

**REPORT OF A PUBLIC FORUM BEFORE**

**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5**

**INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT**

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**At Deniliquin on Wednesday 1 August 2012**

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**The public forum commenced at 5.00 p.m.**

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**PRESENT**

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)  
The Hon. R. H. Colless  
The Hon. C. M. Faehrmann  
The Hon. L. Foley  
The Hon. S. MacDonald  
The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps  
The Hon. P. T. Primrose

**CHAIR:** I now declare the hearing open. Welcome to the first public hearing of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 and its inquiry into the management of public land in New South Wales. The inquiry is examining the operational, economic, social, and environmental impacts of converting Crown land, State forests and agricultural land into national park estate. Before I commence I would like to acknowledge the Wemba Wemba and Baraba Baraba people who are the traditional custodians of this land. I also pay respect to the elders past and present of the Wemba Wemba, Baraba Baraba and Yorta Yorta nations and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present.

This evening we will hear from a number of local sawmillers and representatives from several local business chambers. In addition to tonight's hearing the Committee will hold another public hearing tomorrow as well as later hearings in Bourke, Coonabarabran, Port Macquarie, Armidale and at Parliament House in Sydney. Before we commence I will briefly explain the procedures for tonight's hearing. Firstly, if there are press here copies of the Committee's broadcasting guidelines are available from Committee staff. Under these guidelines whilst members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I would remind media representatives that you must take responsibility for what you publish about the Committee proceedings.

It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of their evidence in this hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments you make to the media or others after you complete your evidence as such comments would not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take any action; for example, defamation. The witnesses are advised that any messages should be delivered to Committee members through the committee staff. The same applies if you wish to table any documents or you are asked to table documents, you can give them to the staff and the staff will handle them.

There will be a full transcript of what is said during tonight's hearing and it will be prepared by our Hansard reporters. The transcript will be available on the Committee's website in the next few days. Could everyone please turn off their mobile phones. There is a practical reason for that; it can interfere with recording equipment for Hansard and it is imperative that the witness statements and Committee questions are recorded accurately. Please turn off your mobile phones. If you wish to leave your mobile phone on please go outside.

**FAYE ASHWIN**, Proprietor, O'Brien Redgum Sawmills,

**KENNETH JOHN O'BRIEN**, Proprietor, O'Brien Redgum Sawmills,

**TODD ROBERT GELLETLY**, General Manager, Gelletly Redgum Barham, and

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN CRUMP**, Proprietor, Mathoura Redgum Sawmill, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Do you wish to make a brief opening statement? You have not made submissions so you can take a little more than five minutes with your opening statements and then the Committee will ask you some questions. If you are unable to answer any question it can be taken on notice and you can provide the Committee secretariat with the answer within 21 days.

**Ms ASHWIN:** I have worked in the red gum timber industry for more than two decades now with my husband. O'Brien's Redgum sawmill has been in business for more than 35 years. It started as a one-man operation and rose to employing 30 people at its peak prior to the River Red Gum National Park decision. In recent times our employee numbers have gone backwards to 20 people. In a little community like Barham-Koondrook it is a significant number of people to be employed. Ken O'Brien and I are members of our peak timber organisations: Timber Communities Australia, Forest Products New South Wales, National Association of Forest Industries [NAFI], the Firewood Association of Australia, Timber Trade Industrial Association [TTIA] and Eco Friendly Hardwoods. We have chosen to take leadership roles as well as be active members of most of the organisations of which we have been part. We were active in the lead-up to the River Red Gum National Park decision being made.

I guess part of this meeting is about finding out what we want for the future as much as reviewing what has happened in the past. I always want to go forward. Our communities are constantly adapting to change due to weather, government policy or the demands of running a commercial business in rural communities that are remote from capital cities where many of the decisions are made. The River Red Gum National Park decision has had a big impact on our small communities, including mine of Barham-Koondrook. Mr Crump will talk about Mathoura and others will talk about Deniliquin and Balranald. We took you for a quick look at our community of Barham, the local forest and a couple of our operations there, and we are grateful you gave us your time. You have had the opportunity to see what we describe as the "dead shed"—Barham sawmill. People are no longer employed to work there and many of them have left our community. That is one of the serious implications of this River Red Gum National Park decision. Some of the dollars that have been put into our community from the River Red Gum Regional Employment and Community Development Plan have assisted some of the smaller businesses to employ more people and we are grateful for that. There are some plans that are still to be actioned which will have a commercial benefit to our communities.

Mr Sartor made the statement that \$97 million would be given to the industry. It was not all given to the industry; at least half of it went to the national parks organisations. Some of the balance went to the timber industry for exit packages and some of it went to the regional development grants. That \$97 million as a total package does not replace the \$70 million per annum that the red gum timber industry contributed to the local and regional economies. There is still a bit of a gap there. There is a polarity of views as to what is best for the red gum forests and the communities. Going forward, the Natural Resources Commission [NRC] report No. 4 recommends that regardless of tenure—whether it is a national park or a multipurpose State forest—it must have active management to ensure its longevity. We plead with this Committee to give that due consideration and to make sure that of all the recommendations made active management occurs in these forests.

We believe the needs of the environment and sustainable production are not mutually exclusive. We believe the red gum timber industry was reduced by more than 85 per cent when there was an 85 per cent reduction in the resource. There is not a lot of the industry left. We believe what is left of the red gum industry should be considered part of the solution and not part of the problem. It is possible to have productive consultation enhancing the environment and to achieve the strong social and economic outcomes that our small communities in rural and regional New South Wales require.

**CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, would you like to make a brief statement?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I have been in the red gum business for 35 years. I have lived in the Riverina all my life. As Faye mentioned, our company employed up to 30 people before this national park decision came along.

We had a range of subcontractors. We turned over \$7 million to \$8 million a year and spent most of that within 100 kilometres of Barham. It does not sound much money but in a little town of 1,000 to 1,500 people it is a lot. We were a constant employer for all that time and we had no issues. We worked hard and we got on with the job. In my opinion the forest was going through a drought at the time and that is when they did the study that said we were no longer sustainable. It was totally wrong; the science was absolutely flawed. At the start of 2010 the then Labor Minister Mr Frank Sartor was in a hurry to get down here. He was still on holidays, I believe. Ian Macdonald was away and Frank could not get down here quick enough. He addressed us and said, "I will give you a lesson in politics." He gave us a lesson in politics but he did not give us a lesson about how he was going to destroy our community at the same time. He was going to give the battlers in the timber industry an 85 per cent haircut, which he did.

Subsequently a lot of people lost their jobs. I meant to show you a couple of people who were sitting on the street this afternoon when we drove through the town. They are still unemployed. They have worked in the timber industry for a long time. A lot of business has evaporated. For us Labor's decision meant that our business was no longer viable. We were looking at probably about a third of our resources, if that. I have been in business for 35 years but we were being forced to take a redundancy/compensation package. I have never taken any compensation in my whole life and I do not intend to. We thought we would get on with it.

I want to refer to recommendation 4 and the failings of the Natural Resource Commission report. I hope the Committee members are familiar with the recommendations in the report. Recommendation 4 says they want to trial ecological thinning on a large scale. Forty thousand hectares were locked up in red gum national parks from July 2010. Up till now virtually nothing has been done except there has been a lot of talk. Millions of dollars have been spent on national parks with only—this is not a joke, it is serious; I thought it was a joke when I heard it—two compartments of nine hectares having been ecologically thinned. I do not think they have been finished. This thinning task is well beyond the capability of National Parks. They have demonstrated that in the last two years. They have had millions of dollars to spend and they cannot finish two nine-hectare plots out of 40,000 hectares.

**Mr CRUMP:** 104,000 hectares.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I am only talking about Millewa, not the total. They have done nothing more. We put every cent of that so-called compensation money back into our business because we are not going to lie down. We are a very resilient lot out here. Just because Sartor made a decision to kick us all out of the forests—we are not happy with that. We have put every cent back in and we are employing over 20 people and we are trying to stay in business. It is a struggle. We would like some security over resource and we would love the opportunity to thin some of these national parks, which obviously National Parks themselves cannot do. My company's experience in thinning red gums is extensive. We have thinned thousands of hectares in the Riverina with great success and not only are the trees surviving, they are thriving. It is good for the economy, it is good for our communities and most of all it is good for the forests and for the environment.

At this point in time we know that the promised tourism benefits have not happened. We heard about the 40,000 people that were going to come and visit Yanga. Dr John Williams from the NRC talked about building roads out through the floodwaters and a new airport in Deniliquin. People would fly in globally to see these forests in flood. The forests have been in flood since 2010. How many global tourists have been out there? How many jets flew into Deniliquin? None; absolutely zero. In fact, tourism is turning down globally as everybody in this room would know. Why would they point to tourism as being the saviour of a \$70 million a year industry that was done sustainably and renewably and that was carbon neutral? I cannot believe it.

Anyhow, we need to get these national parks off welfare. I do not think the national parks like being on welfare. They used to be forests and they were working forests, sustainably managed. They like that; they respond to it. They do not want to be locked up. We do not need more experts making impractical demands on our community. We do not need more expensive research that has no effective results. We need to get on with active management of our red gum forests before they overgrow and become raging bushfires on the wrong day. Some very experienced fire professionals have said that the Barmah-Millewa group of forests could burn within about two days. I did not think that was true until I saw Black Saturday and the speed at which those fires moved. There is no reason to think that Barmah-Millewa would not burn in two days at the wrong time. I laughed today with councillors of the Wakool Shire. I said, "Have National Parks consulted you on their fire plan?" bearing in mind they have thousands of hectares of national park in the Wakool Shire. They said no, they had not consulted with them on a fire plan. Have they got a plan? It is time for change. Instead of the prehistoric thinking of the lock it up, leave it and let it burn mentality we need to adopt multiple use of these red gum

forests on a sustainable basis. That is what we need to do. Peter, you asked me today for three things. I do not need three things, mate. I need two: One is to get permission to actively manage those forests and the other is for you to go back to Sydney to your constituents and educate them about the dangers we are in here with the red gum forests if they are not sustainably and actively managed. Could you do that for me?

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** I will certainly look at the recommendations here and take great cognisance of what you are saying because it is very important.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Thank you very much. Can I ask the Committee as a whole to take these comments back to the decision makers so that they can make informed decisions on how best to implement multiple use in our red gum forests? We in the Riverina would like to be a part of that. When I say "we" I do not mean just myself or Faye, I mean "we" as a community. Instead of having these abhorrent decisions thrust upon us I would like our community to have consultation and for us to have input into the process.

**CHAIR:** Mr Gelletly, would you like to make a statement?

**Mr GELLETLY:** I would, thank you. I have been a full-time employer in a family business for 15 years but my involvement in red gums goes back further than that. I have been involved in red gums since I was a 10-year-old kid helping my father out in his business. I have extensive knowledge of harvesting and best practice techniques to improve the health of these forests regardless of land tenure. As Faye alluded to, the National Parks and Wildlife Service was allocated 50 per cent of the \$97 million package that was offered as part of the Natural Resources Commission recommendations. It is just on two years since the land tenure changed. I have a photo here of the Weetupa National Park. With all the money they have received they have not even bothered to change the sign at the front gate. It still reads, "Weetupa State Forest—Shooting Prohibited". That says to me that in two years they have not even driven in the gate.

**CHAIR:** Better get that sign down fast!

**Mr GELLETLY:** If they cannot change the sign at the front gate what hope have they got of managing these forests? The NRC recommendations go through a number of things and "active management" is mentioned time and time again. Recommendation 2 says in talking about the change in river gum ecosystems:

However, in many circumstances, targeted management interventions will be necessary to achieve outcomes that cannot be achieved simply by allowing ecological processes to run their course.

In other words, national parks are not going to work for red gums. The natural process in running its course is not going to work. That comes from the scientists involved in the Natural Resources Commission. They recommended large-scale ecological thinning. Recommendation 3 is to implement forest management principles. The principles include ecological thinning, grazing and fire management. Rather than just having a land grab and putting a sign out the front, which looks great in some cases but in other cases they do not even change the sign, it is time that these recommendations were put in place and put to use. The Committee has before it a wealth of experience and knowledge and behind us are more members of the red gum industry. We are here. Put us to work and we will improve these places. Over and above anything else we will provide positive environmental outcomes. In turn that will create positive economic income for our communities.

**CHAIR:** Mr Crump, would you like to make a statement?

**Mr CRUMP:** We have stayed in the industry. I think basically we are the only red gum sawmill left in New South Wales State forests other than Arbuthnot sawmill cutting. My family have been in the Mathoura district for almost 150 years so we were pioneers and among the first people there. For most of that time some of us have been involved in the timber industry. I learnt a lot of what I know from my father but I got the impression the Natural Resources Commission inquiry thought the timber workers' information had very little value. When I first met Frank Sartor at a meeting at Gulpa sawmill after we had had the inquiry, as Ken touched on he said, "I am going to give you people a lesson in politics.

The Greens hold 15 per cent of the votes. We need those votes to stay in power. They also want or need a significant national park and they want it in red gum." I signed a statutory declaration to say that he said that and so did other people at that meeting. Obviously it did not matter that \$2.5 million or whatever it was was paid to the NRC to do a report, the decision had already been made. It was just a nonsense. I first met the NRC at a meeting at Picnic Point and we were told the inquiry would be open and transparent, using only facts and science. I suppose that in my own humble way I put these people up on a pedestal and was expecting them to

tell the truth. As we got into the inquiry I found that the input of local people in the industry, myself included, was of very little value to the panel.

At that same meeting at Gulpa sawmill Dr John Williams was alongside me and he said, "We must stop you cutting down trees that are over 300 years old." I said, "What are you talking about, John?" He said, "You are cutting down trees that are pre-European." I said, "No, we're not." When I went to discuss it with him he ran out the gate. He would not talk. He ran out with Frank Sartor. We now have a map from 1848, acquired from the archives in Sydney, showing that a Government surveyor came down here and it shows wide open plains with only a few trees. Only a few trees were out there at the time. We have taken you out to the bush and explained it, and we have given you the map. That is why settlement leases were taken up by my family and others in the Mathoura area for good grazing lands.

The other thing that the Natural Resources Commission [NRC] did was fail to include in their report 20,000 hectares of forest that we were currently harvesting. It would be like somebody asking you how many cattle you have in the paddock and then leaving 100 off at the top end. What they were trying to do was bring down the sustainable yield count of the timber we were harvesting so that it looked bleak and dismal. The other thing was that they then commissioned Professor Chris Brack to verify the frames analysis system that Forestry used for their sustainable yield. It is called the Forest Research and Management Evaluation System. He comes from New Zealand. That report was never tabled. I tabled it here but it was pulled off because Chris Brack had to sign a confidentiality clause. It is not even in their references here. It is not shown in their references here. I actually have a copy of that report.

Basically what happened was they employed him to evaluate the forest analysis and he came back with the same conclusion as Forestry did, so it was never tabled. It was hidden. We rang the Natural Resources Commission, or my wife did, to question this. The response was from Felicity, "How did you know about that report?" It makes you wonder how many other reports were hidden. I also would like to show you Recommendation 3, which relates to ecological thinning. We have a word now, "ecological", written in front of it, and Forestry used to call it just thinning. I would just like to read you something out of this book, *History of the Millewa Group of Forests*, about thinning. We are not trying to redo the wheel or anything:

I may say that red gum possesses a remarkable aptitude for reproduction, and I have no hesitation in stating that where there was one young tree in 1875, when I took charge of these forest reserves, there are now twenty, and all that is required to make these reserves [practically] inexhaustible is the inexpensive work of thinning.

What the recommendation states is ecological thinning, grazing by domestic animals, fire management, silviculture and firewood collection, which is exactly what State Forests were doing in the first place. So we have just paid them all this money to recommend, and now it is an ongoing cost to taxpayers to have this in a national park.

In conclusion I would like to say that the outcome of this inquiry should be that 107,000 hectares of forest is handed back to Forests NSW to manage as they were responsible for creating and managing these forests that everyone now seems to want. But if nothing else happens after this inquiry, I feel we are obligated to get the truth out there for the benefit of future generations to come, and to acknowledge the contribution of our ancestors who pioneered this land and opened up this country. I thank you for your time.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. I acknowledge the presence in the gallery of the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Don Harwin, and welcome him. I invite members of the Committee to commence questions and we will endeavour to allow as many members as we can to ask questions in the remaining 25 minutes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** I thank all of you for showing us around today and telling your stories. One of the problems for politicians in issues like this is that different facts and figures are thrown at us from different sides of the argument in issues like this. In a very brief time available to me, I would like to ask you about the \$97 million package and the 85 per cent reduction in the resources available to you.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I am sorry, Luke, but if you represent the Australian Labor Party, you were there when these decisions were being made. You would have a far better handle on exactly what money was paid out in the red gum package deal.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Ken, I was not a member of Parliament in 2010 when the decision was made.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** You were, or you were not?

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** No, I was not. But my party did this. I accept that. But the \$97 million—Faye, he told us half has gone to national parks. Is that right? Is that your understanding?

**Ms ASHWIN:** That is my understanding, Luke, yes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** What are the Government tells us, or the Office of Environment and Heritage which is now part of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, is that they split up the \$97 million as follows: \$25 million to business exit assistance, \$21.5 million to worker assistance, \$12 million to the Regional Employment and Community Development Fund, and \$23 million to park management. That is what the Government says.

**Ms ASHWIN:** I was working on a press release from Frank Sartor on 2 March 2010. It says somewhere in this that there would be a support package of up to \$80 million for affected timber industry workers and regional communities. That was Frank just playing with the figures. My understanding of it was that it was \$97 million.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** And it was increased?

**Ms ASHWIN:** Yes, it was increased at that initial point. I must admit that I have not sat down and added it up exactly, but we always have been given the impression that at least half of it was going to the National Parks and Wildlife Service for establishment of the new red gum park.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I would just like to add to that, Luke: What figure was given to National Parks?

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** What we are told by the Government is \$23 million of the \$97 million.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** And that is Treasury is it that is telling you that?

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** It is what the Office of Environment and Heritage is saying. We will try to call them before us and ask them.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Yep. We have had meetings and whatever, and it is a bit like 40,000 visitors are going to come to Yanga.

**Mr CRUMP:** It was 50,000. That is what they were promising.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Fifty thousand, 40,000—all those numbers. What has actually happened is that you extinguished a \$70 million-a-year industry that works on a sustainable basis, so does it matter whether it is \$23 million, \$53 million or whatever it is? It has had an 80 per cent or 85 per cent haircut. It has had an 85 per cent hit. There is one sawmill left, as Chrissie said, in Koondrook. There is his sawmill at Mathoura, and that is it. There is no more.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Can I ask you about the 85 per cent reduction? Is that an 85 per cent reduction in the resource you have access to, or is it an 85 per cent reduction in turnover of the timber industry in this region, or both?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** That would be in the turnover because the people have gone out of business, mate. Those people who were employed there are no longer employed in the timber industry anymore. What do your figures show you? The Labor Party implemented this. What do your figures show you that we were going to get? What sort of a hit?

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** We are here to ask.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I would have thought you would have known because the Labor Party implemented this on top of us and said that tourism would fix all this, and tourism has not given us a cracker since. Yet we are still here and we are still trying to run businesses and we are still trying to look after the forests and employ people. What we need is assistance. We do not need to get tangled up on figures.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Ken, we are just trying to get to the bottom in our inquiry of all the different viewpoints that are put to us. The environmentalists will throw in very different figures to the figures you present, and the Government will probably throw in a different set of figures. All of us have to try to grapple with all of those figures and I am trying to give you the chance to put your case. I am not in any way trying to trip you up. And, by all means, if there are other figures you want to give us after today, I am sure we would welcome that.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I am sorry for being cynical, Luke. It is the first time I have met you. It is the first time I have met Peter Primrose and it is the first time a few people here. We have hammered—absolutely hammered—and that is why we are cynical. I do not want you to have me say it is 85 per cent and you quote it at 83 per cent. I do not think we should be splitting hairs. Whichever way you look at it, it has been a significant hit to the timber industry—the most historic hit in the timber industry in the whole time that timber has been harvested in this country from pre-European settlement.

**CHAIR:** We will move on to questions from Hon. Cate Faehrmann. If there is any additional information you wish to provide to the Committee, by all means provide it, and the Committee will take it into account.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I will probably follow up on the industry package as well. Chris, you might be able to respond to this. I want to explore it a bit more. Ken, you were saying today when we were talking that you reinvested the money you received. You put your exit assistance package back into your business because you refused to go down. If I am wrong, tell me. You employed 20 people and now you are worried about the future of the resource. Is that correct? I would like to know a bit about what an exit assistance package means to businesses in this situation. For you, I am sure that it is completely unacceptable in terms of your ongoing profits and historically what you have made. As a Committee, we have to understand what these exit assistance packages mean. Right now, as Luke Foley said, we have a figure in front of us of \$97 million; \$23.5 million went to the parks and we know that some went into the regional communities. Mr Crump, I know there is something about \$580,000 going to K. R. Crump. Are you that Crump?

**Mr CRUMP:** No, that is my daughter.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** That is a different Crump, but it went into a timber museum-restaurant?

**Mr CRUMP:** Museum, yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I am just trying to get a sense of what that assistance package has done for the community and what it means for a business like yours if you took that exit assistance package—and you as well, Tod.

**Mr CRUMP:** Well, look, we stayed in, so we did not take that exit package. But as I understood, it was \$52 million—but I will check that for sure now—for the national parks over the next five years. That is what we were told. I will check that. I will definitely get back to you on that. The other thing is we lost 80 per cent of our resource, right? We had 107,000 hectares that got locked up that we were actually logging. It was 107,000 hectares right through that they took off us and made into a national park.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Chris, when you say 85 per cent—

**Mr CRUMP:** Eighty per cent, it was.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** I am sorry. Is that 80 per cent of the public forests you were in?

**Mr CRUMP:** Yeah.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Or is that 80 per cent of public plus private?

**Mr CRUMP:** No, just the forest itself—80 per cent of the State forest that we had.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** You do private native forestry.

**Mr CRUMP:** State forest that was there, that is all locked up in the national park.

**Ms ASHWIN:** The reduction in resource only refers to State forest. It does not include public land at all—private land, I am sorry.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** So when you say 80 or 85 per cent reduction, that is a reduction in the public forest.

**Ms ASHWIN:** It is 107,000 hectares.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** It was available for harvesting.

**Mr CRUMP:** That is what they took off us.

**Ms ASHWIN:** That was removed from State land to become national park or an Indigenous protected area.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** What remains are Koondrook, Perricoota and Campbells Island, which is about 35,000?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** About 34,000.

**Mr CRUMP:** The fact of the matter is that Millewa, Gulpa Island and Moira forests were not there; as the NRC said in its report. It was not ancient. We handed a map around that showed it was not there. Obviously they did not know or they lied about it being ancient—that's what I cannot work out. We are talking about something that occurred through the process of white settlement. That is why they took it up as grazing leases. It is through cattle coming, grazing and eating it down and settlement that the trees grew. It was not a forest. You are paying for something out there that is virtually a plantation.

The Moira forest is the youngest forest of the lot. It was called the Moira plains as you went down to Bama forest. That sprung up in the 50s. Let us start with the truth on the history to see what has happened. Let us tell the truth. I am very sorry that my community got involved or forced into politics. What we should have done when the report came out is exactly what the people having the water issues did; walk down the middle of the road, throw it on the road and burn it. What has happened here, as I keep saying, is that the recommendations that the NRC have come up with is what was happening in the first place.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** One of the questions I would have to ask you, if it is okay to ask a question of the panel, how much do you presume it is going to cost to run these red gum national parks over the next five years? Surely Government has done costings on that. I know they have not got a fire plan and have not consulted with a lot of people, but I would have thought with Labor implementing this when it was in power you would know how much it will cost to run over the next few years.

**CHAIR:** We will be taking evidence from the Government as a whole and those questions will be asked.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Would it be all right to tender something on notice about the exit assistance package you received? For the Committee's purpose we are trying to get a sense of what that meant for your business.

**CHAIR:** We can keep it in confidence. The Committee will not publish if it is asked not to.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** That is my personal information and I will think about that. Can I say one more thing? I would like to make a note on *Hansard*: myself and Faye, a lot of people behind us, Chris and Todd actually took Dr John Williams from the NRC around for days and days and we thought we were going to get a good honest appraisal of what was going on. Can I make note how disappointed I am, and I speak for the red gum people, in the poor science of one of the leading scientists in Australia, Dr John Williams. We are all disappointed in the research he did and the findings he made.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When you speak about the meeting you had with Frank Sartor what did he actually say to you, in addition to what Mr Crump said, about the lesson you pointed out and the comments that Chris made?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I have not got a map here. I drove Frank Sartor from Barham to Deniliquin. He was in a hurry to get there. He did not want to talk to the people in Barham at all about their businesses. He had a job to do. He said, "We have to get this red gum national park in. That is what the people want." I said, "The people do not want that." I said, "We do not want that." I said, "Talk to the local people out here and you will find they do not want that. Not many people camp in the forest. Why don't you make some sort of reserve on the river side or the river track and see what results you get out of that?" He said, "That is not going to win the election for us. We are not going to get votes out of that." By that time Mr Sartor was worried about getting a cup of coffee. We got to the mill—and Chris was not the only one that heard this.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How many people were at that meeting?

**Mr CRUMP:** The Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water [DECCW] were there.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** There would have been 30 to 40 people there.

**Mr CRUMP:** I know 15 or so people signed statutory declarations and we sent them off to the office of our member John Williams. They were presented to him. We thought the Independent Commission Against Corruption [ICAC] might have been able to do something about it because we thought it was more than inappropriate, it was a joke.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What you are saying is that Frank Sartor delivered that message purely for political purposes rather than any environmental or economic purposes?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Yes. We have no reason to lie. As Mr Crump touched on before, we do not want to be politicians. We do not want to be involved in politics; that is up to you guys.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Did he express any concern at all for the outcomes to your communities as a result of that decision?

**Mr CRUMP:** No.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** He showed by his actions his concern. What followed were hundreds of people being put off and businesses being closed.

**Ms ASHWIN:** It was at the last minute, following political pressure on Mr Sartor's office, that the amount of dollars that he was going to make available to business exit packages and the displaced workers was increased. The community grants went from \$10 million to \$12 million.

**Mr CRUMP:** The fact of the matter is the NRC report was supposed to be a science-based report and we were told by our then Premier that it was based on politics.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When was the announcement of the national park made in relation to the release of the NRC report, can you recall? Was the NRC report in your hands when that decision was made?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I do not recall. I will think about that. I do recall Ian Cohen stating in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that—I cannot remember the exact wording but you can check it out—unless the Government delivered on red gum national parks the Labor Party could go to hell. A few days later, seven or eight days later, Frank Sartor announced these red gum national parks. If you want to check that you can.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Can you describe in your own view the State of the forests at the time of their transfer to national parks from New South Wales forests.

**Mr GELLETLY:** At the time of the assessment we had been through a one-in-20 year drought that turned into a one-in-100 year drought. The forests were in a poor state and their health was suffering because they were overstocked. The tree population was too high. Areas that had been actively managed were showing signs of improvement in health because the appropriate stocking levels were brought to bear by Forests NSW in

their management techniques. The industry removed the product, took it to town and put it through the sawmill which provided economic prosperity for our communities.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Would it be correct to say that the dilapidated state of the forests at that stage was more a function of the prolonged drought than it was due to any logging practices?

**Mr GELLETLY:** I would not say the whole forest was in a dilapidated state, I would say certain areas were and that was due to the lack of flooding in the previous 15 years and the stocking rates being too high.

**Mr CRUMP:** There was no water. What we should have been doing was thinning a little harder. It is like having too many vegetables in a plot; you do not leave them and let them all go straggly and die. As I said, the fire area we looked at today, we were logging or harvesting areas in St Helena that were still green and growing but a little bit sick. A red gum can hang on. There was an area of 1,000 hectares in Moira that had a fire go through. When Forests went to log it two or three months after the fire went through and it got held up because national parks had control of it. We are thinning a forest that was due to be thinned and needed to be thinned but we had bush that was stone dead.

**Ms ASHWIN:** The presumption of the NRC report—you read it in various places—was based on a water-scarce future. Since the report was announced, since the decisions were made, we have had nothing but floods.

**Mr CRUMP:** Six months after that decision was made we had a flood that has continued ever since. That was not because we have managed to get environmental water—they make up the names now—it is because it rained. It is as simple as that, it rained and rain turns into flood waters.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** As professional foresters what is your view of the likely outcome for those forests if selective thinning is not maintained on a widespread basis?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** They will turn into an overgrown tangled mess. It is not a matter of if they catch on fire it is a matter of when. My question would be if there is going to be a high probability of fire and the Wakool Shire and local shires have not been consulted by national parks as to what they are going to do about it, then people in the Riverina should be quite alarmed at what area we are going into. Could I add to that; the fire at Moira on that particular day ended at the settlement at Picnic Point. There is one road in and out; that is it. When that fire started it was uncontrollable. A lot of people from the timber industry were there first trying to get it under control while waiting for the fire brigade to arrive. It turned into an inferno and at that stage there were 5,000 or 6,000 people at Picnic Point.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** From my reading of the NRC report they substantiated their claim by saying that your industry was "small and unprofitable", logging was "unsustainable" and the forest was in decline because of climate change. Now that it is two or three years later could you give me your reaction to that if John Williams were here today?

**Mr GELLETLY:** I think there was too much personal opinion throughout the NRC report. That was evident at the meeting we had with the NRC at the Gulpa Sawmill when Dr John Williams was talking about the ecotourism dollar being a replacement for the timber industry. His exact words were: "I believe, I think—maybe I'm dreaming—that the ecotourism dollar will replace this \$70 million timber industry." I pointed out to him that to do that—I am not 100 per cent sure of the number off the top of my head—would need 284 or 384 tourists per week to visit this area and each one of those would have to spend \$3,500. A husband and wife and two kids would have to stay a week in the Riverina and spend \$14,000 to replace the timber industry that was already there doing that for the industry and the community. I put it to him at a public meeting and he said, "No, I don't think it can replace it." He actually acknowledged that it would not. Another personal opinion was expressed by Peter Canowski when driving through the Koondrook-Perricoota group of forests. Ken pointed out to him how high the floodwater can get and that led to a bet that "this bush will never see a flood again".

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Peter asked me. We were down in one of the runners that feed the Perricoota-Koondrook forest and I said, "There's the watermark up there where the water runs." He said, "Do you think we will ever see water running here again?" I said, "How old are you, Pete?" He said, "About 50." I said, "Mate, we'll probably see water in here in the next couple of years. As a matter of fact I'll bet you a box of Crown Lager that we do and I'll boat you out here to show you." He could not shake my hand quick enough because he thought I was mad.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Has he paid up?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** He has paid up the Crown Lager. He had them ready for me at the Barham Hotel. That particular runner has not stopped running since 2010. It has been running constantly, on and off, since then. Going back to Dr John Williams' dream, the trouble with his dream was it became our nightmare. We are still here and we are only too happy to help. Let us get on with actively managing and sustaining these forests.

**Mr CRUMP:** He forecast 100 years of drought and climate change. Nostradamus made forecasts but Dr John Williams certainly was not Nostradamus I can tell you.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I think he thought he was.

**Mr CRUMP:** If you look through our history—that is what I go on—you can see that we were just about due for a flood. It is usually about every 16 or 17 years and you usually get a back-to-back flood. It is there throughout history; you can see it. David Joss, a good friend of mine, said, "Yeah, we're about due for a flood." Six months later they locked the forest up and it has been underwater ever since.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Across the Riverina when all this was going on we had meetings which Mr Canowski and Dr John Williams attended. They were at Balranald, Barham, Deniliquin and all the places that it was going to have an impact on. Over 1,500 local people went to those meetings. There were a lot of wise people there, people who had farmed or been in forestry for generations. Those people had a very good knowledge of this area. At the majority of those meetings Dr John Williams was still going on with his ideas to the point where we had a vote of no confidence to find out how many of the local people believed in these theories that he was coming up with. We got a vote of no confidence in the NRC at Deniliquin, at Barham and at Balranald. Yet Dr John still went on his merry way, so why would we not be cynical to think that this was just purely politics? It had very little to do with the forests at all.

**Ms ASHWIN:** A few months after the decision Ken was trying to keep in contact and he had Dr John Williams' mobile phone number. He gave John a ring in Argentina and he said, "Ken, I've moved on. I'm doing other things." Here we are now and the situation is just as we have said all along. The faces of the people coming to visit us change and perhaps the names of the organisations change but the core of people in our communities and who work in our red gum timber industry remain the same. They have been here for decades and some for generation after generation.

**Mr CRUMP:** Can I just make one point? If a fire starts in these forests in Victoria or New South Wales I guarantee you will not stop it. You will wait till it comes out the other side. You will have to. You will not get in there to handle it with what is going on out there now.

**CHAIR:** I call this session to a close. I thank you for agreeing to appear before the hearing today. I also thank you for the time and effort you put into showing us the forests and carting us around all over the place. We appreciate you are very busy people. If the Committee has any questions that it wishes to put on notice it will ask the secretariat to contact you and we would be grateful if you could answer in 14 days. We made a decision this week to extend the closing date for submissions to 31 August, so I ask those who have not yet put in a submission to please do so and I can assure you we will take them into consideration.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**NORMAN DAN BRENNAN**, Vice-Chair, Deniliquin Business Chamber and Mayor of Conargo Shire,

**DAVID HENRY KEECH**, President of the Chamber of Commerce of Mathoura, and

**IAN KENDALL FISHER**, Secretary, Mathoura Chamber of Commerce and Citizens Incorporated, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Would any or all of you like to make a brief opening statement, particularly as we have not yet received your submission. I am sure we will.

**Mr BRENNAN:** For a long time the region around Deniliquin has had decisions made from afar. It is very frustrating from a local government and a business perspective to have these people coming here and making decisions without satisfactory consultation and getting local knowledge about what is happening around here. They make decisions that affect us and then go back to Sydney and lie low. We are the ones who have to cope with the long-term results of those decisions.

**Mr KEECH:** The reason we are here is, as far as I am concerned, that the decisions that were made in relation to the forests were detrimental to us. Tourism just stopped whereas tourism had been very good. All our people were absolutely disgusted and we were very upset about the whole thing from the time it started. We hope it is not finished.

**Mr FISHER:** To put it into perspective, the Mathoura Chamber of Commerce is a small organisation, more a progress association. It has been active for 25 years and we are incorporated hence we have a perceived community of interest. We initiate and support a lot of other community organisations particularly with grants and that type of thing. We have great liaison with the Murray Shire and we had good liaison with NSW Forests. We did not get involved in the initial lobbying against the national park. Since that has come about there has been no community consultation. They have never been in contact with us. The only direct contact with our chamber was at our last meeting when we invited the area manager to come and address us.

We had a number of issues that we wanted to discuss. He was not aware of most of them. At a community level we have red gum in the blood. You have only to listen to Chris Crump talk to be aware of that. We congratulate Chris for his steadfast resolve and commitment to try to rectify the wrong. The town is known as the timber cutters' town. The football club is called the Timber Cutters. We have a big red gum log at each end of the town. The school emblem on the children's uniform is a red gum tree. It has a great, proud history. If you take that away, it will be devastating for the town from the general thrust of the community point of view.

At a more personal level on the chamber of commerce, over about a 10-year period we developed a four-kilometre-walk track along Gulpa Creek within the State forest, with great support from Forests NSW and the council and grants through the National Trust. National Parks came in and, lo and behold, they had heaps of money to spend. They did not know where to spend it. They decided to gravel the walk track. They used crushed concrete on the path. It did not need it. It is awkward to walk on now. They did not even know that it had been built by, effectively, the chamber of commerce. There are two timber bridges that were built by community input and they did not have a clue because they did not come and ask. And that was our walk track.

Tourism is flaunted as the panacea to all the wrongs. It is going to start off from a negative perspective because there are going to be so many campers that enjoy the freedom of camping—there is plenty of river frontage and they use Mathoura very much as their service centre when they are camping—who will not be allowed to bring dogs and there will be restricted access for boating. There will be restrictions placed on access to some of the perceived more sensitive areas that in fact will drive the regular tourists away, or to other regions, I suspect. I think tourism will start off from a negative. As I stated previously, I do not know where, why, or who would want to come to walk through a jungle forest.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I have two questions. Why did tourism decline? I think you mentioned that when it was converted to a national park you actually saw a drop-off to start with. That is the first question. Mr Keech?

**Mr KEECH:** With tourism, we had a good volume of people who came through the area all the time. As soon as they got wind of what was going on, a lot of people, especially with the club industry there, they just wanted to get away because they knew something was going to happen and they did not like what was

happening. They were told that they would not be allowed animals and would not be allowed to camp on the side of the road or anything like that, and there would be no camping areas designated, and they would be charged for it. They just said, "Well, we're up and out of here."

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** My second question develops from that. If you were able, what activities would you like to see returned? You talked about tourism. Were there other things? We are aware that overseas national parks are sometimes treated differently and there are a range of activities in national parks. Do you have in mind the sort of activities you would perhaps like to see?

**Mr KEECH:** It is hard to know. We are forever racking our brains as to what we do, and that was pre national parks. You do not need a national park to generate enthusiasm for tourism. That has been part of the core business. The council has built the bird hide. It is a beautiful iconic site and they have opened up the vista of the wetlands near Mathoura. That has been a great thing and the National Parks are going to take that to a new level with interactive electronics that the local community would not have the funding to do. You have got to get must-see type of infrastructure there, you know. A great skywalk would be brilliant.

You could think of a lot of things. But with the majority of people, there are two types of campers: there are visitors or camping people who come to enjoy the recreation, or there is the flyby tourist who drop in and want to spend an hour to a day looking. It is hard to attract those or educate those. We have just gone through a process with council, some of the community members and the catchment management authority [CMA] to look at an education resource centre—an environmental education resource centre, I am sorry—to try to fill a void in the educational process for schools through to the itinerant traveller. But at the end of the day, it was not economically viable. We had to spend \$25,000 on a consultancy report and we have just recently decided that it is not sustainable—unlike red gum, which is sustainable.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Could I just add that what I would like to see is the return of a sustainable modern industry. There is nothing that will replace it. I was here to hear some of the earlier session, and to think that tourism is going to replace a \$100-million-a-year industry, no matter how much you pour into it, you are playing with the fairies down at the end of the garden. It is not going to happen.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** We heard from earlier witnesses about the number of people leaving town because the industry has been closed down. Can you explain from your own members' perspective, and perhaps even your own perspective, what that has meant for businesses in your respective areas?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Look, Deni had suffered from the previous 10 years of the drought, which is well documented. We all know the effect and, really, Deni was on its knees. The removal of this industry and subsequently the jobs and the sawmill—and there is a while variety of other examples—was another kick in the guts to our regional economy. I cannot tell you exactly about the business effect; all I know is that the retail industry is still doing it very hard, even after two years and is slow to recover. But it just seems that in the area continually, another thing happens.

When you are in an urban area, like Sydney or Melbourne, you have other things that can take the place when you take something out. We, in this area here, have not got that. I will just use an example. There was an investment going to be made in Deniliquin of a \$6 million development—I will just leave it at that—and that development was put on hold because of the Murray-Darling Basin plan and that was scrapped. Now, a \$6 million investment in Deni is probably equivalent to \$600 million in Sydney and/or Melbourne because we are in a more micro sort of environment. Little things like that have significant impacts on the whole region and its ability to sustain itself.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** What about the Mathoura guys? What has it meant for your business community?

**Mr KEECH:** Well, half of it has closed down. We have only got a grocer's shop and a service station whereas we had a big café and all that. All that has been gone for two years now, and nobody has even rectified it. It is just sitting there and nobody has any interest in it at all. It is just lost.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you know of anyone in your respective communities who now thinks the creation of the national parks was a good idea?

**Mr KEECH:** No. Definitely, "No."

**Mr BRENNAN:** No.

**Mr FISHER:** No.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Can I go back to the tourism issue again. Mr Keech, when you say that tourism has declined in the way it has, what did the people who were coming here prior to the announcement of the national parks come to see? Where did they come from?

**Mr KEECH:** They were coming from everywhere—Melbourne and all those places—because it was too expensive for them to go too far north. They found out it was a lot easier to go to the caravan parks at Picnic Point. There were good facilities there that were provided for them to enjoy themselves. There was boating and everything there. That was the main reason. But it has declined a lot from what it used to be.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Do you have any figures that we could use?

**Mr KEECH:** No. I never thought to get any figures of them, either, but I can soon get figures.

**CHAIR:** In relation to that, if you are yet to make a written submission, it might be good if those figures could be made available.

**Mr KEECH:** I will.

**CHAIR:** We would deeply appreciate that.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Keech, one of the reasons that tourism may have dropped quickly was the wet. Is that right?

**Mr KEECH:** Because of what?

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** The floods.

**Mr KEECH:** No, no. Most people have been here for years when there was higher water and that around there, and they never seemed to worry much about the water.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In a submission by the Murray Shire Council, they actually do admit that: "Council does acknowledge that flooding has restricted access for tourists." I was up here two weeks ago with the intention of camping. When we realised how wet it was, we stayed one night in the Barmah caravan park and kept going. We did not realise how inaccessible the local parts would be. So I wonder whether that was also part of the reason for the drop.

**Mr KEECH:** No. It has not stopped our caravan park at all. Barmah and others got caught by it, yes, because the excess water got to them before it got to us.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Okay.

**Mr KEECH:** It is just a rising river now, again.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I have a general question about the township of Mathoura. In the previous decade up until the parks decision, was the township of Mathoura's population generally increasing or decreasing? What was the township like before this decision?

**Mr KEECH:** There was an increase in the town as far as we were concerned. There was a definite increase. But now it has declined again. The shire put up a block of ground of 27 lots and that was used up. They were given to them free and they built on it—all new homes and everything—and it was beautiful. They have another block there that they have not even touched yet at the moment because they just do not know what is going to happen. There is a decline in wanting to build there again. There are definitely more houses for sale again now to what it was because it is declining gradually.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In relation to Deni, have businesses closed as a direct result of the decision?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It was probably the businesses that could not sustain themselves long term. There was not the money around to get them out of trouble and so they closed. If you drive around Deni, you will see a lot of vacant windows here. We do not like seeing them like that, but that is a fact of life. Give it another five years, if things are up, you will probably see those business premises will be full of good businesses in them, which is what we would hope for.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What about the impact of the industry exit assistance package that we discussed with previous witnesses? Have Deniliquin and Mathoura noticed during that time—say, in the last 18 months—that money has been given to various projects. What has been the impact of that on the communities? Have you noticed anything from your perspective and from the perspective of the chamber of commerce?

**Mr BRENNAN:** I found some of the projects that did receive money quite interesting, considering they were not connected with the red gum industry at all. I do not know what the criteria were, but I do not really think from the Deni chamber's point of view we have seen any significant, or any, change that is positive as a result of those remuneration packages. But I will say about the remuneration packages that I am not a qualified accountant, but when you are looking at a \$70-or-\$80-million-per industry, and you get a \$12 million compensation package and \$2 million towards tourism, that really does not add to me. It does not add up in the long term.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I think it was slightly more than that. I think the package was \$97 million.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Just under \$100 million—the package, or the industry?

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** No, the \$97 million, from the environmental trust's annual report, is the actual money that has been given out.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Right. I have some different information, so you must be more accurate than me.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Are you aware in relation to the national parks of how many staff have been employed through the National Parks and Wildlife Service since the creation of river red gums and how many—

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes, and the environment, yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What was that number?

**Mr BRENNAN:** According to Greg Murdoch, there are about a dozen down there. Moama has benefited. The rest of the region has not.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Brennan, we are grappling with different numbers that are thrown at us from different sides of the argument. You referred to the \$70 million industry. What is your understanding of how much that \$70 million has been reduced in the timber industry in this region since the creation of those national parks?

**Mr BRENNAN:** I have not seen any figures to see what is remaining in regard to the timber industry since the change to national parks. I am not aware of that.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** When you say the \$70 million industry is that public native forestry, that is, forestry in our State forests was worth \$70 million or is the \$70 million across public and private lands?

**Mr BRENNAN:** My knowledge from the early stages was the \$70 million was the value of the industry in the Riverina.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Public and private?

**Mr BRENNAN:** I assume both.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** You cannot assist us with what the reduction in that \$70 million has been?

**Mr BRENNAN:** I have not got figures like that.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** The regional employment and community development fund, what can you tell us about assistance to businesses in Deniliquin? We are told there is \$12 million that the State government put up as a community development fund, how has Deniliquin gone in accessing their fair share of the \$12 million?

**Mr BRENNAN:** That is news to me and I will follow it up tomorrow.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** It is news to you that there is a community development fund?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes, and I have never heard that figure of \$12 million before.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** What we have been told by the government is that \$97 million was put up as a financial package by the State when the parks were created and \$12 million of that \$97 million was for a community development fund that businesses in the region could make application for to assist their businesses to grow.

**Mr BRENNAN:** I knew there was a fund. I have been on chamber for six years and I have not heard those figures bandied around before, nor have I seen documentation for the chamber. Even so, I would have thought Deniliquin council would have been made aware of that as well. I do not know whether Deniliquin has or not but it is news to me as a neighbouring shire.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** We are told by the government that \$1 million of that \$12 million has gone to the Deniliquin council for the Deniliquin medical centre. Do you know anything about that?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes, that is progressing along nicely and whether that I assume it was part of the package because that is where they got the funding from.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Keech and Mr Fisher, what, if any, assistance has been given to businesses in Mathoura through that \$12 million fund?

**Mr FISHER:** There has been some distribution of funds to local businesses. As Mr Brennan said earlier, they are not necessarily related directly to the timber industry but they have endeavoured to generate employment. Some fairly creative grant applications went in.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** No doubt.

**Mr FISHER:** There have been some businesses that have benefited financially from it. It is money, it goes around and comes into the community and it is beneficial. From a chamber perspective, or our members, we are not aware of the individual outcomes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Brennan, if I could ask you one last question; before these decisions were made in 2010 for national parks what would you say was the relative contribution to the Deniliquin economy of the timber industry compared to the other big industries such as rice and agriculture more generally?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Prior to 2010 the rice industry was nonexistent because there was no water and there was no allocation. The rice mill had been closed for three years. That is 135-170 jobs missing. That is 170 families affected and the flow-on that occurs. Just as the waters came and things started to move that is when the timber industry was affected. We were looking to recover and then there was another hurdle that the regional economy had to overcome.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** How is the rice industry going?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Going gang busters at the moment. They have a 980,000 tonne crop this year and a 100 per cent allocation was announced in July for the first time in a long while. If you look at the dam reports the four main dams are 95 per cent plus so we are looking at the next two to three years, in regard to the rice industry in this region, going well indeed.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** You said 135 jobs in rice went during the drought.

**Mr BRENNAN:** I think it might have been more. I know they put 135 back on. They were looking to source more but labour supply was difficult. The young kids around here need to get a job so they fly-in and fly-out for the mines because mum and dad cannot afford to have them on the farm.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Are you suggesting the rice industry is struggling to find workers since the floods?

**Mr BRENNAN:** They have enough workers, to my knowledge to look after their production capacity now. They were looking to expand. I can quote one farmer, Winton Hall; he said he would be putting in as much rice as possible because of the 100 per cent allocation—as will the majority of farmers in my shire. They might have a bigger harvest next year than this year.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** What about broader horticulture than rice; how is that going since the end of the drought?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It is strong. They have put a lot of wheat and cereals in. The good thing about it—I don't mean any disrespect—America is going through what we have gone through for the last 10 years; it is in a severe drought and suffering significant losses in production. Russia has had a loss in production and is not going to export any wheat at all; hence you have significant price rises in the last few months for the product. It is great for our farmers. If they can get dollars back to reduce debt ratios they are going to be more sustainable down the track.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Keech and Mr Fisher, has the end of the drought delivered any benefit to Mathoura in terms of a revival of agriculture or is your town's fate overwhelmingly dependent on the timber industry?

**Mr FISHER:** The first part of your question is what the timber industry does for the town: Mathoura was very much a timber town. I do not know what the percentage would be but I would say probably 20-30 per cent of the town was directly or indirectly involved with the timber industry. Thanks to Mr Chris Crump there are still a proportion of those working in the industry and others that were previously employed by Forests have gained employment within the national parks. It has been important. With regard to the drought for the region; Mathoura district is more dry land cropping than irrigation and although the drought has finished the seasonal peculiarities of rain have not been good: last year the rain was too late and ruined crops and this year we have not had enough and they are struggling. The grain crops have not been good but sheep and cattle prices are good. Mixed farmers are hanging in there. You can have a good crop in the drought if it happens to occur at the right time.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Compared to Deniliquin the timber industry is a far greater proportion of the Mathoura economy?

**Mr FISHER:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Just on that line of thinking; the rice industry has been subject to water allocations, so they have had a good run and then the dams have dried up. How would you compare that with the timber industry in terms of its variability? Was it more stable in terms of workforce and production and less reliant on water allocation?

**Mr BRENNAN:** The rice industry is an opportunistic crop. If you do not have water you do not grow it. That is the basis of whether you put rice in or not. I do not know as much about the timber industry; I would say that the timber industry is not an opportunistic crop but the correct management procedure would be more applicable as to how you use that industry.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** In my mind the timber industry had a more stable workforce, a stable future and was not as reliant on water being available or not. When compared to the timber industry the rice industry is more variable. What I am leading to is when you take the stable timber industry away what does that do to Deniliquin or Mathoura? At the moment rice looks good for the next two or three years but if you were going to build a house or invest in a business and you do not have that stable timber industry what does that mean to you?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It probably means that you have not got the strength underpinning the economy. Farmers are very creative people and they amaze me how they survive, especially in my shire. If they cannot use water they will go to a different type of enterprise which is not as reliant on water as rice. That is what they did during the drought; they grew different crops that did not rely on heavy amounts of water. The return was not as great but they got through. Some were more into livestock than cereal cropping. Some tried different plants just to see if there was an opportunity so they could survive. I do not see that in the timber industry. It is not so reliant on water all the time.

**Mr FISHER:** There is a regular quota system.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I guess where we are going is that you had a stable industry and stable workforce and a stable economy.

**Mr KEECH:** By far.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I have a follow up question on that same issue. It is fair to say that when we have a drought in farming the impact on the community can be quite severe in the short term; through low yields or in some cases no yield at all? Is it fair to say that in relation to the red gum industry or timber industry generally, that it is virtually a drought-proof industry because you can continue to harvest timber during a drought due to the long-term nature of the regrowth period? It is an industry that can proceed despite drought conditions?

**Mr BRENNAN:** The way I put it is, it is not as affected by drought as other industries, and it is more secure, stable and solid.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** It underpins your economy in that regard?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It does not run the economy but it is a great foundation to operate on.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Do either of your chambers of commerce do any promotion of your respective towns?

**Mr BRENNAN:** We promote from within, we do not necessarily go external. We have a variety of programs such as "shop local". There is a new initiative from chamber coming out for a bi-monthly chamber book with coupons which encourages people to shop locally: for example you get 20 per cent off if you do X, Y, Z. That is the type of thing we do. We also run a matchmakers festival which has gone on for two years which has been very successful: 250 people come for a weekend of entertainment—and you do not know what might happen.

Murray Region Tourism Board takes the initiative there. The promotion is from within. We have always tried to get our businesses as secure as possible. We support them through the NSW Chamber of Commerce, which has a director. There are a variety of things that we do to try to make our businesses as strong as possible. We then try to attract other businesses and quite often people think about starting up a business or moving to the town and we try to promote those as much as possible. We are a little bit bigger than Mathoura. We have 140 members, which is quite significant, and we employ a full-time chief executive officer who is doing a great job.

**Mr FISHER:** We are a different organisation. As I said, we are more of a progress association. We try to promote the town to the tourists that come. We make sure when they arrive that they have a good time. We have two fairs in the town each year, one at Easter and one on the Melbourne Cup long weekend. The chamber gets heavily involved in those. We run a major duck race on the river at Easter and assist with the other fair. A lot of our energy goes into that. The walk track we developed was both for locals and visitors. We are trying to

promote the town that way. We do not have a business assistance structure. We encourage people to shop in Mathoura.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Has your promotion of Mathoura changed in any way to incorporate the national parks since the declaration of the river red gum national parks? Have you had any discussions with National Parks here and the council about the ways that could happen? Have you had discussions about joint promotion of the parks?

**Mr FISHER:** No.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Not from the Chamber of Commerce to my knowledge. They might have had discussions with Deniliquin council.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is there a reason why you have not incorporated the national parks into your promotion of the town?

**Mr FISHER:** We have not heard from National Parks. They have been conspicuous by their absence. Our forests are known as Millewa-Moira-Gulpa Island. They are now just Riverina National Park. There was no consultation and no boundaries as to what is a national park and what is a regional park. There was never any discussion with the locals or our organisation, which represents the locals.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Who is to take the lead role in promotion of the national park? Is it the Mathoura Chamber or is it the national parks promoting themselves?

**CHAIR:** Tomorrow we will have a witness panel from the local shires and we will discuss with them some of these issues related to the distribution of those moneys. Do the chambers have a close relationship with your local government groups?

**Mr FISHER:** Yes.

**Mr KEECH:** We do.

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes we do. It is developing. It had been strained previously but their new chief executive officer is taking big steps to build a bridge.

**CHAIR:** The Deniliquin Chamber was not aware of the extent of the community portion of the money?

**Mr BRENNAN:** No, not to my knowledge.

**CHAIR:** And you have been on the chamber for six years?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** If Premier Barry O'Farrell were here tonight as a member of this Committee what are the three things that you would ask him to do?

**Mr KEECH:** The first thing I would tell him would be to get off his backside and make sure the red gum industry in the national parks gets running again and try to help communities and make it easier for everyone concerned. That is the way I see it. If they do not we will have big problems and they will have worse problems.

**Mr BRENNAN:** I have one for Deniliquin—put natural gas in. It is at Moama and Finley all that needs to be done is to bring it a backhoe. It is going to cost significant dollars but if you are looking at supporting a regional community in the long term something like that would be useful. The rice mill uses a hell of a lot of bottled gas in the dryers and the processing so there is one major user. The negative about attracting industry to Deniliquin and the surrounding regions is lack of natural gas, which would be a cheap method of providing energy for production and manufacturing. If you were really serious about looking at this region, that would be my big tick item. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? If we put natural gas in will we attract business? Over a period of time I think we will. If we do not put in natural gas we will not attract business. If we do get

natural gas at least we will have another viable source of heating for Deniliquin residents, 95 per cent of whom use wood and it is getting harder and harder to get wood. You cannot get in. You have to get a permit and you have to travel 60 kilometres-plus to find a spot to get some wood. That is what National Parks tells you. They are all little things, but when you look at the big ticket items natural gas would be the go.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Where is that gas potentially piped from?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It stops at Moama and at Finley—60 to 75 kilometres.

**CHAIR:** Not a big distance, is it?

**Mr BRENNAN:** No, 135 kilometres.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Are you saying that 95 per cent of people in and around this area rely on wood for heating in winter and effectively the closure of the forests has meant they have lost that source in the local community?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Not necessarily lost it. It has made it a lot more difficult.

**Mr FISHER:** It has doubled in price in the last 12 months.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Difficult in the sense that they have to travel further or that you now have to acquire permits?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes. We are not all 20- or 30-year-olds. There are a lot of people who are getting on in years who have to go out and travel further, pensioners and so on.

**Mr FISHER:** All the commercial firewood cutters do not have the resource. They have to go on private land.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You said the price had doubled. Does that mean a pensioner, someone on a fixed income, has effectively had their heating bill doubled?

**Mr FISHER:** That is right.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** We saw a fair bit of firewood today at some of the mills that we went into. What happens to that firewood?

**Mr FISHER:** It gets burnt.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Where does it get burnt?

**Mr BRENNAN:** It is sent to Melbourne because they pay more. It is unbelievable.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for taking the time to come and give us your thoughts. The Committee has decided to extend the closing date for submissions so if you have not made a submission please do so. Hansard will have taken a very accurate record of your contribution tonight. If anything else occurs to you and if any Committee members have further questions to put to you are you happy to receive those questions?

**Mr BRENNAN:** Yes.

**Mr FISHER:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** You will probably have 14 days to reply.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**DAVID ALEXANDER JOSS**, member of the Mathoura community, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** Are you representing an organisation or appearing as an individual?

**Mr JOSS:** I am appearing as an individual.

**CHAIR:** Have you put in a submission?

**Mr JOSS:** Yes I have.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr JOSS:** As I explained on the bus this morning the landscape we saw on the river was nothing like the landscape that is reported in the historical literature. There is no evidence that the river red gums were here when white explorers first came to this region although there were certainly some red gum trees here. They were not growing in the massive forests that we have today. Charles Sturt, who came down the river in 1838, obviously did not encounter more than a few although he stood at the centre of today's Millewa forest. If you remember what the bush looked like out at Picnic Point, where we turned the bus around and headed back, that is pretty dense bush.

Sturt got as far as the Edward River, looked across, and said the country on the other side was open and covered in reeds. It was all reed beds. He had been battling through reeds to get to that point. He met a group of Aborigines at the Edward River. He did not speak their language of course but they made him understand with sign language that he would not get any further because there was too much water ahead of him. He sent a man out to scout and the guy came back and confirmed it. He said the reeds hid creeks which ran everywhere and were full of rotten timber. He said, "Well never get the drays through." He had two drays with him carrying his supplies. He crossed the Murray at that point into what is now Victoria. It took him two days to find the river again.

Getting back to the river, he said it was issuing from a vast marsh. About four years later a gentleman named Edward Curr, who was a squatter, took up a run on the Goulburn River, not very far from Barmah. The Goulburn runs almost parallel to the Murray for some distance before it joins the Murray. He was not too far from Barham, so he and his brother went across and inspected the river flats to see if there was any good food there because he had 3,000 head of sheep that he had to feed. He wrote of mostly grasslands and lots of reed beds. He did mention riding past some what he called fine old gums from which we know that many a canoe had been stripped in the old days, so that was the Aboriginal use of the resource, but he did not mention vast forests, or anything resembling that.

Looking at the map that we passed around today, it was in 1848, which was 15 years after Sturt came down on the Government's layout by the sounds of it. That map shows a lot of trees. He has very carefully and painstakingly drawn lots of trees, but they are all in what we call box country, and very few red gums grow in that higher ground which is beside the Cadell Tilt. He obviously did not see any vast forests either in the red gum country. What he did draw on the map quite clearly were lots of sandhills and lots of reed beds. The reed beds that he shows are of much greater extent than they are today and that is largely because the red gums invaded the area where they were growing. There were red gums present, but they had not formed forests and you have to wonder why. I certainly do. When you look at the growth habit of red gums, you find that they are shade intolerant. They will not germinate unless the seeds are exposed to full sunlight. Lots of plants are like that.

What had happened was that the Aborigines maintained a regular burning program. Curr mentions that: he said that there was a pattern in the reeds that he saw, depending on the year and the season in which they were burnt. The trees really could not get going and any that did would have been burnt in the fires. They could not get going because the grass was too long. Curr tells us that. He said that the couch grass over at the Barmah area was a foot deep. He was delighted. Sturt tells us the grass that he saw, and this was before he got to the river, his stock was travelling through grass that was up to their necks. So there was long grass and very little opportunity for the sun to get at the seed. The Aboriginal burning program controlled the spread of the trees. Once Edward Curr and his mates crossed the river and put their sheep and cattle on the river flats, the trees had their opportunity. The next flood that came through provided plenty of moisture for germination, so it woke up the forest. That was the beginning of it.

There has been some discussion trees 300-year-old trees. They are regarded as 300 years old because they are a metre wide. But in those early days, those trees, being regularly flooded, grew at a much, much faster rate than that. They grew at phenomenal rates. They have demonstrated that also in Pakistan where they grow river red gums, the same eucalypt camaldulensis. They grow them mostly for domestic firewood and they are grown as a cash crop on irrigation farms. They cut those trees down at three years old. That is the best return that they get from the trees—to cut them down when they are three years old—but they were interested enough to do some tests on them and did a trial of river red gum seedlings. They measured them every year to 10 years. The growth rate was absolutely phenomenal that they got there. It was much, much faster than we expect here. It was something of the order of 33 millimetres a year in diameter whereas we get 3.3. That 3.3 is under the conditions of controlled river.

We spend an awful lot of money putting regulators and levies along the Murray to keep the water in the river during summer because summer floods have been shown to damage the trees. It can kill them so we have got this system of regulating to keep the water back in the river. So we have that. We have the very short term given to the Natural Resources Commission [NRC] to conduct its assessment. Three months was nowhere long enough and it was nowhere near long enough for those of us in the community who wanted to make sure that the facts were right to assemble our research. It has taken me about six or seven years to accumulate what I have on red gum forests, and I am still learning. I am still digging up new material as I come across new books.

I do not believe it was an adequate assessment. I do not believe that they were able to do the sort of job we would have liked them to do. We actually thought we were going to get a favourable assessment from the timber industry point of view. I am not associated with the timber industry. My father worked briefly in a sawmill in Mathoura when I was a very small boy, but I have always been interested in the industry. But we did not have long enough. I firmly believe, with the information we have available now, that if the Natural Resources Commission was to conduct a new assessment, we would get a very different set of recommendations.

**CHAIR:** That sounds like a suggestion to me. Is it?

**Mr JOSS:** I would welcome having them back here to do a new assessment. More than that, I would welcome you people deciding that it was not such an appropriate thing to do with those forests and to overturn the decision. I understand that that is a very difficult decision to make, but I do not think that a national park was an appropriate method of managing those forests because to grow those forests in the first place required extremely intensive management.

I think we had New South Wales' first resident forester appointed out here. The New South Wales Government in 1875 was so impressed with the potential of the forests as a resource that they employed a man and sent him down here to look after the forests and see that they were not cleaned out. They were certainly being felled at that stage for railway sleepers. John Manton started looking at the trees. Five years earlier than that, the forest had had the biggest flood that, even until now, has been recorded at Echuca wharf. The 1870 flood was massive. It was a very, very wet year everywhere. Everyone was bogged down. Overlanders trying to get cattle through, some of them only made a mile a day because they had to keep digging their cattle out. The forest got this enormous drink and that started a huge regeneration.

I think it is generally accepted that there are more trees germinated by the 1870 flood than by any flood since then. Manton got down here and realised that the trees would grow very, very quickly. He had all these skinny little saplings on his hands and he immediately started lobbying the Government to have some thinning done. Eventually, that happened. In about 1890 financial circumstances had changed a bit. We had a major depression on our hands then, probably at least as bad as the 1930 Depression or the Great Depression, and Manton managed to persuade the Government to put some money into thinning the forest. He got unemployed men down from Sydney. He had up to 150 at one stage working out in the forest, working on employment relief. They thinned the forest.

I have got some little folders here. I am reluctant to give you a lot more reading matter because I am aware that my submission is a fairly lengthy one. But in these folders I have some old historical photographs to show you. This is thinning the forest in 1896, and there's hardly a big tree to be seen. They are obviously very young trees. They realised at that time that they needed thinning. I think that will just about do me.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Joss, thanks for coming out with us today. Thanks for your submission. I have read it. You bring to our attention a lot of your own research that we would not otherwise have before us, so thank you. You give us extensive source material from about 1838. What discussions have you had with the traditional owners or the Aboriginal community about their oral history and what their forefathers have told them about the forest, or lack of forest, before the white man came?

**Mr JOSS:** None. Quite deliberately because, I do not know how to put this, I think some of their traditional mythology perhaps has changed over the years. I think we are getting a different version today, perhaps, than what we might get if we had been able to speak to three or four generations.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Right. On page 22 of your submission you tell us of the \$70 million annual contribution previously made by the timber industry to the region's economy. They are your words. I have asked previous witnesses about this because so many numbers are thrown at us and environmentalists will put different numbers. What is your understanding of the reduction in the size of the industry in dollar terms from that \$70 million figure, if we accept that, prior to the national park?

**Mr JOSS:** Look, I am not a great figures man. I love history. The \$70 million, as I understand it, came out of the Arche report, the socioeconomic report, that was done. I believe that's where it came from. I could not hazard a guess at what the current contribution is, but I think that was with the flow-on effect, but it was for the local region and not including the Murrumbidgee area. So I cannot help you with that any further, I am sorry.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Just one more question, David: The \$70 million—do you understand that to be from public forestry, that is, from forestry operations in the State Forests around here prior to 2010?

**Mr JOSS:** Yes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Or is that \$70 million covering both forestry operations on public land, State forests, and private lands?

**Mr JOSS:** No. I believe the Arche report picked out that figure as being from State forests. I think it is Arche Consulting. They were the people who were contracted by the National Resource Commission to do the socioeconomic report because the National Resource Commission did not have time to do it themselves.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I echo the Hon. Luke Foley's comments about thanking you for your detailed submission and for talking to us about your knowledge of the history of the area. I have read different references to reports that suggest that the timber industry was in decline prior to the declaration of river red gums and I want to get your view on that. Over the last couple of decades what was happening with the timber industry in the area in terms of jobs and production?

**Mr JOSS:** I can only speak from my knowledge of the industry in Mathoura. There I believe we had a viable industry. It was certainly not in decline. They were working hard and they were cutting as much timber as they were allowed to. I think possibly there was some decline in some areas but the Mathoura industry seemed to be doing fairly well all the time.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** You quoted a report on the \$70 million figure so I know you have done research in this area. Are you aware of the 2001 BIS Shrapnel report into river red gums?

**Mr JOSS:** I have not read it. I tried very hard to get a copy when I became aware of it. I believe it is a little like the report done by Professor Cris Brack, in that it has been put under lock and key somewhere; it is hard to get hold of. I know it exists. I was told that Forests NSW were not at all pleased with the figures in it but that is hearsay.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I am interested in your views. It said there is history of industry decline and job losses due to mechanisation of the industry and that most mills in the area have been operating at marginal viability since 2001.

**Mr JOSS:** That would have been their assessment at that time. I was not remotely interested in the timber industry in 2001 apart from a passing interest in it from childhood.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** You did look at it historically from 200 years ago to today. You did an enormous amount of good research into many things but you were not able to obtain the BIS Shrapnel report?

**Mr JOSS:** I did not try very hard but I tried to get it from people who I suspect could have made it available to me but would not. I cannot comment on the BIS Shrapnel report.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Joss, in your submission you refer on page 25 to section 9 with a heading, "The world's best solar energy". Would you expand on that conclusion?

**Mr JOSS:** This is not original thinking. I was inspired by something I read on the internet pointing out that in the process of photosynthesis trees turn sunlight into usable solid fuel. They use sunlight all the time and they do not require very much else.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What else do they require that is essential for them?

**Mr JOSS:** They require moisture, nutrients from the soil and carbon dioxide from the air. That is very topical at the moment. They take carbon dioxide from the air; basically they turn it into oxygen and wood. It puzzles me that we are locking up forests in national parks when we know, particularly with varieties like red gum which are very aggressive colonisers, if we cut one down another one is going to grow up there as soon as it gets water and sunlight. We have heard how reliant this region is on firewood. It seems to me that we should be using more of this instead of trying to squeeze energy out of photovoltaic cells and other technology which is not giving us the reliability that we can get out of the forests.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** In your opinion is it fair to say that burning firewood is really a renewable form of energy?

**Mr JOSS:** Yes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Cut a tree down, burn the wood and grow another tree and the carbon dioxide is recycled?

**Mr JOSS:** That's right. When you burn the tree you are giving off carbon dioxide but it is carbon dioxide that has been absorbed by that tree during its lifetime. A simplistic view is that once you cut the tree down another one grows in its place, it too is soaking up the carbon dioxide that was released by the tree when you burnt it.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** In relation to the map you showed us this morning; the description of that area initially by Hume and Hovell when they moved through it and then Sturt some years later, what year was that?

**Mr GRAHAM:** Hume and Hovell were exploring in 1824 but they did not come through this area, they crossed the river near Albury. I use them as a reference just to show that the line of thinking that the early settlers cleared massive amounts of trees from the Murray valley was wrong. Hume and Hovell found that the country near Albury was mostly open and Hovell wrote that in some places there were scarcely six trees to 100 acres. This was wide open country. Other people who explored the Murray wrote much the same thing; they kept coming across these vast plains that ran back from the river where today we have a lot of forests.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is it reasonable to turn into a national park something that was as you say man-made?

**Mr JOSS:** No, I cannot see the point in doing that. I am not anti national parks. When I was a lot younger and my kids were quite small we did a lot of camping in national parks. I always believed they were special places. Perhaps familiarity breeds contempt but I do not think it was appropriate to put something that has only grown up so recently into national parks. It was quite an accident; it was almost like an invasion of the rabbits because the trees had been kept under control.

Mr Foley asked me earlier whether I had any contact with the Aboriginal elders. I have had contact by email with a Professor Haike Tane from New Zealand who did some research back in the early 90s for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. He told me that he had interviewed the Aboriginal elders and they had said to him back then that their ancestors did not like the red gums, they kept them very much under control and they

deliberately limited the number of trees that were able to grow along the river. That to me suggests that there was a very active program to keep the country open which is what we have seen and I cannot imagine anyone declaring a plantation as a national park simply because it went in 150 years ago.

That is pretty much what we have got. They were out of control when the grazing started and the trees started to invade. There was nothing the settlers could do to stop them. I have heard stories of how people tried to crop some of the river flats and realised it was a disaster. Once the crops started to come up they could not plough it to keep down the red gums that were coming up in amongst the wheat. It seems to me rather mysterious that anyone would want to put it into a national park.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Are you familiar about the area around Yanga?

**Mr JOSS:** Not really, I have been there once or twice but not recently.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I will not ask a question on that then. What you are essentially saying is if we want to return to a pre-European utopia which accurately reflected the landscape of the time national parks should be bulldozing and clear-felling the entire national park, burning it and engaging in a large scale replanting program after they have destroyed all the regulators—if they want a pre-European utopia?

**Mr JOSS:** Yes, if you want to take it back then that is exactly what you have to do. The other scenario is if we get a massive bush fire which will kill all the trees out there and we can start from scratch. If you are going to do that I would rather see them cut down and made into something useful, even if it is as mundane as a railway sleeper. They are valuable for that and a resource.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** That leads into my next question; what do you envisage the outcome will be for the national parks if there is not selective logging taking place and they are locked up and left to their own devices?

**Mr JOSS:** If you drive around most of Australia you can see the true iconic form of the river red gum. It is a tree that grows on the riverbank with great sprawling branches and a short stout trunk. That is their natural state. When you put them close together and give them an ideal condition they fight each other for the sunlight and that is why they grow straight and tall. Let us assume they do not touch the forest at all, they do not do a thing, just leave it there and let it develop; it is going to take a very long time but I think what will happen is you will get back to a situation where you have some clearings that open up because trees have died and then you will start to get some of these trees that grow. You can pick them out in the forest.

The trees that genuinely were here when white people came to the area are all trees with branches that run out like that. They are all dead now because they were ring barked—if they are still standing. We had an active program to ringbark any of those old trees. It was an official policy of the forestry commission for close on 100 years because they were commercially useless. They were managing a commercial resource that was earning them good royalties. So they came up with a strategy to ensure that they got plenty of those good tall strong trees and they cut out all the weaklings. If you are going to leave the weaklings there it will turn into a mess; it will be a jungle.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** We heard earlier that Minister Sartor came down here and said that you were going to get a political lesson. Did you ever get a visit from Premier Rees or Kristina Keneally to explain the consequences of the deal?

**Mr JOSS:** No, not that I am aware of. I may have missed it.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Do you think it would be appropriate for a Premier to come down here and explain their decision to you?

**Mr JOSS:** I think Frank Sartor did his best, but he was struggling to make anyone down here believe him.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** He was brutally honest about the real reason for the park, wasn't he?

**Mr JOSS:** I think he was. I have read his book and I think he says in it—in fact I think he agrees with me—that the decision was made in too much haste. If we had had a longer time, given the amount of ongoing

research, I think we would have had a different result. I would like to put in a plug—for those of you who read historical topics—for a book called *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, by Professor Bill Gammage, in which he has done an enormous amount of research based on explorers' literature and various other sources. He has put together what is probably the most logical explanation I have read for the way the Aborigines looked after the country and burnt it very carefully and frequently to produce more food. They were virtually farming with fire throughout Australia. For anyone who is interested in learning about that, that is a very good book.

**CHAIR:** I declare this session closed. Thank you for talking to us and for supplying supplementary information.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 7.32 p.m.)**