



VICHANSARD

Whole Speech (Daily Hansard - Proof Version Only)

13 June 2006 COUNCIL

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APPROPRIATION (2006/2007) BILL and BUDGET PAPERS 2006-07

Second reading

[Hon. E. G. STONEY \(Central Highlands\)](#) -- I shall restrict my comments mainly to fire management and the general management of public land. I draw the attention of the house to page 227 of budget paper 3 under the heading 'Fire Prevention, Operations and Planning' and to line item under 'Quantity':

Fuel reduction burning completed to protect key assets

That shows that the 2006-07 target is 130 000 hectares, that the 2005-06 expected outcome is 130 000 hectares, that the 2005-06 target is 130 000 hectares, and that the 2004-05 actual figure was 127 000 hectares.

I am not the only one who finds the budget papers hard to decipher. I understand that when it relates to fire management, the figures have been collated using financial years, but I point out that we are nearly at the end of the current financial year. The figures I have just read out indicate that 130 000 hectares will be burnt as a fuel reduction measure this year, and indeed, next year. As I said, the budget claims that next year the expected outcome will probably be 130 000 hectares.

I have been doing some digging, and it appears the true figure for 2005-06 was 43 000 hectares which were burnt up to 26 May. My information is that 43 000 hectares has cool or protectively burnt, not 130 000 hectares as has been claimed in the budget.

I have here an internal publication which is not for public consumption but which was widely circulated within the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). It is dated 26 May 2006 and reveals the true figures. It shows that the budget figures are indeed a sham.

Under the heading 'Prescribed burning' it says:

Since the last report 30 burns were conducted. In addition, 24 burns were conducted for regeneration purposes.
... 262 fuel reduction/ecological burns have been conducted. DSE has ... conducted 169 burns for regeneration ... The area treated to date this year is about 43 000 hectares ... and is about 33 per cent of this year's program.

This document also goes on to show that DSE has got around to planning and done the paperwork for only 83 000 of the 133 000 hectares listed in the budget. Over the page there is a column which shows that the program in 2005-06 was for 131 000

hectares but that the total estimated area treated was 43 000 hectares. I understand the department has now moved to using the calendar year rather than the financial year, probably to obscure things a little further.

A footnote states:

... actual program will vary in response to weather conditions and other external factors.

A further footnote states:

... area treated may vary by up to 10 per cent.

I need to explain that 43 000 hectares is 33 per cent of the 130 000 hectares listed in the budget. It is quite obvious that the government has completed only 33 per cent of the program. As Professor Julius Sumner Miller, who appeared on television some years ago, would ask: why is this so? It appears that we are facing a cover-up of major proportions. You would ask, 'Why would the government cover this up?'

Of course you have to look at the history and the pressure the government is under on the whole issue of bushfires. We remember the alpine fires, which were followed by the Grampians fires and many other fires. It became quite obvious that the government was not doing enough fuel reduction burning. The public reaction was severe. The government needed to be seen to be doing a lot more fuel reduction burning, and if it could not do the actual burning I guess it decided to deflect criticism by using spin. It submitted figures that sound good but are not correct. That is all that really matters to the government -- to appear to be doing the right thing.

I am claiming that the figure in the budget of 130 000 hectares to be cool burnt -- protectively burnt -- is not correct. I am claiming there is a major cover-up in the budget figures pertaining to the area that was actually burnt to reduce fuel. The budget claims that for the 2005-06 financial year the expected outcome' of prescribed burning will be 130 000 hectares.

The budget was brought down on 29 May. In the same week the DSE internal web site revealed that only 43 000 hectares had been burnt, as I have just said. There is a major discrepancy between what the budget and the internal web site in the same week showed had actually been done. There are only three weeks until the end of the financial year. The burning season has almost finished in most areas and has not started in others, so the government is never going to achieve its target -- and it must have known that when it printed the budget.

In 2004-05 the actual figure claimed was for a prescribed burn of 127 000 hectares, but given what I have just revealed, how do we know that was correct? How do we know this practice has not been going on for some years? Anecdotal evidence and leaks from embarrassed DSE employees suggests there has been a fudging of the figures for some years.

It is worth noting that between 1997-98 and 2001-02 the Auditor-General had a look at the fuel reduction figures and found: in 1997-98 there were 25 000 hectares burnt, in 1998-99 there were 80 000 hectares burnt, in 1999-2000 there were 60 000 hectares burnt and in 2000-01 there were 40 000 hectares burnt. Since then the Auditor-General has not looked at the government's claims that it has burnt as follows: in 2002-03, 57 000 hectares; in 2003-04, 96 000 hectares; in

2004-05, 127 000 hectares; and, as I said, 2005-06, 130 000 hectares. It would be terrific if the Auditor-General had a look at the government's claims of how much has been protectively burnt in the past few years, including this year. I think he would probably find that the government has fudged the figures, as I have just

demonstrated conclusively. It is quite obvious that the government does not intend to burn any more than 130 000 hectares, despite the budget announcing another \$27.6 million over four years for this activity.

When you look at it, you realise that is not much per year over four years.

Fuel reduction burning has to be done over a short period. In the mountains it is mostly in the autumn; in the Mallee and East Gippsland it can be at other times of the year. A basic problem is that there is simply not enough staff available at those critical times to do the burning in the window of opportunity that is available. I have always said that I think DSE and the government need to be braver in the way they burn -- and they need to explain to the public that they need to be braver. Back in the 1970s and 1980s the Forests Commission was braver. It got a lot more done, and it got it done quite safely. Another problem is that these days DSE is distracted. It has many other things on its plate -- the built environment, the coast, deciding what colour people are allowed to use on houses in the city -- and unfortunately fire prevention is well down the list. There are simply not enough dedicated fire management staff to do the job at peak times of the year, and money alone will not fix the problem.

It is a fact that perhaps four times the target figure of 130 000 hectares has to be burnt each year to have any long-term effect, so DSE cannot burn even 130 000 hectares, we have an enormous problem. A further issue is that there has to be so much signing-off by other agencies before a burn can be completed. Without Parks Victoria, in particular, signing off, the DSE protective burning programs just stop dead in their tracks. This is very frustrating for DSE. We are bogged down with bureaucracy.

There are several main issues: lack of staff at the critical times, the difficulty of dealing with other management agencies and the diversion of DSE staff from their core business, such as fire prevention. It is glaringly obvious that we need one agency that is solely responsible for forests and public land management. We need an agency that does not have to get agreement from other agencies on fuel reduction burning.

We need to remind ourselves that the Bracks government will go down in history as presiding over some of the worst destruction by fire ever seen in this state.

We had the Alpine, Mount Buffalo, Snowy River and Wyperfeld national park bushfires, then we had the Lind National Park and Wilson's Promontory bushfires, and then we had the Grampians, Brisbane Ranges and Kinglake major fires, which destroyed an enormous number of beautiful trees. Now the alpine ash trees that were killed in the bushfires are being sent as woodchips to Japan because they are practically worthless for anything else.

The Premier and his staff should take a bit of time out from encouraging people to go up and look at how wonderful the forest regeneration is, and dig deeper to find out the cause of some of those bushfires. Failed fire management procedures are the cause, and regrettably there is nothing in this budget that will fix that basic flaw in our whole system.

The state of the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and of Parks Victoria and the lack of fuel reduction burning has concerned many people and groups. In no particular order I name but just some that have given voice to these concerns. They are the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV), BUG, Country Voice, blog sites such as Save Our Snowy, the Stretton Group, Fire Management Victoria, and the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF). Every neighbour of our state forests and national parks has an adverse view on how good the department's management is.

Many knowledgeable individuals, including Rod Incoll, Peter Attiwill, David Packham, Athol Hodgson, Ralph Barraclough, bless his heart, and many more people have come out and expressed concern. They cannot all be wrong.

Over the summer several eminent bushfires experts went to Wonnangatta.

Rod Incoll and David Packham are two eminent and experienced people who went and looked at Wonnangatta. I happened to be there with the mountain cattlemen and others.

Hon. Philip Davis -- Just by chance.

Hon. E. G. [STONE](#) -- Just by chance. They saw the fire there and pulled up at the fire. It was pointed out that Wonnangatta has been closed to grazing since 1988. Wonnangatta is a fire trap. One day there could be a major, major incident in the whole of the Wonnangatta Valley. David Packham said to me, and I am speaking from memory, 'If a major fire started and swept up the valley, some people might survive'. In the summer 200 or 300 people could be camped in there.

In a report about it Rod Incoll said:

Fire is the essence of eucalypt forests, and therefore must be the mainspring of their conservation. Systematic broad-scale fuel reduction is the way it has to be done. Perhaps because an increasingly urban Australia is no longer connected to the landscape, public land policy makers seem to view fire management as 'negative, 'difficult', and too demanding of resources. By contrast, systematic fuel management has been shown to be the answer in other Australian states.

Successive high-intensity bushfires prove that glossy posters and rhetoric are no replacement for action.

This is the key bit:

Until a broad-scale program of fire management is widely implemented across forested public lands, continuing widespread and serious bushfires will occur in the mountains. You can rely on it.

Rod Incoll was the department's chief fire officer for some years, and he certainly knows his stuff.

Professor Peter Attiwell was there as well. A bit later he went in with Chris Commins of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, which sponsored that trip. Stock & Land did a big feature article on the trip, which states:

Alpine, botany and fire specialists all say there should be a management burn as soon as possible. Park management should also reintroduce seasonal grazing of cattle as an accepted and valuable management tool.

...

Professor Attiwill said there should be an immediate assessment of the infestation of cape broom and other weeds and appropriate control measures taken. He said the concept of banning cattle grazing to return the high country to its 'pristine' pre-European settlement condition was flawed.

I think they are some sensible comments from a very eminent professor who certainly knows what he is talking about.

I drawn the attention of the house to a major problem. There is a major problem with the ethical reporting of hectares of fuel reduction burning. The government needs to be more realistic about it.

If it is having trouble with it, it should come clean. We all know it is a very difficult thing to do, but for the government to claim that it is burning vast areas of land when it is not, is just deceiving the Victorian public.