of the evidence, but if there are aspects that you particularly want to highlight or if you have new information you have the opportunity to do that now, and then the committee will have plenty of time to ask you some questions.

Mr S. Paton—I would like to thank you all for the privilege of being able to address you. We hope that we can explain, amongst other things, *A case of burning neglect*. You have all read it, I am sure. I do not think you are going to hear anything new from us today—not a damn word. In 52 pages, that report does not say anything more or less than the 300 pages you have so far ploughed through or the next hundred you are going to listen to. I would like to make, if I may, one quick point. Sixty years ago Judge Stretton reported on a bushfire in January 1939. He had heard evidence from the Forest Commission, and he was scathing in his response to that evidence. He said:

It must be stated as an objective fact that the Commission has failed in its policy of fire prevention and suppression. Part of its failure is due to the matter referred to in the preceding paragraph—

which concerned allocation of moneys—

The rest can be set down to its failure to recognize until recently a truth which is universal, namely, that fire prevention must be the paramount consideration of the forester.

In 1944, fires burnt more than a million hectares, killed 59 people and set the Yallourn open-cut coalmine alight. The community expressed outrage, and Judge Stretton was again asked to report at a royal commission. He created the Country Fire Authority, with responsibility for fire suppression in the country area of Victoria and said:

Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other Act or law it shall be the duty of the Commission to carry out proper and sufficient work for the prevention and suppression of fire in every State forest and national park and on all protected public land but in any national park or protected public land proper and sufficient work for the prevention of fire shall be undertaken only by agreement with the person or body having the management and control thereof ...

Two things keep cropping up in this. The first is that the managers of the forest failed to manage the forest. They did no reduction burning; they did not clear the roads. Then, to compound the problem, when there was fire they did not, would not, could not put it out. It burnt for 60 days, for goodness sake. It would have to be a world record. Have you every heard of a bushfire that burnt for 60 days? Have a think about it. Fortunately, the prevailing winds caused a holocaust on only two or three of those days. Do not ask me how, in a summer where northerly winds are the mean.

The submissions that you have all read are screams for help. We want your help. We do not want a repetition of 1939, 1944, 1964, 1972, Caledonia or anywhere else that had exactly the same two problems: nonexistent forest management and a nonexistent ability to put out fires. In our case, we all live within a mile and a half of the state forest—everyone in this area does, with a few limited exceptions once we get here in Albury-Wodonga. All of us from the bush live with the forest managers in control, among other things, of the fire. Their inability to put it out is totally unimpressive. We have got to live alongside them. How can we continue to live there with the existing forest management structure?

I am asking you guys—you are the federal body; you are the guys that can make it work. Nobody else here can do it. Nobody else in our state can do it. You are the federal government. We are depending on you to change it, and it must be changed. The record here expresses

itself—it is a damning set-up. Quite obviously it must be changed, and if it is not changed we cannot live here. Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Who else would like to make an opening comment?

Mrs Scales—I would like to make a few comments, going on from what Simon said. In those days in January leading up to Australia Day, I do not think we have felt so defenceless and helpless in all our lives.

CHAIR—Take your time.

Mrs Scales—I do not think that we will ever feel safe again living in the area while Parks Victoria and DSE are in charge of the state forests and national parks.

Mr Scales—I will continue. Our farm is surrounded on four sides by state forests. We love where we live and we love the bush, but we detest the way the current land managers are neglecting state forests and parks, with feral animals, weeds, undergrowth and out of control, limited fire prevention strategies. I might add a little of my own in here as I go along. We were burnt out, along with many other farmers and hobby farm type people throughout Victoria. We were burnt out by DSE and Parks Victoria—the incompetent managers of national parks and crown lands who believe the bushfire was a natural phenomenon.

Since the fire, I have heard Parks Victoria bosses, I have heard the DSE bosses and I have heard the Australian Conservation Foundation at the VFF conference the other night all say that this was a natural phenomenon. Heaven help us when you have people like that thinking that this was a natural phenomenon! This bushfire was not a natural phenomenon; it was a natural disaster perhaps. It was sparked by nature, but it was a man-made holocaust—make no mistake of that. It was a man-made holocaust because for the past 25 to 30 years every bush user group has predicted that this was going to happen.

When something goes on for that long, when the warning signs are out there for 25 to 30 years and they are not heeded by those bush managers, then there is something grossly wrong. If those bush managers are saying that this was a natural disaster or a natural phenomenon and they are filtering it down through their ranks, to every one of their workers, right down to the fellows on the floor—who I have got nothing against; they worked incredibly hard—if the bosses who are in charge are telling them that this is natural and this is going to happen and it is going to go on, heaven help this country. They have to be looked at very closely.

Carrying on from what Robyn was saying, you have to live close to a state forest, you have to border a state forest, to see the true neglect. We tried very hard on our farm. We have gone through quality assurance, we have gone through Landcare, we have gone through everything that has been asked of us by the government. We spent a lot of money on weed control, we have eradicated pest willows, we have done all the things that have been required of us, and we feel terribly betrayed by the fact that we were burnt down by these people. We are burnt out. If we fail to control a fire on our land and that fire gets into national parks, we are prosecuted. Yet they can fail to control the fire on their land—the fire can come through and wipe us out—and what compensation can we get? We have not got the right to go back and prosecute them. We are a bit sick of this ‘our side, your side’ bit. Surely one law should sit for both parties.

The environmental side of things is an absolute disgrace right now. Years ago, it was a wonderful thing to be able to jump on the horse, muster through the bush, ride through the bush and hear the birds and see the animals going through the bush in front of you. It was a wonderful part of living in the bush. I will tell you what: you can jump on a horse at our place now and you can ride for hours and hours and you will not hear one bird; you are very lucky to see an animal. You will see plenty of dead ones, even though all that you will see now are the bones. Shortly after the fire there were carcasses all through the bush. It was an absolute disaster. Today, after this little bit of rain that we have had, the streams running through our place are black. I am in charge of the water system at Dartmouth, and the water coming into Dartmouth dam will be unable to be used for our water supply in the next three or four days, at least until it clears up enough.

The fight to save Dartmouth township sticks out very strongly as far as I am concerned, because I was also the captain of the Dartmouth brigade. We held the fire at bay on the Wednesday prior to 26 January. It was a great effort by DSE, I might add. On that occasion CFA and DSE did a magnificent job to hold the fire and let it go past Dartmouth—but that was it: they let it go. For the following three days it meandered towards Mitta Mitta, along the edge of the Mitta Mitta River, when a back-burn from the Mitta Mitta River up to that fire could have actually put it out. Instead, all we did was surveillance up and down Dartmouth Road—surveillance of 18 kilometres of road. It was almost as if they were waiting for that fire to jump the river and come back and burn out Dartmouth and our farms in the Mitta Valley. It almost looked like that, and that will never go away as far as I am concerned. I am absolutely disgusted with the way that was dealt with. If I sound fairly dramatic about this, believe me I am. I have reached the stage where I am absolutely fed up with the rubbish that goes on and the absolute lack of respect for us as farmers and people who live in the bush.

CHAIR—Thank you. I know it is not easy to come and talk about these things again, even six months later. We appreciate the evidence that you have been able to give us. Does anybody else want to add anything before we go to questions?

Mr Fraser—I would like to table three items. The first comprises three photos taken in the recovery process. They are not in any order. The photos are of fence line clearing that has taken place since the fires and how inadequate it is. This shows that within a week of it being done a tree has fallen across the fence line. It indicates how occupational health and safety implications impact on the particular work of recovery. The third photo is of a farmer's dam full of black, gooey muck that has come out of the forest after the first rain. It has a cow bogged in it. That particular farmer actually cleaned the muck out of the dam and was told, having done that, that he would have to cart it away somewhere else as long as it was not on a watercourse.

The second item is a list of the motions that were put before the VFF conference last Wednesday. I understand the VFF task force has given their submission to you. The list of motions was printed and circulated in the agenda of the conference, and there were 14 motions relative to that particular task force submission. An unusual event took place at the conference, where a large number of people were present: those motions were passed in a block, the whole lot, all at once—there was not any dissent, and they cover a very broad range of what took place.

Thirdly, there is a leaflet from the Bureau of Meteorology, which indicates the reasons why rain takes place. I have highlighted the third picture, and I feel something should be done about

it, in relation to the aftermath of the fires. I was always under the impression that the reason we got rain in the country that we live in is that the hot air from the inland meets the cool air over the mountains and the upward draft produces rain. There is no cool air over the mountains now; it is completely denuded, and it is just the same temperature as the rest of the country. I would be interested to know if someone could possibly look into that sort of impact and see what sort of an effect it has on the environment.

While I have the opportunity, there is one thing I would like to highlight. I do not think anyone needs too much explanation, but my colleagues will bring all the points out that should be. We have two Auditor-General reports that have been ignored in Victoria. We had an excellent bushfire review committee report after Ash Wednesday, which was something like an inch thick and covered all the problems that occurred on Ash Wednesday. All the recommendations that came out of that report were excellent material and should have been followed. There did not appear to be much of a take-up of any of those recommendations, because all the same mistakes have been repeated.

Very close to the event we had a large fire in the Big Desert area in western Victoria, and one of the highlights there was that the communication failure was rather catastrophic. I would have thought that in the time that elapsed between that fire and the one in the north-east there would have been time to correct those problems, and a lot of experienced people that were talking during the fires indicated that without local knowledge and without experience on the scene you cannot do anything. It is impossible to control a fire or even do anything from a remote control centre. It is peculiar, but all the things to practical people seem to be commonsense. If I look back in the brief time when there has been a de-manning of the public authorities and more reliance on aircraft, I see that that all sounded very good but, in a situation such as we had, aircraft are not the answer either because there are conditions where they cannot fly or they are elsewhere and it is just something that you cannot properly rely on. You need to have on-ground local knowledge and people that can do things.

It is rather a jumble of comments I would like to make, but I just endorse the submission. As you read, I have been a member of the rural fire brigades for 50 years and I was a group officer and deputy group officer for in excess of 20 years, and I cannot believe that I have put all that time into trying to go forward and finding now that we have got a fire brigade that will not fight fires. It is even more alarming to look at the disaster management area, where the impetus was on a lot of work within municipalities to get their disaster plans going and understood. It was quite clear to me in these last fires that no-one understood the disaster plan. It was even hard to imagine that the police understood the disaster plan, and the police are the coordinators of that. Certainly the members of the municipalities did not. To me that is rather a disgrace, because there has been previously an awful lot of work put into preparing disaster plans. If something in the local community does not work, it will not work, and that is what disaster plans are all about. I could go on for quite some time. I do not wish to, because I think everyone else should have a go.

CHAIR—Thanks very much. We have quite a number of questions to ask. Are there any more comments?

Mr Evans—I was not going to say anything up front—as I was going to let the questions come—but, in light of developments and of comments that were made during your hearings

yesterday and today, I feel some comments additional to my own submission could be of assistance. You have heard quite a bit about the lost time for decision making between the fire ground and the command centre. I think the success of the firefighting operations in previous years has been due to the fact that the orders have gone from down to up. In other words, the upper level of management was there to support the firefighters on the fire ground and the decisions were made on the fire ground. This time around, what happened was quite obvious: they were coming from left, right and centre. The decision making was done by people in a remotely located ICC who had absolutely no idea of what was going on on the actual fire ground. Consequently, you had equipment, personnel, volunteers, DSE firefighters et cetera who were on the fire ground but not allowed to operate, because they were awaiting decisions.

I have a problem in that in recent years there has been a focus on accreditation. Quite a few volunteers have a problem with this accreditation business, because it does not totally recognise the ability of the individual to perform a duty. It is interesting to note a statement in the 1992-93 annual report of the then Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. It reads:

A move to competency-based assessment and training during 1992 marked the start of a new era in fire training. Over 1000 operational firefighters were assessed and accredited against the comprehensive standard of the new Fire Training Management System. The system has a four-year implementation period ...

Unfortunately, it appears that people like the coroner, the Auditor-General and, I suggest, other bureaucrats in the system have a great faith in the accreditation of personnel and believe that that gives them the expertise to conduct firefighting operations. Individuals have highlighted incidences of personnel turning up to assist in the fire fight and, because they were not accredited this time around, being denied the opportunity to assist in the fire fight. In this day and age, that is just mind-boggling. It smacks of empire building, because the so-called accreditation requirements have given bureaucrats the opportunity to build their empire.

We in the Country Fire Authority have had to employ an extra 50 or 60-odd trainers across the state to implement the minimum skills program over a five-year period. I have no problems with the minimum skills program—it is a great basic training tool—but I do have a problem with the so-called accreditation at the end of that training program, because it gives the state of Victoria the false sense of security that we have X number of thousands of trained, assessed and accredited volunteers out there who are fully qualified to fight bushfires or grassfires. I would suggest to you that you could go back to a large number of volunteers six months after their completion of the minimum skills training program and assessment and they would fail the program, because they are not using it in their everyday activities.

It is interesting to note in the Victorian Auditor-General's report of May this year that the DSE estimates that it takes an officer eight to 15 years before they gain the proficiency to perform key fire management roles. In other words, it is not something you can learn from just a 15- or 24-hour training course; it is a lifetime experience. Even after my 47—nearly 48—years as a volunteer in the Country Fire Authority, I could not profess by a long shot to know it all, and in every fire you come up against different aspects.

It is interesting to note that the new budget for the Country Fire Authority has just come out with an increase of some \$30 million. I would have to say that the service delivery is about the same as it was previously. As I said in my submission, in 1939 they fought fires in Victoria with

sticks, branches and bags, and burnt a large proportion of Victoria; in 2003 we had sophisticated equipment, technology and all the rest of it, and we still managed to burn more country in Victoria than we did in 1939.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Evans. Mr Scales, you mentioned that you did not do a back-burn from the Mitta Mitta River; you just patrolled it. Could you take us through what occurred when you believed that that was what should be done? Who did you contact? What happened?

Mr Scales—I will go back to the Wednesday prior, when the fire was held on the other side of Dartmouth. We held it on the opposite side of the river. On that night it burnt our neighbours' farm out—the Walshes's farm. Unfortunately, they lost it that night. From there on, it burnt through bushland all the way towards Mitta Mitta—that is a distance of some 18 kilometres—and burnt really slowly. It was at night-time when we were on night patrols—we did all the night shifts ourselves, in conjunction with some DSE pigs. At night-time the fire was barely moving; you could have put it out with buckets of water out of the Mitta Mitta River, it was that easy. It is rather inaccessible country; it is not fantastic country to get into.

On 8 January there was a lightning strike on that side and, because he knew the area, our local bloke took a crew in there and they put the fire out the same day. There is no reason the same thing could not have been done at any stage in the three days after the Wednesday. It was not our place to go in there, as locals or as CFA; it was the DSE's call or Parks Victoria's call as to who went in. We amateurs were instructed to drive up and down the road and keep an eye on the fire to make sure that there were no spot-overs. At any stage at all—because they were not too bad—the conditions were quite good to back-burn back up to the fire or indeed back-burn from the Dartmouth Road back down to the Mitta Mitta River on this side, which would have been just as successful.

On the Saturday night prior to Australia Day, I and two other fellows on the tanker—one of them is down the back here now; there were only the three of us left because the other blokes were just exhausted—were on our way at 2.30 in the morning up and down the road. The DSE officer—I guess he was the bloke in charge of the crews there at the time; they had about five pigs there at the time—came up to me at 2.30 in the morning and said, 'Scalesie, we're out of here.' I said, 'You're joking.' He said: 'We're out of here, mate. We've got to go. We've been instructed to go.' I said, 'You're having us on.' He said: 'No. We've got to go. Our hours are up and we're out of here.' I said: 'But we've got these horrific north winds forecast for tomorrow. We're going to be in serious trouble.' He said: 'I think there's another crew coming in tomorrow. I'm not sure.'

All of a sudden it hit home that we were it. Just the three of us were patrolling 18 kilometres, and we had the pine plantations through to Callaghan there as well—we were on our own. It is not much of a feeling when you have wildfire around you like that and you are on your own. Consequently, we went through the night. Admittedly, at the time the fire was at a very low ebb; it was barely burning. But we did realise the risks the next day. I eventually got home to bed at 10 o'clock that morning, after setting some crews up to take over from us. At 11 o'clock Robyn came bursting through the door to say that the fire had jumped at Spring Pole and was heading towards the farm. I do not think I need to go on any further. That is exactly what happened: the north winds came, they forced the fire across the river, and that was it.

CHAIR—Did you request at any stage to be able to do that back-burn?

Mr Scales—No.

CHAIR—Because that area was their responsibility?

Mr Scales—We were seen to be interfering, I suppose, if we tried to put ideas into their heads.

CHAIR—I want to ask you about insurance. To what extent can you insure fencing and those sorts of things, and what was the result from your insurance company? What assistance have you had from the state government with respect to those fences?

Mr Scales—We always saw insurance of fences, stock and those sorts of things as a bit of an impediment financially, I suppose. Consequently, we had no insurance on stock, fences or anything. We lost all our boundary fences—30 kilometres of fencing in all, with internal fences. We lost 30 head of cattle, none of which were insured. We have not received a cent of compensation for any of this. It has set us back to a stage where we will go on—it will not beat us—but financially it will be a burden that we will have to carry for the rest of our lives, for as long as the scars of the fire, I suppose.

CHAIR—Is the cost of insurance for that sort of thing quite high?

Mr Scales—It is a high enough to be an impediment. With the amount of breeders we have got—about 230—you have to make every cent count, and we do feel it is a little bit high for us.

CHAIR—So you have had to weigh up the risk aspect against the cost aspect?

Mr Scales—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you very much for coming here and for persisting and persevering with telling your stories. The passion and the commonsense that comes through reminds me how fortunate I am to have constituents like you not only standing up and ensuring that you have a voice but ensuring that your voice gets through to parliamentarians and those who make decisions.

Mr Scales, you are a farmer, so I am not going to ask you questions as I have asked those claiming scientific knowledge, because I do not need to verify the parameters and the extent of that knowledge. I am going to ask you questions as a local and as a farmer. As you have heard, we have had a significant number of witnesses begging the committee to recommend that there be cool burning carried out, using in most cases past Aboriginal practices as a guide. We have had another opinion—much fewer submissions—claiming that such cool burning would destroy the environment. We have not as yet had any scientific evidence to that effect, but they are two different opinions. In the absence of any extensive scientific evidence and analysis, using your local knowledge from the number of years you have lived in the area, what is your opinion about the relative impacts of cool burning and the more intense feral fire that we had over January to February?

Mr Scales—I have no doubt at all that a slow, cooler burn is a much more effective weapon as far as the bush is concerned. As far as environmental damage is concerned—and I am a third generation person who came through with bush law; my grandfather passed it all down to me and my father reinforced it—we were great believers in the burning of the country around our farm, because we are surrounded on four sides by crown land. Until prosecution came in for people who were burning this land, we did it as often as it was required. I saw no evidence of environmental damage at all in that time. The only thing I saw was a great reduction in noxious weeds and noxious animals, that sort of thing, around our farm. We certainly were able to control them much better.

Since the lockdown began and since the prosecution of us for doing that sort of thing, we have seen a huge increase in the amount of noxious weeds and vermin around our properties. The problem has become almost insurmountable for people who border crown land. The fuel reduction burning around our properties was something we did when it was necessary, and it was a great tool as far as bush management was concerned. I think I wrote that 20 times—my submission was actually done in about half an hour, I was that uptight at the time, and things just seemed to flow—in my submission. Probably something like that needs to occur.

As far as the DSE saying that they have not got the manpower, the resources or enough days in a year to do the required amount of burning is concerned, certainly I know that any number of volunteers within the CFA or farm groups that border crown lands are more than happy to be of assistance to the DSE if they continue to be land managers. We certainly have some advice that we would like to give them along the way.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am sure you could. Going to the written submission, *A case of burning neglect*, I just want to pick a couple of comments that were made and ask for a brief response, knowing we are under time pressure. On page 15 this point is made:

Civil disobedience was necessary when it was clear that central command was unable or unwilling to authorize remedial action. For example, the historic Wallaces Hut was saved when 'divine intervention' bulldozed ...

And it goes on. There are stories all over the place of what could be described as civil disobedience. Simon, could you perhaps briefly tell the committee why you think that people may have resorted to this? Do you think that there is a possibility of an increase in civil disobedience should the issues that you have highlighted—that is, that the management of national parks and firefighting—not be adequately addressed? What do you think the impact of that would be on future trends in civil disobedience in the north-east of Victoria?

Mr S. Paton—I suppose it gets back to the fact that you will fight to protect your property. If you are living there and a fire is coming at you, you are going to try your hardest to put it out, stop it, contain it, burn back to it, by any means that you can achieve. That is the bottom line. If you have the parks next door and they say you cannot burn it, I guess that is civil disobedience. But, on the other hand, if you have your wife, your kids and a house behind you, and you have a lighter, there is no choice.

Mr M. Paton—I was confronted with the same thing. It was not to the extent that the fire was coming at me, but we had a person deliver a plan who quite clearly should have been there two or three days earlier, because the time for that plan had passed. The debate went on about things

having changed. It was quite clear that the plan was out of date, but they were still implementing it. It was a waste of time. Times had changed. As Simon just said, you then resort to self-preservation. You still have that instinct. You can call it civil disobedience—that is a nice thing to call it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It was in the report. That is how it was described.

Mr M. Paton—Yes, but I think it is a very fine line between that and an instinct for survival. It was clear in this case that the plan was obsolete, so what do you do?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do not let me put words into your mouth, but are you saying that when a law or a policy is ridiculous to the point of threatening you physically or damaging your property, it gets to a point that is unacceptable—

Mr M. Paton—Totally.

Ms PANOPOULOS—and you just ignore it?

Mr M. Paton—You have got no faith in the plan, so you then think, ‘What is my instinct?’ and that comes out in people preparing their own equipment. We had access to CFA units, but we had no control over their use. So we had to go back and get all our old bits of gear together and do our best. All of that is sort of illegal. It is a nasty sort of a situation to be in.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am sure.

Mr Evans—I will just assist Mac in that. Simon and Mac have both been talking about the litigious society that we have today. If you have a look at the pressure that the volunteers were put under by the legal profession during the coroner’s inquest into Linton—where back-burns were conducted under the authorisation of volunteer officers—you will see why, in this day and age, people out there on the fire ground think twice. Because of the structure of the ICS and its apparent imposition on the activities on the fire ground, where orders have to come from the ICC, the incident control centre—and you heard yesterday and probably this morning about the delay period in getting those orders—the people on the fire ground have virtually finished up; they have had to take the action that they have taken.

Mr Fraser—This highlights a problem that occurs all the time. With local knowledge, experience and cooperation between the agencies, this should never happen. Decisions must be made on the fire front. I can remember a long time ago in Victoria with the Forest Commission and the then CFA there were all sorts of problems with cooperation and getting people together. It might be the ideal world, but once we overcame that, particularly in the north-east—where there was a very progressive and astute forest manager—we did get it together and it was working very well. In 1985, the largest fire in our group was 40,000 hectares and there were not too many problems. All those decisions were made with the local captains or officers of the brigade. The CFA Act supported those decisions, providing they were responsible.

Since then, along the line, the wheels seem to have fallen off completely. There is no cooperation; it is them and us. I think insurance—and Ron might correct me—is something like 72 per cent of the CFA budget. That is how it is funded. People who do not pay insurance get the

same sort of treatment in relation to fires and all that sort of thing as those who do not, so there are inequities there. We now have a situation in which we have fire trucks parked, and people in their own private units are actually setting up their own little firefighting organisations. They have very efficient radios. Most farmers have UHF radios and 400- to 600-litre tanks. This has been forced on them, because they want to go and help their neighbours. I feel that the indemnity part might be covered by the fact that if you go and help your neighbour and you have public risk policies there does not seem to be a problem. But it is a reality and it has occurred.

Mr S. Paton—Your question referred to page 14, which is why you were looking confused when I made the answer I did. We were talking about Wallaces Hut on the high plains. Was the heading ‘Civil disobedience was necessary’?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes.

Mr S. Paton—Sorry about that, we were a page out. You said page 15; this is in fact page 14. That was a circumstance where the historic Wallaces Hut on the high plains, in the middle of a national park, was not able to be accessed by any sort of fire equipment because it was a ‘national park’. The presence of mind of the local fire captain—who probably should not be named, along with others who might be reprimanded because of it—sent a bulldozer out there and circled the hut so it could not be burnt. That is where that paragraph came from.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like to thank the witnesses, firstly, for being here today and, secondly, for looking after the committee during our visit to this area. I thank you for that tour and the comments that you made on that occasion. I will just raise a few issues. Firstly, I would like some clarification on the *A case of burning neglect* document, Mr Paton. It is a fairly colourful document that has had a bit of coverage from the press. Could you make clear whether the document has the support of the local community and whether what is contained in the document is factually supported?

Mr S. Paton—I will just go back through the history of the *A case of burning neglect* report. It originated when eight or 10 of us staggered into Mitta and had a meeting—some of whom are sitting here at the table and in the audience and some of whom are not here—about what in the name of Christ went wrong, what had happened. We were at a loss as to what to do. We had all sorts of ideas about how we wanted to get something going, get it together and get something written down so that we could address it as a body.

I got Tony Cutcliffe of the Eureka Foundation to come to the area and go around the fire front, from the Blue Duck, down through Bright and Mitta, across to Tallangatta Valley and the Dart and so on. He talked to a lot of people and we went on a bus tour across the top. He talked to the cattlemen and to Jack Hicks, and he produced this report. We then submitted it to you for this federal government inquiry. We have since bought this report from Tony—he produced it, he wrote it for us, he wordsmithed it; it made sense to us, it was our experiences.

All those interviews in there, as you have suggested, can be backed up. These guys here today can back up most of them and we can get other people—if you would like to call them—to back them up. They are all valid interviews. We bought it because we are going to continue to use the report to try and get some sense out of forest management. We are called, for want of a better word, CALMAV—the Conservation and Land Management Association of Victoria. It is a very

loose group. It includes all of us at the Mitta, and some others, who got together and thought we would get a document done that might make some sense to somebody and tell them what happened.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are saying to the committee that it is a genuine document representing the views of the locals and it is factually based on a number of comments that have been made by individuals who are not named?

Mr S. Paton—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—I will just run quickly through a couple of the comments which you have made. You talk about the fires not being fought aggressively, and other witnesses have made the same comment. You talk about the CFA becoming an asphalt fire brigade. Could you give the committee a view as to why the fire was not fought aggressively? That is the tenor in *A case of burning neglect*—the fact that those 50 fires were not fought aggressively in the first instance.

Mr S. Paton—In the circumstance in Mount Beauty, for example, where both Bluey and I live for most of the time, there were two fires—right through from our buildings and through the fence—that were clearly in sight of the town that was burning for a week before they were addressed by National Parks, or whoever were in charge of their firefighting. That is just a visual observation. Other lightning strikes out in the open country were dealt with by the local CFA teams. In most cases they were—to some degree at least—brought under control. I have no idea why the fires in the park were not addressed. People rang up and said, ‘Hey, do you want us to bulldozer around that outbreak?’ and the answer was, ‘No thanks. It’s a national park. Don’t intervene. We’re running the show.’

To go on to the Mitta side of things, we were surrounded by fire which, as Johnny Scales pointed out, should never have crossed the river. But there was nobody there who appeared to have any idea of what they were doing running it. The incident centre—all 81 of them—who were calling the shots were in Corryong. They, apparently, had some impetus in the area. The next incident centre was in Swifts Creek, 100 miles in the other direction. They appeared to have some influence in the area. The next incident centre was in Mount Beauty, where I live. They somehow had some influence in the area. None of it was coordinated. None of it appeared to work. The incident centre in Mount Beauty, for example, managed to burn the town from three separate sides—one of the biggest incident centres involved in the fire. The Corryong one may as well have been on Mars.

Mr McARTHUR—Just as an aside, you comment in your report that one of the bulldozers was unable to operate because the blade did not meet DSE specifications. That is an interesting twist of technology. Could you enlighten the committee as to what meets specifications in terms of bulldozer blade width?

Mr S. Paton—I have no idea what the DSE blade specification width is, nor could I care less. But I know that one float, towed up from Eildon, presented itself on the driveway across from my ski shop and a little bloke in a pair of overalls and a fast truck turned him back to Eildon. They were appealing for bulldozers to come and help them with the forest. I heard the commotion and went over to try and find out what was happening. This bloke had to turn around

and go away again because his bulldozer blade didn't suit the spec. God knows whether that changed in the next 48 hours or not, but that was the status at the time.

Mr McARTHUR—Did they measure the blade to make sure?

Mr S. Paton—Yes; they ran a tape over it and looked at it from different angles.

Mr McARTHUR—One of the other witnesses mentioned being burnt out by DSE and the reciprocal arrangement if a private landowner sets a fire going and burns out the park. Could you comment on the set of arrangements whereby individual landowners are liable and will be prosecuted if a fire emerges from their private land and burns the park but the reverse situation is not the case, as you report?

Mr Scales—I said that. That is a fact—people have been prosecuted for failing to control fires on their property that get into national parks. If DSE has to bring in bulldozers, excavators and manpower to put such a fire out, the landowner is liable to cover all costs for the manpower and the machine power. Many people are a lot worse off than us. We only lost 700 acres and 30 head of cattle. Many people have lost a lot more than that, as you will hear in the Omeo inquiry. They have destroyed our livelihoods and we have got no recompense.

Mr S. Paton—It did not appear to work in reverse. They chose to fight the fire on private land. They said: 'We cannot put it out in the forest any longer, so we are going to save your assets. We are forsaking ours to save yours. We are going to come and put it out on your freehold.' Then, lit from what whatever break they had on the freehold, they torched the pasture, burnt the boundary fences and whatever other infrastructure was in the way and went away as if that was just fine, thank you, and left us poor, unfortunate brutes standing in the ashes. There is still no sign of any recompense for that.

Mr McARTHUR—John Scales, you have written a fairly strong submission and given us a verbal submission here this morning. In discussions with Parks personnel, government personnel or anyone else has anyone argued with the proposition you have put before the committee and said that you are wrong?

Mr Scales—No.

Mr McARTHUR—So your policy position stands unchallenged by Parks, by the authorities, by state governments or by anyone?

Mr Scales—Absolutely.

Mr McARTHUR—Are your submission and your comments well known in the local area?

Mr Scales—Yes, they are. Only one person has challenged me in any way, and that is in the form of snubbing me—not talking to me. He is a fellow from Parks Victoria, who I thought did quite a good job during the fires.

Mr McARTHUR—Why do you think people will not argue with the proposition you put forward?

Mr Scales—Because it is the truth. I have seen it all first-hand. We have been the major people in the area to suffer all the losses and put up with all the drama. You cannot argue with fact.

Mr McARTHUR—I find it surprising that nobody from any authority would suggest that some of your assertions are wrong. That is a surprising piece of evidence that might emerge.

Mr Scales—There was one other fellow, when I think back. He was from DSE, I believe. Farrell was his name. He challenged me on the fact that he did not think DSE had pulled out that night at 2.30 in the morning. But there were two witnesses on the truck with me and, as I say, one of them is up the back. That is the only thing I have ever been challenged on. I was there and I have been through the whole lot. I know exactly what happened.

Mr McARTHUR—You are saying to the committee that this strong proposition you put here has been unchallenged by anyone, from the highest level of government to the local rangers?

Mr Scales—That is right.

Mr McARTHUR—Can I finish with Bluey Bettles, who I appreciate showed us round on the last visit. Would you be good enough to give us a point of view on the way in which fire control was executed by the SEC in the Kiewa area in your previous life?

Mr Bettles—Thank you to the committee for having me here today. Just to give you a bit of my history so you know who I am, I had 14 years as a forestry overseer with the Forest Commission of Victoria, also 10 years as a forest supervisor grade 3 with the then SEC of Victoria. I was basically over there on the protection of the area up through Mount Beauty up to Falls Creek. For those who do not know, there was a leasehold held by the SEC there something like 19 kilometres wide by 28 kilometres long. When I put in for this position, I was told in no uncertain terms that I had to protect this area, mainly for the quality of the water that goes through the turbines and also the water that ends up in the Murray. My job was to basically do some logging, reforestation, and firefighting, whether it be for protection, fuel production or control lines. This was usually achieved by guys on the ground, and we had two crews of men with a couple of fire tankers and a couple of pigs.

We worked in cooperation with the then DCF and L. Some of my friends on the table here, like Brian Fraser and others, used to attend their meetings, even though they were well outside our area. I believe this is where a lot of the problem has happened, that there does not seem to be any sort of cooperation or getting together and doing a lot of those discussions.

I have a bushfire track condition report, which I will submit to the committee if it wishes, in 2002 referring to some of the tracks that my crew and I had maintained for 15 years or so with graders, and we also had walking tracks that went right through. The fire that started at Little Arthur, which I might add I believe with a crew of eight we would have put out in an hour, ended up being one of the major fires that linked up with the Mount Pinnibar section, which went right across the top of Bogong down the other side and just kept going.

I believe I have experience in this field because I have attended about 160 bushfires, some small and some big. I was actively involved in the Hotham fire, Ash Wednesday, and at one stage

actually got trapped. I would like to say here that I would have loved to have had somebody come up to me and tell me I was getting prosecuted because I lit a back-burn to save my men, because, I tell you what, he would not be standing here. That fact was recorded in the *Age* newspaper about a redheaded fellow, which I was then, who got very angry because somebody asked why I lit the back-burn, but we were in a bit of trouble.

It seems to me that prevention is better right at the start, rather than worrying about what we are going to do, what equipment we are going to buy and everything in the future and getting bigger like the Americans tried to do, as I heard here today. It just does not work. We have to get in on the ground floor. Cool, protective burning does work. We did it at the SEC. We had a mosaic pattern of burning, which meant that certain areas were burnt once in every four years. They were cool burns, which meant that fires were lit from the ridges back or they were done in a grid pattern, which meant physically getting out with men, walking through with firefighters and lighting it up every chain or so so that when it got to a flame height it hit and dropped. The animals had plenty of time to get away and there was minimal damage to the flora. I heard earlier from our Indigenous Aboriginal friends that in the early years some of the stuff got burnt regularly anyway. I am completely convinced that they did not have fire engines 250 years ago. They basically lit the fires and walked away, and then they had a grazing area and a pickings area in later times.

I am talking about burns prior to winter. You have a very small window of opportunity to do this, so you have to get out the old sling psychrometer and work out the wind speeds and everything like that so that you can have cool burns. Sometimes we were given a window of, say, from 10 o'clock to two or three o'clock in the afternoon and then the fire would actually go out. So it can be done. I know what the problem is: it is the cost.

Mr McARTHUR—Could you tell us what the outcome of your fire prevention program was over the period you were in charge of this area?

Mr Bettles—In the period that we were in charge up there, we never had a major fire in our area, but we did assist Forestry and CFA outside our areas.

Mr McARTHUR—How many lightning strikes did you have?

Mr Bettles—In one year we had 17 in our area.

Mr McARTHUR—And you never had a big fire?

Mr Bettles—No.

Mr McARTHUR—So you are saying to the committee that there were lightning strikes, as there were in 2003, and yet, because of your prevention and care—

Mr Bettles—I believe we had more lightning strikes and hotter weather. With regard to the fire in January this year, I class the weather as reasonably mild, other than on a couple of days. I thought it was very mild. There were no stinking hot northerly winds with 18 kilometre gusts or anything like that, which we experienced many years before. Because of our burning off programs we were able to hold the fire down. The whole crux of the matter is fuel reduction.

Mr McARTHUR—How many personnel did you have to control these 17—

Mr Bettles—I was the supervisor and there were two foremen and four leading hands—around a total of 18 guys.

Mr McARTHUR—So you had 18 firefighters who were able to control this area for 20 years in the same sorts of conditions we saw in 2003?

Mr Bettles—It was not only our area. We would go out and assist. As I said, we had a very good rapport with Brian Fraser here—I have met him at many meetings—and, if they required assistance, they had only to ask and sometimes we were allowed to go out. It depended on whether or not it was a threat to our area.

Mr McARTHUR—Could you finish by telling us about the quality of water going into the dam?

Mr Bettles—The whole crux of the matter was to make sure that we had good water quality and, by doing mosaic burning, we had green patches here and there for the filtering of the water.

Mr McARTHUR—And the water quality now—after the big fires?

Mr Bettles—No comment.

Mr ORGAN—What did you mean when you said that nobody understood the disaster plan? Was that a document? Is that plan still in place?

Mr Fraser—It is a document. Normally it is produced by the SES in conjunction with all the other agencies, and it is a municipal responsibility. It sets out clearly what should take place under all conditions when the shire is subject to emergencies. Towong shire, which is the one I have had experience of, had one in place. It was endorsed in 1983 and it was applied meticulously in 1985. If we talk about lightning strikes, in 1985 at one time we had 13 between Granya and Bethanga, which is a very short distance, and two major fires. That document is there to be read and understood by people who are supposed to coordinate welfare and support and to take the load off the actual firefighters. It is there and it should be updated regularly. I think it is a requirement of the act anyway.

Mr ORGAN—There is a plan in place, you are saying, and it was not—

Mr Fraser—There is a very legal document.

Mr ORGAN—And you do not think it was followed at all during—

Mr Fraser—I do not think anyone bothered to read it.

Mr ORGAN—You are saying that it should have been followed, but for some reason it was not and that is one of the main reasons we had problems?

Mr Fraser—I would say a perfect example to highlight that was for that the first four days, from 8 January, firefighters in the Tallangatta valley were not fed. That is part of the responsibility of the welfare agencies. If I can just mention aggressiveness, because that is something that Stewart brought up, we seem to have a new type of fire that is supposed to understand firefighting between 9 a.m and 5 p.m. You cannot get aggressiveness under those conditions, and experience shows us that you get the best results with fires, in all sorts of conditions, by combating them at night.

Mr HAWKER—Can I endorse the comments of the other members of the committee and thank you all for the excellent work that you have done in making these submissions. Mr Simon Paton, in the foreword to *A case of burning neglect*, you make a comment:

To protect these people from unnecessary retaliation I have submitted the report over my name.

What did you mean by ‘unnecessary retaliation’?

Mr S. Paton—In some circumstances, the people who contributed to this report were employed by Victorian government agencies. These agencies have had little or no input into this inquiry and clearly still state that there was no sign of any problem with the DSE’s actions or Parks’ actions and in fact will not stand any criticism of the CFA as a body either. This head in the sand mentality meant that we would not submit this report to the Victorian inquiry. It also meant that we had to be careful because some of the contributors still work for the government and to get them out and expose them, unless they were in a situation like this or an in camera situation, would jeopardise their careers.

Mr HAWKER—Thank you.

Mr McARTHUR—Have you got any documentation of that?

Mr S. Paton—I could get you some if you need it.

Mr HAWKER—Also, on page 7, you talk about legal redress for negligence. Have you pursued that any further?

Somewhere in the stories recounted in this report lies the basis for legal redress ...

Has anything been done about that?

Mr S. Paton—*A case of burning neglect* has been sent to the Victorian coroner, and we have asked him for an inquiry into the fires. The coroner has written back and said that Bruce Esplin is giving him a preliminary report about the fires and that he therefore will not conduct an inquiry. So, from that point of view, we are waiting to see what the Esplin interim report to the coroner means to the coroner and then we will again ask him for an inquiry. We have said that we will take this to the Supreme Court, which is our right, and demand an inquiry.

There is going to be litigation about the neglect, the criminal negligence, the exposure—whatever you like to call it—of the bodies in charge of running the forests. Quite obviously, from the Stretton report, they failed to manage the forests, so somewhere there is a degree of

negligence. We will be watching this carefully. When you get to Omeo and talk to the boys from Swifts Creek and around the track, I think you will find that some of them are already investigating how this will be handled and what case studies they are going to use to prove negligence—and we will be supporting them in every way we can.

Mr HAWKER—On page 15, you cite an amazing case:

A ... farmer's wife began delivering food to a fire crew which had not been fed all day. She was ordered to stop ...

Who ordered her to stop?

Mr S. Paton—This sort of farcical black comedy of errors continued right along the whole fire front. There was some regulation attached to having to prepare food in a prescribed kitchen. It is a food regulation or a health and safety regulation or yet another regulation. The fact that people were actually starving to death did not appear to be an issue.

Mr SCHULTZ—The CWA is irrelevant now.

Mr S. Paton—Apparently. They did not take it seriously in our case; they just kept putting their heads down and getting into it. In one case one cove was removed by two very large firemen, who lent into his vehicle, started the engine for him and pointed him out of town. He did not reappear, but a lot of others did. We had a ridiculous circumstance in our own little gully: when the pine forest which blocks the bottom entrance finally burnt and people could get egress again, the first person to drive in there had lunch from the local CWA for the firefighters, and she was breathalysed at 10.30 in the morning in the nuclear winter by an enthusiastic policeman—complete with jodhpurs and pointy hat—who had turned up for review in a very smart looking car from Wangaratta. It is not one incident of stupidity; it compounds itself. It was like living in a very nasty French farce for 60 days. This report unfortunately does not exaggerate it; it does not even make it large enough to be real yet, but he certainly tried hard, and I give him a lot of thanks.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I say to you at the outset that this report, *A case of burning neglect*, is something that is reminiscent of many of the stories that this committee has heard not only here in Victoria but also in New South Wales. It gives you an indication of the mentality and the philosophy of these agencies, which in my view are running out of control. I want to pick up a couple of points in that report. Some of my parliamentary colleagues have very astutely picked up a couple of the questions I wanted to ask. The last sentence of the third paragraph of page 23 of the report reads:

Volunteer crews from NSW vowed not to return if future bushfires were managed in the same way.

I think that comment was made in relation to the levels of bureaucracy or the different levels of firefighting skills that were available in that crisis. Would somebody like to elaborate on that?

Mr S. Paton—Yes, I am sure Brian would. We had a report at the Tallangatta meeting on that.

Mr Fraser—That was a statement very clearly made at the Tallangatta meeting by the captain of the Culcairn fire brigade. He was horrified when he came over after being asked for support at

the Eldorado fire. The treatment he got was just abysmal. Those were his comments: unless something changes, they will never come back.

Mr SCHULTZ—The first major paragraph of page 26 of your report refers to an incident where a former deputy group fire officer and professional earth mover offered assistance in the form of his bulldozer and his labour free of charge to assist the fire control effort. He was told that he was not required. When he asked what job they would give him, he said it would be ‘running errands and washing cars’. Would you like to make a comment on that particular issue?

Mr Fraser—I missed the first bit of your remarks, but that particular person was a deputy group officer in my group for some considerable years. He was a very experienced fireman and an earthmoving contractor who had two very efficient machines. Everything you said was right. Subsequently both those machines were used in the Tallangatta Valley and Mitta area. In fact, I think it should go on record that he himself and his son volunteered the services of those machines to farmers in the Tallangatta Valley and Mitta area for the cost of diesel only. He is not very keen about the sort of treatment he received after all those years he served with the CFA.

Mr SCHULTZ—So he was a very experienced bulldozer driver—as was his son—and he was a local who knew the terrain, but his offer of assistance was knocked back?

Mr Fraser—That is correct. When I talk about experience, he was a deputy group officer in my time as group officer. He and I fought considerable fires in both Victoria and New South Wales and he was a first-class operator in all circumstances.

Mr SCHULTZ—I have been told by my Victorian colleague here that the DSE is the Department of Sustainability and Environment, which triggers a little bit of light-hearted thought in me. In one of the comments made by a Callaghans Creek volunteer on page 19, it says ‘The DSE seemed reluctant to fight a fire in the bush for “safety” reasons.’ Can you elaborate on why that DSE employee would be making that sort of comment?

Mr M. Paton—I will have a go at that. We were confronted with that very circumstance when we went and had a look at where the fire was running. It was after it had been through and incinerated the Dart and was heading back north-west in our direction. Nobody could see for smoke. The radio reports were pretty general and so we took it upon ourselves to go in through the forest tracks to have a look and see where the fire was. At that stage it was some 20 kilometres from us. It was just floating down a little ridge and the forest track was putting it out. It was stopping it.

When we got home we had a meeting with the DSE person, who had a plan. He did admit that he had come straight from Mount Beauty. We questioned the detail of his plan. We said we had just been up there and that you could put the fire out and he said, ‘We are not risking lives.’ But he had not been there. He had no idea what he was talking about. As Johnny Scales and various people have mentioned time and time again, there was an opportunity. The weather was favourable for attacking the fire, but there was just this blanket approach of ‘we cannot lose lives.’

Mr SCHULTZ—Would I be correct in saying that some of these paid employees of the state that were there, supposedly to help put the fires out, were actually telling fibs about what they did and did not do and about what the state of a particular fire was?

Mr M. Paton—I do not think that they had anyone in to look at the fire. That is all I could conclude because his information was ridiculous compared to what we had just seen. That did not do much for our confidence in the plan, and that sort of thing rolled on everywhere you went. I do not blame the guy. He was doing what he was told, but it did not relate to what was happening.

Mr SCHULTZ—You may not be surprised to know that we have picked up the issue of the nine to five mentality interstate as well. In one section of this report—and I cannot remember which page it was on, because I have marked so many very interesting points in the report—one paid employee made the boast that he had earned \$3,600 for a week's work. What sort of impression does that give volunteers and what sort of impact on the morale of volunteers do those sorts of statements make? Can I elaborate a little further by asking how volunteers feel when you have those sorts of people in the bar of a hotel, as has been described here, at 9.15 in the morning drinking pots of beer?

Mr Scales—I think I can answer that—and I probably would have liked to have had Bluey with me when it happened. It did create huge animosity between volunteers and workers. But fortunately—and I say 'fortunately' because a few of the blokes up there are fairly rough and tough—they were men enough to just keep on with the job and push it aside.

Mr SCHULTZ—Finally, on that particular point, how much did that sort of attitude contribute to the fires not being as effectively and quickly got on top of as they could have been? I am asking that in the context of some of the crews taking four hours to change over a particular shift et cetera.

Mr Scales—It probably did not have that much impact on it. Most of the local firefighters involved had a fair bit at stake, and they were going to go in regardless of what other circumstances were around them. The comments were not forgotten, they were always in the back of their minds, but I did not see anybody actually physically throw anyone into a fire. We were all very aware of what the consequences were if we did not do our jobs, and that was foremost in our minds, I guess. While I am on that, the fire would have burned for seven or eight days had it not been for the local input and the fact that four farmers—three others and me—who were directly affected knew what the outcome of the fire could have been. I am talking about the Razorback fire now. We knew what the possible impact of it was, whereas DSE and Parks Victoria seemed to be just passing it off as another fire. Indeed, it was not until the fire reached something like 10,000 hectares that they realised the enormity of what the outcomes might be. If it had not been for the local input and the very fact that we held the fire and slowed the fire down, the Dartmouth township would probably have burnt to a cinder a week earlier.

Mr SCHULTZ—You do not have to convince me or, I believe, this committee about the commitment of the local volunteers. But the point I was getting to was that, if the nine to five mentality had not been there and the administration had been efficient to the point where you did not have the four-hour turnover for exchange of crews, they would have been fighting alongside

the volunteers. Wouldn't that have had an enormous impact on the outcome in terms of putting out the fire?

Mr Scales—Yes, it would have had an enormous impact on putting out the fire and it would have had an enormous impact on the morale of the fellows who were around.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you.

Mr Fraser—I think one of the famous statements was that a departmental person said to a volunteer, 'I didn't go to university for four years to be told how to do things by a volunteer.' This just is one of the keys to the whole thing: local knowledge and experience were completely ignored.

Mr Evans—Mr Hawker asked Simon about the litigation issue. Volunteers have been questioning the Victorian government for quite a number of years regarding section 92 of the CFA Act which provides indemnity protection for volunteers. It is interesting to note that, since the fires and the autumn sitting of parliament, section 92 of the CFA Act has been altered to incorporate 'acting in good faith' rather than the grey area of the interpretation of 'negligence'.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mr Evans—Thank you very much for allowing us to speak today.

CHAIR—We will have to draw it to close there, I am afraid.

Mr Bettles—Mr Chairman, can I table this document?

CHAIR—We will need to decide on that later. Thank you once again for your evidence today and for your submissions. I meant to say at the outset that the submission entitled *A case of burning neglect* is very comprehensive and the fact that residents have gone to the trouble of putting together a document like that and effectively employing somebody to write it shows how committed people are to getting some answers and some results out of the tragedy that occurred. Thank you again.

Mr S. Paton—Thank you very much from all of us. Thank you to the committee for your time. We honestly owe a big debt to Tony Cutcliffe and the Eureka Foundation for having the ability to put this into a report which makes as much sense as it does.

Proceedings suspended from 1.01 p.m. to 1.43 p.m.

BRIGGS, Mr John Linton, Executive Councillor, North Eastern Apiarists Association Victoria Inc.

McPHERSON, Mr Philip Blair, President, North Eastern Apiarists Association Victoria Inc.

PAPWORTH, Mrs Elwynne, Secretary, North Eastern Apiarists Association Victoria Inc.

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

Mr Briggs—I live at Glenrowan, where my family is engaged in grazing livestock and commercial beekeeping. I represent the North Eastern Apiarists Association at this hearing, as do my colleagues.

Mrs Papworth—I am a commercial apiarist. I represent both the North Eastern Apiarists Association and the state's peak body, the Victorian Apiarists Association.

Mr McPherson—I am a mixed farmer and commercial beekeeper from Wunghnu, which is north of Shepparton in the Golden Valley. I am presently the President of the North Eastern Apiarists Association and have commercial bee site interests in the burnt forest area.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. We have your submission, which was authorised for publication and therefore forms part of the evidence for this committee. We also have two other documents that you have provided us with today, which ultimately will be accepted by the committee as well. Having said that, would you like to make some opening remarks before we proceed to questions from the committee?

Mr Briggs—I will lead off, Mr Chairman. First of all, as you would have noted in the submission, the commercial beekeeping industry is somewhat off the mainstream of ordinary primary production. It is geared very much to the flowering characteristics of our native flora, particularly eucalypts, in this state. Something like 85 per cent dependency on that flora is a fact of life for us. I will briefly address the main focus of the submission, and my colleagues might like to add something to that. We heard this morning from some witnesses that the fire event which occurred in north-eastern Victoria this summer was not a natural phenomenon. I understand where that comment is coming from and I understand the hurt and the passion we saw exhibited on the floor so graphically this morning.

I might take you back a little in the years of my lifetime concerning wildfire. My first experience was in 1939, Black Friday, when as a very young person I saw my father, a police officer, seconded to lead a task force in the Woods Point area in Victoria dealing with the fires and dealing with the aftermath of the fires. I saw the mark that that left on him, particularly in

terms of the management of bodies after the event. My point is that that event occurred when the landscape was thoroughly dried out through drought, and the dynamics that come together and forge wildfire were very much exhibited then: dry forest floor, dry crowns, high temperature and high wind velocities.

I now go to 1967-68, when I witnessed in Tasmania the eruption of the holocaust that developed in that state that summer. Again, it is your hardwood eucalypt forests, somewhat wetter in climate than our forests in north-east Victoria, but the drought really bit deeply in that state at that time and created those conditions again where high temperature and high wind velocity created such havoc. I draw your attention to the practice of the farming community in that state up to that time where regularly through the summer months and in the autumn the forests were burned to exercise fuel reduction and that sort of thing. Even though those forests at that time obviously had been burned for many decades in that fashion and had reduced fuel—and the evidence was there in all the *obliquas*, the messmate eucalypts, with fires scars on them through the trunks and that sort of thing—it did not prevent the impact of that serious wildfire on those communities. I talk about Sandy Bay, Snug, Kettering and all those places that suffered so badly.

I then go to 1982-83, another severe drought. Once again those dynamics came together to forge the wildfire of that period. Again I was involved in that particular holocaust, which resulted in a lot of human lives lost. I was agisting some of my cattle in the Little Yarra Valley at Powelltown and had first-hand experience of that particular event. Again it was a demonstration that wildfire bushfires will always be a part of this Australian environment, at least the south-eastern part. We must accept that, and we must do our best to mitigate those effects, as one of your principal terms of reference indicates.

I come now to 2002-03: again there was a very severe drought and again there was the incidence of wildfire. Certainly, as our CFA representative said this morning, it could have been a heck of a lot worse. We had very little wind; the conditions were really benevolent. As you would have read in our submission, every bush person in north-eastern Victoria knew that, if the spot fires caused by that very unusual lightning event were not contained in that remote country, there was going to be trouble and we were going to be very lucky to get away with it.

While I am speaking, I would like to pay tribute to the CFA and their volunteers. They have done a magnificent job over the years, and a lot of the commonsense that came through in their discussion this morning was noted by our industry representatives. I know that the select committee will take those things on board and evaluate them very carefully.

The main focus of the submission is to discuss the dynamics that lead to wildfire, for example, but also perhaps to look beyond the passion, beyond the hurt and beyond the recrimination to how we can do the job better as far as protecting life and property is concerned, because that is what it is all about in the end. So we look at that and we look at the issue of fuel reduction and one or two things that we can do as a community to try to make things better. I will hand over to Mr McPherson.

Mr McPherson—My specialty in the discussion will be mainly the Mount Pilot, Beechworth and Chiltern area. We have had commercial bee sites in that area now for approximately 20 years; my family has been beekeeping for some 50 years in north-eastern Victoria, and we work

other areas in the ranges as well. The association has put together some figures, which you have been presented with, on the cost to our industry from these fires over the next 10 to 20 years. Our concerns are whether we will receive any assistance from government or anyone to support our losses, and ways of averting this situation from occurring again in the future.

Mrs Papworth—My credentials are that I am a second-generation honey producer. My family has around 70 years experience in the industry. We work New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria in our enterprise. We are not only honey producers but also pollinators. I am on the North Eastern Apiarists Association as secretary but I am also an executive councillor for the Victorian Apiarists Association.

I feel for the people who have been speaking this morning because, while I am sitting here as an apiarist, our business has suffered four times, with fire loss in the Ngarkat National Park in South Australia, in the Hattah Kulkyne National Park in north-west Victoria in the Mallee Region, and twice in the red gum area, once in the Jerilderie area and the other time along the Murray River near Deniliquin, losing quite a lot of apiary in some instances and the whole lot twice.

The Victorian Apiarists Association have not been able to bring together the paperwork which the North Eastern Apiarists Association was able to present to you, with the figures of detriment and the cost to the industry which we foreshadow. This is not only in the loss of honey production but also in the wider community for the extra pollination services and in the economic benefit to the community work-wise et cetera. In my capacity as executive councillor, I wonder whether the select committee might give my peak body extra time to get some more figures together to be able to give you more of a guesstimate of the cost of the very extensive loss of beekeeping areas in the north-western area of the banksia country, which may not come online again for at least 10 years.

The ability to pick up apiary and go somewhere else is not possible because we do have constraints within the regulatory system of the parks and forests within the states. When national parks are declared, there is a certain amount of bee sites within those parks. They then go from an annual site to a temporary site, and no more sites are available. We have the restricted areas of buffer zones around wilderness areas, flora reserves and so on, which we are not allowed to use. We have access to state ordinary forestry, but almost every commercial beekeeper has permanent bee sites, which they maintain constantly in order to keep their business running on an ongoing basis.

Mr Briggs mentioned the cycle of flowering trees. We do not go to the same place every year; two, three, five, sometimes 11 years pass before we visit the same area. With the restrictions on access to the sites that were lost in the fires in the north-east, at this particular stage, the loss is enormous to the industry. While some people may be able to get a little private land somewhere else, a lot of beekeepers who rely completely on the bush system itself cannot replace those bee sites in the near future at all.

CHAIR—Thank you. If you could have that additional information to the committee within the next few weeks, that would be useful.

Mrs Papworth—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—The hearings will continue for another couple of weeks in the rest of Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia. That sort of information on costs is an aspect of the terms of reference and therefore we would welcome that additional information. Thank you to the North Eastern Apiarists Association for the costings that have been done for the region. It is good to get some information that finetunes some of the costs to various industries. We appreciate that.

Mr ORGAN—In section 4.15 of your submission you talk about frequent reduction burns in areas of forest where eucalypts are budded having the potential to impact on your production. I am wondering if you have in place any process whereby you have links with the volunteer fire brigades and so on as to what areas are being burned or not. Also, when you talk about the areas of forest which your industry needs, are you referring to large areas or small pockets of eucalypts or specific pockets that are regularly used which could almost be quarantined from some of those frequent fire regimes? Could you give me a feel for what you mean on a detailed level in regard to that?

Mr Briggs—Once you come down from the tropics area, all eucalypt forest systems in Australia and woodland systems that are located on private property are utilised at some time or another by the commercial beekeeping industry. The industry is highly mobile, and has to be because of the sporadic nature of the flowering characteristics of eucalypts. Very rarely do you see a eucalypt species carry bud and flower in successive years. Our research shows that on average in Victoria one year in three becomes a general flowering year in a particular eucalypt species. Drought, obviously wildfire and other things can get in the road of that and stagger those frequencies even further apart. But because there is such a huge range of eucalypt species in Australia—in north-eastern Victoria there are about 24 or 25 species that are useful to beekeepers—they are monitored very closely by the industry.

Fortunately, most of the eucalypt species put on new growth in response to soil moisture and precipitation, put on bud on that new growth in a particular season—usually late spring to early summer—and then flower the following season. The industry become very finely tuned to these flowering characteristics of eucalypts. They watch for growth and budding wherever rain has gone through country, and they are able to plan their movements for the following season sometimes 12 months, and sometimes even further, ahead.

Mr ORGAN—What I am trying to get is a feel for the hazard reduction regimes that are currently in place, for example—do they impact on your industry?

Mr Briggs—I missed the first part of your question, I am sorry.

Mr ORGAN—I am just wondering if your industry has had ongoing discussions with the CFA with regard to the impact that some of their firefighting regimes may have on your industry. That is one part of the question. The other part is: do these normal firefighting regimes, such as five- to seven-year hazard reduction burning cycles et cetera, have an impact on your industry, or is it mainly the wildfire disaster events like we have seen?

Mr Briggs—The issue you raise is so important that we do maintain very close contact with our department responsible for forest management, currently the DSE. In that situation, we evaluate country and we notice there is a budding on, for example, *Eucalyptus macrorhyncha*—red stringy-bark—which is a tree that normally flowers once every four years for about a six-

week or two-month period. It is a tree which flowers about 14 months after bud. So we are able to say to our departmental people, 'Here is a eucalypt which may be our only crop next year. We notice that the fuel reduction burning program may impinge on some of that crop resource. Can we do something about bending the program around that particular flowering and burn next year instead of this year?' and that sort of thing.

We have found the department very accommodating in that regard. We also, as a result of that consultation, sit down with the department and have a look at three-year projections for fuel reduction burning, bearing in mind of course that the department, with less than, I think, adequate resources—in consideration of the community's concern about the amount of control burning that goes on—is in a difficult position. Its charter is to protect life and property around the edges. That is about where it rests. It is a delicate balancing process to get it right in terms of community expectations and that sort of thing. I am not making excuses for the department, but that is a fact of life.

It is my view that we will never get back to the pre-European forest estate in terms of fuel loads. I do not think we can expect that to happen. We can have a go but, in order to have a go, it would be a requirement of the community at large to say, 'Here are the resources to do it'—infrastructure, capital, manpower or whatever. But the window of opportunity is so small and the estate is so large that, as far as trying to mimic the forest landscape we had before the Europeans arrived in Australia goes, the mind boggles. There are many reasons why that landscape has changed since, which most of us are familiar with. Yes, we do cooperate with the department, and that cooperation has served the industry well over the years.

Mr SCHULTZ—Are you in favour of controlled hazard reduction burns?

Mr Briggs—Yes, we are in favour of that.

Mr SCHULTZ—On page 7 of your submission, in paragraph 4.16, you refer to:

... a build up of fuel over vast areas of conserved and reserved forest that never would have occurred during pre European settlement.

You say:

In some areas of the north east forest estate, fuel has been accumulating on the forest floor since the fires of 1939, a period of 64 years.

Are you trying to highlight the fact that, because there was no hazard reduction burn there, the fuel built up to the extent where massive intense heat was generated through, for example, the 2003 fires and, as a result of the massive intense heat accumulating from that fuel build-up, seed stock or the flowering process of eucalyptus was detrimentally affected?

Mr Briggs—Certainly in the remoter areas of the north-eastern forest estate, where there has obviously not been any structured controlled burning and where there have been no naturally occurring fires, there has been an accumulation of fuel. That of course represents a hazard of considerable proportions. But how do you deal with that? How do you deal with that, given the situation we have today where there are inadequate resources to stretch right across the estate

and do the job and where management practices have closed off some tracks and access to that type of country? In our submission we go further and suggest ways and means by which we can perhaps improve that situation.

Speaking of fuel loads that have built up over 64 years, I could take you this evening, if it were not too wet, to country where there are fuel loads that have built up over 100 years on the forest floor—that includes the Black Friday episode and all that sort of thing. Even in a drier sclerophyll forest type, those sorts of fuel loads are there. I come back to the point I made earlier: if the community wants to see greater attention to fuel reduction, then it has to share some of the responsibility for that by providing resources—capital, manpower, infrastructure and whatever else it takes. I will leave it at that and perhaps come back to that particular point a little later on.

Mr SCHULTZ—So you are in essence saying that, because there are areas that have had fuel build up for 100 years the community—that is, the taxpayer—should be making resources available so that controlled, ecologically sustainable fuel burn-off can be undertaken to reduce that fuel load, with a view to your industry being able to access the appropriate flowering stages of eucalypt at some stage. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Briggs—I am not sure about the latter part of your question, but certainly I come back to the point that, if the community has an expectation that the job should be done better, the community needs to provide the resources.

Mrs Papworth—Most of the area referred to there is country that is inaccessible to us. We could not get in there, and so it would not be an advantage to our industry.

Mr SCHULTZ—So that is just a general comment?

Mrs Papworth—Just a generalisation, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Mr McPherson, I noticed in the Victorian Apiarist Association submission that in your recommendation under other matters you say that you have given notice to the Victorian government that you are seeking damages from them because of the fire. That is the way that I read it. Why would you get some consideration from the Victorian government, when other land-holders—and some of them have just given evidence to this committee—are not getting any consideration because of the fires?

Mr McPherson—At the moment, to put bees on public lands you are required to apply for a licence. The licence gives you a site and a circle of country approximately 1.6 kilometres in radius around that bee site, for which you have to pay a license fee. The license fees are quite considerable. They vary depending on the area inside that circle, which is under the control of the state government. They can vary in price from \$60 to \$110 or \$115 per annum. As stated in our submission, there are 29 sites in the Beechworth forest area for a start—which is the area that I am specifically covering—that have been completely burnt out and, by our estimations, will possibly be unusable for the next 10 years. At present, if we are to retain those bee sites for the longer term, we will be required to pay that licence fee for that 10-year period, and that will add up to a considerable amount. What we are asking is that the state government waiver some

or all of that fee, in order to assist us, therefore allowing us to maybe access forest elsewhere, while still retaining those sites for our use when the forest does return.

Mr McARTHUR—Under what precedent would you be asking this favour of the government, when the government will not repair fences or recompense private land owners for damage that Parks, as alleged by some witnesses, caused to their private landholdings?

Mr McPherson—I will give you an example: in the north-western division of Victoria, in mallee country, fees for burnt out bee sites are completely waived until those sites are returned to some sort of production. In that country, it would possibly take five to 10 years anyway, as mallee does regenerate a bit faster than mountain timber. What we are looking for is something in the order of a percentage reduction in our fees—if not a complete waiver—for that period of time, to help us get through that period.

Mr McARTHUR—Mr Briggs, does reduction burning affect the activities of apiarists?

Mr Briggs—Fuel reduction burning?

Mr McARTHUR—Yes.

Mr Briggs—If the burn becomes too hot—in other words, if the heat from the burning of fuel on the floor does actually reach the crowns—then it will affect the young and tender budding that is on that new growth. That budding, I remind you, is due to flower next year. That is when it is at its most vulnerable. So that is why we sit down with the department and say, ‘Look, is it possible to burn around that provenance of red stringy bark,’ or blue gum or narrow leaf peppermint or whatever, ‘this year and burn it next year as part of the strategic fuel reduction program?’ Obviously, if I go through country where the trees are actually flowering, it has the same effect, if the crowns are scorched.

In the current fires, where we have estimated that perhaps 20 per cent—apart from the Mount Pilot region—was subject to high intensity burn, we expect that all of that country will be lost for 10 years of production. But regarding the other 80 per cent of the estate and those places where it was budded well for flowering next year, in terms of the species *Eucalyptus radiata* or narrow leaf peppermint and *St. Johnii* or St John’s blue gum, some of those crowns are not scorched. We are hoping like crazy that maybe there is some potential still left there for next year’s crop. We are not hopeful, because a lot of that bud is already on the floor of the forest because of the trauma of the heat. I trust that that answers your question. If it has not, come back to me.

Mr McARTHUR—I just want to be clear: are you in favour of reduction burning or are you not?

Mr Briggs—I am absolutely in favour. It is a policy of the association that—

Mr McARTHUR—But you seem to have some caveats on it: you seem to be in favour of it just when it might suit you.

Mr Briggs—No. Wildfire does not do anybody any good—you, me or Mr and Mrs Smith down the street. So we support fuel reduction burning to reduce the hazard of wildfire. We say then that in the controlled burning program—

Mr McARTHUR—You say that unequivocally?

Mr Briggs—Absolutely.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you. It has taken a bit to get to that stage.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and for that additional information. We really appreciate that and we welcome the additional information you spoke about earlier. All of that information together has been very useful and will be very useful in our further deliberations as part of this inquiry. We thank you for your time and the effort that you have put into that and also for the information that you are going to provide.

[2.17 p.m.]

BLACK, Dr Dennis, Convenor, Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre

DUNCAN, Ms Susie, Woodlands Ecologist, The Wilderness Society

CHAIR—Welcome. I know that you were both here before when I read the statement with respect to evidence, so I will not reread that. The committee has a submission from each of your organisations. Both those submissions have been authorised for publication, so they are now on the public record and are part of the evidence that the committee will use as part of its deliberations. Would you each like to make some brief opening remarks, before I give the committee the opportunity to ask some questions?

Dr Black—In addition to being convenor at the environment centre, I am also a lecturer in the Department of Environmental Management and Ecology at the La Trobe University campus here in Wodonga. My research interests there have to do mainly with soil and litter invertebrates and relate particularly to events such as grazing, introduced pest species, firewood collection and fire, which cause disturbance to those communities involving soil and litter invertebrates.

My particular experience with fire is that I have supervised a PhD student who worked in Dandenong Ranges National Park looking at the effects of fuel reduction burning on terrestrial invertebrates there. I also had undergraduate students in February this year working at Mount Buffalo National Park. Of necessity, they had to do fire related projects at Mount Buffalo. I am personally involved in post fire monitoring around the Falls Creek area in the Alpine National Park, through the Centre for Applied Ecological Research at the main campus of La Trobe University. My particular role there is to monitor the effects on the terrestrial invertebrates of the recent fires. I teach in the alpine ecology course out of Howmans Gap in January. I actually had a group of students from that course out at Timms Spur above Falls Creek the day that the major lightning storm came through. We actually witnessed a couple of the fires being initiated through lightning strike.

There are four main points I would like to make now in relation to the submission from the environment centre. The first one is that after the recent fires there was a lot of antienvironmentalist rhetoric and also a lot of public criticism of government employees in the media, particularly Parks managers, and I personally feel that a lot of that was unfair and quite unwarranted. Secondly, after the recent fires I also think that there were claims that the extent of the damage was much more extensive than it actually was—not geographically, but in terms of effects locally. I think that in many cases those claims were grossly exaggerated. My own personal experience going into some of those burnt areas tells me that.

Thirdly, relating more to my particular area of expertise, I think there is a danger that future fuel reduction programs might become a bit overzealous, in an attempt to compensate for alleged deficiencies in previous management approaches. I think that this could be extremely ecologically harmful, if it occurs. The soil and litter organisms which I study are really critical aspects of the health of forest ecosystems. That is summarised by E. O. Wilson, a well-known Harvard biologist and biodiversity specialist who refers to invertebrates as ‘the little things that

run the world.’ They are critically involved in the decompositional and nutrient recycling processes. They are essential components of food webs, and they have lots of other very fundamental roles such as seed dispersal and soil aeration. I think it is very important that we use ecological burns when fuel reduction is necessary. We are only just beginning to understand the nature of what ecologically sustaining burning is.

My final point is, I think, pretty obvious: we need much more research, particularly in the area of fire ecology. Both state and federal governments need to provide funding for that research. There have been some very recent positive developments, such as the establishment of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, but the effectiveness of such efforts is going to be very dependent on future government support. Thank you.

CHAIR—Ms Duncan, would you like to make any opening remarks?

Ms Duncan—Firstly, I would like to say that we were requested to share this slot, but we represent two different organisations. Though we may have some complementary material, we have not produced our submissions in concert in any way. I would like to present evidence on behalf of the Wilderness Society, quite separate from what Dennis has presented.

CHAIR—We have done that with numerous witnesses. If you look at the huge number of submissions that we have, in various situations we have had groups of people—

Ms Duncan—That is fine. I just want to make it clear that we are not a tag team.

CHAIR—No; that is understood.

Ms Duncan—Fine. I have worked on forests and woodlands as a biologist for the past 20 years, and I have undertaken considerable flora and fauna work both in north-east Victoria and East Gippsland, so I have a good understanding of the ecology of these systems. I have had experience in firefighting both in Victoria and interstate. I was intimately involved with the fires this last summer. Parts of my family in four different locations were threatened by the fires last summer so I am very aware of the difficulties faced by the community in regard to the fires.

A strong focus of the Wilderness Society’s submission was fuel reduction burning, simply because that was such a key part of the informal debate that went on—particularly in the media—at the time and after the fires. The important thing we would like to see come out of this whole process is a scientific approach to something like fuel reduction burning. We cannot just be working on sentiment; we need to use all available expertise in fire ecology and fire behaviour—the people who understand how the dynamics work—to develop some sort of strategy that is going to be sustainable in the long term, that can be resourced, that is achievable and that is going to achieve the protection of both human assets and our biodiversity.

There is a tendency to think that they are opposite or conflicting values or aims, but they do not need to be. Dennis has touched on some aspects of that in terms of ecological studies that are underway right now. The Chiltern National Park, which is right where I live, has quite a lot of fire ecology trialling going on, and that has been going on for some years. There is a great opportunity here to look at how that fire ecology understanding can be merged with needs for

fire protection. There may be some cases where it does merge, but we need to make the most use we can of those opportunities.

Because there has been so much emphasis on fuel reduction burning there has been a tendency to ignore a lot of other issues. You as a panel will know a lot more about everything else that has been presented to you in recent times—I do not know what else people have been raising—but that has somewhat clouded issues such as the actual ignition sources for fires. We know lightning occurs. It is one of those things that we are not able to control, but we can control accidental and arson events. It is not that easy, but they are issues that need to be addressed. I have discussed that in the submission. I think that does require some attention. Any sort of practice that exacerbates the intensity and extent of fires needs to be taken into account. That includes things like the configuration of pine plantations in relation to human settlement. Canberra was a key example where, although the fires started in native forest, the pine plantation flammability did exacerbate and contribute to the problem. Those sorts of exacerbating factors need to be considered.

Ultimately, as I am sure you have already considered to some degree, there are the strategies employed by agencies and property owners to contain fires. As a property owner and having so many relatives in risky settings last summer, I learned a lot about fireproofing property, as I think a lot of people did. It is very important that the educational aspect does come into what proceeds from this inquiry. Certainly what has happened between agencies—dialogue, planning and all those things—is very critical too. The volunteers and professionals—whether DSE, the New South Wales parks service or the CFA—need to start working together very closely before the season gets under way in any particular year.

I will just emphasise what Linton mentioned earlier on. The recent fires were severe and extensive. The conditions were extreme. It is one of those events that occur every so often. We had extremely dry conditions in the three years leading up to this summer. The high temperatures were sustained throughout summer. There were high wind speeds, low relative humidity and an unusual number of lightning strikes that were not followed by rain. All those factors made controlling those fires very challenging.

In summary, I believe we need to look widely at preventative measures and fire suppression measures, which are going to improve the wellbeing of the community and the environment in similar seasons in the future. There may be two sets of issues here: how we manage fire in average seasons and how we manage it in particularly bad seasons. It appeared to me that the factors that arose last summer were far more challenging than any we have known for some years, and you cannot expect the same management processes to work equally well at different levels of risk.

CHAIR—Thank you for those opening statements. The Wilderness Society submission states in part:

From our observations, fuel-reduction burning is sometimes carried out more frequently and extensively in National Parks in Victoria than in State forests, possibly because more resources are available for management of this land tenure.

The overwhelming evidence that has been put to this committee says the complete opposite to that. Can you provide me with more information as to why you would make that statement?

Ms Duncan—The submission included a local example. The Chiltern National Park was formed in 1996. Prior to that it had been a regional park and before that it had been a state forest. Until 1996, fuel reduction burning was not carried out or was carried out very infrequently in that park. Since 1996, it has been burnt each season, in the autumn, to reduce fuel hazard—particularly to the adjacent town. I have spent a lot of time in the Killawarra forest in the last few years. That is to the north of the Warby Ranges and has recently changed status. In the 10 or more years since 1991, there had been no fuel reduction burning. The reason I put those two examples in was that they are ecologically very similar forests. They are box-ironbark forests—predominantly ironbark. They have similar fuel loads and similar understoreys. This, to me, was a key example of two very similar forest types being managed very differently. Whether this is to do with the resourcing that Parks had or pressure from the community or what, I do not know. I am not saying how that has arisen, but that is the reality of what is happening there.

CHAIR—So the statement that you make is based on that one example?

Ms Duncan—That is one example. I have quite a network of friends working around Mount Buffalo and the Alpine National Park who are very involved in fuel reduction burning programs each season. From what I have gleaned from them, there are regular burning programs, which are both strategic and ecological. They are strategic for asset protection as well as for ecological reasons. They are under a lot of pressure to carry those out within—Linton may have already mentioned this—the limited opportunities each season. In fact, rangers and other DSE staff have told me that in the last season there were probably four days in which they could effectively and safely carry out fuel reduction burning. So my understanding of fuel reduction burning in parks is that there is a deliberate policy and there is a strong intent—if only, if you want to be as cynical as possible, because of community pressure—to ensure that fuel reduction burning is carried out frequently in parks.

CHAIR—So you would not accept the volumes of submissions that argue very strongly—

Ms Duncan—Could you give me an example of a situation that was cited to you?

CHAIR—I am not answering questions; I am asking them.

Ms Duncan—Yes, but I cannot respond to that if you are asking me to give an answer about something which I do not have an example of.

CHAIR—I have drawn your attention to the evidence before the committee. There are 450-odd submissions, I could list numerous submissions. Maybe I should put it this way: have you had a look at the submissions that have been made?

Ms Duncan—I have not had access to the submissions.

CHAIR—In which case it is unfair of me to ask you whether you agree or disagree, I guess. I am just raising the point that there are numerous examples and quite a substantial part of the evidence provided argues very strongly that fuel reduction burning has reduced dramatically in those areas that have been transferred from state forest to national parks, and that is in conflict with your point.

Ms Duncan—Could I respond to that? My experience in East Gippsland in north-east Victoria—and I have been involved in doing Wildlife’s flora and fauna surveys in both of those areas since the early 1980s—is that, whenever areas have been committed to parks, a fuel reduction burning program has been implemented as soon as they have been made parks. Many areas of state forest that I have worked in, in response to prelogging surveys in East Gippsland, were not burnt at the same frequency that I was seeing in parks, and that is an on ground observation. I think that this is where anecdotal stuff needs to be substituted with scientific information: what do we know, and what are the records of extent and frequency of fuel reduction burning programs that have been carried out in parks and state forests?

Maybe what I could contribute to that is that in the fires last year something like 600,000 hectares of state forest were burnt and 500,000 hectares of national park were burnt. The Ash Wednesday fires in East Gippsland—the Cann River fires that burnt east for two weeks to the New South Wales border—burnt through state forest. Even though parks were a little to the north of that and the fires burnt into some of the national parks, that state forest burnt for two weeks. These two things have to be considered. What do we know? What are the facts of those burning programs that are undertaken and what are the results? Unless there is evidence that less is going on in national parks—which I do not believe—and that state forests are less susceptible to burning, then there is nothing to support the argument that Parks are exacerbating the fire intensity or the extent.

CHAIR—I accept your particular evidence. I was just drawing your attention to many other submissions arguing basically the opposite view. The committee will deal with that evidence as—

Ms Duncan—I am happy to stand out.

CHAIR—as we have received it.

Mr HAWKER—I was going to ask you a question on those two figures. We did get a summary of the fuel management program in Gippsland. The percentage treated annually, in 1999, I think, was 4.6 per cent—

Ms Duncan—Was that in 1999?

Mr HAWKER—Yes. At June 1999, I think, it was 4.6 per cent, and the average over the last 10 years was about half that. You stated that 500,000 hectares of national park and 600,000 hectares of state forest had been burnt: what percentage of national park and state forest do those figures represent?

Ms Duncan—Do you mean state wide?

Mr HAWKER—Yes.

Ms Duncan—I do not know off the top of my head.

Mr HAWKER—You were just saying that this was to show that—

Ms Duncan—There is more state forest than national park in the state. When I talk about national park; it is national park and conservation—

Mr HAWKER—Yes, but I am trying to get a percentage. You claimed, on the basis of those two figures, that the parks are not especially susceptible to fire, when compared to other land tenure. I am just trying to get the percentages.

Ms Duncan—I do not have the figures in front of me. I am happy to chase them up for you.

Mr HAWKER—I am just wondering how you drew that conclusion.

Ms Duncan—It depends what we are talking about. The wetter forest type is going to burn less than others. There is a mosaic of different vegetation types in the alpine area. The lightning strike started in the alpine area for reasons of topography: that lightning lands on the higher points, on rocky outcrops, and so on. It is very hard to measure. I am not sure of the question you are asking.

Mr HAWKER—You have drawn a conclusion, based on those two raw figures.

Ms Duncan—What I am saying is that both burn, and extensive areas of both burnt in the last set of fires. Given that most of the lightning strikes occurred at high points, which were in the alpine area, which were in national parks, they still burnt in state forests. That is not always the case. That is not the point I am making. The point I am making is that, once it got to the state forests, the fire did not stop burning—it kept burning.

Mr HAWKER—I am still trying to understand why you have drawn the conclusion:

This does not indicate that parks are especially susceptible to fire when compared with other land tenure ...

Ms Duncan—No, because they burnt and the state forests burnt. Maybe a better way for me to explain it is this: I believe the conditions in the last season—unlike those of the previous few years, although the previous year could have presented something similar—were so dire and so challenging that I have concerns that people should suggest that fuel reduction burning would have made a lot of difference to the control of those fires. I believe fuel reduction burning can deal with most average conditions, but the DSE, the CFA, volunteers, professionals and landowners have all said that last summer they saw fire burning on Pilot and surrounding areas on granitic outcrops and in paddocks that had no grass. There were cow turds with metre-high flames burning off them. There were incredible conditions that potentially could not have been stopped by any amount of fuel reduction burning.

That is why I feel there need to be two levels of looking at this: how do we manage for average years and how do we manage for exceptional years? There may be two sets of things we need to consider. Fuel reduction burning may never be the complete answer to an exceptional year, and that is why I think all the other fire protective measures, containment measures, ways to fireproof property and so on need to be considered alongside fuel reduction burning.

Mr HAWKER—Can we go on to fuel reduction burning. In your submission, you also state:

It must also be recognised that in forests, fuel-reduction burns reduce fuels to low levels for a short period of only 1-3 years after a burn.

How do you compare that with the CSIRO work done by Dr Phil Cheney? He suggests that a fuel reduction burn will have a positive effect on reducing the intensity of fire for considerably longer periods than one to three years.

Ms Duncan—It depends what forest type you are in.

Mr HAWKER—You have made a statement there that it is one to three years.

Ms Duncan—I can get you any amount of information out of this book, which provides a lot of academic information on fuel regimes in Australia. Basically, some forest types will deposit more litter than others. In our local Chiltern-Pilot area, we have dry forests that merge into woodlands. They tend to have a very rapid leaf drop afterwards. Some of the moister forest types have some resilience to fire and may be less inclined to drop as much, unless they have a particularly large amount of bark that will fall. It depends on what forest type you are looking at. One of the limits in the way people have been looking at this issue is that they are saying, 'We need to do the same thing everywhere.' You cannot do the same thing everywhere, because there are some inherent factors in forests that provide fire resistance.

We probably never could turn it into one uniform monoculture of flammable and quickly-seeding, turning over and regenerating forest, because the forest estate is so large. If we burnt the whole forest estate every few years or every two years or whatever, we would end up with a more flammable environment. We have to think about degrees and variations according to forest type and use the natural factors, including the invertebrates, as well as the bacteria and the fungi that are part of that decomposition process to reduce the fuel matter which is contributing to these major fire events.

Dr Black—Can I make one point relative to the work my student did in the Dandenong Ranges National Park. The rangers were routinely unable to measure the fuel loads due to lack of time. They simply could not do it. Because of that, they were burning on a regular basis and probably burning some areas of forest unnecessarily. That was simply because of lack of resources. That is a concern for me, because I think it can have a very detrimental effect on the health of those forests by reducing the biodiversity.

Mr HAWKER—I think we have heard a lot of submissions about the lack of resources, and you are reinforcing those. Could I move on to one other point in the submission?

Ms Duncan—Don't you like Dennis?

Mr HAWKER—Sorry, I was just going through this—

Ms Duncan—I am just joking. I am just trying to have a bit of light relief, for my sake if for no-one else's!

Mr HAWKER—Under the heading 'Maintaining tracks for fire access', you talked about the problems of maintaining biodiversity. You made one point, which I was a little curious about:

‘Biodiversity is also affected by roading’, arguing against having too many tracks. Then you said, ‘Weeds are introduced on vehicles’ and various other things. I am wondering what evidence you have that that is the major source of weeds. I suggest that the major source of weeds is birds and animals, including feral animals, because weeds have a great ability to attach their seeds to fur and all sorts of things. Is that not a higher priority?

Ms Duncan—If you look at the weeds that you see along forest tracks, there is a mixture—for example, blackberries, which things such as foxes and birds will readily move around. In our drier settings around Chiltern, you will see olives because a lot of birds will pick those up. But a large number of the weeds that you see on forest tracks are species that are not eaten. They do not have fruits; they do not have edible parts that will be transferred by mammals or birds. The most likely vector is going to be either vehicles or humans walking through picking stuff up on their boots and so on. There are a whole lot of seeding things that are not eaten by our native species.

Mr HAWKER—Which is the right balance when it comes to trying to control weeds—access or non-access? With things such as blackberries, non-access means they just get worse.

Ms Duncan—If you put a track through a bit of bush that has not had a track through it, you will bring weeds in that were not there.

Mr HAWKER—But if the weeds are already there—

Ms Duncan—The ecology here is that most weeds are suited to invasion of exposed soil, and that is what is created when you put a track through. You clear an area; you open up the soil. The best design for weeds is to make the most of those opportunities to become established. In bushland that has not got that soil disturbance—and this is the difficulty of talking in generics about things—particularly in wetter and damper forests where there is a dense shrub layer, usually the shrub layer and the ground layer complement each other to rarely provide those opportunities for weed species to establish. So it is along the tracks and things where you will always see a great infestation of weeds.

Mr HAWKER—But if the weeds are already there, why would you not want to have the tracks available?

Ms Duncan—They are where—on the tracks?

Mr HAWKER—If the weeds are already in the area, I am not quite sure why you are saying you should reduce the number of tracks. You only reduce the opportunity to get rid of the weeds or control them.

Ms Duncan—I am not sure in what context you are taking my words. What I was getting at were the situations, as I mentioned, of the gold areas where there has always been an enormous number of tracks, where some are superfluous to being able to manage fire and certainly are disadvantageous to the protection of biodiversity. Those areas can be rehabilitated. In places like Chiltern, the weed invasion level is very low because it has poor fertility and poor moisture. When you go into wetter forests, if you are doing rehabilitation there, any amount of native or indigenous vegetation that can get established will to some degree out-compete the weeds that

are there because they are given the opportunity. If a track is ripped then those native species can get established, but if a vehicle is going along it or it is being trimmed regularly then they cannot be reinstated in the native vegetation.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I have questions for both of you but I will start off with you, Susan, seeing that you are in full flight. You are the owner of a property, I gather from the evidence, and you have been in the area for 20 years.

Ms Duncan—No; that is not quite accurate. I grew up on a farm in southern Victoria. I have been coming to north-east Victoria since I was about four. I have been working in north-east Victoria as a biologist since the early eighties and other areas as well. I have been living in north-east Victoria for 4½ years.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You said that your family and relatives were involved in the fires in some way. What was the personal impact on them?

Ms Duncan—My brother is at Dargo; he has a property there. He was heavily involved in the firefighting effort through the whole area. He was mainly up in the High Plains for a large part of that. My father is retired. He is at Bright. He fought the 1939 fires when he lived at Buffalo Valley. He was not burnt out, but he was very close to being burnt out at that time. My partner's relatives live in south Wodonga, and for a while they were on stand-by. We were at Chiltern. They were the situations. I was at Bright for a bit over a week because my dad would not move out. I was making sure that his place was fire-safe and that, if it came to it, I could get him out or I could save his life, I guess. So it was a very direct contact with what was going on there.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could you outline for the committee your experience of National Parks management. You have alluded to that in some statement you made. You seem to say that, when these parks are declared, there is a program of fuel reduction burning immediately instituted and plans drawn up. What has been your experience with National Parks personnel in this regard?

Ms Duncan—In the past I worked within, as it once was, CNR or DCE—whatever you like to call it—with quite close relations with NPWL, which was National Parks Service and various entities. I did work for Parks Victoria back in the late seventies, just on the summer programs. I have a large number of friends working within the Parks services and I liaise very regularly. I am a member of the Friends of Chiltern National Park. We have a lot of programs for weed eradication and general support for Parks staff within that area and increasingly for Mount Pilot and the Warbies, and I have also been involved with the Kilawarra. I suppose it is liaison which has been both formal, when I have worked within the department, and informal beyond that.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I am interested in your evidence, from the point of view that there are elements of it that directly contest some of the views that have been expressed to the committee—one by representatives of the timber industry. You make the statement here that 'clear-fell logging can contribute to a more fire-prone environment'. Can you expand on that a little bit, please?

Ms Duncan—The process of clear-felling is complete felling of trees within, say, a 40-hectare coupe. That area has a post-logging burn put through it. This is to create an ash bed for seedling

establishment, which occurs initially with acacias or wattles. This is gradually replaced by eucalypts, which are the key species intended to regenerate for future timber utilisation purposes. At the time of both the wattle—which is highly flammable—and the eucalypt regeneration, these are very dense stands but over time will thin out naturally. They do provide a high hazard. It is somewhat like a monocultural plantation setting, where there is a dense number of trees with very high flammable qualities, including a lot of oil in the eucalypt leaves. There are tracks leading into that area. There is a break-up in the forest composition. That clear-fell setting is much more fire prone than other areas perhaps surrounding it, which are mature forests that do not have light and air coming in and drying off the forest and providing that dense regeneration. The wetter, mature forest has a much moister environment and has many layers and a much damper microclimate than that clear-felled coupe. So, if a fire gets into that forest, it will burn much more rapidly through the clear-felled environment.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You also express the contentious view—in terms of some of the evidence given to this inquiry—that cattle grazing is a fire hazard and that cattle grazing should be withdrawn from the High Plains to reduce fire hazard and to protect the particularly sensitive alpine vegetation. I would like you to expand on that and also comment on the proposition that, around private property, grazing could be used as one means of assisting in the controlling of waste and making private property more safe. You obviously do not see a role for cattle grazing in certain alpine regions, but do you see a role perhaps for well-created and well-managed buffer zones? Could you comment on that?

Ms Duncan—I would rather see fuel reduction burning occur in those situations. Grazing animals do create a lot of disturbance, soil erosion and damage to the understorey. I do not necessarily disagree that, were we to have expertise recommending it as a strategic way to reduce impacts on communities, some sort of strategic edge-burning at the interface between native forests and private land would make sense. I believe that could achieve a much better protective measure. I was not around in 1939, but my impressions are that grazing was extensive in native forests at the time of the '39 fires but really had no obvious impact or reduction in the fire intensity. I think Dennis should be able to add to that.

Dr Black—I teach in this area, and I have been involved with the Alpine Research Centre at Latrobe. I think there is substantial scientific evidence that in fact shows grazing increases the fire hazard in alpine regions, contrary to submissions that you may have received.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could you make those references available to the committee?

Dr Black—I do not have those references with me, but I would be happy to do that.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could I ask you about this research. You welcome the fact that there is going to be a CRC set up into bushfire research. What sort of an agenda ought to be there for that particular research? We have limited resources—we cannot investigate everything. From your perspective, what would two key items for that research be?

Dr Black—My own feeling is that research into the nature of fire and how it spreads has been done to death already. I think there is a desperate need for more ecological research, particularly into what constitutes ecologically sustainable burns. I do not think we can get away from the fact that we do need fuel reduction burning, but the nature of that is going to vary immensely,

depending on the particular forest communities we are looking at. We do not have that baseline research. That needs to be done; we need to do basic research in all the various forest types to find out what is sustainable and what is not. That has only been done in a very few forest types—certainly in Victoria.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—Mr Chairman, I would like to continue but I realise we are pressed for time. I will hand over to someone else.

Mr ORGAN—Ms Duncan, you have a section in your report about softwood plantations as a fire hazard. I come from the Illawarra, where we do not have this phenomenon, but as part of this committee I have seen the circumstances in, for example, Canberra and this area of Victoria where you have large pine plantations. You did make the statement that pine plantations exacerbate the problems. Has that been confirmed or is the research yet to be carried out regarding their real impact on the environment and how they operate in bushfire incidents? We have seen the example in Canberra, where we have had major problems with putting pine plantations straight next to residential areas. Could you give a quick summary of your views on the role of pine plantations.

Ms Duncan—What I would do?

Mr ORGAN—Your view about the role of pine plantations.

Ms Duncan—I feel that is an area that needs to be looked at really closely. I do not know all the answers. My experience as a child was that the pine plantation near to where we lived went up and was an enormous hazard. We were very lucky that we did not lose the farm. What I saw on *Catalyst* on the TV about the CSIRO work that was done on the Canberra fires did suggest that the one metre high fire front from the native forest—for sure it started in the native forest—entered the pines and within about 150 metres was in the top of the pines. That created the windstorm that flattened mature pines and then created the hazard that went into Canberra, which, even if people were extremely well educated, would have been enough to scare most people away from trying to protect their properties. It obviously was a horrendous event.

I think the issue of whether it is on the prevailing wind side of residential areas or whether you just do not have pines in association with native forests and you have them out in the farmland where you can manage them better needs to be given some consideration. Certainly a lot of people who were very fire experienced in the Ovens Valley were very edgy about the pines. There was a constant fear that, if the fires had come into Bright, the pines would make a large contribution to the intensity of the fire. Particularly in such incredibly dry conditions with such resinous material the pines would just turn into torches. Certainly the *Catalyst* program illustrated that the conifers surrounding the properties in Canberra’s suburbs were really the main hazard to those homes burning down, because it was ember attack, not radiant heat, that actually burnt those homes, and you could see that on film.

I think that needs to be thought through really carefully. I am not saying we should not have pines; I just think we should think about their configuration in regard to property and native forest.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could I ask about your attitude to fire trails? We have heard evidence that in some situations in recent fires access was not available to firefighters. This seems to be a very strong source of frustration for especially the volunteers and local communities who sought to get to fires early and suppress them to save their properties and their communities. There is a particular criticism that in the national parks and other areas the fire trails have not been kept open and there have been obstacles deliberately put across them to prevent access from either the general public or from whomever. This in times of emergency creates real problems. There seems to be a real frustration at this particular fact on the part of the firefighters. Do you have a comment or a policy with regard to fire trails and access into these areas?

Ms Duncan—Without seeing those submissions it is hard to comment on accusations of people closing off tracks. If it is policy to close tracks on the part of whatever agency is running the forest, they are the ones who should be questioned about that. Basically, there has to be fire access, and the Wilderness Society recognises that in what I have presented in the submission. But it has to be, in a sense, rationalised in terms of—and I know you are sick of hearing this—resourcing. If we look at areas that are highly networked for historic reasons with tracks, you cannot maintain all those tracks to a safety level that is going to ensure that fire crews are secure when they go down those tracks even if they do not know the condition of the track and that they can get out again if they cannot return the way they have come.

So it is actually important that we know which tracks are being committed to firefighting purposes and to general recreational or other purposes and that they are well maintained. The worst hazard is having secondary or tertiary tracks—or whatever you care to call them—that are not being maintained and provide a fire hazard to crews going into those areas because they are not able to get out afterwards. I think, basically, along with all the other things, there has to be clear planning about which tracks are to be maintained. If they are not going to be maintained, they should not be left open, because they are dangerous.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Thank you.

Mr McARTHUR—Is your policy to put out the lightning-strike fire immediately or to let it burn, in a national park?

Ms Duncan—Looking at what happened this last summer, some of those lightning strikes were in incredibly remote places, and it has been commented that you could not put a bulldozer line around those sorts of remote areas. Basically, they are almost vertical slopes or they are dense vegetation in the alpine setting. Those fires need to be controlled if they are going to provide a threat to human assets or lives, for sure. But there are situations where it may not be practicable to control them—we may not be able to. People who live in our local area were sent up to walk in for kilometres into some of the alpine areas, with backpacks and rake hoes and things, to try to control some of those fires. They did actually feel incredibly vulnerable. We have to look at specific situations.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you in favour of putting them out or letting them burn?

Ms Duncan—If it is not a hazard to human life or property, there may be some situations where a hot fire is useful ecologically.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you telling us that you are happy to let them burn if they are not a perceived problem?

Ms Duncan—This is a complex issue, and I cannot just give you a one-way answer. Basically, it has often been suggested that burning that occurs in hot fires can reduce the fire hazard in an area for a long time to come—years. Fuel reduction burning is often done at the wrong time of year because it is the only safe time of year that we can burn. It often does not have a very effective impact on the fuel load. A hot burn in some areas may actually reduce the fire risk and provide ecological values as well on occasions.

Mr McARTHUR—Especially on 8 January?

Ms Duncan—No-one would deny that we did not want those fires to continue, because we were all threatened. I was threatened and everyone in the community was threatened, but there is a limit to what can be controlled. But I have no objections to the attempts to put fires out.

Mr McARTHUR—I just note that most of the fires were put out on private property and a number of fires were let burn in parks and on public land.

CHAIR—We have had that evidence.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you, Chairman.

Ms Duncan—I do not think that is quite accurate actually. I would also like to say that the burns that occurred in the Pilot park were all either accidental or caused by arson. They were not caused by lightning strikes. There is an issue there that needs to be addressed. People just seem to see that there is a lightning strike thing and it is all natural, but there are other issues that need to be addressed there.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence this afternoon, and thank you both for your submissions to the inquiry. We appreciate it. Dr Black, you will be providing the committee with that scientific evidence with respect to cattle grazing and fires?

Dr Black—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[3.11 p.m.]

ROPER, Mr Ian (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Roper. We do appreciate your coming. We have your submission, which has been authorised for publication as part of the evidence. We wanted to cover as many people as possible, which was why we asked if you could give some evidence today rather than yesterday afternoon. If you would like to give some opening comments, we will then have a couple of quick questions. I have to reinforce that we have, unfortunately, fairly limited time.

Mr Roper—I am a fourth generation resident of Tawonga and the Bogong High Plains. I am representing nobody today. I was asked to come here yesterday to speak to you to tell you about what happened to me up on the Bogong High Plains. I would like you all to know that I am not a scientist and I am not a doctor of philosophy; I am just a plain, ordinary farmer. From 1986 or thereabouts I was a member of the Alpine Advisory Committee, until our state government last year decided they did not require my services any longer.

I would like to pick up on a few things that have been said here. As you know, I drive my cattle up onto the Bogong High Plains. I know a fair bit about the tracks. We have heard about tracks being closed and that sort of thing, but to my knowledge in the Bogong High Plains area—and that is all I am talking about; I do not know the other areas—there are no tracks being closed. But Parks had a policy that if a tree fell over a track, they would only clear that tree off the track so that they could get a four-wheel drive vehicle past it. That meant that you could not get a fire truck past, for starters. The only road I know of up here that was closed was a track into Cowombat Flat, and that is way out of our area.

We hear a lot of people talking about the Bogong High Plains being a fragile area. I do not believe that; I think it is a very tough area. I was on an area called Mount Nelse with my cattle until a few years ago—about nine years ago. My family had been there for over 100 years ago, and you may not know it but we salted rocks in places like that so that we could control our cattle. When I shifted off my run to another run, I thought that the vegetation around those rocks would never rejuvenate—or not for a long time. The first year we were away, sorrel started to grow there. Now I know sorrel is not much good for anything, but it started to grow. The next year, there was a little bit of white clover, and within five years the snowgrass was starting to come back and impact on that area. I thought that would take years and years to happen, but it did not.

The fire that started on 7 January did sit at Tawonga. In our area, our two particular lightning strikes sat there for at least four days before Parks did anything about them. The fire then eventually took off in different directions. We had beautiful weather for fighting fires, but this fire was a devil. It was just like trying to hold jelly in your hand, and, as you know, if you try to hold jelly in your hand, it sneaks out between your fingers. That is what this fire did all the time. It would go away and then come back, and go away and then come back. Eventually, after 7 January, the fire got up to my run on the Bogong High Plains. It got up there to my run at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 21 January. So for a fortnight it was just sitting down below. It would have been

there earlier most probably—up on the high plains—except for Jack Hicks, who is here. Jack had a local brigade in there, and they worked like the very devil.

When the fire got to my run, the Southern Hydro or the Kiewa Power Company or whatever the thing is called, had workers there within two hours. Then they realised that they needed an aeroplane with fire retardant. They asked DSE if they could have an aeroplane. One aeroplane was all they reckoned they needed. A plane was at Dinner Plain, sitting there doing nothing, and DSE said, 'No, you cannot have it.' We thought, because of that, that DSE wanted the Bogong High Plains to burn, and we are all quite certain that that is what they wanted.

We could not see down at Tawonga. You could not see from my house to the Kiewa River, which is a matter of 300 metres. We did not even know that Mount Bogong was burnt all over, because we could not see. No-one knew. The only news we had about the fire was from the ABC. They were the main ones. They were excellent. The commercial stations were good too, but we had a good service from the ABC so we stayed tuned to them.

When the fire eventually did get up to us, it only burnt the heath country. My run is at a place called the Rocky Hills, and I border the southern part of Rocky Valley Dam. The northern part of my run, which runs into the Rocky Valley Dam, was all heath country. You could not get a horse or a beast in there. That burnt very badly. But when the fire went through we were pleased to see that there was very little damage done to any moss beds in there. For sure, it had burnt right up to them and it had burnt over the top of them and it had scorched them, but it did not seem to have harmed them.

As soon as the fire got into my grazing country, it went out—except that it would spot. You blokes have been up there, so you most probably know: it would go a chain or two and spot out and catch one bit of heath and then go out. It would jump like that. My son and I and one of the Maddison boys went up there when we knew it looked a bit drastic. We wanted to see what our cattle were doing, and we went up there and we took rake hoes. We went round and stomped out what fire we could see, just with a hoe. We did not dig with a hoe; we just stomped with it. Two days after that I had a letter from Parks, telling me that it was a fire area and I was not allowed to go up there any more—I only had about \$100,000 worth of cattle up there, so I don't suppose it mattered very much!—and they had a man on the gate at Mount Beauty. As you would imagine, I did not take much notice of the letter, and we found that we only had to get to the gate at Mount Beauty before six o'clock and we could go through, because they did not have a man there before six o'clock.

Anyway, my cattle still had the same amount of grazing country as they had before the fire. My old country over in Nelse was completely burnt out. Old Roper's Hut was burnt out. That was a historical hut for walkers in the high plains, and I really think that for safety's sake that hut should be rebuilt as soon as possible. We managed to save our new hut. The fire that came up from Mitta, which is the place you were talking about this morning, came up on our side of the hill and it jumped, but we managed to save our hut. But we had to keep on going back to it, because the grass was like cotton wool. You would put it out and then the next day it would spark and it would come up again. Anyway, the fires were eventually out, and we were asked to take our cattle out early, and Parks offered to pay a certain amount a kilometre for us to get our cattle out. We took advantage of this because we could not get our cattle out anyway, because the

track we used was through the Nelse area and the road was not open and we could not get out anyway.

We hear about fire hazard burning in the Bogong National Park. When the SEC had their license or their lease country—which was not as wide as Bluey Bettles said this morning, although it was fairly wide—Bluey and his men kept that lease country pretty well. There has been no other fuel reduction burning in the Mount Bogong National Park ever. Parks will tell you that there has been, but Parks, to my knowledge, or to my belief, will say, ‘We are going to burn this amount this year,’ and it is on their map. If the weather is bad and they do not burn it, they still think it is burnt. That also goes for the bush country round it.

The other contentious thing I want to speak about is the mountain ash. We believe that our state government is going to harvest the mountain ash in the lower country—the natural bush, the ordinary bush country. There is not very much mountain ash in that country, I might add. All the mountain ash is in the alpine area, and millions of dollars worth of mountain ash that is there is going to die. In 40 years it will fall over and it will be a fire hazard capable of creating just as big a fire as this fire was. Thank you.

Mr SCHULTZ—Mr Roper, I am interested in your last comment there about what appears to be—and please correct me if I am wrong—a deceitful exercise by Parks, giving the impression to the community that areas that were previously destined or earmarked for burning but were not burnt were actually marked off on their papers as being burnt. Is that correct?

Mr Roper—I have not got access to their libraries, but I reckon it would be.

Mr HAWKER—Just on that other point you made about the mountain ash that will die, what is the response so far from the state government about allowing that timber to be taken?

Mr Roper—They have just said, ‘No, we will not log the alpine area.’

Mr HAWKER—That is a final ministerial decision?

Mr Roper—I would imagine it is a final decision. Usually when these blokes make a decision it is. And I think they are going to do the same thing about our cattle next year too—they are going to say no.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Just a brief question, Mr Roper. With regards to the area into which you are allowed to take your cattle to graze, have you experienced over the years a decrease in the available land, and do you think that certain government departments want to ban you altogether? What is your feeling?

Mr Roper—If you are talking about a decrease in the acreage that we are allowed to use and the number of head of cattle there, yes, there has been. I have been losing cattle all my life. Also, because of the policy of no burning, these woody paths are taking over the grazing land too. But if we get a good spring next year, and I am sure we will, I will have double the amount of grazing land that I had this year, because, hopefully, all that woody country will be taken over by grassland next year.

CHAIR—How long have you been grazing cattle in those high country areas?

Mr Roper—My family has been grazing cattle there since the 1880s. I first went up there with a mob of cattle when I was seven, so I have been going there for 60 years.

CHAIR—So you have seen a number of fires over that period?

Mr Roper—No, we have not. I was only three when '39 was on, and I cannot remember it. I have seen a certain amount of smoke, but with men like Bluey Bettles, with a crew of men that are prepared to either jump out of a helicopter or climb in with a rake hoe, we have never had any fires. I think Bluey might have said he had seven fires every year or something like that in our area, because they never got away. These blokes were there. If lightning hit, these blokes were there.

CHAIR—You said in your opening remarks that the most recent fire basically stopped when it got to the country that you are grazing?

Mr Roper—It stopped burning fiercely. On my run I would say—I have not got the exact figures here; it does not matter anyway—65 per cent was overgrown, and that was burnt out. Out of the rest of the country on my run, five per cent was damaged by fire and the other 30 per cent was not harmed. And the five per cent that was burnt was only singed, because the fire used to go out every night.

CHAIR—So you presumably would not agree with the previous witnesses' evidence that says that grazed country is more of a fire hazard?

Mr Roper—I have heard one of those people before state that cattle are bad because the snowgrass has a certain amount of dry matter in the clump and the cattle eat the green grass in the clump that would put a fire out—that they eat the green grass, and you only have the dry grass left there. I am terribly sorry, I could not agree with many of the previous speakers' points.

CHAIR—But the specific evidence was that cattle grazing creates bare ground, subsequently providing opportunity for shrubs to establish, which are more flammable.

Mr Roper—No, I do not agree with any of that.

CHAIR—So, from your experience, you do not agree with any of that evidence?

Mr Roper—That is right, and as I said we have been there since the 1880s and I have been going up there all my life. I think that every other cattleman would agree with me too. I would also like to add that we all love that country and there is no way known that we would hurt it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you consider yourself a conservationist?

Mr Roper—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you.

Mr Roper—There have been some bad years when I have not taken cattle up there. The same goes for next year: if we do not get a good spring, the cattle will stay at home. My cattle are my livelihood, and I cannot afford to expose them to hazard. By hazard, I mean sending them off for three months to somewhere where there is no feed. It would be ridiculous. I would also like to add, if I may, that 99.9 per cent of the people who live up in these gullies would agree with what Simon Paton and his friends from Mitta Valley said in their submission.

CHAIR—Thank you for your contribution—both your submission and your evidence today.

Mr Roper—Thank you very much for listening to me.

[3.30 p.m.]

PATON, Mr Mac, Board Member, North East Catchment Management Authority

ROBINSON, Mr Geoff, Manager, Land and Vegetation, North East Catchment Management Authority

CHAIR—Welcome. I know you have heard the statement I gave earlier on with respect to evidence, and Mr Paton gave evidence earlier on in another capacity. We have your submission, which we thank you for. It has been authorised for publication and is evidence before this committee. We are a touch behind time, and we must finish at four o'clock. I just let everyone know so we can work towards that. Would you like to make some opening remarks? Then we will have some questions to finish off this afternoon.

Mr M. Paton—I would like to explain exactly what the North East Catchment Management Authority is. It is a Victorian statutory authority which is charged with the management of the catchments of the upper Murray, the Mitta, the Kiewa, the Ovens and the King's rivers. Included in that is the area around Omeo, which is at the top end of the Mitta river, right back into Hotham. Our area was very much involved in these fires. I think 708,000 hectares and 35 per cent of our area was burnt. Our board is made up of community people, and we have two distinct links into the community. One is that we have a series of committees on the catchments, which help us manage those specific areas. Then we have an overriding responsibility for the water quality and general maintenance of the catchment, which includes a large area of public land. This fire has devastated a huge part of the catchment, and—from that point of view alone—we were confronted with whatever might happen whenever the rains came. Geoff is involved in the technical side of our concerns, and he is quite happy to answer any of those sorts of questions.

With respect to our community responsibilities, our submission explains that we are very aware of the criticisms raised in respect of the management of the fire, and that is well documented. They came through to our board through the system of implementation committees we have in each catchment. As long as you understand we have a community concern and a physical concern with the catchment, I will leave it as that and answer any questions.

CHAIR—Mr Robinson, do you want to make any opening comments?

Mr Robinson—No. I would only add to what Mac said in that the submission has been based on input from the community; it is a community submission developed by the board.

CHAIR—Mr Robinson, you are the Manager, Land and Vegetation. What effect do you think the rains we are experiencing right now—after the fires—are going to have on your water quality?

Mr Robinson—There is no doubt that there will be some impact. We have got some early feedback from some monitoring being done in some of the feeder streams to the upper Kiewa River. The initial monitoring events yesterday were indicating that the turbidity readings were at about 50 NTU—NTU being the measurement unit. Normally we would expect that to be in the

tens. It is higher than it should normally be, but it is certainly nothing like the levels that were experienced in the Buckland event earlier this year.

CHAIR—Is that caused by the bareness of the ground that the water is running off?

Mr Robinson—The turbidity is caused by sediment entering the water courses.

CHAIR—Mr Paton said that the impact on a lot of your area was really quite intense. One of the submissions from a previous witness this afternoon described the post-fire impact on Alpine and Mount Buffalo national parks as follows: ‘in many areas burns were of low intensity and very patchy’. These are areas that are within your catchment, as I understand it. Does that fit with what you have found?

Mr Robinson—Most definitely. That is just the typical nature of fire. It does burn in a mosaic pattern.

CHAIR—So parts of it would be low and patchy and other parts much more intense. What sort of proportion of the area that was within your catchment falls into those categories?

Mr Robinson—We do not have that information. Are you asking what proportion of areas was burnt under high intensity and low intensity?

CHAIR—Yes, exactly.

Mr Robinson—We do not have that information at the moment.

CHAIR—But there is obviously significant areas if you are still getting higher turbidity—which is the flow of sediment. There must not be much regeneration in some areas to cause that flow of sediment, presumably.

Mr Robinson—There are areas where that is the case. I could not answer as to the proportion of the areas burnt being high or low intensity.

Mr M. Paton—I had the opportunity to fly over the Dart and back to Mount Beauty in a helicopter, and there were very few areas that we could see that were not fairly savagely burnt in that area. It is still not a very definitive answer. The biggest problem that we were facing was just how the rains fell, more so than how badly it was burnt. The extreme example was a rainstorm that hit the Buckland Valley. If that had happened on a larger scale—and fortunately it has not, and we are pretty grateful for that—who knows what the consequences could have been.

Mr Robinson—It would be fair to say that the upper parts of the catchments—or the southern parts of the catchment—probably did experience more intense fires. They probably related to the day that those areas burnt and the weather conditions at the time as much as the vegetation type that they were burning through.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It was very encouraging to read the suggested recommendations in your written submission and very refreshing to see you recommend the implementation of pest control for both plants and feral animals. I am sure you are as familiar as I am—as a local federal

member—with the devastation to local ecology from weeds and pests. I have been a bit disappointed that that has not been a focus of previous submissions, primarily those that are scientifically based. From a very practical perspective for our local area, what recommendations would you have relating to that particular objective?

Mr Robinson—I think what we were really getting at there was that the fire event triggers some natural regeneration response. For some of these weed species it will trigger a large proportion of the seed bank to germinate, and that will present an opportunity to get mass control of some areas. It also opens up some areas that may previously have been less accessible because of weed growth, and I am particularly talking about blackberry infestation.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You probably do not have any information on this but I will ask you just in case you do. With regards to the large areas that were burnt out—and we have the most concentrated wild dog problem in the Upper Murray—do you have any evidence or information regarding the proportion of wild dogs that suffered in the fires and the proportion of native animals?

Mr Robinson—No.

Mr HAWKER—Under the heading of ‘Fire suppression preparedness’ you state:

Potential peer assessments of preparedness should be made to assess people’s capability to stay to defend their properties and lead to better preparedness.

Would you like to expand on that?

Mr Robinson—There are a couple of reasons for that point. Beechworth and Yackandandah were threatened by the fires, and both those communities were probably not as prepared as they could have been for the fires, having not been subjected to such an imminent threat before for a few reasons. There was feedback from the community that they were being told to implement their bushfire plan. Many people to both these towns either are new to the area or have not experienced a bushfire before and did not know what a bushfire plan was. So that is where that point has come from so far as bushfire preparedness is concerned. Whilst the general rural population understand what a bushfire plan might be and what implementing that might involve, a number of people in these towns did not necessarily know what that meant.

Mr HAWKER—In that same section you made the point:

There is widespread dissatisfaction in the catchment community about the final outcome of the fires being far worse than they should have been. The DNRE/CFA Strike Team/Local CFA communication and general liaison can be improved.

Is there anything you want to add that has not already been said today?

Mr M. Paton—I do not think there is. I think we are saying the same things over and over again really. A lot of the people who have been through here are the same people who are on our implementation committees. I do not think there is really anything to add to that.

Mr SCHULTZ—I would like to ask whether the much needed and very welcome rains that we have had in the last couple of days are already having an impact in terms of slippage and damage to feeder streams in the water catchment areas in the area that you are responsible for.

Mr Robinson—We have some early indication that the feeder streams are experiencing higher than normal sediment or turbidity levels, but I could not really expand on it more than that because it is obviously a bit too early for me to have that information or that raw data.

Mr SCHULTZ—Would you like to make some comment on the effect the fires and the run-off in terms of ash and stuff may have for the ecosystem, particularly the aquatic ecosystem, in the water catchment?

Mr Robinson—There is the obvious risk that we will see an increase in nutrient and turbidity levels. This could lead to algal blooms. The sediment loads obviously entering the Murray River have the potential to impact on some of the habitat by covering up snags and logs with silt. It is a little bit of an unknown, not having had the experience—

Mr SCHULTZ—Would it be fair to say there is going to be a significant impact on the oxygen levels in the water, which aquatic life depends on?

Mr Robinson—It really depends on the flow rates in the rivers. In a high-flow situation the sediment could be transported very quickly and that would not transpose, but there are other factors that play a part in whether that would occur or not.

Mr SCHULTZ—Have you been able to assess what sort of water run-off loss there is going to be due to the effects of the fires in terms of absorbing moisture that would otherwise have run off?

Mr Robinson—We have not, and that is what one of the recommendations is—to look at some of these questions. We would expect that in the short term we will see an increase in run-off and ground water recharge. In the medium term, say a five-year period, we would expect to see a reduction in surface water availability. Obviously, that will in turn have some impact on inflows to the Murray River, and it will also have some influence on the amount of water available for extraction downstream—particularly given that 38 per cent of the entire Murray-Darling Basin water comes from this region. We do not have an idea of what that quantified would be in five years time, but it will have an impact on water availability.

Mr SCHULTZ—What about the issue of electricity generation? Do you have any electricity generation in your catchment area?

Mr Robinson—We do. Are you talking about hydro-electric—

Mr SCHULTZ—I am talking about ash run-off into the turbines and the problems that could create mechanically.

Mr Robinson—I could not answer that question for you.

Mr M. Paton—There are two power stations—one at Kiewa and one at the Dart.

Mr SCHULTZ—Do they run from the hydro—

Mr M. Paton—Yes.

Mr SCHULTZ—That is precisely the point I was trying to make. We have been told in other areas of the Snowy Mountains Scheme that there is considerable concern about the quality of the water going into the turbines and the effect on the system of the ash and sediment as a result of the fire, such as the seizing and burning out of bearings, which is going to create massive problems in terms of their ability to maintain an ongoing supply of electricity. They are taking contingency plans to try and overcome that. That was the reason for my asking the question.

Mr Robinson—We have not had any advice on that.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Thank you very much for the submission. Although only three pages, there are some very interesting ideas that have been expressed. I am interested in the relationship between the bushfires and the health of rivers in the medium term. I do not think this point has been canvassed widely enough. You mention monitoring and evaluation systems, and a need to ensure they are put in place so the impacts can be understood. Have you given some thought as to what form those evaluation and monitoring systems might take?

Mr Robinson—We have given some thought to it. There is a regional task force which is looking at water quality monitoring as well as water quantity. In terms of terrestrial and aquatic monitoring—and I think your question was directed at the rivers—we would be looking at things like flow and water quantity at different points over time.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So they are already in place?

Mr Robinson—There is certainly some infrastructure in place for undertaking long-term monitoring. There would be a need, I would assume, to establish some additional sites.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I think your idea to document the lessons learnt from the recovery process to assist future generations is a very important one. There is knowledge that is handed down by word of mouth, but I think the sorts of monitoring that you are going to do will be very important over the longer term. What sort of thought has gone into that suggestion?

Mr Robinson—There is obviously scientific quantification of information, but there is also perhaps capturing some of the more qualitative, anecdotal, evidence as well. We have had feedback that some of the fire behaviour was counterintuitive. It would be good to understand some of the lead-up factors that have contributed to the fire—in particular, the long dry period which preceded the summer, which was a bit uncharacteristic.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Could you explain the nature of your relationship with the DSE and the CFA on a practical, operational level?

Mr M. Paton—In terms of firefighting there was none. But there is a lot of work done jointly with them on catchment projects. That is with DNRE, not the CFA. We virtually have nothing to do with CFA, but we have a lot to do with DNRE for many of our projects.

CHAIR—Is it correct that the DNRE is now the DSE? Have I got the acronyms right?

Mr M. Paton—Whatever you like.

Mr Robinson—Yes, that is right.

CHAIR—Not being a Victorian, I just wanted to clarify those.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—How has that relationship played out in the sorts of projects that are undertaken and the cooperation that you receive?

Mr Robinson—Are you talking about in the post-fire—

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—No, just generally speaking.

Mr Robinson—Generally speaking, there is a very good relationship between the DSE and CMA in developing catchment projects, in establishing projects based on community input and setting priorities. Our regional catchment strategy is the primary guiding document for our catchment programs.

CHAIR—I want to finish by asking you about the sediment that could get into the creeks and rivers in your area. You said that if there were strong flows then the sediment would pass through quickly. Where does it ultimately end up?

Mr Robinson—In the Murray River or the storage dams.

CHAIR—The storages along the way?

Mr Robinson—Yes.

CHAIR—That completes our questioning. Thank you very much for your evidence this afternoon and your submission. There are some very good suggestions there, which add to the very good overall evidence that we have received from the region.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Schultz**):

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

Committee adjourned at 3.53 p.m.