COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

FRIDAY, 1 AUGUST 2003

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SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Friday, 1 August 2003

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

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mrs Gash, Mr Nairn and Mr Organ

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

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

(a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;

(b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;

(c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;

(d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;

(e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;

(f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;

(g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;

(h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;

(i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

(j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 9.11 a.m.

ROLLEY, Mr Evan, Managing Director, Forestry Tasmania

SLIJEPCEVIC, Mr Alen, Manager, Fire Management Branch, Forestry Tasmania

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the 12th of the inquiry. It follows a hearing we held on Wednesday in Ballarat and inspections that the committee conducted in the Hobart region yesterday. While we do not have too many people in the public gallery at the moment, I should put on the record now that once we have heard from listed witnesses today there will be an opportunity for others to come forward and make short statements that will also go on the record of evidence if they so wish. Anyone in that situation should see our committee secretariat. Next week the committee will be holding hearings in Western Australia, which will then bring the main part of our public evidence gathering to a conclusion.

First this morning I welcome representatives of Forestry Tasmania. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We have your submission, for which we thank you. That submission has been authorised for publication and forms part of the evidence that the committee will be considering. That evidence is on the record. This morning would you like first of all to make a brief opening statement? Then we will ask some questions.

Mr Rolley—Thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee. There were just three or four key points that we felt we would like to make that are drawn from the substance of the submission. The first point that we wanted to emphasise was that this recent season, both in mainland Australia and here in Tasmania, has brought home the very low level of understanding that the community generally has about fire. I think for all of us that are involved in managing land, this was a huge wake-up call. The combination of the drought conditions and the fire events have highlighted that there is a very low level of understanding about fire.

One of the difficulties about that is that we only seem to have attention paid to fire issues when there has been a significant wildfire event. These tend to be interspersed with periods of relatively mild conditions. The sort of interest that is paid to and the understanding that is developed about fire tends to have long gaps. We had this experience, of course, here in Tasmania following the 1967 bushfires when there was major review and major policy reform. Then you have a significant gap of seven to 10 years before you have other major and significant events. One of the points we wanted to highlight was that we really must draw from this experience, which affected the whole nation, including major fires here in Tasmania. There is a significant ongoing need for better public education about fire in the environment. That is a very important point.

The second point I want to make I will illustrate by referring to this land tenure map of Tasmania. I will pass it around to members of the committee. Basically, the three major colour codes on this, the brown and purple colours, are our national parks and wilderness areas. The green colours are the state forest lands that our business manages. The yellow areas are the private property areas of Tasmania. About one-third of that yellow or private property is forested landscape. As you would know, 54 per cent of Tasmania is forested, so it is a very forested landscape. The point of showing you this is that fire in this landscape has no respect for these boundaries. It has no idea that we had long political debates about which areas should be set aside for conservation and which for wood production or where the private property boundaries are.

It has been that very simple but profound point that has led Tasmania to develop what is unique in the country, and that is this interagency fire management protocol, which basically puts the fire service, the parks service and forestry together in a single unified group. I think we have provided you with some further information this morning about how this operates. To achieve it required a bit of a leap of faith on the part of the players, but it has now required an ongoing commitment to make it work. So there is a seamlessness about all of the activity, be it the planning activity, the training activity or the equipment purchases. With the interoperability of that equipment, there is a seamlessness about that. Quite frankly, I do not think we could have dealt with the issues we dealt with in the last season if it had not been for that very seamless activity.

It is driven down from the top level by the State Fire Management Council, which is chaired independently but which has on it as a statutory body all of the major stakeholders involved in fire in Tasmania. Again, its leadership comes from the fire service. It has Forestry Tasmania, the Parks and Wildlife Service, local government, representatives of the TFGA, the private land-holding, farming community and local industry. It has a wide canvas. It meets quite regularly, certainly every six to eight weeks, depending on the issues. It meets and reviews all of the significant issues. People identify initiatives and then work by sharing resources together.

This facing page is just one example of a recent initiative which has been put together. It is a web-enabled facility that provides an introduction to a whole range of the issues that face all of us who have an interest in fire, fire protection and fire management. It is accessible to the community generally. Be it volunteer groups in a local fire area through to forestry officers, this information is available. It is kept up to date. It is contemporary information. It is just another example of what is possible if people start to work together, rather than be at each other's throats, and figure out what are the opportunities to significantly improve the delivery.

The other point I wanted to make about this protocol is that the evidence we have—and I know this comes not just from Australia but also from the Canadian and the United States experience because we engage in regular exchanges between Australia, Canada and the US—shows that our costs for delivery of fire protection on the ground using this approach are significantly less than they are if you have three separate agencies involved in fire and fire management. So there is some cost efficiency that comes out of this sense of running a single and more unified approach.

The second table I wanted to highlight was the causes of fires that are attended by our business. Forestry Tasmania is the largest of the forest fire management agencies in the state.

The major expertise we bring to the table is in forest fire management. What I want to highlight from this table is that two-thirds of the fires that we are dealing with in terms of their impact by area and more than 70 per cent by number are due to escapes, arson or some sort of related cause. The major area that we have got comes back to my earlier point: some further investment in education and better information could perhaps go some way to reducing that significant number of fire causes.

Two other points I want to make relate to research. As you know, we are supporting, along with the Fire Service and Parks and Wildlife, this new initiative for the CRC. We think it is very important that it is driven by the users of the information rather than being an academic exercise related to good or new ideas. It needs to be very much related to users. In particular, one of the things that is going to be a real challenge if we are to use prescribed fire more is smoke modelling. One of the things that communities are increasingly saying to us is, 'We don't really want this smoke in our eyes.' So there has been a reluctance. I have to say that in Tasmania in aggregate, the amount of prescribed burning not to prevent fires but to reduce fuels and to make it easier to deal with them has dropped away. We are probably doing about half of what we ought to be doing across all land tenures. Part of this is a lack of education and information. Part of it is this community concern about smoke. Having good tools that enable forest and fire managers to be able to predict smoke, smoke dispersal and actually manage smoke is going to be very, very significant for enabling us to do more prescribed burning in the landscape as the years roll out.

Another area of research is new equipment. It is an area where we need to be very careful about practicality, it is an area that attracts a very strong media interest. You could have some big bit of new technology; you can have a crane helicopter that can drop water. In certain applications, that is great and very sexy and makes great prime time television. The fact is that for firefighting on the ground, a lot of it has got to involve well-coordinated, hard slog, hand-tooled equipment, very fit, well-trained crews that can do work effectively and efficiently on the ground. So new techniques and new technologies need to be very practically based. We are positive about a whole range of new technologies. I guess we are sending a signal that it is pretty important to make certain that it is not just about night-time news; it is actually about really good, effective, practical stuff on the ground to get fires dealt with.

Finally, there is a point about the use of prescribed fire. It has fallen away for a variety of reasons but I think there has been a lack of public acceptance generally. On the one hand, you have some shrill voices that say, 'We need to burn everything and we need to burn it regularly.' The considered position is that fire has a role in the ecology of our landscape but it needs to be applied while understanding that. Too frequent a burning will just produce more flammable material on a regular basis, so you lock yourself in to having to burn every couple of years. But a thoughtful approach to prescribed burning in a strategic sense is very important. We need to see more of it happening. We need to develop the tools, the consultation, the education and the modelling that will enable that to happen. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thanks for that introduction and the additional information, which we appreciate. I ask for a clarification in this table. The number of fires is 6.9. I am just not quite sure what those figures represent.

Mr Slijepcevic—That is seven fires on average a year caused by—

CHAIR—So these are average figures?

Mr Rolley—That is why they are an average.

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes. That is a 10-year average.

Mr Rolley—That is a 10-year period and we have taken 10-year data and that is an average of the fire causes. It is the number of fires. In a year, we would average, in Forestry Tasmania, about 80 or 81 or 80.7. Arithmetic has done that to us. On average over a 10-year period, we would fight 80 to 81 fires in total.

CHAIR—You said the State Fire Management Council of Tasmania is independently chaired?

Mr Rolley—Correct.

CHAIR—Is that a ministerial appointment?

Mr Rolley—Yes, it is a ministerial appointment. It is a statutory council. The framework for its activity and its membership is in the fire service legislation, so it is in that portfolio. It provides for the senior representatives of those major categories of stakeholders to be represented.

CHAIR—So fire services, Parks and Wildlife, Forestry Tasmania—

Mr Rolley—The forest industry are involved, the local government association are involved, the TFGA, farmers and so on. In the case of the Tasmanian Fire Management Council, we represent Forestry Tasmania on that.

CHAIR—On that council?

Mr Rolley—The whole objective is to have decision makers who support the major fire activity there with an independent chair. Maurice Geard, who Dick Adams would know, has been its chair since it was established. He has a farming and rural background and is very experienced and has provided the leadership for the council over the last number of years.

CHAIR—So how long has that council been in place?

Mr Rolley—That is a good question. It would certainly be more than 10 years. I do not have it off the top of my head, but I have certainly been involved with it. It followed a significant review that Bill Bale, who was our Solicitor-General, did in looking at a range of fire issues. We have certainly had that statutory body for in excess of 10 years.

CHAIR—And the interagency fire management protocol, when was that first established?

Mr Rolley—In 1993, so it is almost 10 years as well. It was an initiative that came from the three agencies together, basically from the three individuals who at that time were involved. It formed a logical umbrella in the sense of the work that was going on with the State Fire Management Council.

CHAIR—I am interested in the guiding principle that states the most able firefighting crew of any agency will respond immediately to a reported fire as a priority regardless of the land tenure involved. I guess it is a pretty attractive statement when you look at some of the conflicts that we have seen in other states over this problem of who is in control. They say, 'That's Parks's area, so we will leave that to them.' We had evidence in one particular area where volunteer bushfire fighters were all ready to go to fight a fire but because it was in a particular land tenure they were not asked and therefore nothing happened. Could you go through for the committee how that works in a practical sense.

Mr Rolley—A fire is reported. In the main, fires are very evident to either passers-by, someone travelling, or it has been picked up as part of a detection system, either from a tower or from our aerial detection system. I might add again that that whole system is completely unified, so we do not have a fire service and a parks and a Forestry Tasmania aircraft. One aircraft flies over this landscape and reports the fires in a coordinated way with the tower system that supports it. So as soon as that is reported, the closest available resource goes to the fire immediately and commences an assessment of the appropriate suppression strategy and commences that work.

That information then is relayed on so that it is centrally coordinated through the fire service. The Tasmanian Fire Service incident control room will have information about all of the fire activity. That can be reinforced with either fire service or parks or forestry resources as required. Depending on the scale of the fire, you have different levels of resourcing and different organisational structure, but that all comes through this ICS system, which I think was explained to you yesterday. This is not an issue of what uniform badge or braid you have on; it is about the expertise that is available on the site, the team of people assembled and the tasks assigned to those team members. It could easily be a forestry person with fire service people working to him or it could be the other way around. It could be a forestry team working to an incident controller who is a fire service or a parks and wildlife officer.

CHAIR—That is good. We will come back to you.

Mr Rolley—This takes work. This is a cultural question. This takes leadership from the top down to make sure people understand that we will not broker arguments about turf. It takes education and support to make certain. It did not happen overnight.

CHAIR—That is why I was interested about when it all started—basically 10 years ago. You have seen that culture gradually develop in that period of time?

Mr Rolley—That integration has significantly improved. At the end of each season there is a debrief led by the fire service with parks and forestry to have a look at and to analyse the circumstances of the previous year's fires and what we learnt from them. There have been areas where we have to go back and reinforce the message that we are one on fires, not three. That has taken time. In the early years, I do not think it worked as well as the theory, but we have just kept at it from the top down. I think a lot of the regional managers adopted it and understood it was the best way to go. It has also helped, of course, because we have a funding formula for it, which has been agreed with the Treasury so that it is not a question of the dollars. People need to be conscious of what is being spent, but we are not there saying, 'Forestry is in a national park. We are not going to get paid for this,' or 'Fire services are on state forest.' We have arranged and

have in place, agreed with the state Treasury, a system that recognises that. Every three months or so it reconciles and at the end of the year wraps it up.

CHAIR—So there is no incentive for one agency to try to dominate on the basis that that will attract more money?

Mr Rolley—They are not going to get any more money. That is a really important issue. People compete for the attention of politicians to get the dollars. We all know this. It is not helpful.

Mr ADAMS—I want to continue. There are a couple of things that have come through in other areas as well relating to the management of reserves and parks. We have had some evidence in relation to taking new reserves and new areas and then locking them up and saying, 'This is now reserved' without putting resources or management needs into continuing to look at fire or fire trails or whatever. I guess this goes to the management and understanding of what you were talking about with smoke. We all know that the Tasmanian community has been revved up a bit on smoke. But how do we educate the community that smoke and renewal burns from forestry's point of view are a positive thing and not the negative that we seem to get run in the press so often?

Mr Rolley—There are two things. First, it does not help if it is just a single voice making a comment on it. For example, in the case of Tasmania, if it were Evan Rolley's lone voice saying this, it would be perceived in the community as Forestry pushing its barrow. Likewise, if it were Parks's Tony Blanks just out there on his own, it would be a matter of saying, 'Well, Parks are covering for something or they are trying to run something.' If it were Ken Burns from the fire service it would be the same. I think the important thing is coming from the State Fire Management Council so that it comes from a body that is not seen to be pushing the interests of a specific constituency. It needs to be an integrated television, print and radio thing that you manage and run forever. It has to be resourced properly.

Mr ADAMS—Yet there are risks that when we do set fire to something in order to reduce, there is a change. The figures are—

Mr Rolley—You can see them here.

Mr ADAMS—Are there escapes in there? It is 1.8. There are always risks in risk management. The public does not understand that very well, would you say?

Mr Rolley—I do not think the public understands that at all. The great irony of this is when you think about major fires in this last year, for example. What is back-burning? It is fuel reduction under summer conditions. People seem to be able to accept that fuel reduction is actually important in reducing the impact of a wildfire in the middle of January or February, but we have not actually made the connection. That same technique is called back-burning when you are trying to put the fire out. It is actually fuel reduction. I think we need to get that message more simply and carefully communicated.

Mr ADAMS—I think it is something that the committee has probably picked up. There is an educational thing here nationally. We need to certainly have a coordinated look at it right through

from your fire council to the rest of Australia. We need the public to understand that broader concept of fire and management of fire and the risk of back-burning, or to come to grips with what back-burning actually means.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you, Mr Rolley. It is quite refreshing to see this multi-agency code or approach in Tasmania. In other areas of Australia it is obviously not operating that way. You are the only real government agency before us at the moment. You seem to be saying that it is working pretty well, which is good news. I think it is a real model for the rest of Australia that they really need to take on board. I am wondering within the Tasmanian environment how you have community involvement, be it with the volunteers on the ground or the local communities. Is this just purely the agencies running the show? One of the issues you have referred to is community awareness of the whole issue. So I suppose there is one level of community involvement, which is the volunteers out there. The next level is probably what you are talking about, which is getting the rest of the community aware of these issues. Is there a way forward?

Mr Rolley—I still think there is a long way to go, Michael, on that. You would not be having this inquiry if everything was hunky-dory. There is still a journey to be made here. There is not sufficient understanding or involvement of local communities in understanding that fire is no respecter of your property boundary. It has no idea that that is your personal block and that is a park and that is a bit of state forest. It understands fuel and weather and ignition, that is all. So there is a way to go there. The vehicle for that, I guess, is the fire management plan. And it is not just a plan for the day for this activity but this notion of a plan that does cover a significant landscape to which all of the stakeholders have an opportunity to have an input. It should be a very public document that should be on the Web and available so that people can have an input to it. If they think there are significant fuels and risks that are not being managed, there is a way they can register that concern. I guess that would be something that would help to move that forward.

Mr ORGAN—I am wondering if the council has an education program and an education officer or someone whose job it is to get out there and promote it.

Mr Rolley—We do not. Part of the step to get this initiative with the web page and so on was to say, in the absence of having a resource to appoint someone, is there a way we can use our existing resources to get this readily available to everyone in the community, be it the local council or a local volunteer fire group. This is one of the ways of getting that there. I am saying to you that I think we still have a way to go here. I do not think Tasmania has it perfect. We have some good structures that have evolved because half a dozen people have been pretty passionate about this and care about it and want to get it right, basically, but we still have a way to go. And the recent fires you saw at Dromedary and so on highlight that while we are able to do some very effective things, there is more to do in terms of the involvement of communities. We would promote the fire management plan vehicle not as a document that sits in a Forestry Tasmania office or a parks office or a fire services office but a document that is alive and is available that people can relate to in the community.

Mr ORGAN—It seems that you have all those basic management things in place so that if you did now go out to the community with an education program you have a lot in place to back up that program.

Mrs GASH—First of all, can I say how impressed I was yesterday in finding out exactly what you do and what you do not do and particularly about your education policy. I think the rest of Australia has a lot it can learn from that. Please take that on board and congratulations on the work you are already doing.

My interest has always been with volunteers and how they relate to the fire control officers and the paid staff of fire control. You state in your fire management protocol and in your submission that you actually have 570 employees, 400 of whom are trained, equipped and physically fit for fire suppression duties. I will not ask what the other 170 are. Are they the administrative staff?

Mr Rolley—Yes.

Mrs GASH—I figured that was self-explanatory, but nevertheless.

Mr Rolley—Well, it is. But it includes me, for example.

Mrs GASH—Are you not physically fit?

Mr Rolley—Well, they want me to keep doing these tests and things. I probably should one day. I am sure I am quite capable of doing them. Part of our risk management strategy has been to require a physical assessment of the fitness of people for particular tasks. We take that very seriously. We do not force people to do that. We insist that if you are going to be on a piece of equipment or on a fire line, then you have to be in one of those categories that has been rated.

Mrs GASH—I take your point there. You have volunteers as well?

Mr Rolley—We are a business enterprise. Either my direct staff or our contractors are paid for. We have about 400-odd contractors who work for us as well.

Mrs GASH—So what is Forestry's role when you work with volunteers?

Mr Rolley—I do not live in Hobart. I live south of Hobart in a rural community with a local volunteer fire group. I know a bit about it, not theoretically but in practice. I think the relationship there is actually very good. It is because people use and share the equipment. They make arrangements to assist each other. This is the local forestry and park staff with the local volunteers. I think it is probably a lot better than it has been for some time. People find the ways of providing solutions to people—making pumps and equipment available if they have a problem or issue. There are a lot of informal things that are done to support people as well as if volunteers are working alongside our people making arrangements for a payment to be made to them.

Mrs GASH—That is the controversy we have in New South Wales as well in relation to volunteers. I am going to ask you a question that you may choose not to answer. In your opinion, if they are providing the job resources and doing the work of a fully paid person and they are actually volunteers, should there be some recompense?

Mr Rolley—I think there should be. One thing I think we have to be very careful about—I have been all my life in rural environments—is that there is a thing about community and service that comes out of involvement here. It is not about money. I know people who work on my farm with me who spent in that last summer hundreds of hours unpaid. They were not doing this to seek to be paid. They are young and older Australians who just value the community that they are in and want to share and pitch in to help each other. To move into a culture where we lost that would be to change forever the nature of what we do. I do not think we could probably afford it. To some extent, there is something very Australian, if you live in rural Australia, about being a volunteer and being involved in community activity. That aside, I do think we have to have some mechanisms where we can recognise it and make some form of payments available.

Mrs GASH—My final question is to do with your debriefing. You say you have regular debriefings after every fire, which is commendable, and naturally should be the case. In the state and area that I come from, which is the Shoalhaven, they have debriefings. They neglect to include people on the ground, such as your radio operators, your people who provide the food, the people who might be on the ground doing various other tasks. Do you include all your people?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes, pretty much. Everyone is invited to come and participate after each of the fires.

Mrs GASH—I think that is another area we should learn from. Those people all have comments to make as well in relation to how the situation has evolved and what could perhaps be changed. Sometimes we neglect to include those people. I just wanted to know how you actually did yours.

Mr Rolley—Fire is not something about which one person has the universal knowledge. A lot of things go on all the time at ground level where you can make improvements. We find in our own organisation we have the weekly involvement of all of our people in debriefing on activities. People have small but practical ideas about how you can make improvements, and they get documented. It is also important not to just have these activities but to document the outcomes and then make someone accountable for actioning those items that have been identified. That is an important thing, too. You do not do it because you want to feel good about it. You do it because you genuinely want to make some changes that will improve the situation.

Mrs GASH—Thank you, and thank you for yesterday.

CHAIR—I return to the issue of paying volunteers. In the protocol, you have a capacity for that on a written request. Do many volunteers take up that opportunity?

Mr Rolley—Yes. I would not say it is universal, but we certainly do. It is not an industrial condition because all the flexibility that you need to think about in particular circumstances has gone. For example, if this was a group of people for a half a day versus a sustained period of a week, there is a huge difference in the way people think about that. I know myself when I pitch in for a thing for a half a day or a couple of days I do not worry about it; I do not want to put a bill in. But if we have to sustain that and you cannot pick up or you cannot move the stock or you have missed the fencing job or whatever, it is not unreasonable to get something in return for that. I cannot answer the question in black and white on that issue because I think you do

need to have a bit of flexibility to get the right solution but to maintain this ethic we have in rural Australia about volunteering to support a whole range of things, be it fires or floods or any other disaster.

CHAIR—It is very commendable if you can achieve a good result, where somebody quite legitimately deserves to get some sort of assistance to cover the fact that they have spent three weeks fighting fires and the farm has been neglected or whatever or they have missed out on other payments. But finding that right balance must be difficult. Clearly, it is not abused, for instance.

Mr Rolley—I do not see any evidence of it being abused. If your committee had the time to talk to all the volunteers, you would probably find some who are not happy about it. There will have been specific circumstances where we maybe did not get it right. All I am saying to you is that in aggregate, when I look at the big picture of it from year to year, mostly it is about right. I do not think it is something that we should try to legislate for. We should try to have some management systems that take it in that direction, if you know what I mean.

CHAIR—Yes. That is good. You said that this protocol is unique. To your knowledge, there are no other such protocols in any other states or territories in Australia?

Mr Slijepcevic—I think there must be a protocol in Victoria between DSE and CFA. I think they have a protocol.

CHAIR—They have a protocol?

Mr Slijepcevic—I think that came out of one of the inquiries. I am not sure which one. They have a protocol.

Mr Rolley—Does it includes the parks people as well?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes. I think the fire agency basically looks after the parks and forestry side of Victoria. They provide the fire management for both.

Mr Rolley—One thing I do know is that this is probably the most deeply embedded issue. People have worked really hard to figure out the ways to do the cultural stuff as well as the statutory things.

CHAIR—I have a couple of other quick questions. The CRC that is being established now, I think they have not totally signed off but it is close to it. Are you happy from Tasmania's point of view with the involvement you might be having in that?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes, definitely. We provided $100,000 for Tasmania in cash from the government plus we provided $180,000 in kind. We will do lots of projects here in Tasmania that are important to us but also we think they are important for the whole of Australia, especially for the south-eastern states.

CHAIR—You do not have any concerns that it might be dominated by some of the bigger agencies elsewhere?

Mr Slijepcevic—No, I do not think so. We have a representative on the board. It is John Gledhill.

Mr Rolley—John Gledhill is on the Tasmanian Fire Service. He is the representative for Tasmania. John—

CHAIR—Will stick up for Tassie?

Mr Rolley—John is there, so I think he has good experience. The other thing, of course, is that there is a lot of sharing of this expertise around the country now. You see fire crews and equipment coming from Tassie to work in mainland Australian states and vice versa. We have had forestry, parks and fire service teams from Tasmania working in the United States. This thing about fire and boundaries that I made at the outset is a really important thing to get into people's minds. There is a sort of a universe. The French are fighting the fires at the moment, as are the Italians. The Indonesians did it a couple of years ago. There is a sense in which you need to share the best of what is available globally in this area. Australia has got some first-class things happening. But you need to have systems of exchange. I think the American, Canadian, US and Australian fire exchange things and those types of programs should be supported strongly nationally. We particularly need to have people involved at the operating level of the fire agencies so that they look at what some of the best practice is and think about how it might be applied. Those sorts of things need to be happening on a regular basis.

CHAIR—I understand our next witnesses have actually pulled out so we have a bit more time to pursue a couple of things. I was going to pursue the issue of hazard reduction. You mentioned that the amount of hazard fuel reduction has reduced in recent times. You gave a couple of reasons. Part of that was public pressure against smoke being around. I can only ask you about Forestry Tasmania's land tenure. Do you set yourself certain goals for areas to hazard reduce in a year?

Mr Rolley—We have set some quantitative targets. It has an advantage but it also has a potential perverse outcome. The advantage is that you have a way of regularly reporting the extent to which you are getting what you think your long-term average of annual burning needs to be. The perverse is that people go and burn another 100 or 1,000 buttongrass plains that are not strategically that important and the numbers get made up but it might not be in places where you most need it. I think you have to have some quantitative targets. I am just saying they also need to be couched strategically. You want to know that 100 per cent of what you have done is your No. 1 priority strategic risk, and it is not a grossed-up area of all the hectares you have burnt. Getting fuel reduction done is actually really hard. It is very difficult. You can see from this landscape there are lots of neighbours that will be involved. You cannot just go out there and do it. Society today requires that neighbours be consulted. You have only a limited number of days in which you can probably do it safely. It is a resourcing issue that has to be tackled. I would be nervous about setting a broad hectare number without couching it against a strategic position. But we are doing a lot less. We are doing probably 50 per cent less than we were doing 10 years ago; that is in aggregate now between parks and forestry and ourselves.

CHAIR—That includes national parks as well?

Mr Rolley—I am talking in general terms. We would be doing probably 50 per cent of what we have done. We need to find ways of getting more hectares strategically completed.

CHAIR—Do you have a feel for what sort of rotation you think you are achieving within your forestry areas? Is it ultimately once every five or seven or 10 years that you are getting fuel reduction? I suppose you have to take into account your generation and regeneration parts as well.

Mr Rolley—We would do over 20,000 hectares annually of some form of fuel modification, be it prescribed fire to reduce fine fuels on probably a five- to seven-year cycle. Shorter than that and you are probably just continuing to produce increased flammability. It depends on the type of community, but it would be five to seven years. We then have our selection harvesting areas, where we are doing top disposal burning, which is just basically very lightly burning the tops of trees that have been left following harvest. Then we have our clear-fell harvested areas where the fuels are being burnt. In aggregate, we would do around 20,000 hectares or thereabouts. It is the prescribed component of that that has been reduced, I think, for Tasmania as a whole probably by 50 per cent. It is that as an aggregate that needs to be on about a five- to seven-year basis, depending on the type of vegetation. This is about the ecology of these—

Mr Slijepcevic—Some of them you can burn every 10 years because we have a species that regenerates over certain periods so you have to have another frequency between burns.

Mr Rolley—You need to get that frequency right. Particularly in these coastal communities, you have rare and threatened species, for example. You do need to understand the sort of ecology of the fire frequency so that you are not going to simply burn them on a regular basis and lose the very value that the reserve or the conservation park has been established for. But generally, all this landscape has got a fire ecology. A lot of Australians have become so urban that we have forgotten that fire is an inherent part of the shape of these landscapes. We need to work out what that ecology is and then apply a thoughtful regime to it.

Mr ORGAN—We have heard a bit about your relationship with Parks in both fire management and in assessing the ecological value of lands under your control, for example. You just indicated that you are aware some lands have specific ecological values. What is your relationship on an ongoing basis with Parks in assessing some of those and working out fire management regimes?

Mr Rolley—We do them jointly.

Mr ORGAN—So you have a close working relationship with Parks?

Mr Rolley—Absolutely. The operating managers in the fire service, Parks and Forestry work together seamlessly on a whole range of these projects. The big thing that has to happen in this country is that we have to separate the political decision making about land use, which is, rightfully, for politicians to decide, because it is about values that should be there. When that decision is made, the issue is how to most efficiently manage land. You do not want agencies playing war games that are about political decisions that should be made on land use.

Mr ORGAN—And that does happen?

Mr Rolley—In the country, I am conscious that it does happen. What I think is a very positive thing about what has happened in relation to the parks, fire service and forestry stuff here is that when those land use decisions are made, people at the management and the operating levels are actually working together to share the expertise to get good results. They are not waging internecine warfare about land tenure issues. To me, we have to try to make sure we get a clear separation between the politics of land use and then the management of those lands, particularly from a fire point of view, to get the best result. They are two separate issues. They get jumbled up. People are prosecuting a land tenure case through a fire or an operating area. That is totally inappropriate.

Mr ORGAN—If what you are saying is true, which is that they do have a great working relationship between the various branches of the state government, that seems to be a great model for the rest of Australia.

Mr Rolley—People work together. That fire management committee has got the senior people from Parks, the fire service and Forestry. You do not ever read about it in the media in the sense that there are Indian arm wrestles about things. Maurice Geard chairs this. He is a person with a wealth of experience. People get on with the business of these joint projects. People actually work together. We scope and sign off on projects that are jointly resourced. Our people work with the fire service and the Parks people on projects. This project we initiated was supported technically by fire services and Parks. I think there is quite a bit of that.

CHAIR—Do any of Forestry's people help out in the state from a firefighting point of view?

Mr Rolley—Yes. We have had crews in Victoria and New South Wales and in the US.

Mr Slijepcevic—Twice in the US.

Mr Rolley—You have personally?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes. In 2000 in the USA and in 2001 in New South Wales.

CHAIR—Have you come across any sort of incompatibilities between the states that the committee ought to know about? We got some evidence at some stage of a problem with simple things like different couplings on machinery from Victoria to New South Wales with the old railway gauge debate.

Mr Rolley—Different gauges in Albury.

CHAIR—Yes, exactly, where hoses were incompatible with equipment.

Mr Slijepcevic—You just have to bring adaptors and that is fine. There are existing adaptors so you can link any hose to any hose.

CHAIR—But there are differences?

Mr Rolley—There are differences.

Mr Slijepcevic—Our remote area crews, when they go out, take all the gear. They take everything with them when they go out.

Mr ADAMS—Is there a bringing together of that around the country?

Mr Slijepcevic—There are a lot of big projects now on actually buying equipment for all the fire management agencies across Australia. So I think it will be unified at some stage.

Mr ADAMS—I think there is a move to get signage the same in each state too, isn't there, on what a symbol means. Is that true?

Mr Rolley—And training standards.

Mr Slijepcevic—And training standards and ICS. AFAC is doing a big review of ICS, and all stakeholders are involved in that process as well.

Mr ADAMS—Do you see that as important?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes. It is very important that we all talk the same language.

Mr ADAMS—And be interchangeable when people go from one state to the other.

Mr Slijepcevic—When you ask for a sector leader to come from another state, you know exactly what you will get, not what you think is a sector leader.

Mr ADAMS—So it is a matter of training, and the people he is actually directing have the same understanding. They have all been trained in the same methodology?

Mr Slijepcevic—That is very important.

CHAIR—I think we had some evidence in Ballarat that suggested there may be scope for expert national teams being available to jump around the countryside when these things happen, where you can slot them into a region. I guess that is a little bit along those lines. If you have standardisation, it does not matter if you do bring somebody in to fill a gap somewhere.

Mr Rolley—We should have standardisation. What is the point of it, unless there is some particular fire circumstance that requires a different configuration, which is pretty unusual. When we are talking about the landscape of most wildfire management in this country, then to move to a pretty standard and uniform system and using best practice and reviewing it on a regular basis, that has surely got to be the way to go—it is one country, after all.

Mrs GASH—You may not know the answer to this. The New South Wales government basically funds firefighting in that state through the local councils and so forth. We have a number of bushfire volunteer groups throughout our area, as I am sure you probably do as well. Even though it is funded by the state, there is still a considerable amount of fundraising taking place, which can cause a bit of discontentment because they still have to raise funds for such items as extra uniforms or boots or whatever it is they might need. Do you have that here as well?

Mr Rolley—I do not know. There is certainly a mixture of funding sources. But I am not sufficiently involved to know the detail of that.

Mrs GASH—Who would be the right person to ask? Do we have anybody coming today who could answer that? I had a quick look down the list and I could not see anyone.

CHAIR—Probably not. We may be able to access that information elsewhere.

Mr Rolley—I am sure you would be able to organise to access that from the Tasmanian Fire Service.

Mrs GASH—Thanks.

Mr ORGAN—Have there been any major problems identified arising out of the most recent fires here in Tasmania by your group generally? Do you think they were managed as best as could be expected and there were not any major problems as such?

Mr Rolley—I think the evidence is that they were managed very well. In the circumstances and with the prevailing size and scale of the fires and the fire weather, I think they were managed exceptionally well. We had some errant arson behaviour that made the job of the firefighting task, particularly in the case of the Dromedary area, bloody difficult with people lighting fires when people were out there actively fighting them. That warrants sanctions and also stronger education. The message that came out of all of this for me is that we have to push much harder in education. We have to get fire management plans much more publicly available at a level where people understand where they fit in the whole thing and what contributions they can make if they think there is an issue. That certainly comes out.

Mr ORGAN—But in regard to communication and availability of maps, you think it was pretty well done?

Mr Rolley—Generally, yes. Each time you look at it, the guys are working technically at the GIS level in terms of improving the availability of that, getting that into a more standardised format. You are never 100 per cent there but we are each year making pretty good progress, particularly with the GIS stuff, mapping past fire history, where the resources are, where the risks are and having that available now. That is getting to an online position.

Mr Slijepcevic—That is another project that is being undertaken by the State Fire Management Council—the integration of the GIS systems between all three agencies. So we share all the information about flammability and assets and fire history combined into one and then dispersed to all other stakeholders, so we all work with the same information.

Mr ORGAN—You may not be able to answer this. You did not have an instance where you had fire getting out of control, for example, or where you had limited resources and certain fires could not be fought? It was not as dramatic as it was in other parts of Australia in the last year?

Mr Rolley—There were certainly fires with uncontained edges and running fires. Judgments were being made by fire control officers about which flanks to work on and so on. I do not think you could say that it was all under control; I do not think that is the way to put it. I think the

resources deployed to work on those fires and the review of that fire indicated the adequacy of the resources, the coordination and communication were pretty good. There were things we learnt out of that fire. Out of every fire there are things learnt. I would not have said we were inadequately resourced. It does say we still have a long way to go on this community education question. We need to resource that better. We do need to get these fire management plans that relate to a locality available online so that people can get access to them. They should be updated so that they become the tool that gets more community participation. I think those things are quite important.

Mr ORGAN—We had a testimony from the group in Victoria saying there was a plan out there but nobody knew how to implement it. Nobody knew much about it. So at least it appears here that the authorities had the plan and they implemented it. Maybe the community was not necessarily fully aware. But that is the next stage.

Mr Rolley—There has to be a lot of energy that goes into that. There is a huge amount of planning that goes on. Mostly, it sits in bookcases or in cabinets. When you get a fire, it is not used. The most powerful piece of information in a firefighting situation is a map. You generally draw your knowledge and experience from that map, to figure out what to do. You do not go back to look at volumes and tomes. When you think about it, we have to keep these things simple but meaningful and have them readily available. Maps and GIS technology allow people to have good-quality mapping that can be updated. That is the direction in which we have to go—keeping these things simple, practical and not trying to fulfil some heavy statutory requirements, where we have to have all these pages about this and that and a thousand other things. In the end, they do not actually have a bearing on what you do on the ground.

Mr ORGAN—It is the experience, the good maps?

Mr Rolley—I think so, yes.

Mr ADAMS—It is about upgrading the maps and getting onto the Net and other things. I think we will be making some good recommendations along that line.

Mr Rolley—Yes. We have no problems in Tasmania with you accessing the best that the lands department has in mapping.

Mr Slijepcevic—The rolls, everything.

Mr ADAMS—We have that on visual stuff now? That is computerised? We upgrade it?

Mr Slijepcevic—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—We do not have it in the trucks yet.

Mr Rolley—But it will happen. It will not be far away. That sort of technology is powerful.

Mr ADAMS—Maybe the federal government could fund that. It could be a recommendation out of this report.

Mr Rolley—Education is a huge issue. About 20 million of us live in this huge landscape that has been shaped by fire. The trouble is 75 per cent of us live in cities and have forgotten the connection that the rest of the landscape has to fire. When we do get these fires, people say, 'Oh, shock, horror!' People start waving the finger rather than thinking, 'Hang on. While we live in these big cities, we have this landscape. We have to understand the resource and manage fire thoughtfully.'

Mr ADAMS—It is a bit like drought. These are natural phenomena that occur.

Mr Rolley—They are going to be repeated. We will have another repeat of this in another seven to 10 years.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the additional evidence, the additional information and the submission. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your participation in yesterday's inspections as well. We appreciate that.

Mr ADAMS—We appreciate the use of forestry land, I think. We had lunch on it!

Mr Rolley—Yes. Thank you very much.

[10.16 a.m.]

BRIGINSHAW, Mr John Ernest, President, Binalong Bay Ratepayers Association Inc.

SMITH, Mr Brian, Committee Member, Binalong Bay Ratepayers Association Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and can be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We have your submission. Thank you very much for that submission. It has been authorised for publication and forms part of the evidence that the committee will use in its deliberations. Thank you for coming forward in the agenda this morning. Unfortunately, one of the other witnesses was not able to get here. Would you like to make some opening remarks first? Then the committee will probably have a few questions.

Mr Briginshaw—Basically the problem started at the beginning of the last season. Although there has always been a problem over the years, it became exacerbated when the local fire chief, the second in command in Launceston, Rodney Reid, came around and delivered a brochure on all the extremities of Binalong Bay. This brochure has galvanised us into taking action as to what we should do about it. So we called together members of Parks and Wildlife, Forestry, police, all the government agencies, the local council and so forth. That meeting was held. We had a reasonable meeting but we were not happy with the end result because it seemed to us that the fire brigade had different views on what was a fire hazard from what Parks deemed to be a fire hazard.

This is the background of what has happened. Over the years prior to this, various residents have—this is private land—asked the council to have fire hazards removed. The council are rather slow. It took them four to five years to have one part cleared and then it ended up that the council did work after four years to put in a decent firebreak. This is on extremities between private land and crown land. The crown land could burn but the private land was worse or tended to be worse. So we feel the council is not doing their part—this is an example I am using—in stopping these problems quickly. What we are basically saying is that the fire brigades, either local or the head of control in Launceston, should have the last say in what is a fire hazard, because I presume they are the experts. This is not happening. I will ask Brian Smith to add a few words.

Mr Smith—As John mentioned, when this meeting was called, it was important because it was the first time we had managed to get together a whole group of people who have a direct interest in fire safety in one form or another. We asked them questions in two areas. One was to give us the assurances we needed that should there be a fire problem, the plans were in place so they would work together. They gave us that presentation. We felt extremely satisfied. However, when we got to the issues of fire prevention, a totally different ballgame began to emerge. There were, as John mentioned, different approaches and different interpretations of what constituted a

fire hazard. Parks and Wildlife said, 'Yes, we haven't done such and such because we have a shortage of resources.' The liability regarding fire services is clearly laid out in the act and their authority is clearly laid out. They have the ability to go in and step over crown land occupiers and owners. First of all, that part of the act was not apparent to everyone present. We got no satisfactory response. Within the fire services act, the capability exists for the Fire Service to put in, if you like, an absolute authority. But their representative again claimed a shortage of resources meant that they could not do it.

As part of the total committee, we had also looked at the various acts in relation to this. Let's forget the fire service act, which picks up the totality of it. But in the parks and wildlife act, the word 'fire' does not appear. In the forest practices act the word 'fire' does not appear. In the local government act, the word 'fire' appears in one area only, and that is in division 6 of the act under the heading 'nuisances'. This falls in the same subparagraph; it says a nuisance is a fire or a risk of fire or unsightly rubbish. That is the level of importance placed on fire in these various acts.

We also discovered in this whole framework that within Tasmanian legislation there is an act called the Acts Interpretation Act 1930. Every other act in Tasmania is subordinate to that act, which lays down very clear interpretations of the intent behind laws. Is it possible that in each of the areas of legislation that pick up parks and wildlife, forestry and fire services there is a fire safety section which brings together an across-the-board requirement, an overriding requirement, for each one of these areas to be forced to comply with, like the interpretation of a fire hazard, the need to work together? In parks and wildlife, for example, we discovered the word 'fire' does not appear. But what appears in paragraph 36 of their act is a statement that says if you damage a fallen tree, you can be fined 500 penalty points or two years imprisonment. Yet the word 'fire' does not appear anywhere.

Mr Briginshaw—There are lots of anomalies in the system. Where we might clear our land beside us, Parks, within 40 metres, has very heavy fire burns. It is not listed in their designated burns at any rate. But when you ask them about it, they say, 'Don't worry about it.' But the point is the burns are there. They are heavy loads. I am not an expert. When you see things pushed up against trees as very heavily matted matter, it is a fire hazard, in my opinion. Parks are behind in their mosaic or fire reduction burns. They claim they have not got the money. When we challenge them and say they are responsible, they say that because they do not have the money, legally they are not liable for any damages caused by their fires getting out of control.

CHAIR—Three of us are not from Tasmania; just describe the geography of your area. Binalong Bay is obviously along the coast. Is the urban area predominantly surrounded by national park?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes. The Humbug Point area and Mount Pearson reserve are all reserves. The east coast, as you know, is a light sclerophyll forest which is extremely volatile in fire. The west coast is just the opposite.

CHAIR—How far up the coast is it?

Mr ADAMS—Towards the north.

CHAIR—So north of St Helens?

Mr Briginshaw—North-east of St Helens.

Mr ADAMS—It is more on the coast than the bay. The bay comes in and St Helens is on the bay. Binalong Bay is out on the point or near the point where the actual bay starts. Would that be right, John?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes. We are also looking at the broader area. There is a St Helens point area which has also had the same problem.

Mr ADAMS—There were a lot of empty blocks in your area there. There are a lot of blocks?

Mr Smith—It appears so. I think so.

Mr ADAMS—Do they pose a hazard, in your opinion? Does the ratepayers association have an issue? Are they some of the issues?

Mr Briginshaw—There is an issue with neighbouring blocks. We asked the council. It took three months for the council to operate. It is slow.

Mr ADAMS—You are saying the fire service has the power to say, 'That block is a hazard,' and use the interpretation act or whatever. But the fire service has the power to say that that block needs to be cleaned up and therefore council should act. Is that correct?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes, that is true. I think the system has changed over the last 50 years. Where that area was grazed before Lands took it over, it was on lease, it was very open and it was not a problem. But since we have still had cattle leased on it, the forest is regrowing and it is becoming worse.

CHAIR—What is the tenure of this land that you are talking about that used to be grazed?

Mr Briginshaw—It was crown land. It was leased out on a permanent lease. That is how the bush has grown back.

CHAIR—So it is still crown land but it is not national park?

Mr Briginshaw—It is Humbug recreational reserve.

Mr ADAMS—We have several categories of reserve in Tasmania. There is national parks, conservation reserves, other reserves that you can hunt on and things like that. There are a whole range of them.

Mr Briginshaw—So it is not burnt off any more. There are large areas that are not planned by Parks to burn off. It is only virtually a barrier around us that they have their hazard reduction burns. But there are large areas that do not even exist on their maps.

CHAIR—Have you got a local volunteer bushfire group?

Mr Briginshaw—We have a volunteer group. I am told—I have only lived in that area for the last 12 years—that the local fire service would burn off the necessary bits in the past, but that power has been taken from them by Parks. So Parks have control.

Mr ADAMS—That is interesting. It is certainly a management issue. You have certainly highlighted it by coming to us. You continue to do that with the council. You say that you are getting some resolution from council to assist you?

Mr Briginshaw—I will ask Brian to answer that.

Mr Smith—First of all, you have a copy of the summary of the meeting held. There was no adverse comment. No comment came back from any of the panel members. We have quoted that the individuals stated they were short of resources and so on. We are working on the basis that they accept what was said at that meeting. A major issue cropped up at that meeting, and it does come back, Mr Adams, to the point you raise about vacant blocks. John handed out at the beginning of the section a pamphlet that had been handed out by fire services. A representative of Tasmania Fire Service went around our area. Where he saw that there was a potential problem, a copy of that document was passed to the householder. So it was not distributed everywhere. A major problem on a number of the blocks that we have encountered is not so much with the undergrowth but where you have the interlocking of massive eucalypt trees. We saw that interlocking being a very real potential fire risk if the thing just blew.

But we then have from the council perspective the fact that, as part of the planning and building, you do not cut down these trees. From their perspective, if there is no undergrowth problem, then you will not have a problem with interlocking canopies of trees. This does not leave us with a particularly satisfying—

Mr ADAMS—I think it comes back to the management of a block or a reserve. There has been a tendency for people to buy a house block, keep it for 10 years and not touch it. They are going to build something on it in 10 years time or later on. They leave it for 10 years but they do not actually deal with the hazards. It is a bit like some of the reserves, where we have seen in recent times management rules have changed or the management regime has changed. There is no grazing any more. Therefore, there isn't a fuel reduction. If there is not a reduction burn, there is not a reduction. So there is a different philosophy in actually looking at how the management takes place on those.

Mr Briginshaw—That is right.

Mr ADAMS—We probably are neglecting that in the sense that it needs to be looked at. We are locking something up and saying, 'We now have that.' Whether it is a block at Binalong Bay or whether it is a block in a suburban area of Hobart or whether it is a reserve of 500 hectares in a certain area, there still needs to be management of that area of land.

Mr Smith—That comes back to one of the issues we raised earlier. It is one we face significantly in Binalong Bay. It is the demarcation line between what is under the control of council and what is under Parks and Wildlife. These are natural across the whole country. What becomes essential is that there is this cooperation and coordination. If it does not happen

voluntarily at the lower levels, we believe it has to be enforced somewhere in the legislative systems.

Mr ADAMS—We have had some very good evidence about when a fire starts, and about fighting fires, but this is about pre management. This is the management of land management.

Mr Briginshaw—This is preventing a catastrophe.

Mr ADAMS—That is right. This is councils, Parks and Wildlife, Forestry or whoever managing the land prior to a problem.

CHAIR—Are you saying to the committee that, for instance, the Tasmania Fire Service ought to have some sort of overarching control to direct Parks to reduce the hazard?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes, immediately. Not next week, not next year but within the next—

Mr ADAMS—When they see it, basically.

Mr Briginshaw—They tend to have to put it off because certain elements within the community do not want it burnt. A classic example is this: I was telling you about this guy who wanted his boundary cleared. You had some neighbours saying, 'Oh, no. We can't have it cleared. We don't want it cleared.'

CHAIR—I was going to ask you about that. What is the view of your members with respect to some of these issues, particularly having an area smoking, for instance, when a hazard reduction burn is being done? Do you have conflict within the community about that?

Mr Briginshaw—Not so much about that. Some people have asthma. At least I think it is fair to let them know that there is going to be a burn-off so they can take something. Asthma is a serious thing. I do not have it, but it is a serious thing if you have a bushfire.

Mr ADAMS—Have you had a bushfire recently?

Mr Briginshaw—The year 1982 was the last bushfire. Forestry were hard pressed to put it out. They had lots of fallback positions.

Mr ADAMS—So Forestry dealt with the fire?

Mr Briginshaw—I do think so. I think they were called in to put it out.

Mr ADAMS—So there are fewer resources in your area now for Forestry. There is hardly anyone left there in their depot now. The resources are less from that position.

Mr Briginshaw—Yes. But they can pull together pretty quickly. What we did get out of the meeting was that if we did have a catastrophe—we do not want that—the services would pull together very well. Some people were worried that we could get trapped in there. The police said they have a method to get us out.

Mr ADAMS—That is a boat?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes.

Mr Smith—There is only one road in.

Mr Briginshaw—We were also worried because if there is a fire, we lose power and we lose our pumping ability. Some of us have put in for pumping. It is common sense.

Mr ADAMS—Do you have tanks in there?

Mr Briginshaw—Tanks. If you have an auxiliary pump, you have a chance.

Mrs GASH—I would like some clarification. I am new to Tasmania. I come from the South Coast of New South Wales, where we also are surrounded by water and National Parks and Wildlife and crown land. We have difficulties with our building codes. I notice one of your comments related to the adequacy of building codes in that particular area. Do you want to expand on that a little further?

Mr Briginshaw—The building codes are not prescriptive. They are performance based. When a code becomes performance based, then for a member of the council it is interpreted in a way to suit themselves. Perhaps that is being a bit harsh. But performance based building codes can be a bit messy because if they say it is aesthetically pleasing, we will have to leave it there. But if it is dangerous, they do not worry about it because it is aesthetically pleasing. I am using that as an example.

Mr Smith—Again, I think it comes back to the situation where there needs to be in the building codes, in the totality, a degree of flexibility for decision making. In regard to Binalong Bay, for example, at the meeting we had a bit of an argument between representatives from council and the representative from Parks and Wildlife. Building had been allowed, development had been allowed by council in an area and then that area in which the development took place was later handed over to Parks and Wildlife, who had a far different viewpoint as to whether the development in its own right should have been allowed in the first place. What we were asking for was burn-offs in areas that Parks and Wildlife consider should never have been allowed for development. Again, it comes back to the fact that somewhere there has to be the coordination.

Mrs GASH—Have you had fire happen in Binalong Bay?

Mr Briginshaw—There have been controlled burns.

Mrs GASH—But not a fire go through at all as such?

Mr Briginshaw—The last one was in 1982. That really cleaned it out to the north-west of us. That is where it will probably come, if it comes anyway. It has been cleaned up. You can still walk through the forest very easily.

Mrs GASH—I want to ask a question in relation to your association. I am quite sure you have probably discussed it. Should a fire occur again in Binalong Bay—hopefully, there never will be—have you discussed the issue of evacuation or whether you should stay with your home?

Mr Briginshaw—Well, we brought this up with the police inspector. She said there is a plan for emergency escape. I personally would probably stay with my home because I have put a pump in. I would make sure that I fulfil the guidelines that Forestry lay down. No. 1 is gutters. We had a bit of a problem. Like Brian said, next door had trees on it. Well, we decided, because it fitted within the fire brigade guidelines, that they should be removed because they had interlocking crowns. We went to the council. Silly us, we asked the council whether we could cut them down. The owner did not mind whether we cut them down and removed them. The council said, 'No, you can't cut them down.'

Mrs GASH—What have the authorities said you should do in case of fire? Did they recommend one thing or the other?

Mr Briginshaw—Sorry, I did not answer your question properly.

Mrs GASH—That is okay.

Mr Briginshaw—They have not said anything in that case, I do not think. Brian?

Mr Smith—One thing was discussed by the committee at a follow-up from the meeting. Tasmania Fire Services have told us that they have a range of plans available that allow groups of residents in the area to form—maybe 10 or a dozen at a time—their own fire group so that if anything emerges, we help ourselves and we determine who stays, who goes, who covers for one another. Fire Services Tasmania will be, once we set a date, sending someone down to help us to arrange these groups so that we ourselves can contribute to the situation if a fire happens.

Mrs GASH—How does your community feel about that? Do they endorse it or think it is somebody else's responsibility?

Mr Smith—I think it is fair to say there has been a mixed reaction to it. I think the success of that approach will depend on the number of areas where you have a group of people who are of the same mind. That is a problem.

Mr ADAMS—Your community is getting a bit older, too.

Mr Smith—Yes, indeed.

Mr ADAMS—Please do not take it personally!

Mr Briginshaw—Our fire unit, if there is an emergency, will not go out of the township. It will stay intact because spot fires will occur. That is what they consider will happen.

Mrs GASH—How do you feel about the brochure that was handed out?

Mr Briginshaw—It galvanised us into action, didn't it? That is why we are here.

Mr Smith—It did.

Mrs GASH—Thank you very much. I think it is excellent.

Mr Briginshaw—I am sorry that it appears that not more people have become more interested.

Mr ORGAN—I would like a bit of background information. How big is the Binalong Bay community?

Mr Briginshaw—There are a lot of holiday homes there. To give you some idea, the last census said 203 people live there, but we are getting a lot of mainlanders deciding to stay or live in Binalong Bay. Holiday homes are being sold. The population is building.

Mr ORGAN—So you are a coastal, small—

Mr Briginshaw—Township.

Mr ORGAN—A small coastal township made up of what? Retirees?

Mr Briginshaw—Retirees, some workers.

Mr ORGAN—Holiday people with holiday homes.

Mr Briginshaw—In season, yes.

Mr ORGAN—You are relatively isolated?

Mr Briginshaw—We are 12 kilometres from St Helens.

Mr ORGAN—And you are surrounded by bush?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have a local volunteer fire service?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes. The fire unit will stay there in case of emergency. If an emergency occurs, it will not move itself.

Mr ORGAN—How big is that?

Mr Briginshaw—It is not a big unit. We have a fire station. That is where we have our committee meetings and things like that.

Mr ORGAN—Are you a member of that group?

Mr Briginshaw—Not of the fire brigade, no. I got too involved in too many other things.

Mr ORGAN—But there is an active volunteer service?

Mr Briginshaw—It is very active, yes. I have access to that fire station. It is not given lightly.

Mr ORGAN—Are members of that group part of the Binalong Bay ratepayers group?

Mr Briginshaw—No. Mainly they are all working people.

Mr ORGAN—So you are coming at it from a different perspective?

Mr Briginshaw—To be honest with you, I said to the fire chief, 'I'm going down to Hobart to say a few words on this issue.' Because they had actually—I think I am right in saying this—burnt off some of the blocks that Parks had not, the fire chief did not want to get into trouble, if I might say something that seems underhand. He was not keen for me to say a few words down here. I cannot see anything wrong with the fire brigade. I have no complaints.

Mr ADAMS—You have a good service.

Mr ORGAN—Are they generally pretty happy with the way fires are managed?

Mr Briginshaw—No. They want to use the burn-offs as practice for a major fire. They want to do the burn-offs. Parks have a qualified team of people who are designed specifically to do the burn-offs, but they are understaffed. They are not always able to use the window of opportunity that is available to them to bring their team in. So they cannot do what they are supposed to do. But the local firies could.

Mr ORGAN—You are saying that the local firies feel they do not have the—

Mr Briginshaw—They do not have the backing of the government.

Mr ORGAN—They do not have the backing and support to go and do some of that hazard reduction?

Mr Briginshaw—I think they think because they are volunteers, therefore, they are not skilled in soil dryness indexes and all the things that go into understanding whether we can burn off or not—wind direction, all those areas.

Mr ORGAN—You might not know the answer to this, but have some of those members of the local volunteer service been around for long?

Mr Briginshaw—A lot longer than me. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence about what went on 20 or 30 years ago. They know about it.

Mr ORGAN—Binalong Bay has been subject over the past half decade or whatever to fires. So there are people who have lived there for a long time and have local expertise?

Mr Briginshaw—The last one was in 1986.

Mr ORGAN—There are members of the local volunteer fire group who have fought those fires?

Mr Briginshaw—They fought that with the help of Forestry. They had to put a lot of roads in to fight that fire. There was a lot of road building to do that. Once again, various people do not want these roads. To me, it is crazy. I have driven along some of these roads. How can you get into the bush if you do not have a road?

CHAIR—The volunteers would be happy to help Parks, wouldn't they?

Mr Briginshaw—Overjoyed.

CHAIR—But they do not get asked?

Mr Briginshaw—They do not get asked.

CHAIR—So it is a bit of a case of local knowledge and expertise probably not being utilised to the extent that it could be. Would that be true?

Mr Briginshaw—That is right, yes.

CHAIR—I think I am right in saying this from briefings that we had down here yesterday. It is something you might take back. I suspect that the fire service does have the legislative capacity to direct council if there is council land or whatever that is not being cleaned up. I suspect they do but they probably want to try and work close in hand with them. I think at the end of the day it is something that the ratepayers association might take on board. I think they probably do ultimately have the capacity to direct council to sort out a dangerous situation.

Mr Briginshaw—I think the act says that fire services have the final say. But it takes time for things to happen. It is two hours and 10 minutes from Launceston to here to get an expert down who is not an amateur or a volunteer.

CHAIR—You mention that council would not let you cut down trees on an adjoining block even though the owner was happy for that to occur. Is there a conflict between council regulations and fire regulations?

Mr Briginshaw—I would say there was. The planning system for Break of Day Council is performance based. It used to be prescriptive.

CHAIR—Is there such a thing as a tree preservation order in your council regulations? Is that the reason why council refused to have it cut down?

Mr Smith—Again, this partially answers the question you raised about the building. Within the building codes, from a council perspective, trees are only removed—to put it simply—if it is essential for the house that is about to be built. So there is a great antipathy to cutting down anything that might look aesthetically pleasing on the land. Quite often, that is in conflict with the document which came from the fire service, which is talking about a zone around the buildings.

CHAIR—I am pleased you have highlighted that point. That is an issue that perhaps the committee needs to take on board.

Mr Briginshaw—In an Australian context, it would make a big difference, I suspect.

Mr ADAMS—It is an issue of debate and an issue that needs to be discussed in the community. There needs to be a discussion.

Mr Briginshaw—I do not know whether it is relevant, but I am a bit disappointed that Parks did have fire trails within Humbug Point. They have bulldozed them so no fire truck can drive through them. I find that very, very disappointing. The local fire brigade are really upset about that.

CHAIR—Humbug Point is a national park?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes.

CHAIR—It is not a wilderness area?

Mr ADAMS—It is a recreational reserve.

Mr Briginshaw—You can take your dog or ride horses.

Mr ADAMS—It is not a park in the sense that you cannot take a dog.

CHAIR—And the fire trails have been blocked off?

Mr Briginshaw—They have been blocked off. Four-wheel drives and large fire trucks cannot drive through it.

CHAIR—We have similar evidence about other national parks in other states.

Mr Briginshaw—As far as I am concerned, it is not on. It just does not make sense. You want to get in there quick. I was looking at the statistics that Parks put out on how fires started in different ways. Arson was a high number. If you have stupid blokes that want a fire—and even a campfire gets out of control—you cannot do anything about it. The local blokes will be there within an hour or two or maybe five or 10 minutes. You cannot get to it.

Mr ORGAN—This committee has spoken to local agencies such as the Tasmanian Fire Service and Forestry and we have been given information on how there is good coordination, good policies and management plans in place. I suppose to a degree—you might be aware of this—you would feel a lot better if, when there is a major fire, the local authorities in Tasmania were pretty much prepared to be able to deal with those fires. They have plans in place. They have a lot of resources et cetera. In the summary of the meeting with the panel of fire safety experts, you say, for example:

There is less than quality harmonious relationships between some agency representatives on fire prevention issues and responsibilities.

I take it that your main concern is with regard to fire prevention, not necessarily with regard to managing fires when they actually occur. Is that right? You are quite at ease if a fire did break out that you would have confidence in the authorities to deal with that?

Mr Briginshaw—If a major fire starts—I am very confident; I am bragging about Tasmania here—I believe Tasmanian fire services and all the services joined together make one of the best.

Mr ORGAN—Therefore, you have concerns about fire prevention issues, which is where you are bringing in councils, national parks and the various authorities with regard to hazard reduction, creating fire zones and things like that. Your group obviously arranged one meeting with various so-called experts. What other action has your group taken in speaking with firefighters, in speaking with council and other groups? What action will you be taking in the future to basically address some of your concerns with regard to these areas?

Mr Briginshaw—I will let Brian answer this one, if I may.

Mr Smith—First of all, I would like to come back to this issue of concern with fire prevention. As John said, that is perfectly correct. Having said that, having been given by that group promises that things will be all right if there is a fire and accepting that at face value, to suddenly then find that their apparent method of working together to deal with fire prevention is far below what we would like, it also throws in doubt the promise of the future should there be a fire. Having said that and having seen, without going into the detail of it, that at the local level there were less than harmonious relationships, what we did was send a copy of the letter that you have to the minister for local government, to the minister in charge of forestry and in charge of national parks and wildlife. We felt that the issues were so important that what was wanted was those agencies working together to come up with a coordination plan and for it to be forced down from the top from ministerial level. It was no good trying to force it up from the bottom.

Mr ORGAN—Do you feel that those state government departments feel that basically they have a good understanding of the situation in your area and that they feel they have in place the plans to deal with fires et cetera? Your group might be showing a bit more concern than might be necessary and they are reacting that way because they feel they have plans in place and are carrying out hazard reduction et cetera.

Mr Smith—That is a possibility. But we do not just have a local parochial approach to our own operations. We recognise that it is more than likely that the problems that we face are not problems that within the whole of Australia apply to Binalong Bay only. Therefore, we have taken the opportunity to say, 'Well, it is not happening at a local level. The only way we can get this to happen is to force it down from the top.' That is why we have taken this approach. We believe the issues we are facing of non-cooperation are not just local issues for Binalong Bay.

Mr ORGAN—When you say there is less than quality harmonious relationships between some agency representatives, could you give us an example of what that means?

Mr Briginshaw—The local firefighter is also our council executive officer. He challenged Mr Barker, who is head of parks north-east, as to the progress of his fire reduction burn-offs in the Humbug area. He said they were up to date. Tony Walker said, 'No, that's not right. You're three years behind in your program. You're getting behind.' Of course, there was disagreement

between the chief of the parks department for the north-east and the local firefighter. Is that answering your question? They are not in harmony. They are not agreeing with one another.

Mr ORGAN—This was a local firefighter, a local resident?

Mr Briginshaw—Yes. It was a local resident and firefighter disagreeing with him. It is true. We have the plans there of their programs. You can see the sections they have not done and the sections they have done. They are behind. I will make it quite clear that they are behind. I might add that, in my opinion, the amount of the fire reduction burn is only a very minor component of the Humbug area. They do not have a program for the whole area, or there does not appear to be. They are not telling us what their program is, anyway.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time this morning. We really appreciate it. A very good part of this inquiry is that we have heard from people who are right there at the coalface, so to speak. We are very appreciative of getting that sort of evidence for our inquiry.

Mr Briginshaw—I hope it will be of some use to you.

CHAIR—It will be very useful. Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 10.59 a.m. to 11.29 a.m.

EDWARDS, Mr Terry, Chief Executive, Forest Industries Association of Tasmania

HENDERSON, Mr Larry Earl, Manager, Sawmiller Services, Forest Industries Association of Tasmania

HICKEY, Mr Gregory Brendon, Industry Representative, State Fire Management Council, Forest Industries Association of Tasmania

HOBBS, Miss Katy, Assistant Manager, Member Services, Forest Industries Association of Tasmania

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 the parliament.

The committee has received your submission, which has been authorised for publication. Therefore, it is part of the evidence of the committee. Would you like to make some opening remarks? The committee will then proceed to ask questions.

Mr Edwards—Thank you. We would like to reiterate a small number of issues that are raised by our submission and, I suppose, set the scene for the subsequent discussion I presume we will have directly with committee members through questioning. We have outlined in our submission exactly who FIAT is. We are an industry association. We represent the predominant processors of forest products in the state of Tasmania. Our members' activity is very diverse, and includes the production of veneers, sawn hardwood and softwood timbers, pulp and paper, and woodchip production. We are heavily involved in plantation forestry, both hardwood and softwood.

The forestry industry in Tasmania contributes about $1.3 billion annually to the economy of the state of Tasmania. Our members would produce the vast bulk of that turnover. In our submission we have identified two particular terms of reference on which the Forest Industries Association would wish to make representations to the committee. The first is the cause and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfire, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests and other crown land and private property. The second is 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.

I wish to turn briefly to the first of those terms of reference. As we do, I wish to state that our intention is not to try to apportion any blame for the events of last summer. Primarily we want to concentrate our efforts on looking to the future to see whether we can find and identify mechanisms to avoid any repeat of that most unfortunate set of circumstances.

We wish to deal firstly with risk factors. The CSIRO's principal research scientist, Phil Cheney, who we suggest is Australia's foremost bushfire researcher, has stated that for the past 30 years there has been a continuing decline in operational prescribed burning. He went on to

say that the January fires were a truly historic event, producing probably the most extreme, widespread and continuously burnt area in living history. It is really that statement that we wish to concentrate the bulk of our endeavours on. It is the build-up of fuels in our forest areas that is an issue that we believe is of primary concern.

In Tasmania, the reduction in operational or fuel reduction burning has occurred in tandem with quantum increases in the amount of our forest areas that are in reserves of one kind or another. Reserves in Tasmania have increased from being approximately 13 per cent of our land area in 1982 to now representing 40 per cent of our land area, which is an increase of well over 200 per cent. FIAT members are concerned that as a result of 40 per cent of Tasmania's forests, or about 1.3 million hectares, being reserved there is an increasing build-up of large fuel loadings in these areas. These fuel loadings have built up due to a reduction in land management practices, namely prescribed burning, and they pose a massive threat to the biodiversity of Tasmania's forest resources and adjoining multiple use forests and private property.

There is an advantage, we suggest, in developing strategic access to create management units which would permit easier access and control of bushfires that do eventuate in those forested areas. It is current policy of Parks and Wildlife in Tasmania not to permit any heavy machinery access into the parks area to create road and access points in the event of fire, which in turn means ready access for firefighting is not available. Consequently, wildfire, once started, will spread significantly and will burn large tracts of forest before it can be controlled.

As these areas are being managed for all current and future Tasmanians, we believe it is appropriate that active tactical fire suppression activities be implemented to ensure that we do not lose large tracts of our forested area to wildfire with the consequent adverse impacts on biodiversity that these parks were, after all, formed to protect.

We recommend that there be a state-wide review into planned burning and hazard reduction in our state forest reserves. Specifically we recommend that there be a provision made for access for firefighting to our reserve land areas, that there be active fuel reduction activities on a planned and managed basis, and that the responsible public land managers be required to prepare and report annually on three-year management plans that are designed to ensure appropriate fuel management strategies.

Current management strategies employed within reserves by the Parks and Wildlife Service in Tasmania are potentially threatening some of our forest communities through a lack of necessary fire activity required to regenerate eucalypt forest types. Whilst these management practices may be well meaning, they are misguided and potentially fatal to some forest communities. In particular, we highlight eucalyptus regnans and eucalyptus obliqua communities, which are the tall forest communities in Tasmania that are the subject of much of our forestry debate that we all read so much about. Those areas are threatened by a lack of proper management processes.

I will now move to the second of the issues we wish to talk about briefly in opening. It is the issue of building codes, urban design and land use planning. We have placed a reasonable amount of information in our written submission and we just wish to briefly supplement that. There is a concern from within our industry that current approaches to dealing with the issue of codes, urban design and land use planning are overly simplistic. There needs to be a multifaceted approach, in our view, to be effective in reducing the risk to houses in bushfire prone areas. This

approach must address issues such as planning, design, building maintenance, education and enforcement and must be placed around scientific evaluation.

With respect to urban design and land use planning, authorities need to use a combination of strategies to protect life and property from bushfire. A coordinated plan should be developed to deal with urban planning, house and building design and construction, maintenance, education, and enforcement. In the past, urban development was often surrounded by cleared rural buffer zones and housing did not interact directly with the bush area. Now urban development is pushing increasingly into natural vegetation areas. In addition, there has been a tendency to subdivide large bush blocks on the urban fringe. Environmental controls often prevent the clearing of native vegetation. Where rural land is subdivided, revegetation with native species creates the same environment. Future disasters in these areas, we believe, are inevitable unless adequate precautions are taken.

For example, the Australian standard 3959, building in bushfire prone areas, identifies the requirement for the design and construction of buildings in bushfire prone areas. We consider that standard to be overly simplistic for a number of simple reasons. The first is the standard only applies to houses being constructed in areas that have been designated as bushfire prone areas. I think we have seen over the last summer that that designation is not necessarily done at an early enough time or in a broad enough range of areas.

The standard contains a procedure for classifying building sites for hazard category. But the standard is only enforced at the time of new construction. Existing houses are not necessarily compliant and nor indeed are they required to be. Again, we believe it is overly simplistic. The standard specifies that timber used externally in the fire prone areas must be fire retardant timber. However, there is currently no fire retardant available to meet those performance standards. While some timber, for example, high density and in larger sizes, will meet these performance requirements, testing is needed to confirm compliance. That has not been undertaken except in a small number of circumstances.

Maintenance of vegetation around buildings is crucial to bushfire survival. This will reduce the level of the hazard and, in particular, the risk of attack by flame contact and radiant heat. It is critical that fire hazard reduction through vegetation maintenance is carried out routinely to avoid the risk of unexpected fire threats. In this context, continuing and ongoing education of the public is critical to implementing a holistic approach to the protection that is suggested in this submission and that we suggest is necessary.

Property owners need to be aware of the three main elements that will aid their survival and the survival of their house in a bushfire situation. They are the original house design and construction, the reduction of the fire's potential around the home through vegetation maintenance and through removing debris build-up and having a person or persons in attendance at the house to put out the small fires that start from burning embers that fly through the air during a bushfire situation.

FIAT recommends the implementation of a holistic approach to bushfire protection in property management in Australia. In that context, we recommend the formation of a joint federal and state working group—that is what we termed it for the sake of a term; I am sure one or other of the parts around the country will come up with a more technical term—that would draw upon

expertise in areas such as forestry, building design and construction, science of fire behaviour and control, and urban planning. We believe that working group could draw together existing knowledge and resources to put together a best practice approach to the design and management of urban planning. We believe that the implementation of this holistic approach will ensure a strategic rather than a knee-jerk reaction and will provide the greatest potential to avoid a repeat of the events of the past summer. We recommend that strategic approach so that people do not simply take a knee-jerk reaction, for example, of banning the use of timber in the building of homes, which is not a satisfactory approach, and nor is it necessarily the appropriate one.

I wish briefly to talk about the final element of our submission. We say that attention must be paid to the increasing predilection of particularly state governments throughout Australia to declaring new reserves of one type or another in the heat of an election campaign with no or little regard to the longer term consequences of those decisions. Our natural environment, in our submission, deserves a far more considered approach than that. We have suggested in our submission an approach that would require state governments or any other government or instrumentality wishing to declare a new reserve to do that in conjunction with providing a management plan and a costing of how that management plan can be implemented. This continent has lived for centuries with the constant interaction of fire and forest. Since European settlement, the competing forces between modern high-density living and the retention of the natural environment have increased dramatically. In that context, we refer to community decisions to now live in densely forested areas surrounded by bush and the reservation of vast tracts of forested land without any or adequate fuel reduction strategies.

Recommendations arising from this review, in our submission, should address these twin evils to the extent that any government, federal or state, that intends to proclaim additional reserves must be compelled to put in place an adequate management regime and ensure sufficient funding to manage such a reserve for all of its values. These management plans should be reported upon in the annual reporting of the relevant agency to the parliament in question to ensure complete transparency and to ensure that commitments made are being honoured.

It is our view that the implementation of the holistic approach we have advocated along with the additional protection of rules that can be applied as a precondition to any new reservation will provide an avenue for the best practice protection of our forests and all of the diversity they contain. That is in broad terms the nature of the submission we wish to make to the committee. As I said at the outset, I am sure the committee will have a small number of questions.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Edwards. I appreciate that and your submission. In evidence earlier today, Forestry Tasmania said that they believe there is probably only about 50 per cent of the fuel reduction burning happening today compared to, say, 10 years ago. That was an approximate percentage. They were talking about across all land tenures, not just forestry land. Would you agree with that assessment?

Mr Edwards—Yes, we would. It is certainly our opinion that the fuel reduction of the past is not currently being brought forward into today's fuel reduction activities. We did a bit of research. We took, for example, an area in south-western Tasmania, which examined the fuel reduction activity in that area that had taken place by varying regimes, starting in the early 1800s by the Aboriginals and moving through to today. Today's is showing no fire activity in that area whereas in the 1890s almost the entirety of the area was subjected to fire of one type or another,

be it wildfire or planned reduction burning. The reason we make that observation is that it shows that the original inhabitants of the land had a far more active and extreme management regime than we did today and yet they produced the magnificent forests that are the cause of the forestry debate in Tasmania. Something has changed and I am not necessarily convinced that it is for the better.

CHAIR—Mr Hickey might like to comment, as he is FIAT's representative on the State Fire Management Council of Tasmania. How do you think that body works? Does it work well?

Mr G. Hickey—I believe it works well. It brings together all the different interested parties in fire management in the state and sets some guidelines. So it is a cooperative effort. We do not always see eye to eye, but I guess it does a good job in setting a direction for fire management in the state.

CHAIR—The industry has been involved in that from the very beginning?

Mr G. Hickey—I believe so, yes.

Mr ORGAN—Tasmania is obviously heavily forested. Could you just quickly tell me the percentage of Tasmania that is forested.

Mr Edwards—Tasmania's land area is 6.8 million hectares. Our total forest cover is 3.1 million hectares out of 6.8 million.

Mr ORGAN—So it is about 50 per cent. In your submission, you state:

> FIAT Members are concerned that, as a result of 40% of Tasmania's forests being reserved, there is an increasing build-up of large fuel loadings in these areas.

About 50 per cent of the landmass, approximately 40 per cent, is reserved. By that you are talking about those in national parks reserved areas? Is that what you are referring to here by 'forests being reserved'?

Mr Edwards—It is a broad range of reservation. There are national parks. There are world heritage areas. There are forestry protection zones. There are tall tree reserves. There are buffer zones that are in place to prevent forestry activity, for example, on streamside reserves. There are habitat retention corridors and the like. There is one form of reservation or another.

Mr ORGAN—So the other 60 per cent is areas of forest that are available for your industries, basically? They are the other 60 per cent of those forested areas?

Mr Henderson—There is 40 per cent of the forest that is in formal reserves. Of the other areas, there are some areas available for production forest. I think about half of state forest is available for production activities. The other half is available for the maintenance of a number of community values. So not all of the forest that is not in reserve is production forest.

Mr ADAMS—Mount Wellington is a water catchment area for the city of Hobart. There are enormous tracts of forest on private land that make up some of the other land.

Mr ORGAN—I want to get a feel for the figures. You are obviously very critical of National Parks specifically in your submission. You say that 40 per cent of Tasmania's forests are reserves. There is an increasing build-up of large fuel loadings in these areas. What about the other 60 per cent? Are you at all critical of fuel build-ups in Forestry Tasmania's land and in other private land? Why are you specifically targeting national parks? What about the other 60 per cent?

Mr Edwards—My use of the term 'national parks' is probably a little ill-advised inasmuch as the criticism we make is of our public land managers. Perhaps I should have used that wider term. I did not mean to mislead. It would apply equally to land that is managed by Forestry Tasmania, National Parks and Wildlife or indeed the Commonwealth through areas like the world heritage area in south-western Tasmania. We do not distinguish necessarily between those land managers. What we say is that there is a significant build-up in fuels in forest areas. We have identified particularly the management policy of Parks and Wildlife, who have made a conscious decision not to actively involve themselves heavily in fuel reduction. They have limited their capacity to deal with wildfire situations by making conscious policy decisions not to allow heavy earthmoving equipment into their forested areas, which would otherwise make points of access that we could use to fight fires that start.

Mr ORGAN—You are concerned about building codes and urban planning. Could you give us a specific example of where you see some of these problems of urban planning and house design causing problems. We saw a few issues yesterday. From an industry perspective, could you give us an example or two both in urban areas and in rural areas.

Mr Edwards—I suppose in rural areas the example I would give is the increasing predilection, particularly in Tasmania in, say, the Huon Valley area for people to construct housing in very heavily forested areas without significant areas of clearing around the home. In fact, a lot of areas of clearing are not permitted because of our native vegetation retention policy. As a result of that, houses are now being constructed in areas that are prone to bushfire. The Australian bush is prone to bushfire itself, as I am sure you have already heard from any number of experts. You do not need to hear it again from me. But that is an example we would give of a rural situation.

Even in a more urban environment, you have increasing encroachment of forested areas close to urban built-up areas. I think Canberra was a classic case in point, where you have significant forested areas closely approximating the urban built-up area with the obvious consequence that occurred. They are the areas we believe ought to be better regulated by the holistic approach that we have advocated in our submission of using a combination of strategies to try to ensure that those situations cannot be replicated.

Mr ORGAN—Is your organisation approaching local governments? I suppose a lot of this comes down very much to a local government issue. What measures is your organisation taking with regard to approaching local government and raising the whole issue of better management?

Mr Edwards—We have constant interaction with local government on this and many other points and also through the State Fire Management Council. But in addition to that, we have advocated in our submission that there needs to be a properly coordinated approach from all tiers of government—Commonwealth, state and local government—and indeed involving experts

from a wide range of spheres of science as well to ensure that the very best practice approach can be developed and applied. I do not think it is reasonable or fair to apply the bulk of the responsibility for that to local government even though they have the responsibility for implementing the codes and the planning schemes. Nevertheless, we think the development of those schemes ought to be undertaken in a far more strategic and broadly based way and then trickled down, if you like, to the local government implementation level.

We intend to involve ourselves actively in that if it became a recommendation of this committee. But in some ways we prefer to let this committee run its course before having any knee-jerk or non-strategic approach to local government.

Mr ADAMS—Mr Edwards and others, we have had evidence about the reduction of fire reduction burns over the last 10 years in Tasmania. That has gone down by about 50 per cent, indicating that we have changed the land management processes that have served us for a long period of time. One of the issues coming out of that is, of course, the concern the public has about smoke. I would be interested in the association's views on how we go about educating the community to understand how reduction burns do cause smoke. I think it was said this morning that the community seems to accept that back-burning in the middle of the fire season is liable to save their home, but we do not seem to have linked that to fire suppression. Do you have any comments in relation to that? Does education have an important role to play? Maybe this committee can look at some recommendations along those lines.

Mr Edwards—It would be our opinion that education has a fundamentally important role to play. I certainly agree with some of the comments you have alluded to. It does seem, and almost quite ironically, that the public accepts fairly readily smoke which is generated by uncontrolled bushfires or back-burning to control bushfires once started, which probably have a far greater deleterious effect on their health than to, dare I say, a healthy forest regeneration burn after a clearfell harvest or indeed a fuel reduction burn because there is less particulate matter in the burning of a clear-felled coupe because of the high intensity of the burn. If you want any more information on that, you will have to refer to Mr Hickey. That is the limit of my knowledge.

But education, to us, has an important role. I do not know whether Forestry Tasmania alluded to it in their submission this morning. But in this last season, Forestry Tasmania and FIAT jointly put together a brochure for distribution throughout the Tasmanian community on fuel reduction burning and, indeed, on regeneration burning. We tried to provide the community with base level, balanced information that we felt they needed so that they could understand better why forestry does involve itself in the burning activities that it does. We have also tried to describe to them the fact that a good burn is the one that is probably the most visible. Particularly a regeneration burn has a very high flume of smoke going straight up into the air, which means there is very little of it reaching the actual community. That is a good burn as opposed to a bad one, where the column collapses maybe because of wind or other factors.

So we have commenced that process of education. We certainly intend to continue it. As part of that process last year, we also, in conjunction with Forestry Tasmania, did some media work through all forms of media to advise people. We also have put in place a regime so people can identify when and where the burns are going to take place. If there are people, for example, with asthmatic conditions or something similar, they may be able to avoid being in a given area at a given time because of the activities that may be undertaken.

Having said that, there is insufficient activity in the area of education of the public in this area. I suppose to some extent, we take some responsibility for that. Certainly if a recommendation were to come out of this inquiry for greater education to take place, I think it would be very beneficial. It should be starting at the school level and moving forward. One area where I could see it rolling out would be through organisations like the Forest Education Foundation, which is an independent education body which informs schoolchildren particularly and their teachers on forestry and forest practices, including burning and why burning takes place. So I think we would be very, very supportive of any recommendation that went to the issue of education.

Mr ADAMS—There is another issue that I think we left in abeyance from my colleague Michael Organ. There is 60 per cent of Tasmania that is left. We do not have 60 per cent of forest under the control of Forestry Tasmania to be logged. I think we need to tidy that up as a committee. Could you take that on notice. It really is an issue that has started to show up today. It is really about land management and how we manage. I think Tasmania has shown that when we have had a fire, we have good management structures and that we do coordinate that very well. That seems to have worked over the last 10 years, bringing that council together.

It is more about what occurs prior to the actual fire. It is preparing or reduction, reducing the opportunity for fire. That comes down to land management practices. Your criticism of that is that that is a philosophical view, I guess, that some people have of how they manage the land that is under their control. That is, that there be no large vehicles into that area, no fire trails and no access. Therefore, it becomes more difficult. There are no fire reduction burns. There are some areas, which we would accept, where there are sensitive plants that do not need to be burnt, which is only a small minority of our land and our forests. With respect to this change of philosophy which has taken place probably in the last 10 to 15 years, would you like to comment more broadly on that than you did in your submission?

Mr Edwards—In a broad sense, I suppose we would say that the forests of Australia have been subjected to fire for millions of years. It is one of the fundamental regeneration factors relating to Australian forests. Prior to European settlement, as I said earlier, the Aboriginals in Tasmania at the very least involved themselves very, very heavily in firing of the bush. They did it for a number of reasons, somewhat intuitively in some instances, but also to ensure that the fuel build-ups that were occurring did not stop them from seeing and hunting the game they were chasing as much as anything else. They also did not have very good techniques for carrying fire with them. As a consequence, fires were allowed to get out of control and constantly fired the bush. As a consequence, we have very, very healthy and dense forests in Tasmania and some very, very tall eucalypt forests, much of which probably owe their origins to some of that firing that took place.

The advent of European settlement changed our fire management techniques, firstly for the poorer in one way inasmuch as firing was even more extensive. The first European settlers in Tasmania fired the bush, very, very extensively without any regard to the areas they were burning, and they did not regenerate those areas. There is a very good discussion of that on the Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment web site. Following that, there has been a change in the European way of the management of our forested areas in Tasmania. The areas that are in reserves that we discussed earlier are now subjected to virtually no burning and certainly no real planned burning or fuel reduction activity. In fact, the policy of at least the Parks and Wildlife Service that I read this morning suggests they have a policy of actively

suppressing fires that start. That means that even when there is fire, it is not allowed to do what it would originally have done in terms of regenerating the bush.

So from our point of view, in terms of dealing with fires that do start, particularly when they start in the high bushfire season, the drier season, there is very little opportunity for us to access those fires to put them out. Once they do start using techniques like helicopters, they are not overly useful in suppressing a fire because they are far too hot and too fast moving. So you would never really control them in that way. We need to be able to access them and we need to be able to do that quickly. You cannot do that unless there are readily formed roads for our firefighters, which includes forestry personnel from private forestry companies as well as Forestry Tasmania actively involving themselves in firefighting activities.

So I think the whole question of being able to access our forests to protect them needs to be re-examined from a far more philosophical point of view of saying there is not much point putting all these wonderful forests into reserves for future Tasmanians to view if indeed we are going to allow them to be destroyed if they do catch fire. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to ensure that we can protect them.

Mrs GASH—I would have to disagree with the education process. I think here in Tasmania they are very well advanced compared to the other states that I am aware of in education and having regard to what we saw yesterday. I would have to say that they are doing extremely well. When the plans are prepared for bushfire prevention and so forth, does your association have an input into those plans?

Mr Edwards—We would through the State Fire Management Council.

Mr G. Hickey—The plan is on very different levels. If it is a specific operational plan, it would depend on which agency is doing it. I guess in terms of the broad scale, the State Fire Management Council will set some overriding guidelines in terms of planning. But the specific plans themselves, as they currently stand, are generally done by the agencies undertaking the management of the block.

Mrs GASH—Did you have any input into the fire management protocol?

Mr G. Hickey—I did not personally.

Mrs GASH—But did the association?

Mr G. Hickey—As a member of the State Fire Management Council, they would have, yes.

Mrs GASH—When we had our hearings in Canberra, the local forestry industry there said that approaches had been made to the industry with regard to whether there was commercial viability to help with the clearing or the fuel loading in reserve forests, so to speak. There was the possibility of a viable commercial industry. Has that been approached here in Tasmania? Have you been approached on that basis?

Mr Edwards—No.

Mrs GASH—Is there?

Mr Edwards—I suppose it is a difficult question to answer. It would depend a little on exactly what was proposed. If it was cutting a narrow track or road through forest to allow access, then the answer is no. But if it were to engage in selective felling of certain forests in order to reduce the fuel build-up, then potentially yes. But it would very much depend on the economy of scale involved. It is quite difficult to mobilise a forestry crew to go out into the bush and recover small numbers of stems of trees. But if it were done on a commercial level, then we would certainly be interested in exploring it if it were being offered.

Mrs GASH—But you have not been approached on that basis?

Mr Edwards—Not to the very best of my knowledge.

Mr G. Hickey—No.

Mrs GASH—Lastly, can I say it is nice to see a woman in the forestry industry. Thank you for being here.

Mr Edwards—There are lots of them down here, I can assure you. We love them.

Mrs GASH—I have no further questions.

CHAIR—What is the percentage, for your industry, of native forests as opposed to plantation forests now?

Mr Edwards—In terms of harvesting or available forest?

CHAIR—Well, isn't it the same thing? I meant harvested each year.

Mr Edwards—Available.

CHAIR—Available forests for your industry. What is the break-up between native and plantation? When I say 'plantation', I mean hardwood and softwood. I will ask you another question in relation to that.

Mr Edwards—We have just under 200,000 hectares of plantations in Tasmania currently . That is sourced from the background report used in the regional forest agreements' recent review in Tasmania. The rest of the forests are native forests.

CHAIR—Which is what in area?

Mr Edwards—The total forest area in Tasmania is 3.169 million.

Mr Henderson—That excludes plantations.

Mr Edwards—That excludes plantations, so you add another 200. It is about 3.3 million, roughly. I am happy to leave this with the committee. This is all source information. We used it for a completely different purpose than this. I just brought it with me almost by accident today in case I got a question. I am more than happy to provide that.

CHAIR—What is the break-up of the 200,000 between hardwood and softwood?

Mr Edwards—In plantation, hardwood is 135,000 hectares and softwood is about 78,000 hectares.

CHAIR—That is all pine, is it?

Mr Edwards—Radiata, yes.

CHAIR—Radiata pine.

Mr Edwards—Those figures will not tally perfectly. The reason they do not is because of the source of the information. The source of the first information I gave you of total plantation area is that RFA documentation. The source of the second is the national plantation inventory Australia annual update published by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. But all the sources are listed on the sheet of paper that I will hand to you. I will hang on to it now in case you ask me any more questions about it.

CHAIR—The size of the forest industry today in numbers of people is obviously smaller than it was 10 years ago. Would that be true to say?

Mr Edwards—No, I do not know that that would be quite right. In Tasmania at the moment, there are about 10,000 employees directly employed in forestry. There has been a significant demographic shift in where those employees are located and what they actually do as a task. Instead of all being out in the bush cutting down trees and processing them, we now have a significant number engaged in plantation development and the pre-planning that goes with plantation forestry.

CHAIR—And perhaps value adding as well?

Mr Edwards—And value adding as well.

CHAIR—But the numbers of he people working in the bush have probably reduced?

Mr Edwards—As fellers.

CHAIR—And equipment as well.

Mr Edwards—I might have to defer to Mr Henderson, who has been around the industry a lot longer than me. He may even remember back 10 years.

Mr Henderson—Certainly there have been improvements in equipment which have given us greater labour productivity.

CHAIR—I guess the point I am getting to is there are fewer people around to put into firefighting activities or fire prevention activities than some time ago, or is that not the case?

Mr Edwards—Given in Tasmania that forestry operations tend to take place in fairly small and very dispersed coupes, we do tend to still have a large number of forestry crews around the state at any given point in time. The short answer to your question is that in any one location the answer is probably yes, there are going to be fewer people because forestry operations were probably more concentrated in the past than they are now and the dispersal of people in a more broad way across the state makes it more difficult to garner resources in one place at one time. But I think overall there would be something like the same number of people cutting fewer forests in a native forest sense than we used to some years ago. We used to cut something like 400,000 cubic metres a year. It is now 300,000. But a lot of that is taken care of by Mr Henderson's comment before about productivity levels changing. So it is more of the dispersal thing. I think it is a question of having available at any one point resources to deal with fires when they occur.

What we saw last summer is that where forestry activities were closely aligned with an area where a fire started, they were relatively quickly suppressed. The amount of forest lost was significantly smaller when they were in more remote areas. But I guess that is almost a bit trite to say.

CHAIR—From the industry's point of view, do you see the protocol that exists between the three main agencies—Forestry Tasmania, the Tasmanian Fire Service and the Parks people—working well?

Mr Edwards—I think the protocol is working well. Our problem is not so much with the protocol. Our problem is more with the policy of some of the individual land managers on the issue of fuel reduction. I have instanced particularly, and as Mr Organ has already pointed out, that Parks have a policy of very little fuel reduction. We have a concern with that. Our concern is that whilst these parks and reserves have been specifically designed to protect particular forest types, they are in fact having the opposite effect by almost neglect. But I think the ability of the major public land managers to be able to relate to each other through the protocol is a good thing and it does work reasonably well in conjunction with the State Fire Management Council. But it is not necessarily at this stage leading to the result we would prefer to see, which is the reduction in the fuel loads.

Mr ADAMS—A danger to the forest industries in Tasmania is wildfire. So there are companies that own large blocks of forestry themselves. There are also private forestry operations other than Forestry Tasmania, which manages the crown asset. I am trying to put on the record the significance of wildfire—what it can cause in damage to us in a fire season from a loss of production of saw logs, pulp wood and veneer et cetera. Do you have any stats you can give us on that or on something we have lost in the past? I guess it is rescheduled from one area to another.

Mr Edwards—It would be. If there were a fire through an area, it would have to be scheduled away from that area for some time, depending on the severity of the fire. Obviously, if it severely damages the trees in that area, they will not be available to harvest for 50 or 60 years. But I think the point you make is right. In Tasmania, because we have a fairly significant forest industry in

the context of our total state economy, it is a very important and integral part of the state economy. Impacts of fire would be very keenly felt in Tasmania if we were to have landscaped wildfires, such as had been occasioned in the past. The loss of productivity from saw log, pulp log and veneer log would be very, very considerable.

I guess I can only go back and say, as I did earlier, that the industry in Tasmania is worth about $1.3 billion a year to the state economy, which is very significant in the context of an economy as small as Tasmania's. If we were to have significant fire activity in the state that in a significant way affected our capacity to harvest our forest, the impact would be catastrophic in a Tasmanian sense. As I have already indicated before, there are 10,000 Tasmanians directly employed in this industry. There are about 15,000 directly and indirectly employed in this state because of forestry. On a national basis, ABARE figures suggest that it is about 25,000 people Australia wide that are employed directly or indirectly because of Tasmanian forestry operations. The source of those numbers was quoted in the regional forest agreement background papers. It was a study by Grist and Tran done for ABARE in 2001.

Mrs GASH—You briefly touched on plantation development. It is probably not related directly to bushfires. But is it generally accepted within the industry?

Mr Edwards—Plantation development is accepted within the industry but I am not sure that it is all that well accepted within the community or some sectors of the community. We believe plantation development in Tasmania is essential if we are to have a significant value added industry in the state. We have very significant tracts of native forest but we also have significant public pressure applied at all times to have more and more of that resource moved from the industry. In the event that any further of that activity were to result in areas of forest being made unavailable to the industry, we need to be identifying and planning to have alternatives. In particular, there are significant tracts of eucalypt plantation being put in in Tasmania at the present time. That will in part feed the woodchip industry I suppose initially, but hopefully down the track more value added on Tasmanian shores through a pulp mill or something of that nature. But there are significant debates in the Tasmanian community about the benefits or otherwise of plantation forestry.

There is a Senate inquiry at the moment into the federal government's 20/20 vision for plantation forestry, which has had three days of sittings in Tasmania already and one to come. It is debating this issue at considerable length. I do not wish to go over all of the politics that underpins a lot of the submissions being made in that area.

Mrs GASH—Have you made a submission?

Mr Edwards—Through NAFI we have. FIAT did not make a direct submission. We planned instead to allow it to be done at a national level to try to de-Tasmanianise the debate somewhat. There is a particular senator in Canberra who likes to Tasmanianise the debate considerably.

CHAIR—I think we have covered the things we needed to. I thank you again for your evidence this morning. Those figures would be useful for us. It is often difficult to really tie down some of the figures. They can be looked at in various ways so if we have the broadest scope on them, that would be useful. .

Mr Edwards—If following our submission today there is any confusion left over any of those numbers that I have used—I know it is very difficult to follow; it is very difficult to do, too—we are more than happy to put in a supplementary sheet of paper that clearly sets out exactly how much forest we have, what its tenure is, whether it is plantation or native and indeed whether it is an exotic species or a native species in the plantation.

Mr Henderson—We were to supply something of that nature?

Mr ADAMS—The 60 per cent issue.

CHAIR—That would be useful. I would be happy to take that. Thanks again for your evidence, your submission and additional information.

Proceedings suspended from 12.21 p.m. to 1.29 p.m.

BIRCH, Mr Ricky Samuel, Member, Timber Communities Australia

CHIPMAN, Mr Barry Lloyd, Tasmanian State Coordinator, Timber Communities Australia

HICKEY, Mr Basil Leo, Member, Timber Communities Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We have your submission and the additional material—there are two submissions, basically. We have both of them, which have been authorised for publication and will form part of the evidence. Would you like to make some opening remarks and we will then proceed to ask questions.

Mr Chipman—On behalf of the membership of Timber Communities Australia and Tasmania, we would like to thank the committee for giving us an opportunity to expand on what we see as a very serious matter—managing our land to minimise the impact of wildfire. First, for the benefit of the committee, Timber Communities Australia is a national organisation that endeavours to give representation to the community that depends upon our forest industries. We would like to expand upon the submissions we have made.

In endeavouring to do that, we have brought along two of our members today that have a vast experience in forest management and both have been very active on the fire line, if you like, in a volunteer capacity dealing with wildfire. The first one is Basil Hickey. As I said, Basil has had a lifetime of experience in fire management. He was a past leader of the rural brigade in Esperance back in 1967 when the volunteer element of our Tasmanian Fire Service was first raised as a result of the 1967 bushfires. Basil was one of the inaugural leaders of that brigade. He is also a past forest industry representative on the Tasmanian Fire Service advisory committee. I will let Basil raise a few of the points that he made in his submission.

Mr B. Hickey—Tasmania did not escape the summer of bushfires that most people suffered. We had some 23 fires, which affected about 50,000 hectares of forest, bush and grassland. A busy season has been predicted, though. Forestry Tasmania fire management officer Dick Chuter told his staff in the December issue of *Branchline* that, if the wind continues, we can expect vegetation to dry out and it will be a particularly bad summer.

In Tasmania, fire agencies were well prepared to tackle the bushfire risk after a series of combined interagency workshops held over the winter. This interagency cooperation was seen as a major contributing factor to the management of our state bushfires. I think without that interaction there would have been a lot more problems. However, members believe that this state and the rest of Australia need to be more proactive in minimising the risk of bushfires in our forests. We are alarmed at reports from the major states that very little fuel reduction burning was carried out in the national parks and forest reserves. With over 40 per cent of Tasmania's

landmass now in this category, we believe that fire management regimes in these areas must include adequate strategies for fuel reduction and management of our forests.

It must be remembered that the Aboriginals were farmers who managed the land by the use of fire. Their aim was to open up the country for easy access and for the establishment of grasses and other plants to feed kangaroos, wallabies, possums and other animals to make up the majority of their diet. All studies show that for some 50,000 years before white settlement the Aboriginals burnt the country whenever it would burn. This system allowed for low intensity burns that created natural regeneration and the survival of most of the older trees to the end of their life cycle. If you look through some of the history written by people such as Josephine Flood, even the diaries of Abel Janszoon Tasman and Dr Peter Attiwill, you will find that they talk about the same thing. The Aboriginals burnt the land basically whenever it would burn and consequently had low-level fires.

The regeneration of the southern forests of Tasmania will not succeed without a major disturbance. With the removal of the understorey and the provision of minimal seed beds, the practice of regeneration of eucalypt forests is well documented. Many scientific studies have been carried out since 1950. These include Gilbert in 1950, Cunningham in 1961 and Mount in 1964. A system for regeneration in state forests in Tasmania is based on this research.

However, in Tasmania, we have one million hectares of old-growth forests in national parks and reserves set aside from logging, with growing pressure to lock-up additional areas. The majority of these trees are between 300 and 400 years of age. Old-growth eucalypt trees die between the age of 300 and 500 years. Therefore, the trees will die over the next 50 to 150 years unless there are major fires in these areas or a change in the management system. Our grandchildren will not see these large areas of old-growth trees in national parks as there will be no regeneration if we keep the fires out of these areas of eucalypt trees—that is, if we do not have a major fire. Unfortunately, because of the lack of burning since white settlement, in most forests, any fires would cause the death of the majority of the old-growth trees due to the length of time since the last fire—between 50 and 150 years, on average. This allows the build-up of material around the butt of the root system of the trees, leaves and branches et cetera. Any fire would cook the roots and allow the fire to run up the stems, usually killing the trees.

The most logical, cost-effective way to manage the fire management in these forests would be to log the area over a 100- to, say, 200-year cycle with a system which established younger trees in strips to create breaks plus some road access to allow controlled burning and access to fight any fire that comes along. Logging roads would allow some access into these areas. This is another problem with most of our national parks. Even where there was some access, the policy is to close that access off. So there is no access into these areas.

In my first 13 years with the forestry commission, I was mainly working on survey and assessment works and covered particularly the south of Tasmania. In those days, you could walk around a fair bit of the area because of early fires. There was a lot more burning off by hunters and various other people of the buttongrass plains. They usually got burnt very early in the summer or late in the winter and they usually did not spread off those plains. So that gave areas where there were breaks in the whole system. If you got a fire, it did not just sweep for miles without any breaks.

Over the last 20 or 30 years there has been a policy to do less and less burning. Most of these buttongrass plains have grown very high fuel reserves. It would take very little to set them off. One of the other things I have noted is that as the old-growth trees die, they have dead tops and many dead branches standing up, which makes them more susceptible to lightning strikes, which also causes problems as far as getting fires to go. The most logical way, as I said, would be to change the forest over a period. A system could be amalgamated with state forest operations to allow swapping of areas to set aside for longer rotation. At about the age of 20 to 25 years, the areas could be thinned, which would reduce the number of trees, allowing low-intensity burning every eight to 10 years, which would return the forest to what it was before white settlement.

If you look at a lot of the early surveyors and people who travelled around Tasmania just after white settlement, they walked around in a lot of areas that you could not walk in today. You just would not get through there. That indicates how much the Aboriginals kept the country open. That was all done by fire. They had no other way of doing it.

One of the things that will help with fuel reduction burns on areas that are logged is the wood fire furnace to generate electricity, which is planned for the Southwood project in the Huon Valley. This will reduce the fuel left after logging or any disturbance and makes fires a lot safer and gives you a lot more flexibility regarding the time when you can burn.

Since white settlement, there are areas that have shown to be burnt whether you want them to or not, somewhere between 20 and 150 years, regardless of whether it is logged. The landscape is what it is because of past fires. Implementing fuel reduction burns and strategies can reduce the damage and risk of wildfire. The well-trained and equipped fire services of Forestry Tasmania, the Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmanian Fire Service, backed up by well-trained volunteers in each community working together, can be effective in fighting fires once started. Unfortunately, fuel reduction burns are discouraged by many in the community who do not understand the place of fire in our environment or that the risk of destruction is far greater if burning is not carried out. The major challenge to the committee is to develop a recommendation that will demonstrate to the public the very strong need for fuel reduction management. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Hickey.

Mr Chipman—Our next contributor is Ricky Birch. Ricky is also a member of Timber Communities Australia. He has had 13 years experience as a volunteer with our Runnymede brigade. In the past six years, he has been the chief of that brigade. It was only last year that he fulfilled the role of sector commander for last year's Runnymede fire. That fire burnt state forests, parkland and also private property. In reference to that last fire, he has also had further extensive experience working alongside the other major agencies that deal with fire in Tasmania. Ricky is also very much involved in providing training for volunteer firefighters. I will hand over to Ricky to pass on some of his past experiences.

Mr Birch—As a member of the TCA and also a forestry worker—that is my nine to five job—I have been involved in quite a few of the multi-agency fires with Tasmanian Fire Service, Parks, Forestry Tasmania, local councils, larger timber companies and private land-holders. It works really well with radio communications; there are no problems there. Everything is compatible, even the hoses. All the things that matter most at a fire marry up.

There are good working relationships. I have been at fires where I have had Parks, Forestry, TFS and private people all working in the one area. Everyone just gets in and gets the job done. That is the aim—to be there. We are only volunteers so we do not get paid. The quicker we can get it done and get out of it, the better. Unfortunately, I have not had the chance to go to New South Wales or Victoria to the fires. Quite a few of my friends and people I know have and they reckon we are streets ahead of the way things have operated over on the other island.

As a logging operator, we quite often use machinery that is our own machinery on fires. There are always dozers in the rural areas. In the Runnymede fire, we had something like nine dozers working. The majority of them came from a logging operation or plantation operation. So there is always the utilising of forestry machinery.

In the community I represent up in Levendale, there is not a huge population but there is a big push on there. People are asking me to organise a public meeting to see what is going to be done about more hazard reductions. We have all the agencies listed there with land-holdings bar TFS, a lot of the timber companies and a lot of the bigger landowners and even some of the smaller landowners are doing a lot towards hazard reduction. To forgo a bit of smoke in the spring, there have to be more hazard reductions done to save the bigger picture come the end of the year and early next year.

I am also a fire weather observer on the logging job. As a forest industry worker, we have to take fire observations from 10 o'clock to three o'clock every half hour during a fire permit period. That is a matter of doing a five-minute test of humidity, temperature and wind speed. We have a little scale we work off. It gives a fire danger rating. When it reaches a certain figure, we have to knock off. We try to manage it and prevent fire from spreading from logging operations which we also have as part of our industry standard. We have to have firefighting appliances on each job. Machines are all equipped with extinguishers. Blokes using chainsaws for fallen trees now have to carry extinguishers down in the bush with them within a certain proximity.

It is multi-agency. There are Parks and Wildlife, state forests, TFS, the Tasmanian Fire Service—I do not think we could work without each other's cooperation.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mr Chipman—Please ask any questions.

CHAIR—We will.

Mr Chipman—We will answer the questions.

CHAIR—Forestry Tasmania said in evidence this morning that their estimate is that only about half the hazard reduction is being done today compared to about 10 years ago. What would TCA's estimate be of it?

Mr Chipman—We do not have access to the actual figures. As Ricky mentioned, on the ground there is a concern that the level of hazard reduction out there in the bush, if you like, is not being fulfilled. Basil, who has a lifetime experience with fire management, perhaps could add a bit to that.

Mr B. Hickey—I think there is no doubt that there should be a lot more work done in areas that can be easily burnt in the safer times of the year, such as a lot of buttongrass plains and open country that would reduce the risk quite considerably, because that is often the place where fires start. There is no doubt in my mind that over my lifetime I have seen a vast reduction in the amount of this type of burning that is being done. It really has fallen. I am not encouraged by it.

CHAIR—So that 50 per cent figure is possibly quite right?

Mr B. Hickey—Yes. I reckon that would be pretty right.

Mr Chipman—I can remember as a youth what we used to call the back run between middle Tea Tree and Tea Tree, which was just a sheep grazing run. That would probably be burnt just by Gunns, the farmers that owned it, perhaps every four or five years. It would just be burnt in the autumn when it was right. I cannot remember the last time that has occurred out there.

Mr ADAMS—Would autumn be the best time for hazard reduction burns? Is that the traditional burning time?

Mr B. Hickey—It is a bit of a combination, depending on the area you are looking at. You can burn very successfully in the spring. You can also do it, there is no doubt. For heavy burns, probably the autumn is the safest time because you do not have to worry about logs that might keep burning on ground that may burn. But a lot of the more open areas, such as the buttongrass plains, were usually burnt in the spring and could still be fairly safely done.

Mr Chipman—In the midlands and so forth, you would understand that it is dry country anyway. That is why you tend to do it in the autumn so you can control it.

CHAIR—The TCA is a community organisation. What are your communities telling you about the smoke issue? Is there education that can be done?

Mr Chipman—That is a very good point. The traditional rural people—we do not want to start divides—understand that if there is smoke, it is there for a very good reason and it is for hazard reduction. Farmers must burn poppy stubble. A fire in the country in the right period at the right time is understood by country people because it is part of life. But over the last period of time there are city folk that have come from the mainland to live in the rural areas. It is all new. Most certainly we only have to read the papers every year. There are people concerned about smoke. There does need to be an effort to educate the new residents within rural Tasmania that when smoke is on the horizon, if it is managed, it is there for a very good reason. It is far better to have a fire that you can control than have a fire that you cannot control. Yes, it is a problem.

Mr Birch—Controlled smoke is better to combat than smoke that is coming down that you really do not want coming down.

Mrs GASH—In this comment in your submission you say:

> Governments and the public, through taxation, will have to be prepared to meet the very considerable costs associated with an Australian wide adequate fuel reduction program, if better protection from severe wild fires is to be achieved.

Mr Birch, in relation to your work with the volunteer bushfire brigades, do you see a role for volunteers to do a lot of this fire protection burning?

Mr Birch—They can assist in it. They have to assist in it along with the other agencies and the land-holders involved. Bear in mind that volunteers have nine to five jobs as such. They can only give up a certain amount of time. They spend a lot of their time in the summer chasing fires that probably could have been prevented prior to the summer coming on.

Mrs GASH—I am talking about training programs. You obviously have training programs. I wondered if that could be part of that training program.

Mr Chipman—Yes.

Mrs GASH—You do.

Mr Chipman—I will add to that. One of the things that came out in the ACT fire is that the volunteers and the ACT fire service had not been exposed to wildfire previously. They were working from teachings from a book, if you like. We all know that one way, really, is the practical way. With hazard reduction burns, it is a way that you can introduce new fire crews to the nature and characteristics of fire. It can become actually a training tool in introducing people to a fire and how a fire reacts. Again, it would be under control. It is far better to do it under a controlled process than—

Mrs GASH—Do you see a role for the national government in this? Do you see a role, period, for the Australian government?

Mr Chipman—Wildfire impacts upon everyone. It means that from the federal government right down to local government there is a cost. There is a cost to rectify what occurred in the ACT that is going to be shared across all levels of government. I do not think it is a thing about which any level of government can say, 'No, that is not my responsibility.' I mean, it is everyone's responsibility, not just the three levels of government. It is the community's responsibility. It is the land managers'.

Mrs GASH—This brings me to my next question, which is probably directed to Mr Birch. In your opinion, has there been any concern expressed between the paid firefighters and the non-paid voluntary firefighters?

Mr Birch—Could you expand on that?

Mrs GASH—In the eastern states or certainly where I come from, there is controversy with regard to whether volunteers should be paid.

Mr Birch—I cannot comment on fire service policy, about a payment.

Mrs GASH—In your neck of the woods here, has that been an issue?

Mr Birch—Not in my neck of the woods, no. It has got to be done to save time down the track in the fire season.

Mrs GASH—That is good to hear, thank you. My last question is addressed to Mr Hickey. In your last paragraph it says:

The lack of access in National Parks makes fire fighting more difficult and dangerous than in forests managed for timber production.

Could you expand on that? Could you give an example of where it has been a danger?

Mr B. Hickey—Well, it is one of two things. You either do not go in and fight because you cannot get in there or if you get in there, you have the risk of how you get out of the way. One of the things that really concerns me is the fact that in a lot of places where there were access roads into national parks, they tore them up. As they were already built, they could have stayed there and been of some access value. It is all right to say you can use helicopters along with other things but usually on the really bad fire days because of smoke and wind, they often cannot get off the ground.

Mrs GASH—What do you think has been the reasoning behind this? Why do you think they have closed them off?

Mr B. Hickey—Because people believe it should be left untouched by human beings. That is really what it gets down to. It is an icon. That is one of the problems that I see we have in managing our national parks. Nobody wants it to be touched whatsoever. I do not believe it can stay that way. Eventually, if you do not do some burning, nature will wipe it out, like it did in the mainland—very large areas, where you could not control it. You can still keep some pristine areas provided you make sure that there are areas where the fuel loads are reduced so that you can control the fire to stop it spreading through the whole area.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Hickey, I want to ask a few questions about the 1967 disaster and what has happened now. We read here that this was the largest loss of life and property on any single day in the history of the Australian continent. It was obviously a major disaster. We are hearing a lot about hazard reduction. At the time of the 1967 fires, had there been a hazard reduction regime set in place? Was there a major timber industry at the time?

Mr B. Hickey—No. If anything, it was exactly the opposite. This is one of the things that worries me today. Particularly in the Huon Valley, where most of this occurred, for some 40-odd years there had been what they call the case mill industry, which was cutting boxes to put apples in. There were hundreds of small sawmills doing this. People did not understand how forests were established or how they grew. People selectively logged the bigger trees and left the others and all the rubbish on the ground because there was no pulpwood industry, with the aim that the tree would grow on and they would come back year after year and get more trees.

From Cockle Creek in the south of Tasmania to the back of Mount Wellington, particularly on private property and in some of the state forest that had been selectively logged, there were thousands and thousands of tonnes of fuel laying on the ground. Then along came that one day. A few people had fires going. Other people lit them et cetera. In about six hours it burnt from the bottom end of Tasmania to the back, even through Mount Wellington. There were 67 people killed and there were 3,000 houses burnt down. Most of this was because there was no fuel reduction whatsoever. I saw myself; I was on the side of a hill when the fire swept through and

went around Geeveston. I could look over the Huon River. I saw pieces of bark half as big as this table floating 500 feet up in the air that went straight across the Huon River and lit the hills on the other side. The fire was that severe. But everywhere a spark landed there was fuel, particularly on the private property. The only thing that stopped that fire was when it got to the coast.

Mr ORGAN—Were there also extraordinary weather conditions at that time?

Mr B. Hickey—It was extraordinary, but you do get that extraordinary weather. If you look at the history in the south—I spent a lot of years doing ages of trees and one thing and another in timber assessment—somewhere between every 20 and 100 years there have been major fires, usually about 50 years. That is because you get these major blow-up days. If a fuel reduction has not been done, then it is there to blow up and that is what happens. That is what happened on that occasion.

Mr ORGAN—So you see that as one of the major causes—the weather conditions and the fuel loads?

Mr B. Hickey—The selective logging and the fuel load. Now that has been reduced since woodchipping came in, of course. Some of the moves to use additional fuel for boiler fuel et cetera will help that again. But the real problem in the south was this selective logging and the amount of fuel left on the ground with no burning to reduce the fire hazard.

Mr ORGAN—In 1967 was there a firefighting service as such?

Mr B. Hickey—No, there was a very poor fire service throughout the place. But that fire moved so quickly that I do not believe there was anything anybody could do on that occasion. In six hours it burnt all that part. I do not believe you could have done anything, no matter what you did, except get out of the road, and that was what the 1967 people tried to do. Trees fell over roads and blocked their cars and all sorts of things and they died.

Mr Chipman—The type of equipment you fought a fire with in 1967—I was only a young kid but I can remember—was that you got a sugarbag and wet it. If you did not have a sugarbag, you just got a branch from a tree. That was what you had to fight the fire with.

Mr B. Hickey—There is no doubt that with the equipment we have today and the training people have you would stand a lot better chance. I believe that one of the things that should be done is there should be a lot more training in schools to let people know about it—bring them up to understand the effects of fire and how to handle it and what to do if your house is threatened. One of the big things that came out of 1967 was that people tried to run away whereas most of them would have been a lot safer if they had stayed with their house.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you.

Mr ADAMS—Mr Hickey, you have a lot of experience because you have lived a long time. I say that with no disrespect. You also come from a beautiful area in the Huon Valley. What are your comments in relation to local councils letting houses be built in many remote areas and on the fringe of national parks and forest? What is your opinion of that? How difficult do you see

saving property sometimes when there is a wildfire in those areas? Is there a need for us to look at building codes and the way we let buildings be built in today's world?

Mr B. Hickey—Yes, I believe that is so. I was recently up at Lucaston Road et cetera and looked at some of the houses up there. There is no doubt in my mind that on that one day if they get a fire that sweeps down that valley, there will be no houses left. They have scrub and trees right up to the back door. There is no way that you can save a house under those conditions. I also worry about their access out if they have to get out. I believe there should be a lot more rules when you are living in those areas as to the area that should be cleared around your house and equipment that you have to try to save your house. There should be provision for what you are to do if you are caught there. We need to make sure that people understand and know what to do. I guess it is inexperience and they are willing to take the risk, but people want everything growing naturally right up to their door. It catches up with people eventually.

Mr ADAMS—Mr Chipman mentioned rural people understanding smoke. I guess with education we have to get people living in Hobart and other places to understand that there are a lot of contrary views as to why smoke is bad. I think of the educational thing—I think Mrs Gash raised it—and understanding smoke. Do you see that as a need to certainly educate the general public about fuel reduction? We accept that back-burning is quite acceptable to save a house. People seem to understand being able to light a fire back from a road to let it catch up with a fire that is coming down. We save the houses on the other side of the road. But we seem to have lost the information flow to get people to understand. I know there are people that like to confuse that for their own political reasons, but do you think we have a need to get that education line up there?

Mr Chipman—I think you have touched on a point. It is only in the last short period of time that there has been this public concern about smoke caused through regeneration burns or whatever. We would argue that there is a certain amount of politics and that people are using it for a political end. Hazard reduction burning on farms using fire as a land management tool is not new. It has been going on forever. When I was a youth, no-one ever said, 'Oh, dear. That's terrible.'

Mr ADAMS—You might just elaborate. You mentioned earlier the stubble of poppies. You might just elaborate on that.

Mr Chipman—Tasmania is the only state that produces opium poppy. Part of the control for that is that once the crop has been harvested, that stubble must be burnt by law. It is part of the licence that that farmer gets to grow poppies. Once the crop is harvested, he must burn that stubble. A crop of stubble, be it wheat or poppies, generates quite a bit of smoke. There have been times I know up through the midlands where people have rung talkback radio and said, 'Oh that terrible forest industry. They're causing all the smoke' when it was farmers doing what they had to do by law. Again, it then adds to the confusion and people in the city not being aware, and then it builds a perception that that smoke is terrible. Again, as we said, we manage smoke for a very good reason.

Mr B. Hickey—I will add to that. I believe that the real argument comes with regeneration burns that create the most smoke. There is no doubt about that. That is the one that creates the most media hype. But things like the Southwood project in the south, where they are putting in a

boiler to burn most of this fuel, will reduce that by some 100 to 400 tonnes to the hectare. I was in charge of Port Huon pulp mill at one stage. We had a wood fired boiler. We actually did this. On cut-over areas where we took the fuel off, you could not only reduce the amount of smoke and the intensity of fire but it gave you an lot more flexibility when you could burn. There was less fuel, it dried out quicker, so you could burn out later and earlier in the year and you could pick your days better. That made a big difference to the amount of smoke, which would worry people in the street.

CHAIR—You mentioned that farmers as a condition of their licence have to burn. Is that to prevent them having a crop that is unauthorised or something or other?

Mr Chipman—Yes. When the industry was first developed in Tasmania, it was one of the policies that farmers had to burn stubble.

CHAIR—Do you see a conflict between any of the council regulations—for instance, tree preservation orders and things like that—and fire control advice that is provided to the community?

Mr Chipman—To the best of our knowledge—and our knowledge is not total knowledge—there has not been a conflict at this point in time. But within local government there are now increasing scenic management policies, tree preservation policies and nature conservation policies. I understand that these are going to look at vistas and say, 'Well, that has got to be kept for the tourists to add to the scenic value of the municipality.' It could mean in future when that needs a hazard reduction burn it could create some conflict within the policy of that particular council. Local government has a responsibility and does carry out that responsibility, where it can actually direct a landowner to perhaps not hazard reduction burn but to clean up any fire hazard that they may have on their property. I know in our southern midlands council that if you are directed to clean up an area of land that you own and if you do not follow that direction, you can actually be prosecuted. They will do the hazard clean-up and then charge you for it.

CHAIR—Mr Birch, you answered a question about paying volunteers. The protocol that exists between the three agencies in Tasmania actually has the capacity for Tasmanian Fire Service volunteers to be eligible for payment for firefighting. There has to be a written request. The evidence we got earlier today tended to suggest that it is not abused. It is used in extraordinary circumstances where people just might be called out for really long periods of time.

Mr Birch—Where people suffer financial hardship.

CHAIR—Can you tell us what the experience of that is? It is obviously not a well-used provision.

Mr Birch—Within my area it is not abused. If someone has financial hardship out of burning long-running fires, there is probably a case for them to take up with the agency. But most people who join a volunteer organisation to do that, to volunteer, to put something back into the community. But on the other hand, it comes back to doing the hazard reductions. A lot of the time they give could be reduced if the burns were done under controlled environments.

CHAIR—Good point.

Mr ADAMS—I want to pin that down a bit. If in the volunteer group somebody has been under some hardship and they have not been able to get to work and they are not going to get paid, there would be a request put in to cover that? That is how it usually works, I think.

Mr Birch—That is right. On the other hand, too, if our volunteers cannot go, they do not have to go. They are not forced to go. They are not compelled to go.

Mr Chipman—It was actually at the Dromedary fire last year which had the potential to be a very serious fire if the weather conditions had married up. One of the Tasmanian commercial radio stations—the fire went over three or four weeks but the peak was over a two- or three-day period—broadcast that people go along to the Shell service station at Brighton and leave a cut lunch for the firefighters. At the end of the day, they had to put over the radio, 'Please, no more cut lunches.' They were embarrassed by the generosity of the community. For the volunteer firefighters, their satisfaction is doing something for the community. Ricky is a tree feller. While he is fulfilling his role as a volunteer, he is not earning money for his family. So at some point in time we can afford one or two days. But, for example, a lot of Tasmanian volunteers were called away to the mainland over the last two or three seasons. They were on a week or 10 days rotation.

Mr Birch—A week to 10 days rotation.

Mr ADAMS—The argument that has started to emerge for us as a committee on the mainland is that people who volunteer their time to fight fires in national parks or state forests do not see reduction of fire hazards within the parks service taking place. They are starting to say, 'I don't know if I want to volunteer my time if I don't think there is a good fire regime taking place in the land management prior to the fire season.' Have you got any comment to make on that?

Mr Birch—What you say is right. I know my own local brigade get a bit annoyed if they just keeping chasing fires in parks or forestry or wherever if there have been no burn-offs done for years. They get a bit annoyed having to chase something that could be prevented.

Mr ADAMS—It is quite a forestry area where you come from.

Mr Birch—That is right.

Mr Chipman—And you have got the two land tenures—parks and state forests.

Mr Birch—We have got parks and state forests. We have got a lot of private land-holdings.

Mr ADAMS—And the farmers.

Mr Birch—Yes, private timber companies. As I say, I have been approached to organise a public meeting out our way to try to address these points to some of the company representatives. I have spoken to some. They are quite prepared to talk to the people. Once again, when you start doing the burn-offs, the smoke starts going up and then the media see it

and you end up with a negative response to doing burning. People then freeze and they do not want to do it.

CHAIR—In that area, you said you have forestry and parks. Do you see problems in both of them as well—forestry not hazard reducing as much as they used to either?

Mr Birch—Yes. No-one is doing the hazard reductions. Even the private land-holders are not doing what they used to because people just get sick of the negative response when they do light up. There is actually no fine boundary between parks and forestry or private landowners. One of the major ones in our area this year was started by a simple thing. Someone stole a car, drove it into a national park and dropped a match in it. It just kept going. It was over five or six days.

Mr Chipman—To have a controlled fire, the window of opportunity for the right weather conditions is small; we do not have days. You know what Tasmanian weather is like. We do not have days of them banked up. The political requirement is that we do not do anything on special days, like Easter and major events. That is fine. But from a land manager's point of view, he is not governed by a calendar of special events. He is governed by a thing called the weather. The weather determines it. It just so happens that you may have a special day but it is the most perfect day to do a hazard reduction. Yes, we may have to be a bit of sacrifice. But it would be far better to sacrifice one special day than have all of our Christmas out there fighting a wildfire that is out of control, which happened.

Mr Birch—A lot of people have been called out on fires on Christmas day.

Mrs GASH—I want to comment on something the chair said in relation to private land-holders not burning off like they used to for whatever reason. However, is there a problem with them burning off? Is there some legislation that says they cannot if they decide to do it?

Mr Birch—No, not that I am aware of. During the fire permit period—I am a permit officer—they can ring and request a permit. Depending on the weather conditions, you can write the permit out and they can still burn. A lot of people just do not want to burn because of the conflict that seems to be raised in the community further downstream.

Mrs GASH—I come from the Shoalhaven in New South Wales. You really cannot always get permission to burn whenever you want to.

Mr Birch—As a permit officer, you have a responsibility that you do not write out a permit today when tomorrow has north-westerly winds.

Mrs GASH—No, I understand that. But National Parks have a say in it and local government has a say in it, the state has a say in it.

Mr Birch—Over there in the Shoalhaven.

Mrs GASH—So it is not quite as easy as you are saying here, where if the private land-holders want to burn off, they actually can.

Mr Birch—Yes.

CHAIR—That is a point. As somebody authorised to write a permit, you might just tell us what your responsibilities are and what advice you have to get.

Mr Birch—You make sure they have got appropriate resources to control the fire on their own ground if all else fails. Log heaps are not allowed to be lit certain times of the year, which is normally your hottest, windiest period. Log heaps are not allowed to be lit. If you have a problem as a permit officer and you need clarification, you have people higher in the fire service that can give you advice. But the main thing is to make sure that people have got appropriate fire breaks around what they are burning, they have appropriate resources available, be it slip-on fire tank unit, a truck, machinery, tractor and discs.

CHAIR—As a permit officer, you do not have to get authority from parks or the fire service or anybody else before you write out the ticket? If everything complies, you can write it out?

Mr Birch—I can write it out. It is up to the landowner then to notify the fire service through a toll free number. They register the permit. If that is seen from a fire tower, they can cross-reference the grid references and make sure that is the controlled one. The landowner also has to notify neighbouring landowners that they are lighting it.

Mr ADAMS—What if the landowner next door says, 'No, I don't want you to light it'?

Mr Birch—I do not know. I have never had that happen in my area, to be quite honest with you.

Mr ADAMS—Has the cricket pitch ever been threatened down there?

Mr Birch—No. That is the first thing we save. There is only a cricket club and a fire shed in Runnymede.

Mr ORGAN—You are saying that once you have given the permission, they are just informing their neighbours about it. They are not asking them for permission?

Mr Birch—No. It is on their own ground. You give them a time frame, such as three or four days to do the burning. Once a total fire ban is called, the permit virtually goes.

CHAIR—If they do that burn and they do not manage it properly, even though they are supposedly demonstrated that they have the capacity to and it escapes into adjoining public lands, are they responsible and can be prosecuted?

Mr Birch—I am not real sure, to be honest with you. I am not sure what happens after that. That is a fire service policy.

Mr ADAMS—There has been a criticism in Tasmania of fires. Every time a fire starts there is a certain bent put on it that this is an escaped fire from a reduction burn. Just so the committee understands the politics of the local scene, I think this is what some of Mr Birch's evidence is probably coming from as well.

Mr Birch—It is easy to blame someone else.

Mr Chipman—TasRail, the train line, travels up through the midlands. In the last two fire seasons, there have been fires. The year before last, there was a major fire created through from spark from the train. There is still a court case proceeding. It burnt out two farms at Andover, two major sheep farms. It burnt the total farms. This year, TasRail are making a much bigger effort to clean up along the train lines.

CHAIR—Good. Thank you very much for appearing here this afternoon, your evidence and the submissions. We very much appreciate it.

Mr Chipman—We thank you for the opportunity.

[2.22 p.m.]

RADFORD, Mr Reuben, Federal Rural Delegate, Rubicon Roland Branch, Liberal Party

SHACKLOCK, Mr Tom, Vice President, Rubicon Roland Branch, Liberal Party

CHAIR—Welcome. I will not reread the formal advice. You were here before when I read that with respect to evidence. You have heard that twice now, I think. We have the submission of the branch and yours, Mr Radford. Your submission is already on the record, so you do not need to reread it as such. Would you like to make some opening remarks? Then we will have some questions.

Mr Shacklock—The opening remarks for this submission are about providing some further background. These people here consists of a broad range of people representing small business, farmers and local government people. We are actually representing a very broad church. We are not representing a particular group, although it is under the Liberal Party. We are representing those people as we see it.

There are a number of dot points that I would just like to refer to. The main policy or the main problem that we actually came across is a policy of the different groups of people involved in this area. What has been highlighted in the research since putting in this submission is that Parks and Wildlife seem to have a different policy very much varied from the rest of the community in total. That is a very important point. As we have heard this morning, that has come across very strongly. That is exactly what we have found.

I have put a number of sections here that are quite important. This particular section here on the Cradle coast shows that it is a rapidly developing area of tourism and people settling in there from the suburbs of various towns and countries throughout Australia. They have migrated to Tasmania. People were very concerned about the fact that they were not educated as to the ways that it happened in this area. There were a lot of roads being developed in a lot of the urban areas that are coming up. There is not only insufficient access to their properties but there are no escape routes. This seems to be throughout Australia in the last 20 to 30 years a thing that has actually been developed where there is no way out. If trees fall down, people are trapped. There is no way out of this situation.

Education is something that has not really been taken on board. I am only going to repeat some of the things that have been said this morning. School children and people like this are not being trained in this area to really appreciate the situation.

The main issues that seem to trouble these country people that have been there for years is the fact that these new private landowners are not sympathetic towards the situation, because basically there has been a lot of adverse publicity on how you manage the land within rural Australia. There is no real appreciation of that. There is a lot of strength within small pressure groups to divert them away from that very important point of looking after their properties and the whole community. As has been said, how lovely it is to have the trees at the door and have everything around them. But how do you really manage it? What comes out is that no-one seems

to think that it is a good idea to provide that protection that you need and to avail yourself of the education.

From what I can gather from the fire service in the last few days and from people I talk to, funding is a problem for education. Education seems to be the right thing at the time when we have a major fire. But it is another thing at this time of the year to encourage people to educate and especially in practical terms to go out there and firefight. We have a lot of volunteer people, but how do you encourage them to do it at this time of the year when it is most effective rather than the time that they have really been hit with the stick to get out there and do it? How do we provide the carrot at this time of the year to do those things?

Obviously, regarding a lot of the things that have come out today, land management is a thing that is really something that is not emphasised. We also believe that broad education on the use of the media is not taken full advantage of. We need to use it at the times of the year when it is important, not when we have had the wildfires go right the way through Australia, which is the time that we have heard about all these things. It is about what is happening now. We need a new system where we use the media to prepare these people to take advantage or encourage TAFE to run courses for people. But they need to be actually encouraged to do so.

Finally, in my submission, before I introduce Reuben and where he comes from, we had a very serious fire on a national park at Rocky Cape in this last year. It was on Aboriginal private land. The Aboriginals were not allowed to burn and there was a person killed in that area, yet there were numerous warnings that that build-up was going to be there. That was never, ever activated until it was all too late. So this is the thing—plenty of warnings have been given.

I will finish there. I would like Reuben to speak. I would just like to say this for Reuben: he has got a broad experience in the rural industry. He is a representative of Tasmania at the party political level for the whole of Australia. The evidence he will give is short, direct and to the point. I am willing to answer any other questions.

Mr Radford—You have my copy there that you can read through. I think back over the years when I used to go hunting in the lake country and some of the old chaps I used to go with. When they lived on the lake country and a lot of that area up through there, they always insisted on burning these strips and patches out to make the country safe and to get the green shoots and the green growing. No-one has mentioned the wildlife or does not seem to have mentioned the wildlife. When they have the green strips and patches that are burnt out through the bushes and the swamps, that is where the wildlife move to. That is where the best wildlife are. I think in the last bushfires, in the really serious fires we had and all the wildlife that got lost, it was a great tragedy because they had nowhere to go. A serious fire went through. With respect to some of the reporting in the conservation groups that made them lock these up, I think they should be responsible for some of that devastation that went on. They are just my own views.

Mr Chipman mentioned poppy stubble having to be burnt. That is not quite correct. It has got to be destroyed within seven days. The latest trend—I have been on the poppy growers committee for 10 years—is that you mulch the ground and you mulch that straw back into the ground. You use it to break down in the soil over the years. You have to destroy it but you do not have to burn it.

CHAIR—So you have to destroy it, not necessarily burn it?

Mr Radford—Not necessarily burn it. When we travel on the mainland we see big areas of wheat country where they used to burn wheat stubble by the thousand acres. Now they are chewing it up and working it back into the ground. I get a lot of the agriculture books. You will see that they got better crops last year through no till seeding, by which they mean seeding straight through the straw without burning it. I think there is some law—I am not really sure—and the taxation incentive is probably important there. I think there is ploughing machinery and digging machinery. You cannot get the same write-off on that type of machine as you can on a no-till machine. So there is a taxation angle there that could be followed. I just came down on my own bat today. I am pleased you accepted our evidence and asked us to come along.

Mr ADAMS—When you were talking about the central islands, were you talking about Walls of Jerusalem and Mackenzie's lakes?

Mr Radford—Yes, the lake country, right back through there.

Mr ADAMS—Where we used to graze stocks right through there.

Mr Radford—Yes, they used to graze cattle and sheep back through there. There are not as many animals back there now as what there used to be.

Mr ADAMS—A lot of that conservation area—

Mr Radford—It is locked up.

Mr ADAMS—It is not a national park. People can still hunt in there. There are no grazing animals as such.

Mr Radford—There is no burning and no grazing.

Mr ADAMS—Where they used to take them up, where I grew up, at the back of Blackwood Creek and up through the sand banks there.

Mr Radford—Wild Dog Tier and out through there.

Mr ADAMS—That is right, yes. Do you still go up to that country?

Mr Radford—I go through there and have a bit of a walk there. But I have travelled to Hobart for many years now.

Mr ADAMS—But how do you see the country now? There is more fuel in there to burn than there used to be?

Mr Radford—The last time I was through there, the bush was higher than the scrub and the plains and the sags and all that type of thing grow up. Unless you get—this is another point I think someone might have made—a fire through some of this country, the seed does not regenerate. It does not restrike and regenerate. You need the heat of a fire to get certain black

woods and those to regenerate. I do not know whether anyone made a point about that or not, but that is what I have been told.

Another point I did not make earlier is that I just heard the forestry workers say that when they are going to shift to a different coupe in the forestry, I often wonder why they advertise it so well. They advertise that they are going to shift in months ahead so that if there are any illegal drugs and stuff being grown in there, they get time to shift it out. They threaten that if they do not get fair warning, that is what I am told by people with authority. You can take that with a grain of salt if you like.

Mr ADAMS—What do they do? Do they threaten to burn them out?

Mr Radford—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—We did have that.

Mr Radford—There are serious threats to life.

Mr ADAMS—There was a chap on the north-west coast who threatened to burn out plantations, I remember, a couple of years ago. On the Rocky Cape, it is a traditional Aboriginal area, which I think we all recognise as being a traditional Aboriginal place. That would have been burnt over the years traditionally.

Mr Shacklock—But that was being stopped and discouraged by the Parks and Wildlife, which is coming over and over again to us. I have dealt with five different people interested in the land. Out of those five different people, they all say they have problems with the Parks and Wildlife. I find those five other different people have a lot of experience and tradition. They have a problem. As I see it, these groups have got to be coordinated together. The policy has got to be as near as it can be the same as one another if we are going to get anywhere on this subject. Otherwise we will just have infighting and fighting all over the place.

Mr ADAMS—It is about land management.

Mr Shacklock—Someone has to force the issue.

Mr ADAMS—On the burning, that is a good contract, isn't it? It is similar to what you describe, Reuben.

Mr Radford—I think the straw one is important too, to start on the younger children, the school children. That is the time when they are doing a light reduction burn. When you take children out, it could be a safe area. I am talking about 15- or 16-year-olds, not 10- or 12-year-olds. Some of the children today you have to realise would not know how to light a fire. Everything is electric at home. They would not know how to light a fire. But they have to be shown and taught what fire can do and how to handle it.

Mr ADAMS—Your family has been a part of rural Tasmania for a long time.

Mr Radford—A fair time—108 years.

Mr ADAMS—It is always well respected as well. But this is an ongoing problem for rural Australia and the farming community in that people have got too far away from the food source. Kids think milk comes out of a carton or out of the fridge. Wheat is represented by Cornflakes. People do not understand what fibre is or whatever. Do you think that is an educational thing as far as fire is exactly the same? We do not understand—

Mr Radford—It certainly is. It goes back to our publicity and our media and our schools and our teachers. We have to have input in there somewhere.

Mr ADAMS—I return to the local area. I have been involved with Roland fire problems for a long time. We had a big fire in there about four years ago.

Mr Shacklock—That is right, yes. That is exactly right.

Mr ADAMS—There is a track now to the top. There is a new track put in. It has been made accessible by a tanker. I think we could get a tanker up there. Is that a plus for firefighting in that region now?

Mr Shacklock—It certainly is. But it is pointed out to me, as I am the area representative, there are over 10 or 12 roads coming into that area and it is a dead end all the way through. If people get trapped in those roads, although there has been quite a bit of improvement, there is still no way out, out of 10 different roads. Unfortunately, the various authorities that have properties, industries or whatever. So it is not just one group of private owners. We have a massive thing to do to get everyone together to do it. But I am informed that Sheffield council have been very cooperative in what they have tried to do. But there are limitations on what they can do unless you have a proper management plan and it all fits together.

Mr Radford—There are a lot of people, in some of those places in Roland and around there, who are weekenders from Melbourne and places from that. You would not believe it, but they fly over. They are only weekenders there. That is another problem when people are away.

Mr ADAMS—We had evidence yesterday from forestry at Mount Dromedary. You may have 100 people that own 100 blocks in an area. To get them together to do a reduction burn is just about impossible. Therefore, a reduction burn does not get done.

Mr Radford—Someone has to have authority and who can give it to them?

Mr ADAMS—Well, notify them, I suppose.

Mrs GASH—You have heard us comment on volunteers working in conjunction with the authorities. How do you see it working in your area?

Mr Shacklock—From the information I am getting, in our particular area, it seems to be quite good. But I get various opinions. So it is not constant throughout Tasmania. There are some problems, such as those you brought up earlier today. But it is definitely not right that across Tasmania there is full agreement. Some of the older people are people that have actually done it in the past and do not get on too well with the new system. But in the area that I have been dealing with here over the last few days, that appears to be minimal in that area. It is the worry

about the increasing population that are coming into Tasmania now. It is getting more interesting. Basically, as you may or may not know, in the last six months, the price of property has doubled in Tasmania. The only place that sort of money comes from is the centre of Sydney and Melbourne, not to run anyone down. So those people coming here are going to have less experience in this area. That is becoming a real worry, so there urgently needs to be an educational program put in to be able to inform the public.

Mrs GASH—I will ask the same question. Mr Shacklock, you are representing the Liberal Party in this instance in this submission. Has the Liberal Party in your area taken a role in educating the people in your particular community in this?

Mr Shacklock—Not in this. This is the first time that we have really come across the strength of the unease that is there. It was in the particular case where this area mentioned in the submission has gone for a long, long time without a reduction burn. It is becoming more frightening because the uneducated population is moving in.

Mrs GASH—Do you see a role for your association to perhaps takes this on if nobody else is doing it?

Mr Shacklock—We believe our role is to encourage the local government and those other people to do it. They are members of the Liberal Party within that branch. We believe that we can pass that one on to those areas through doing that. But it is important. I am very surprised, not pleasantly, that we do not have more representation from other groups, knowing the seriousness of this problem throughout Australia. I am surprised to see in the paper—I was only landed this job last week—that we were the only community group that was doing it. I could see self-interested people here, such as forestry, but we are a group that have no particular profitable interest in it. That really concerns me.

CHAIR—We heard from the Binalong Bay Ratepayers Association. There was Timber Communities Australia. While its interest is the forestry industry, it is a bit broader than that. It is the communities that, I guess, make their living and see it as a significant industry in their particular region.

Mrs GASH—With your expertise and experience in the past, I relate that to the question on volunteers.

Mr Radford—One thing that I have not heard mentioned here today about volunteers is their insurance. When you get volunteers lighting a fire on someone else's property, the first thing they think of now is, 'Am I going to be sued for the responsibilities of this fire?' I think both in the states and federally, we could be doing more on insurance and public risk insurance and things like this. Even if I am saying something that does not agree with the parties, I think state and federal governments have got to get back together and do something more about insurances. When you get a fire brigade that goes out to do what it can to put a fire out and there is a house threatened or on fire, the firefighters do not know whether to break the door down or what to do because they could get sued for their responsibilities. It is something that I have not heard mentioned here today but I know it has occurred in our local brigade two or three times. So it is a worry—insurance.

Mrs GASH—I appreciate that comment, thank you.

CHAIR—You mentioned grazing. Clearly there are areas in your region which once upon a time were grazed and are now not. Is it your view that those areas that are not allowed to be grazed any more are more susceptible to fire as a result of that non-grazing?

Mr Radford—Close into cities and the towns. Close into Devonport, I can take you to places now that 10 years ago you could walk through and ride a horse through and now you could not even walk through. That is where the kangaroos and the wallabies have moved off the mountain country down there right around our back door of Devonport and our farm property. We have only got about 10 acres left that are not cleared. Kangaroos and wallabies are on our open country now because they hide in the thick scrub and bushes. We do not mind a few of them. We even have eagles there. We do not mind a few. But that is where they have gone to. It is only in patches. It is not big dense areas but I could see a real problem where they are letting 200 and 300 hectare patches around the town and right in Devonport city. We went fighting a fire there about six or seven years ago and it was supposed to be in a green belt right in the city.

CHAIR—But that is an area that once upon a time had cattle or sheep on it?

Mr Radford—Open paddocks on it. Now it has grown up because they want this green belt around the city.

Mr Shacklock—I would not mind commenting on that. We had certainly a very big industry, the beef industry, here that has been rapidly reduced, and the dairying industry. There does not appear to be a lot of money in dairying today. It is showing up in that fewer people are working in that area. About 1,000 cows is nothing unusual whereas in the past there were 50 or 60 cows; 20 years ago, you would still have been making a living from it. A lot of people work there. When you have that happening, there is a lot of good land management taking place. Also in the last 10 years a lot of irrigation has been ripped up out of this area. It was intensively farmed. Therefore, the fire control would be much better than it is today. That is growing, as you quite rightly point out; right up towards Cradle Mountain we had farming and stock running in those areas. Today that is no longer happening. That is getting overgrown. There is nothing to replace what you would call a private enterprise land management there. So we have a developing problem that is going along there that has to be managed in some way or we will have those problems. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for taking the time to come down. We really appreciate that. We appreciate your submission and the evidence this afternoon. It has been very good. We are not going to have any other people in the public forum that would like to give any evidence. We will adjourn the hearing. Our next hearings will be in Western Australia.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 2.49 p.m.