

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne—26 October 2016

Members

Mr David Davis—Chair
Mr Richard Dalla-Riva
Mr Cesar Melhem

Ms Melina Bath
Ms Samantha Dunn

Participating Member

Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

Witnesses

Mr Brett Ellis (affirmed), Manager Risk, Emergency and Community Safety, Yarra Ranges Council, and
Mr Victor Steffenson (via telephone) (affirmed), National Indigenous Fire Network.

The CHAIR—Victor, can I welcome you. We also have Brett Ellis, who I think you know very well, in the room here. If you both would like to lead off with a very short statement. I might ask you, Victor, to start and then I will ask Brett to follow with a short statement too, and then we will follow with some questions.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes. I am Victor Steffenson. I am an Indigenous fire practitioner from North Queensland and I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and communities that have been mentored into this program over the last 23 years in Australia. I would like to acknowledge them and move forward with this proceeding to becoming beneficial for them all. Thank you.

Mr ELLIS—I am Brett Ellis. I am the manager for risk, emergency and community safety with Yarra Ranges Council. I also do wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri, and pay my respects to elders past and present, and in particular to Uncle David Wandin, who is the Wurundjeri lead for the project for Yarra Ranges but also the other elders that we are also working alongside, so the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Wathaurung as well. We are joining forces to put a project together around bringing lost cultural knowledge back to Victoria and applying that on country. I would like to acknowledge Victor as well, of course.

The CHAIR—Can I perhaps start with a question. There are a number of key points of focus for our inquiry. One of them is a question that relates to a twofold potential target: one the government's new, more sharply targeted prevention program, which seeks to prioritise in terms of risk to life and property on one hand but, following out of the royal commission into bushfires, there has been a standing target of hundreds of thousands of hectares for preventative burning. I am interested in your reflections on those two models, whether they coexist, and how the two of them might relate to any lessons that you might give us on Indigenous practices. It is a big question.

Mr STEFFENSON—That is what is happening more and more these days. There is more burning, and more burning in terms of reducing fuel loads for life and property. The thing with that, though, is that people are not educated in the environment or in understanding exactly how to apply the right fire regime. In traditional burning practices it is really about looking after country, as well as stopping the fuel loads. In the old times they did not want the country to burn like hot fires, like the ones that you are meaning, because to them, they would be burnt out of home and food, and also the environment suffers.

When we look at what is happening today with the burns, what I see is people are treating the land as a quota. They are just getting out there and burning masses of country and using very short windows to do that. There is a wealth of knowledge on all those ecosystems and all that country, where we can burn on a larger window and look after country, as well as educating the community, but at the moment the difference between traditional burning and the hazard reduction is that they are missing out on a wealth of knowledge and they are missing out on a wealth of practice that can make this a lot more effective, as well as healing relationships and community. They are missing the whole point, and they are missing all the benefits that come out of managing country and looking after country using fire.

That is something that I find frustrating sometimes. When they just pick two weeks off a calendar, and choose also a window out of a calendar, and then look at country they have not burnt for 10, 15 years or more and just go in there and there is a lighting-up for the sake of just getting rid of fuel to look after life and property, they really are going backwards, because we could be looking after the environment and life and property, burning more regularly for the seasons and having larger windows, and, on top of that, educating the nation with the beautiful knowledge of how to maintain this country and landscape for a long, long time. I think that there could be a lot more consideration in developing these programs and having a lot more knowledge on country to make these decisions.

The CHAIR—Victor, if I can perhaps interrupt there and put an argument that I have put to a number of witnesses: that through the nineties and a long way into the 2000s the preparatory burning regime fell into inadequacy, the fuel load built up, and consequently the state got some very big fires in 03, 06, and especially in 09, and that, if I can be blunt, bureaucrats cannot be trusted to keep up the regime unless there is some very sharp focus for them, because there is risk when you do a burn—I think that is true, is it?

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes.

The CHAIR—But by not having a target, the risk is that over a time it builds up and then we get huge fires that do massive damage and potentially cause loss of life.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes, and it is fine to have a target, and a target in terms of looking after country. That target can be reached, and my argument is that it can be reached with a lot more understanding of the landscape and looking after the land a lot better than what they are actually doing, and bringing a wealth of education and knowledge to the community so that they understand when they see the smoke, they understand what the fires are for. I think that the targets are fine, and what you are saying, but there is a lot more to a fire than people realise and that needs to be taken and accounted for. You cannot go out there and just burn thousands of hectares of country without any idea of the landscape, because we are losing lots of trees and plants, and animals are declining rapidly. We cannot keep doing this because the landscape just cannot handle that. In the next 50 years or so our own children are going to start not to see certain things that we have seen in our lifetime in the landscapes.

The CHAIR—Victor, can I perhaps see if Brett has got anything to add to that.

Mr ELLIS—In support of Victor, I think what we need to understand is that Victor's methodologies and the traditions and the knowledge that Victor has have been handed down to him from elders who have never lost connection to country, so to some extent he is one of a few people that have got connection to the traditional burning practices that have occurred within Australia for thousands of years, and they are completely different to the burning regimes and the type of fire that we currently are putting into Victoria and into other parts of Australia.

The methodology that Victor is talking about would see more fire on the landscape, more fire of a lesser intensity, a smaller fire that goes through and cleans up country but is not impacting into the canopy. Our fires that we are putting in at the moment are drying out our canopies, and those canopies are then dropping those leaves down on and suppressing any grasses and any other vegetation from coming up, so we are killing our vegetation. The area where I live is up at Toolangi; it backs onto Toolangi State Forest. That area has been impacted significantly through 2009. It is recovering, but it needs the right type of fire into it now to help it transition and recover better, rather than leaving it for 10 years or 15 years and putting a hard fire in again and just destroying it more.

The CHAIR—Or leaving it for a long period and then having a terrible, massive fire.

Mr ELLIS—A big fire. I think the challenge we have got is, Victor's fire is small intensity but more regular, so it is putting that fire in depending on the country and the time. It is smaller mosaics. It is not looking at it as DELWP and the agencies do. They look at a map. They sit down and work out, 'Okay, we'll draw this map and this is the area that we're going to burn. We'll burn that every 10 or 15 or 25 years.' The decisions that Victor is talking about are made out on country. They are made looking at the trees, interpreting what that country needs at the right time and then putting the right fire onto that landscape. The fires that we are talking about are fires that would be in April, May, June, July and August when the native species are ready and tell us when they are ready to burn, not because it is March and that is when we have got to get our biggest bang for our buck in reducing fuel load, which then just dries the forest out more and causes a problem that continues to create a situation which is worse for us.

Mr MELHEM—Could you just expand on that. Can you give me some practical examples? You talked about March, April, May, June, July. That is getting into the winter season as well.

Mr ELLIS—Yes.

Mr MELHEM—So how will these typical fires start if the country is wet, for example?

Mr ELLIS—Victor, can I hand over to you?

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes, sure.

Mr ELLIS—Again, I have trialled this on my own land. We have been doing that over this winter, and it burns, but it burns safely. I will hand over to Victor, though.

Mr STEFFENSON—There is a larger window when you think in terms of burning country at the right time. Each different ecosystem has a different time of year when it cures, from the beginning of the year right to the end. The concept of Indigenous burning is based on burning all those different systems when they are ready at different times, rather than looking at country and looking at a window and just burning anything and everything that you can see. There is clearly too much fuel and rubbish on there anyway. The burning window is a lot wider because they come in at the earlier times of the year, before winter. There are systems that are during the winter season, and there are a lot of systems that burn earlier that have a lot of rubbish on them that need to burn in the winter season just so that we do not have too much heat in the soil. There are also the late season burns, especially around the ironbark country where vast areas, especially around Victoria, actually need to start burning after the rains at the end of the year and when everything else is greener. That sort of knowledge and that sort of management for that system, they do not know yet, and that is the sort of stuff that I was just sharing in Victoria while I was doing workshops down there and assessing country they were burning at the wrong time.

Ms BATH—I hate to use averages, but in your traditional burning, over the course of four seasons, so over the course of a year, with your cool burns approximately what percentage of the land would you burn?

Mr STEFFENSON—If we are looking at a size of half of Victoria, for example—that is probably a big area to pick out first-off, but if you look at the size of that, we are looking at burning at least 60 per cent of that country and there will be constant fires all the time, all year round, so the burning is full time and the assessment of country is full time. There is not a season when it comes to fire.

Ms BATH—I will just swing over to Brett.

Mr ELLIS—We need to understand that the type of fire is completely different. It is not the big fire that causes the big plume that we see every autumn. It is a fire that is small. It slowly goes through the country, and in a lot of cases the smoke does not even penetrate the canopy, so it is a cleaner fire. I have been up in the Daintree with Victor. We have burnt country up there and we burnt lots of parts of that country and at no time did you really see the big plumes or anything like that. We are talking about a completely different regime, and a different outcome in some ways, but it is achieving the same outcome in fuel reduction and looking after country and actually creating an environment that is a lot wetter and protecting that environment.

Ms BATH—Victor, if you were in charge of the fire regime in Victoria, if you had at your disposal DELWP and our Country Fire Authority, our equipment, our helicopters, our manpower and womanpower, how would you run this? How would you reduce our fuel load?

Mr STEFFENSON—That would be amazing, in terms of picking a small area first and demonstrating to everybody exactly how that would work, and a small area that would take in a couple of townships, large amounts of national park, and around rural areas as well. We could demonstrate an area where this would actually roll out, and how it would work, and actually show fires, the windows, the feasibility, opportunities for communities, as well as education, the whole shebang—all of those examples. We would love the opportunity to show you that, but with Indigenous burning practices, the way that we do this is that we need to demonstrate.

It is different to Western practices, where you are doing research, and outside from country. We have a practice of knowledge that has been demonstrated for a long time, and we need to demonstrate that, and Australia has not given Indigenous people the opportunity, until this date, to demonstrate that burning regime and that knowledge into country and into a contemporary setting. Getting teams like #(indistinct) and DELWP and other agencies and Indigenous communities involved on the same project would be an amazing opportunity to show that, because one thing is for sure: not one group can do it on their own. It needs to show how people work together and how communities are aware and start to evolve the culture of fire, rather than leave it up to one agency that is equipped with the equipment but not equipped with the knowledge. So that is what I would love to see.

Ms DUNN—Thank you, Victor and Brett. I am interested in your Indigenous burning practices and how biodiversity is assessed as part of that, particularly around what we have seen in some places that are extensively burnt under the DELWP model. I will use the western face of Mount Dandenong as an example. We have seen significant modification to the ecological vegetation class there, so I am just trying to understand and reconcile your approach, how that looks after biodiversity values but still ticks off on the risk management objectives that are part of fire preparedness.

Mr STEFFENSON—That is really good. I am really glad you asked that question.

Ms DUNN—I love the bush, Victor.

Mr STEFFENSON—That is exactly what Indigenous burning is. Indigenous burning is burning for biodiversity. We burn to look after that country and to make it rich so that everything benefits. We have not burned country to benefit solely ourselves. It is burnt in a way that everything benefits from that system. That is why we burn the country at the right time of year, at different times for different systems. It is a very complex knowledge and it is about the responsibility that we have to the country, down to the resource. So people are confusing everyone when they separate fire, traditional burning and ecological burning, or hazard reduction. It should really narrow down to one fire and get away from the confusion. Indigenous burning is burning to look after country from wildfire and it is to look after the ecological aspect of the country too.

All of my projects in the southern areas, around your area and Tasmania and New South Wales and Western Australia, they are all sick country. Everywhere I go, the country is unhealthy, and the whole objective is to teach people the indicators, reading the signs and indicators of country and applying knowledge the right way to make it healthy again. When we look at hazard reduction, they turned a blind eye on country with low fuel—for example, country that has no grass, that has just got thin leaves on the ground and hardly any canopy, there are a lot of dead trees in the environment. 'Oh, there's no fuel there. It's not worth burning.' But for me it is the opposite. You cannot turn your back on country like that. We need to be healing that country, and there is quite extensive work when it comes to healing the landscape and making it healthy again. When we make it healthy, then we have grasses, and then we are able to burn regularly instead of letting it build up with rubbish and lantana and other things that cannot burn and sits there for ages until it becomes that ticking time bomb.

Ms DUNN—Yes. So it is the introduction of weed species, because of poor burning practices, that is creating a bigger risk, rather than looking at it from an Indigenous burning practice point of view?

Mr STEFFENSON—That is right. People look at the weed and they focus on the weed rather than focus on the natives. So they will put a hot fire in, a hot burn, and all that will be out. They will put a massive fire in there to burn it all, but what they are actually doing is putting a fire in there not thinking about the natives. You have to realise that when we burn for making the country healthy, we are giving the natives and the country a boost to its immune system. It is alive, and so we need to work with that immune system and with that country so that it can fight the weeds back and fight these grasses back, and also grow more trees and be a lot healthier so that it is, in a biodiversity sense, a lot richer and there is food for animals. The biggest problem, from Queensland right down on the east coast to where you guys are, is that the current fire regimes and conservation are actually starving the animals because there is no food left for them. There is just dead grass and rubbish, and thickening of woody weeds, in place of native species. It is choking our landscapes. It is a big problem at the moment in that sense and it is also a massive fire hazard when you have the understorey thicker than the canopy, because basically our country is upside down rather than the right way up, the way the old people had it: clean and beautiful, and thick canopies and a large diversity of landscape.

Ms DUNN—This question might be to Brett. I am interested, from a Yarra Ranges point of view—because I completely understand the risk profile of Yarra Ranges Council in terms of bushfire, being an ex-councillor there—in your views in relation to a risk approach that is based on Indigenous burning practice. Is that meeting risk management objectives of council and also biodiversity outcomes?

Mr ELLIS—I am a hundred per cent sure it will. Again, we have not seen this type of fire in our country yet, so we need to bring everyone together to actually apply that. We brought Victor down and we

spent a week where we met with DELWP, PV and a whole range of other stakeholders, and we met in Yarra Ranges, over in Bendigo and over in Ballarat. There was everyone from ecologists through to ethnobotanists, Indigenous traditional owners, DELWP. Everyone was there and you could tell that they were saying, 'Hey, there's something in this. This is potentially the missing piece of the puzzle.' So we know that fire is part of the natural environment of Australia, but we have been putting the wrong fire in, and everyone from foresters to the ecologists were all sitting there nodding their heads, saying, 'Hey, there's more in this,' and we have got full support from a whole range of stakeholders at the moment to say, 'Let's kick off with a trial.'

We just need the support from the state, and we are also looking to the federal government to give us some funds to underpin the traditional owners, because ultimately this is their knowledge and it is about building their capacity and capabilities, which will have a whole range of other spin-offs and benefits, from health—and healing not only country but healing people—to then also working with the agencies to actually trial this, and trial it over multiple sites in multiple locations in different environments, and then test that over not a one-year period but over five, 10, 15, 20 years, and we will get information back on that.

There are projects linking with a number of universities as well. Federation Uni, Swinburne University, and one other are on board. A number of universities are on board as well that are keen to support us with either monitoring or providing advice so that we can help fill in the pieces of the puzzle in relation to fire in Victoria, and Victor is a key part of that because the knowledge he has got is amazing. It is the missing piece that we have not seen in Victoria yet, so it is about how we apply that here and get it going.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—Thanks, gentlemen. I am quite interested in what you have been saying and it makes sense. I think as you were saying before, Brett and Victor, it makes sense. I am just trying to work out where are the blocks that you are sensing or having in trying to get this installed into Victoria?

Mr STEFFENSON—Like I said before, it is just giving us the opportunity. In my whole time doing this work, over the 20 years or more, it has been really hard to get the opportunity to demonstrate. Right from the beginning it was really hard because they did not want to hear about Indigenous fire or knowledge. Today things are going a lot better and #(indistinct), because all the work that has been done is starting to show, and also people are hitting brick walls now with their landscapes, but the blocks are that we do not get the opportunity, and we just need that opportunity to demonstrate, because we have had clear demonstrations that it works in many parts of the country and there is a long list of its benefits and why people need to be looking at this more strongly as a solution.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—So maybe that is leading in to Brett, who has got the Victorian Fire Stick Project underway. Brett, you might want to explain how you got that project up with Victor, and are you finding any blocks or impediments in your processes?

Mr ELLIS—To date everyone has been really supportive. I thought DELWP would be a real challenge, but actually it has been quite the opposite, in the sense that they are quite open to something new and looking at it. I think that probably the biggest challenge is how do we support the traditional owners to build their capacity and capability to give them the time, because ultimately they are the ones that need to own this knowledge, regain this knowledge and invest in that, in trialling and testing on land.

The challenge we have is that we do not have much land that is theirs, so it is about trialling and testing that on public land, getting access to land for extensive trials and being supportive for those sites, but it is also about giving them support so that they do not have to deal with their own jobs to try and make money so they can spend their volunteer time trying to do what we are paying other people to do and trial. It is really about how we support them with not only time, in spending time with Victor and learning this knowledge, but also with doing the Western training so that they will learn about fire management and that side of the job as well, and then also to build capability, capacity and a career path so that we have this knowledge actually coming back into state government agencies so that it can build from there.

Again, it is really about how we see that, how we support those young people, and there are people that already exist. Wurundjeri have what they call the Green Team. It is the Narrup Team and it is a team of individuals that do a lot of the cultural work on country within Yarra Ranges in other municipalities. There is a group of eight people that are working hard. How do we underpin and support and build the capacity and

capability of that group and give them the kick so that they do not have to go out and mow lawns to then spend time actually doing the work that Victor is talking about, which is critical and needs to be done in a supportive and scientific way so we get the evaluation and the monitoring happening alongside? I think that is probably the biggest challenge, because ultimately we as agencies should not be trying to steal this knowledge and then throw it in. It is about how do we underpin the traditional owners and build their capability and capacity? Otherwise it is not going to work. We will just end up causing more pain to the traditional owners, who we should be embracing, supporting and acknowledging.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—That was my next question to both of you, gentlemen: the learnings and the processes of engagement with the non-Indigenous communities. Is there an Indigenous operation within DELWP or any of the fire services, either in Victoria that you are aware of, or indeed, Victor, in other states, where it is in operation and you are finding it successful?

Mr ELLIS—There are Indigenous people employed within the different agencies. Dja Dja Wurrung is probably a little bit in front in that space, with the work that they are doing, but it is still very basic and it is not at the knowledge and capability and capacity that we probably need, plus it is only one part of Victoria and it is only a small pocket in a certain environment. Potentially how do we do this at a state-wide level?

Mr DALLA-RIVA—Yes, that was my question.

Mr ELLIS—How do we get ownership and traditional owners from each of the mobs, and this is from East Gippsland all the way through to the west, but actually get that buy-in so we have got traditional owners trained up and there is a capacity and capability to spread that so we do not have different mobs going onto different mobs' country, or we can do that but with permission? So there is all that that we need to navigate through.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—Yes. I think, Victor, in your statements earlier you were saying that different parts of country have different needs, different landscapes.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—So that obviously would make sense. Different mobs would obviously not necessarily go to another part of country Victoria or the state of Victoria, because there may be different landscapes which their traditional learnings would not necessarily help, unless I am misreading it. So I am just curious, Victor, about how you have felt in terms of the learnings and the development of those learnings in other states and how that can be applied here.

Mr STEFFENSON—The whole work that I have been doing is all about going through the right door, and the right door with the people from country to be involved, and then from there everyone benefits. The work that I do trains and builds on the knowledge system of those communities that then work with other agencies within their areas. Everyone can learn this knowledge. All the agencies can learn this stuff and be a part of this knowledge if they all go through the right door, and it is what Brett was saying earlier: it is not about agencies taking the knowledge and then running off with it and then calling it biodiversity burning or giving it a different name, or research institutions owning our knowledge and colonising our knowledge still. It really is about going through the right door and then everyone benefits from there.

The methodology that I deliver is really based on that sharing, and sharing knowledge, because, as I said earlier, it is a massive country and not one person can do it on their own, in terms of Indigenous people or anyone. People need to be working together and seeing the country the same way, but in recognition of where that knowledge comes from. It is as simple as that. It is not that complicated, once we start moving and start getting the little fires happening and then growing it from there. The sooner that we demonstrate it and make that happen the sooner people will see how they fit in and understand how we all work together in delivering this sort of stuff.

I have been burning for the last three days with Indigenous rangers on a national park here in Queensland. The national park rangers call it 'joint management' and they are stoked because they are learning a whole new way of looking at burning country. They are just letting them go without holding their hands all the time, and

that is moving to a point now where the traditional owners are able to burn a lot more freely, knowing exactly what is happening and what is going on, as the parks continue on with their work and getting that joint management happening. That is happening a lot in Queensland here, and also a lot of NRM groups are supporting the programs that I am doing now and supporting the traditional owners on country. That is also involving other land management agencies that go in through the right protocols, do the right training through traditional owners and building that capacity and, yes, showing that acknowledgement.

Mr DALLA-RIVA—Thanks, Victor and Brett. You have covered a lot in what I have asked.

The CHAIR—I have a couple of generic follow-ups. Is there some information that we should access on this that you think you should pass to us on some of these techniques? This is to both of you. And is there some logic in us seeing some of this somewhere? I see Brett nodding. Do you want to make a comment on that, either of you, briefly?

Mr ELLIS—I think the best way to learn this is to actually be on country with Victor in a number of different environments. That is what we have done in the last week with agencies. On that day you will see it first-hand. You will hear the connection that Victor has to country. You will hear how he talks about our country and how he interprets that, and what is needed at what time, and then, if we move to different country, what the differences are. But getting something in a written document and stuff, it is not really there yet. You really have to be part of this on country and very much listen to Victor.

The CHAIR—Are there any documents in Queensland that you think we should be accessing? If there is anything you wanted to make available to Michael Baker—

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes. I have co-written—I had someone to write a PhD on my methodologies, and recording traditional knowledge and applying the fire knowledge of the country, and the monitoring and the whole box and dice in terms of all the work that I have been doing. I can get hold of some of those readings for you as well so you can read that. That was written on behalf of me and the two old people, Dr George Musgrave and Dr Tommy George, which is really the methodology that I am rolling out. I also have a number of films of all the case studies with all the communities around Australia.

The CHAIR—Anything that you thought was appropriate to make available to Mike Baker we would certainly welcome.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes.

Ms DUNN—In terms of understanding this practice, is there any time that you might be in Victoria walking on country and doing that assessment of either sick or healing country that we might be able to join you on?

Mr STEFFENSON—I just came from there a couple of weeks ago.

Ms DUNN—I know. That is not good timing!

Mr STEFFENSON—I have been all over the place. Yes, I am ready to go and do that whenever the opportunity arises again. I think that is what Brett and the communities there would be working towards since my last visit, but I am not sure how you are going there, Brett.

Ms DUNN—So we should put the hard word on Brett and Yarra Ranges Council to facilitate that.

Mr ELLIS—Yes, we are happy to facilitate that, for sure.

Ms DUNN—I just think the committee would find that incredibly useful to actually understand that in a real, meaningful way. Victor, you talked about the work in Queensland where it seemed the Indigenous people are working with whatever your parks people might be called up there—the authority. I am interested, both Brett and Victor, in understanding how it would be managed if a similar program existed in Victoria on a broader scale. Would it be a collaborative arrangement? Would DELWP be part of it or not be part of it? I am

just interested in your thoughts on how that might be managed.

Mr STEFFENSON—My thoughts, first, are to get everyone involved and to have DELWP involved in supportive positions, because they have people working in their agencies already and, from what I have seen from my last visit, all the ingredients are there in terms of interest and the different agencies working and trying to get something rolling.

Mr ELLIS—Yes, I would agree. I think everything is right at the moment to kick this off.

Ms DUNN—And cross-agency.

Mr ELLIS—Yes. Again, it is about how do we support the traditional owners to build their capacity, capability and space so that they can invest their time and energy into this. That is probably the biggest, the whole, sticking point at this moment every time we run this. For instance, the Narrup Team that did the two days with us did not get paid for that, so they are coming off their paid jobs, and there is a challenge for Wurundjeri Tribal Council to work out how we are going to pay them for the two days that we had them out there learning with Victor. That is what we are up against.

Mr STEFFENSON—There will also be exchanges. We are already looking at exchanges from different communities, going to other communities and getting the experience in burning in different country. It is crucial that we are giving our farm managers that experience in learning the different country, learning different problems on country and applying different types of fire for different situations. That would also link in with these projects as a training ground on a broader scale to build the professionals that we need to build and to follow on with this important work.

Mr RAMSAY—You were talking about funding. Is the federal government funding or helping to fund the Fire Stick Project?

Mr ELLIS—Yes, we are putting together a project brief. Originally that was a project brief between Yarra Ranges and Wurundjeri. We were putting that together for them and supporting them in bringing this knowledge back, but after the workshop in Cairns where we met up with Dja Dja Wurrung and the Wathaurung, we are looking at the opportunity of growing that out so it is broader than just one mob, it is multiple, but potentially it is how do we make that a state-wide project. We will still go for federal funding but there is no guarantee in that and it might be only peppercorn sort of stuff, where really we are talking about a multimillion-dollar project if we are going to do this properly, and it is worthy of the investment if we are going to do it over the long term. Again, I keep saying it cannot be a one-year project that we do. It has to be a project that we trial and test and continue to monitor and feed back into the loop to say, 'Yeah, this is working, this is working, this is working,' and build that evidence and that base. Community and government will need to actually support it.

Mr STEFFENSON—I just want to talk about the ongoing process and agree with what Brett said about that. That is one of the biggest obstacles, as well, with this work. Nothing is ongoing. Everything just goes for a year or three years and then we are back into sick country and the problem all over again.

Ms DUNN—Yes, repeat the cycle.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes. We have got to bear in mind that fire is forever and we need to prepare our future generations for that. That is about all I can say there.

Ms DUNN—My question is for Brett. This inquiry is about fire preparedness and I just wanted to check in with you: prevention burning is part of a suite of activities, I assume, that are undertaken in relation to fire preparedness and not the only thing that happens in terms of preparing your municipality for fire preparedness.

Mr ELLIS—Yes.

Ms DUNN—I just wanted to understand what are those raft of other things. It is not only about

preventative burning.

Mr ELLIS—No. It is about a whole range of things, you are right, Sam, and you have been part of that as well. It is about education of the community. It is about fuel reduction in mowing and maintaining properties. It is doing private inspections and getting people to mow their own lawns and manage their own properties, right to building people through the events, because we know we will see fire again. Yarra Ranges gets a massive fire every 15 years on average. We will see death and destruction, with loss of homes and houses, every 15 years on average. We have seen that in the sixties, eighties, nineties and 09, so we will see it again and the time is ticking down as that happens. There is a lot of work that Yarra Ranges does with the agencies in trying to do our best, but I have never seen anything that makes as much sense as what Victor is talking about and I think this is the bit that is missing. To do that work hard up against the urban interface and build those buffers and improve that country hard up against communities has definitely got to be the way that we move.

Ms BATH—In Eastern Victoria there is a high fuel load, Victor, and I am not sure if you are aware of it in Eastern Victoria.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes.

Ms BATH—There have been some places that have not been burnt for 50 years. Do you see your method being able to still work in there without creating those vast, intense fires, with still being able to sustain or not kill off mass population of fauna? Do you see that still being able to occur? The argument is that it is too high in intensity to have a trickling burn.

Mr STEFFENSON—Yes, we can. No matter how much fuel load you have, as much #(indistinct) but as much fuel load as you have, we can always have a cool burn. I am burning in country just today where there is masses of fuel load, and all the rangers came around with rigging, ready for helicopters and stuff—the national park staff—and I said, 'No.' But by the second day, they just turned their backs on us and walked away because they had seen how cool it was. It was just slowly eating this bit of country away, like eating an elephant really, in terms of getting the fuel loads down and doing it the right way. That is going to bring up the feed bank in the soil.

So there is a way. I love burning in country like you are describing, because it just demonstrates how amazing that knowledge is. It really is about ignition points; it is about the timing; it is understanding that landscape, the trees, the soil. That is the knowledge that ensures that we look after our country when we put the fire in, regardless of how long it has been sitting without fire. So the way I look at country is: how do we fix it and do it so that it is done the right way and is healing that landscape, rather than, 'Oh, we're just going to do it. We're just going to burn to get rid of the fuel load'? That again is why I say that knowledge is really, really important and why we need to train more people to understand that knowledge in those landscapes.

The CHAIR—Victor, I am going to call a halt. I want to thank you in particular for coming in electronically like this, but also thank Brett for his contribution. Mike Baker, our committee secretary, will be in touch to follow up with some of those pieces of information, but we are thankful for the assistance that you have both provided today.

Witnesses withdrew.

Committee adjourned.