



## **Victorian Lands Alliance**

**Submission to the Inquiry into  
Bushfires in Australia  
by the  
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural  
and Related Industries**

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## **Terms of Reference**

On 12 May 2009, the Senate referred the following matter to the Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries for inquiry and report on 26 November 2009:

The incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia, including:

- a. the impact of bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities;
- b. factors contributing to the causes and risks of bushfires across Australia, including natural resource management policies, hazard reduction and agricultural land maintenance;
- c. the extent and effectiveness of bushfire mitigation strategies and practices, including application of resources for agricultural land, national parks, state forests, other Crown land, open space areas adjacent to development and private property and the impact of hazard reduction strategies;
- d. the identification of measures that can be undertaken by government, industry and the community and the effectiveness of these measures in protecting agricultural industries, service industries, small business, tourism and water catchments;
- e. any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented;
- f. the appropriateness of planning and building codes with respect to land use in the bushfire prone regions;
- g. the adequacy and funding of fire-fighting resources both paid and voluntary and the usefulness of and impact on on-farm labour;
- h. the role of volunteers;
- i. the impact of climate change;
- j. fire – its causes (accidental, natural and deliberate) and remedies;
- k. the impact of bushfires on biodiversity and measures to protect biodiversity; and
- l. insurance against bushfires.

The VLA notes that some Terms of Reference overlap. Therefore, some VLA comments under one particular Term of Reference will be applicable to others.

## Recent bushfire reviews and inquiries

The Senate Committee will be well aware of recent material of relevance to this inquiry. Some that the VLA particularly draws to its attention are:

- The Victorian Parliamentary Environment and Natural Resources Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria. This was tabled in Parliament on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2008.
- A Nation Charred. Report of the Inquiry into Bushfires. House of Representatives Select Committee, October 2003.
- The Peoples Review of Bushfires, 2002-2007, in Victoria. Final Report 2009 Peter Attiwill et al ISBN 9780646510392 (pbk).
- Submissions to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, especially one by Peter Attiwill and Professor Mark Adams and one by David Packham, which are available on the Royal Commission's website. Various constituent bodies of the VLA have also made submissions to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and the attention of the Senate Committee is also drawn to these.

There is a wealth of material available to the Senate Committee in submission to these inquiries and the subsequent reports.



*Christine Fyffe MLA member of the Bushfire Inquiry*

## **Key points**

This submission by the Victorian Lands Alliance argues

- a. That the concept of the primacy of fire management as the cornerstone for effective public land management in Victoria must be embraced.
- b. That more fuel reduction burning be undertaken in Victoria to maximise fire management opportunities.
- c. That the primary operational constraint on meeting current fuel reduction targets is a lack of financial and personnel resources.
- d. The focus of expenditure on fire suppression over fire prevention is delivering a poor financial and environmental outcome for Victoria.
- e. On substantial areas of public land, no fire prevention work is undertaken on a year to year basis.
- f. That forest industry activity provides fire prevention and risk management benefits not provided effectively by any other stakeholder group.
- g. There should be a State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land.
- h. That the Committee recommend initial or seed funding be made available to the Victorian Lands Alliance to assist it to become the fire forum, or State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land.
- i. That the Senate Committee review the beneficial impact cattle grazing can have on reducing fire fuel loads and recommend that this be part of fire management for public land.
- j. That the Victorian Government introduces a planning overlay designating Fire Prone Local Government Areas to assist fire prevention activities.

## **About the Victorian Lands Alliance**

The Victorian Lands Alliance was established late in 2008, at least partly in response to a recommendation in 'The People's Review of Bushfires, 2002-2007, in Victoria' for:

'the establishment of a State-wide peak fire forum for the people, which we shall call the People's Fire Forum.'

And:

- From the growing community concern at the government response to the parliamentary Environment and Natural Resources Committee Bushfire Inquiry
- Because of the perception that only the minority view of city-based green lobby groups was being heard by the Victorian Government and the community on public land management issues

The current VLA Members are:

- Australian Environment Foundation
- Australian Motorcycle Trail Riders Association
- Australian Trail Horse Riders Association
- Barmah Forest Preservation League
- East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce
- Gippsland Deer Stalkers Association
- Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
- Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance
- Sporting Shooters Association of Australia [Vic]
- Victorian Game & Deerstalking Association
- Victorian Association of Forest Industries

Its aims are:

- The primary objective of the Victorian Lands Alliance is to initiate public policy which is consistent with the ideals of its member organisations.
- This policy will ensure active management and sustainable multiple-use of public land that balances the needs of the environment and the community.

## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference:

### a. the impact of bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities;

It is not the intention here to catalogue the various impacts of bushfires - especially with the inference that it be done with only the recent massive tragic fires in mind. The impact of bushfires is much more pervasive than the experience of the past 10 years. Bushfires have shaped our existence and it is their all encompassing impact that needs to be recognised.

In any review of bushfires it is important to have some notion of the preferred manner in which land and fire should be managed and for what preferred outcome. Attiwill and Adams write extensively on this subject in their submission to the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission and the full text of this submission is commended to the Senate Committee. In part, they write:

*Around the world, fire is recognized as 'the dominant fact of forest history'*

*"The great majority of the forests of the world - excepting only the perpetually wet rain forest, such as that of southeastern Alaska, the coast of northwestern Europe and the wettest belts of the tropics - have been burned over at more or less frequent intervals for many thousands of years. Fire is a worldwide phenomenon that ... appears in the geological record soon after the appearance of terrestrial plants".*

*Nowhere is this dominance of ecosystems by fire more important than in Australia. Victoria is the most seriously affected State within Australia, accounting for some three-quarters of deaths and more than half of the economic losses due to bushfire.*

*Australia was not always like this. Australia, in its northward drift from its Gondwanic connections 130 million years ago, became hotter and drier. The extensive cover of cool- temperate rainforest was gradually displaced by hard-leafed vegetation, by vegetation which, because of its evolution in relative isolation, is highly endemic. With increasing aridity came an increasing incidence and spread of fire from lightning. The frequency of fire in Australia increased with the coming of Aborigines some 50,000 years ago.*

*In short, fire has played a major role in the evolution and distribution of flora. We cannot escape our role as managers of the land. The opposition in our society to the use of fire in forest management is impossible to accept, given the devastation we have seen in the last six years.*

*The options for planning for fire (developed from Gill et al. 2002):*

- 1. Let 'nature' run its course-laissez-faire management with no intervention-on the presumption that 'natural' fire regimes will prevail in a beneficial way;*
- 2. concentrate resources on fire suppression- on the presumption that all fires are bad;*
- 3. recreate the fire regimes of Aboriginal people*
- 4. develop and implement planned fire regimes with the aim of managing diversity and of decreasing the risk of major, high-intensity fires (fire prevention).*

*The disastrous bushfires from 2002 to 2007 in south-eastern Australia showed the social, economic and ecological outcomes both of laissez-faire management and of fire suppression. Commonwealth and State inquiries following the fires stressed the imperative for programs of planned fire (prescribed burning, or fuel reduction burning).*

Clearly option 4, "develop and implement planned fire regimes with the aim of managing diversity and of decreasing the risk of major, high-intensity fires (fire prevention)" is the only sensible course of action.

## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference

- b. factors contributing to the causes and risks of bushfires across Australia, including natural resource management policies, hazard reduction and agricultural land maintenance;**

Fuel reduction burning and the need for it to be increased is of particular concern to the VLA.

Numerous inquiries and the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission identified the core issues in fire management and the most fundamental of these is the level of fuel in the forest. Judge Stretton stated: "*Fire management must be the paramount consideration of the forest manager*". Clearly, this has not been the case in Victoria for decades.

Tom Griffiths in his book *Forests of Ash* recounts some of the evidence given at the Stretton Royal Commission by mountain graziers and sawmillers where they were hounded by the Forests Commission to stop their practice of cool-burning the bush on a regular basis. The people who lived and worked in the bush became fearful of the 'dirty' bush that was a result. The thick, scrubby undergrowth that they regarded as a fire trap was all incinerated in the Black Friday fires of 1939. Decades later the Victorian Auditor General noted in his report on fire management in 1992 that: "*fuel reduction burnings had not been adequately implemented*" and in 2003 he noted that "*further work is needed in a number of critical areas*" such as "*increased focus on strategic management of hazard reduction on public land, to ensure that appropriate targets are set, resources are provided for their achievement and performance is monitored. However, there has been a consistent failure to achieve hazard reduction targets*" And ominously, "*At stake is the protection of human lives and homes, State forests, national parks and other public lands*".

This was highlighted by the Parliamentary Environment and Natural Resources Committee '*Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria*' which tabled its report five years later in June 2008 in the Victorian Parliament. This inquiry was initiated after the public outcry over the disastrous Alpine Fires and Great Divide Fire, in 2003 and 2006 respectively that collectively burnt over two million hectares of public land. In three years, these two fires incinerated more biodiversity values than all bushfires for the previous 150 years. Many areas show no signs of recovery.

The inquiry report states "*On balance the Committee finds it is likely that the bushfires of 2002/03 and 2006/07 were both the result, and the most recent examples of inappropriate fire regimes. The Committee finds that an increase in prescribed burning across the landscape represents the best strategy for managing the risks that future bushfires pose to biodiversity and other natural assets*" And "*The Committee finds that the frequency and extent of prescribed burning has been insufficient over a number of decades, for the preservation of ecological processes and biodiversity across the public land estate. An increase in the extent and frequency of prescribed burning for the enhancement of environmental values should therefore be a priority for the Department of Sustainability and Environment and its partner agencies*".

It seems we have the need to learn the same lessons over and over at the expense of lives in our rural communities and the environmental values we seek to protect.

The primary recommendation of this parliamentary inquiry was: "*That in order to enhance the protection of community and ecological assets, the Department of Sustainability and Environment increase its annual prescribed burning target from 130,000 hectares to 385,000 hectares*". It is therefore incomprehensible that the Minister for the Environment, Gavin Jennings should stand in the Victorian Parliament on December 4th 2008, after the mountain of evidence presented at this inquiry demonstrating the level of fuel reduction in Victorian forests was manifestly inadequate, and state that "*Hectare-based targets are not considered to be the best way of measuring effectiveness of the planned burning program. There is a need to begin to move away from hectare-based targets and*

*start thinking about reduction of fuel loads across the board, understanding community sensitivity to planned burning and better mirroring nature through the effective use of fire as a land management tool."* Numerous bushfire scientists, researchers, rural communities, Judge Stretton and the recent parliamentary inquiry all call for a quantum, measurable increase in prescribed burning.

The People's Review recommended the following in relation to fuel reduction burning:

*"Recommendation 1: The People's Review recommends that goals, procedures and accounting of prescribed burning in Victoria are totally revised, with the view to aiming toward a target of 10% of public land per year.*

*Recommendation 2: The People's Review recommends that the authorities capitalize and maximize the opportunities for prescribed burning to be used as an essential part of training in fighting fires.*

*Recommendation 13: The People's Review recommends that the grazing of domestic livestock on public land be honestly and objectively reviewed, bearing in mind the extent to which grazing can be managed to reduce fuels."*

These recommendations of the People's Review are strongly supported by the VLA.

### **Fuel reduction - how much?**

Western Australia has documented the control over wildfire with prescribed burning at the rate of about 18 per cent of the landscape. Their experience with a decline from that level is that a rise in damage from wildfire can be expected.

The Peoples Review of Bushfires made a strong case for prescribed burning in Victoria at a rate of 10 per cent of the landscape per year, which would entail annual burning of approximately 700,000 hectares per year. Other bushfire researchers state the rate of burning should be at least 460,000 hectares per year.

The ENRC Inquiry made the specific recommendation that 5 per cent of the landscape or 385,000 hectares should be burnt each year.

The average area burnt over the last 10 years to 2008, by DSE through prescribed burning, has been 97,190 hectares per year and this failed to achieve their own low target of 130,000 hectares by 17 per cent.

We acknowledge the DSE target for the current year was 130,000 hectares with 154,000 hectares burnt.

2009 Budget Service Delivery papers [page 218] show the DSE target for next year, after the worst fire tragedy in our history, is 130,000 hectares, the same as the last four years. This is unacceptable to the VLA, its members and the rural community.

By any measure, the current level of prescribed burning on Victorian public land is inadequate for ecological and fire management purposes. This has been conveyed to DSE, Parks Victoria and the Victorian Government on many occasions prior to the Great Alpine Fires of 2002/ 03 and many times since.

**Victorian Lands Alliance recommendation** - That the level of fuel reduction burning in Victoria be increased to a minimum of 385,000 hectares annually. The recent involvement of the VLA in community meetings concerned about fuel reduction burning is highlighted in Appendix 1.



## **Cattle grazing and fuel reduction**

Members of the Victorian Lands Alliance, the Rivers & Red Gum Environment Alliance and the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria in particular, have stressed the need to review the role of cattle grazing on public land as part of the fire management regime.

It is of great interest that the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre and the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, has now (April 2009) stated:

*"The existing evidence about whether the combined effects of fire and grazing are effective in managing fuel loads and fire risk was scant and inconclusive."*

The Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre is undertaking unbiased research into the impact of cattle grazing on fire fuel reduction. Recently also, the Environment and Natural Resources Committee of the Victorian Parliament commented, *"the scientific evidence that grazing may not be an effective or preferable bushfire mitigation strategy alone but believes that it can be used as a tool to complement other fuel reduction strategies on public land."*



*Charlie Hartup, concerned resident at the launch of the state-wide community No Fuel No Fire campaign at Healesville on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2009*

## **Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

- c. **the extent and effectiveness of bushfire mitigation strategies and practices, including application of resources for agricultural land, national parks, state forests, other Crown land, open space areas adjacent to development and private property and the impact of hazard reduction strategies;**

As stated, the main concern to the VLA in relation to “bushfire mitigation strategies and practices” is fuel reduction burning. This is covered extensively elsewhere in this submission.

The events of the last decade have demonstrated that we as a community have not yet learned the lessons of bushfire tragedy that are inevitable for this part of Australia. Already, 815 people have died in Australian bushfires in the last century and a half; around 600 of those people have died in Victoria.

Our level of preparation does not match the level of risk that we face.

We need to focus our efforts on preparation and planning more so than suppression. If we fail on preparation, as we have in the past, squadrons of aircraft and battalions of fire-fighters will be insufficient to protect life and property from firestorms like Black Saturday.

This is not to downplay the effort or resources that should be allocated to suppression however, currently in Victoria there appears to be an imbalance in funding of 10 to 1 in favour of suppression. We need to refocus our commitment to fire preparation.

The cost of bushfires to the taxpayers in a single year needs to be considered against the \$10.5M budget allocation for fuel reduction burning. It is understood the 2002/03 fires cost in excess of \$250M to bring under control, the 2006/07 fires over \$600M for suppression and recovery, and \$1B in costs of suppression and recovery for 2009. This makes the fire suppression and recovery cost to the Victorian taxpayer in the last decade alone, in excess of \$1800M.

**Victorian Lands Alliance recommendation** – On the basis of the current funding for fuel reduction burning, the Senate Committee recommend adequate funding to meet the level of fuel reduction burning required for minimum fire protection and biodiversity protection on public land.

## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference

- d. **the identification of measures that can be undertaken by government, industry and the community and the effectiveness of these measures in protecting agricultural industries, service industries, small business, tourism and water catchments;**

### **Beneficial impact of forestry operations during bushfire emergencies**

In its "*Overview of stakeholder evidence*" in relation to traditional bush users, the Environment and Natural Resources Committee [ENRC] stated:

*"A significant number of stakeholders expressed the view that access to public land had been increasingly restricted over recent decades, resulting in a range of negative impacts on land and fire management. Impacts identified by stakeholders included: increased fuel loads in forested areas; the loss of valuable sources of local knowledge; the loss of firefighting experience and equipment; and a decline in the condition of, and access to, vehicle tracks. On the latter point, stakeholders' concerns focused on the condition and right of access to management vehicle only tracks and those tracks currently subject to seasonal closure.*

*The creation of national parks and the reduction of timber harvesting in public native forests were the two developments most commonly cited by stakeholders as having contributed to the above impacts. Many stakeholders also expressed the view that such impacts were the cumulative effect of these and other public land access restrictions, including the restriction of grazing, four wheel driving, hunting, mining and prospecting."*

The VLA strongly endorses these statements.

The gradual removal of timber harvesting operations from many areas of public land has several direct economic consequences, which manifest themselves at a point in the future in an unwelcome manner during a fire emergency and in a manner that the general public are not aware of.

Allocation of public land to reserves not available for timber harvesting, transfers that land from an earning capacity for the state to a burden on the taxpayer through budget allocations to maintain the national park estate.

The correlation of a decline in the area of forest available to timber harvesting to the current 9 percent of the available forest and the decline in track access and maintenance is hard to ignore, but is the undeniable consequence of less timber industry funding of roads and tracks that is not subsequently replaced by government funding.

The decline in the availability of heavy machinery in the bush, near fire ignition points, is overlooked by many. However, it is this type of machinery and the skilled bush operators who are experienced in working a heavy dozer down a spur that can mean the difference between early containment or a major conflagration.

The ability to access fire on a track network capable of carrying fire tankers, the ability to have machinery that can quickly form fire breaks or cut new access tracks can be crucial and whilst not the sole domain of the timber industry, the decline in the machinery and personnel available on the spot or at short notice has affected fire suppression.

The downsizing of the timber industry as a direct result of environmental activism for the 'protection of conservation values' has had a long term adverse effect on the ability to suppress fires quickly on public land. This has been one contributing factor in the wholesale decline in biodiversity protection in the last decade in Victoria.

## **The need for a non-government organisation representing people involved in fire and public land management**

The recently created VLA exists as a State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land, and needs some initial financial support to firmly establish itself in the mix of fire management debate and decisions.

It is of fundamental concern to the members of the Victorian Lands Alliance that a State wide non-government organisation exists to represent people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land. This is the reason for the establishment of the Victorian Lands Alliance in late 2008.

As previously indicated the Victorian Lands Alliance developed in response to a recommendation by the People's Review and growing community concerns with the management of public land.

The People's Review stated:

*"In many fields of endeavour, the main location of knowledge is in institutions created to maintain and develop that knowledge. In the case of fire, however, much of the basic knowledge about local topography, fire and wind conditions lies not with city-based institutions, but with the local people themselves. This is why the people need such a strong voice. The following recommendation is not directed to Government but to the people of Victoria to urge them to pick up where this People's Review concludes and carry forward the imperative that the people have a right to be heard, their views assessed and changes implemented.*

*Recommendation 9: The People's Review recommends the establishment of a State-wide peak fire forum for the people, which we shall call the People's Fire Forum.*

*The development of fire prevention and suppression policy must be in the hands of people of all ecological persuasions. There is undeniably strong anecdotal evidence that the staff of Parks Victoria and Department of Sustainability and Environment is, simply put, seen as being too green. Fire policy must broaden from bureaucratic control and city-based politics to reflect the views and aspirations of the community, especially of rural communities. After all, it is they who live in the area, respond as volunteers to fight fires and bear massive social and economic cost of bushfires.*

It is self evident following previous major conflagrations in 2003 and 2006 that:

- There had been a failure by land managers on a massive scale to protect the biodiversity of Victoria from large and intense fires.
- Local knowledge – in the protection of the environment and suppression of bushfire – had not been considered or utilised effectively, leading to further losses.
- Major stakeholders in the management of public land, such as represented by the VLA, had no input into the decisions relating to the fire management regime on public land.
- There has been insufficient policy change since the massive fires of 2002/03 and 2006/07 to bring about operational change that would minimise events like Black Saturday 2009.
- Fire management is not the primary concern of the land manager

*Recommendation 10: The People's Review recommends that fire prevention and suppression policy be set and reviewed by a Fire Policy Group that includes representatives of the People's Fire Forum.*

*Recommendation 11: The People's Review recommends that Prescribed Burning Groups, on which local communities have at least 40 percent of the representation, decide arrangements for prescribed burning including targets, timing, location and accounting."*

The People's Review made these recommendations to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee "*Inquiry Into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria June 2008*".

This parliamentary committee stated:

*"As the Committee has noted above, a significant number of stakeholders expressed the view that the current approach to community engagement by DSE and its partner agencies involves an over-reliance on public meetings.*

*"While the Committee welcomes the obvious improvement in community engagement by DSE and its partner agencies in recent years it has also found that room for improvement remains. One suggestion for increasing the level of community engagement in a way which has the potential to provide greater community input into the decision making process was provided to the Committee by the People's Review of Bushfires in Victoria Since 2000 ("the People's Review"). In its submission to the Inquiry, the People's Review stated that it had found a "major gulf between on-ground local expertise and knowledge on the one hand and DSE, PV and (to a lesser extent) the CFA on the other [which] results in some serious problems in fire prevention and suppression". The People's Review made the following recommendations to address this situation:*

- *the establishment (by the community rather than Government) of a state-wide peak fire forum for the people, to be known as the People's Fire Forum;*
- *the formulation and review of fire prevention and suppression policy by a fire policy group, consisting of DSE, CFA, PV and representation by the People's Fire Forum; and*
- *that prescribed burning groups be established, with a minimum local community membership of 40 per cent, to determine the targets, timing, location and accountability arrangements for prescribed burning.*

**The Committee considers that the establishment of a state-wide forum for the purposes recommended by the People's Forum does have merit.** (Our emphasis)

The Environment and Natural Resources Committee supported the need for a state-wide fire forum but missed the point that it should be established by and within the community. The Victorian Lands Alliance has been established to become the fire forum and a State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land.

**Victorian Lands Alliance recommendation** - There should be a State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land.

**Victorian Lands Alliance recommendation** - That the Senate Committee recommend that initial or seed funding be made available to the Victorian Lands Alliance to assist it to become the fire forum, or State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land.

## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference

- e. **any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented;**

Earlier comments particularly in relation to fuel reduction burning are relevant here. As indicated, the amount of fuel reduction burning has been too low for many years (15-20 years) and the level has to be increased.

### Bushfire research

Problems with bushfire research were highlighted in David Packham's submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. He wrote,

*"The last issue is the disgraceful state of bushfire research in Australia. Almost all of the fire research conducted is under the control of the fire agencies. There is no research that will produce results to guide policy generation that does not have the stamp of approval of the agency controllers. The Bushfire CRC is the main conduit of control. The Chairman of its Board is the past Chairman of the Victorian CFA, the CEO, is the previous fire manager of DSE, Victoria.*

*Fearless and independent research in this environment is impossible. Whilst this situation exists we will continue to go down the path of future fire disasters with extensive environmental damage, loss of water supplies, loss of homes, businesses and other assets and an increasing death toll. If this continues it will become the greatest act of public negligence in our short occupation of this land."*

David Packham further discussed this issue in a letter to the Weekly Times in January 2009. Mr Packham wrote:

*"Even though I have been a bushfire scientist for now in excess of 50 years I write this letter as a matter of personal rather than scientific opinion. My opinion is of course based upon the five decades of involvement with all aspects of bushfires from prescribed burning to flame chemistry and a stint as supervisor of fire weather services for Australia.*

*It has been a difficult lesson to me that despite the severe damage to our forests and the inclusion of fatal fire into our nation's capital the political decision has been to do nothing that will change the extreme threat to which our forests and rural lands are exposed. The decisions to ignore the threat has been encouraged with some shocking "science" from a minority of fanatical academics using strategies that are common place in political debate but have had no place up to now in scientific discourse. We have been treated recently to the decay of a once great bushfire scientific journal through a perversion of the editorial system where by the primary offenders who have had substandard papers published whilst other scientists with different views being excluded, one for not referring to a paper by one of the editors which had not even been published.*

*The conclusions of these authors who hold editorial positions include the concept that high intensity fires are actually good for the forest, massive mudslides are merely localised and serve to redistribute nutrients and other such twaddle.*

*Only a very few expert retired fire managers, experienced bushies and some courageous politicians are bucking the decision to lock up our bush and leave it to be burnt. The purpose*

*of this failed policy is clearly to secure uninformed city votes.*

*The politicians who are willing accept this rubbish will use it to justify the continuation of the greatest threat to our forests, water supplies, home and lives to secure a minority green vote and continue to throw millions (and no doubt soon billions) at ineffective suppression toys whilst starving the few foresters and bush people who know how to manage our public lands.”*

Clearly some action needs to be taken to ensure research into bushfires is “*fearless and independent*”.



*Bushland in Melbourne's water catchment burnt in the Black Saturday fires 2009*

## **Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

### **f. the appropriateness of planning and building codes with respect to land use in the bushfire prone regions;**

Excessive regulation that restricts native vegetation removal and management overlays for activities, such as roadside burning by CFA brigades, are as effective as a total ban by preventing the practical implementation of these activities. This is prohibition by default.

It is not uncommon for local CFA brigades, staffed by volunteers, filling out forms on multiple occasions, sometimes weeks in advance, seeking municipal permission for the same burn area when the weather on the nominated burn day turns unfavourable for conducting a burn. Some smaller brigades have ceased conducting roadside burns because of the paperwork and road safety compliance measures the brigade must undertake for each burn. Obviously, this is counter-productive for fire prevention in local communities.

Roads in designated 'Fire Prone Local Government Areas' must be mandated as escape routes and a vital link in the supply of emergency services, rather than an extension of forested areas.

It is not uncommon for restrictive local council vegetation clearing by-laws, administered by over-zealous council officers to result in:

- Compliance with the regulation, which results in minimal fire protection for the property in question and /or adjoining properties.
- No clearing of native vegetation by landowners because of the complexity and perceived low fire protection value of such regulations, which increases the risk for all in that community.
- Refusal by the landowner to abide by the regulation which can result in prosecution. Numerous Victorian landowners have suffered this fate in trying to protect their properties resulting in fines of up to \$50,000 in individual cases.
- Apathy in the community from conflicting messages from, for example CFA advice to have a wide clearance around buildings from native vegetation, whereas some local councils severely restrict the amount of vegetation cleared.

**Victorian Lands Alliance recommendation** – The Senate Committee recommend that the Victorian Government introduce a planning overlay for 'Fire Prone Local Government Areas' in designated areas. This overlay should empower residents and communities through enhancement and encouragement, not prohibition through restriction and regulation. This overlay could provide a uniform approach in fire prone local government areas that lifts the burden from local government on many fire prevention matters and restores the responsibility to landholders for their own protection. This planning overlay could provide a mechanism for design by bushfire researchers with a level of expertise that may not be available to many local council planning departments.

A Peoples Fire Forum, advocated previously in this submission, could provide valuable input to such a planning overlay.

Landholders must take responsibility for their own safety and protection of assets, but also must be empowered to do so, on their own land.



## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference

### **g. the adequacy and funding of fire-fighting resources both paid and voluntary and the usefulness of and impact on on-farm labour;**

Until the concept of the primacy of fire management is embraced by land management planners, adequate resources are unlikely to be allocated for the key areas of fire preparation [fuel reduction, access tracks etc] and fire prevention.

If adequate resources are unavailable for fire preparation, as has been highlighted on numerous occasions, then it is unlikely that trained, experienced personnel with sufficient resources will be available at short notice to deal with large or numerous outbreaks of fire.

Few in the community would quibble at the increases in fire suppression resources allocated in recent years, but would query the wisdom of ignoring the adage 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'.

The reduction in levels of staffing employed in the bush by DSE since the 1980's, along with a decline in numbers of forestry workers and their machinery is a key factor in whether early control of the spread of fire is successful or not. The over reliance on aerial fire fighting at the apparent expense of the availability of on-ground personnel and resources was exposed in the Alpine and Great Divide Fires where, on a number of days, aerial fire fighting resources could not be utilised because of weather and smoke conditions.

The VLA supports the following recommendations of the People's Review:

*"Recommendation 3: The People's Review recommends that the government increase the number of departmental people living and working in country towns and the bush.*

*Recommendation 4: The People's Review recommends that the government increase the resources available in the country, both for fire prevention and for general maintenance and upkeep of State lands.*

*Recommendation 5: The People's Review recommends that the system of roads, tracks, fire towers, firebreaks, and water-points throughout State land (State forest, national parks and unoccupied Crown land) be thoroughly reviewed, with a view to opening up and maintaining access and maximizing fire-fighting capability over the estate.*

*Recommendation 6: The People's Review recommends that, together with employing more staff in the bush, the government utilize public land resource and recreation groups, individually and in groups, to assist in general maintenance and in keeping roads and tracks open and in good condition.*

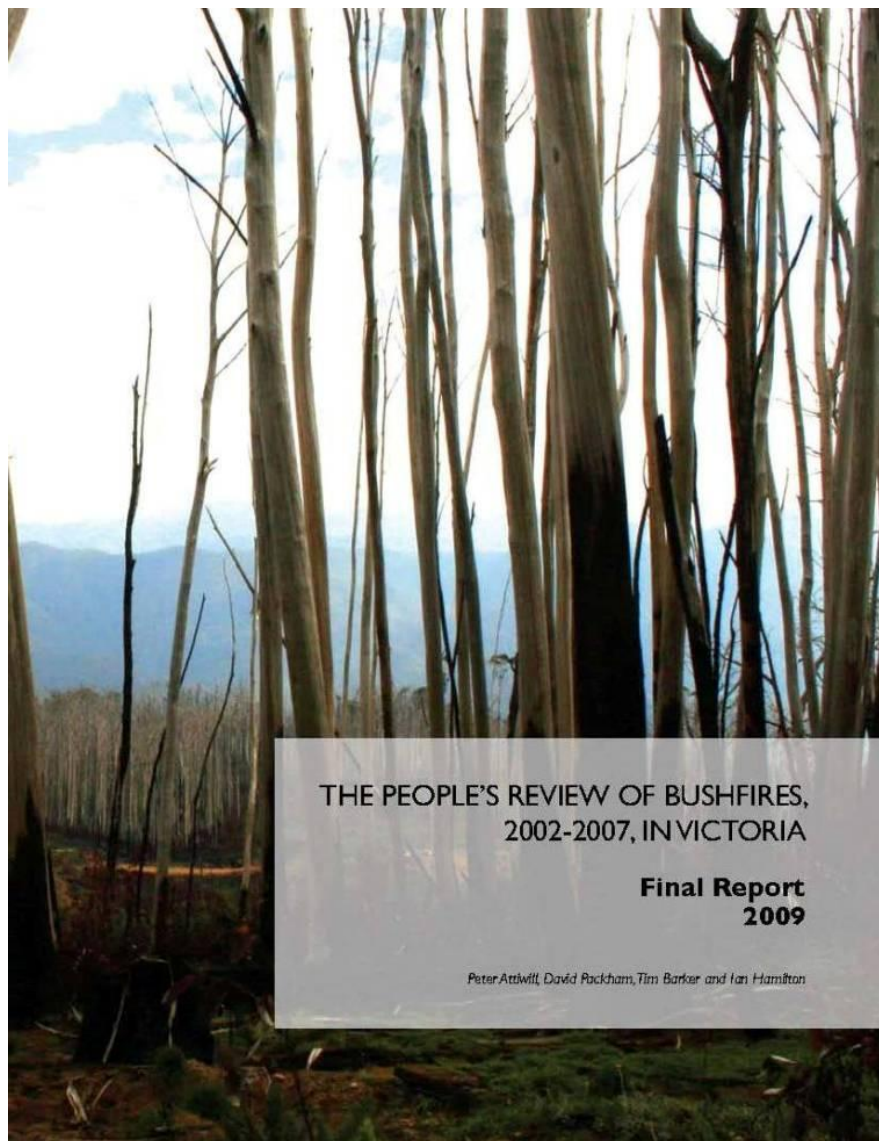
*Recommendation 7: The People's Review recommends that all steps are taken to provide an immediate and aggressive first strike capacity across the State so that fires are contained as soon as possible.*

*Recommendation 8: The People's Review recommends that there should be a thorough review and overhaul of bushfire suppression activities in Victoria, including the line of command in fire-fighting, the line of command in granting and enabling access across State tenures, and communications."*

The VLA notes the culture of DSE in many areas of management is skewed towards central planning. While this may work in some management disciplines, it is the view of VLA, rural communities and fire-fighters that this is a disaster for fire prevention and suppression activities.

There is a curious reference in the Terms of Reference to the "usefulness of and impact on on-farm

*labour*". On-farm labour, including that of landowners and lessees, is the base from which fire fighting volunteers are drawn. On-farm labour is the most vital component of all fire fighting assets. Not only does on-farm labour provide the basis for local brigades but farmers provide immense fire fighting muscle through the provision of vehicles with "slip-on" tanks and fire fighting equipment.



## **Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

### **h. the role of volunteers;**

The VLA notes:

- The availability of volunteers is essential to fire management. The role of volunteers is vital and part time and essential workforce must be supported.
- Essentially, local people volunteer to be part of a local network and to assist each other in times of fire. In the unlikely absence of any full-time Country Fire Authority bureaucracy, the local brigades would continue to exist. This illustrates the strength and local necessity of local brigades. The volunteers are more important than the full-time Country Fire Authority staff.
- The number of personnel working in the bush needs to be increased. This increase in numbers of people would provide a wider base from which to enlist volunteers.
- Where there has been dissatisfaction within the Country Fire Authority, this has usually been directed by the volunteer level at the upper echelons of paid and full time personnel. At the local level and within local brigades the People's Review did not detect any concerns that would adversely impact on the number of volunteers.

## Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference

### i. the impact of climate change;

The VLA accepts without hesitation that climates change. The recent fires in Victoria have not been due to climate change. The causes of recent fires have included drought, inadequate fuel reduction burning, inappropriate fire suppression regimes - as outlined in the Peoples Review and sudden extreme heat – all unrelated to long term climate change.

In their submission to the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, Attiwill and Adams state:

*“We submit that Victoria (and other States in Australia), like the United States, Greece and many other countries, has expanded its budget for fire suppression at the expense of fire prevention activities. Fuel loads throughout the State are high; with increasing temperatures and a prolonged drought, megafires have been the result. The costs of firefighting, and the environmental damage have been enormous and unsustainable. We nevertheless continue to concentrate our efforts on fire suppression.*

***We are in danger of being brainwashed into believing that the sole cause of megafires is global warming.”***

The following article from The Age (26.02.09) explained the weather surrounding Black Saturday and refutes suggestions that the fires were related to climate change. William Kininmonth, a former head of Australia's national Climate Centre and consultant to the World Meteorological Organisation on climate issues and author of *Climate Change: A Natural Hazard*, wrote

*A point to be emphasised is that the meteorology of extreme fire days develops and persists over a period of many days. Black Friday of 1939 was part of a heatwave over south-eastern Australia that sequentially, over a week, brought record temperatures to Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. A week before Black Saturday 2009, Melbourne had a series of three days with temperatures in the low 40s with intervening days about 30 degrees as temperatures were tempered by sea breezes. The excellent early warnings, on-day predictions and real-time advice given by the Bureau of Meteorology on Black Saturday point to the importance of maintaining the modern infrastructure that supports these essential services. Megafires fortunately are a relatively rare event but each summer has the potential for another catastrophe.*

***It is fashionable to promote climate change as being a contributor to changing fire frequency and intensity. The pattern of rainfall over the past century does not point to a trend of reduction in rainfall. Nor has any link been offered between global temperature trends and the meteorology of Victorian heatwaves. Extreme bushfire events are rare events and must be analysed according to the statistics relating to rare events; the breaking of a previous temperature record established 70 years earlier does not establish an underlying trend.***

*The firestorm conditions of Black Saturday 2009 resulted from the earlier conditioning of vegetation and the unusually intense meteorology of the heatwave that established hot dry airflow and accompanying strong winds over a wide area. While it is possible to broadly identify and monitor the characteristics there is much to be learned about the large-scale controls over seasonal rainfall and the unique meteorology of heatwaves. Ongoing research, early adoption of new technologies and the maintenance of robust meteorological infrastructure are essential strategies forming part of our community defence against future megafires.*

## **Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

### **j. fire – its causes (accidental, natural and deliberate) and remedies;**

The VLA has canvassed the causes of fires elsewhere in this submission and does so again in brief in this section.

In many respects the cause is immaterial - we will always have to deal with ignitions.

Fires will continue to be lit by accident (campfires, machinery) and natural causes (lightning). It is the condition of the countryside after ignition that becomes all important. Where the landscape into which fire is introduced

- is dry due to drought,
- is volatile due to heat, and,
- has excessive fuel due to inadequate fuel reduction burning,

major fire will erupt.

This will be worsened by inappropriate fire suppression regimes as outlined in the Peoples Review.

What we can have an impact upon is,

- the landscape into which the fire is introduced and
- the machinery that is available to put fires out.

The landscape issue involves fuel reduction burning and this must be increased. This is extensively discussed elsewhere in this submission.

The machinery issue involves aerial fire fighting, on-ground resources, communication resources and fire watching and surveillance capacities. It has been clearly expressed elsewhere that, despite the ever increasing amounts of money spent on suppression technology, the fires continue to rage. Put simply, the lack of fire prevention has caused fires of such size and ferocity that no amount of human technology can put them out.

## **Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

### **k. the impact of bushfires on biodiversity and measures to protect biodiversity;**

The impact of bushfires on biodiversity is catastrophic. In Victoria, the 2003 and 2007 alpine fires blasted the “diversity” out of “bio”.

This is covered in detail in the submission presented to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission by Attiwill and Adams.

After fires of such intensity and expanse the biodiversity clock starts again at zero. The diversity has been destroyed and all flora and fauna start again at year 1.

The *Eucalyptus Regnans* (Mountain Ash) is a particular case in point in regard to biodiversity. Many stands of Mountain Ash were burnt in the 2003 alpine fire. Intense fire kills these trees but the same fire starts the growth of new trees. However, the 2007 fire reburnt some of these areas and killed the new trees. This meant there was no seed from which a new forest could grow. These areas are now grotesque landscapes of dead Mountain Ash weathered as grey as a suburban lamp-post. The landscape could remain in this situation for decades. It might also provide the dead and dried fuel for even more intense fires. This sort of impact is catastrophic.

The main fire management regime technique to protect biodiversity is to undertake fuel reduction burning in a patchwork manner which leaves a mosaic of areas burnt at different times.

**Comment on the Senate Committee Term of Reference**

**1. insurance against bushfires.**

The VLA has no comment to make on this Term of Reference.

## Appendix 1

### Involvement of the VLA in community 'No fuel No fire' meetings

The VLA has been involved in the following 'No Fuel No Fire' community meetings

- 'No Fuel No Fire' Launch in Healesville on April 4th
- 'No Fuel No Fire' Launch in Barmah on April 7<sup>th</sup>
- Gunbower Island Fire Prevention Group formed at a meeting in Cohuna on April 15th
- Fire forum held in Colac on April 16th
- 'No Fuel No Fire' meeting at Inverleigh April 21st
- Fire forum held in Bairnsdale on May 19<sup>th</sup>
- 'No Fuel No Fire' meeting at Pakenham July 22<sup>nd</sup>
- 'No Fuel No Fire' meeting at Cann River July 23<sup>rd</sup>
- 'No Fuel No Fire' meeting at Traralgon August 4<sup>th</sup>

These meetings have been particularly concerned with the findings of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee report

- Finding 3.2: The scale and intensity of the 2002/03 and 2006/07 bushfires were a result of inappropriate fire regimes, and in particular, of an insufficient level of landscape scale prescribed burning.
- Finding 3.3: An increase in prescribed burning across the landscape...in a manner which mimics natural fire regimes, represents the most appropriate strategy for minimising the immediate and long term threats to biodiversity from large and intense bushfires.

The meetings noted that the Victorian Auditor General found in 2003 that there had been a "consistent failure to achieve hazard reduction targets".

Of the 20 inquiry recommendations, only 7 were given full support. Arguably the most important recommendation was, 2.2: "That in order to enhance the protection of community and ecological assets, the DSE increase its annual prescribed burning target from 130,000 hectares to 385,000 hectares."

These meetings have seen a need for:

- A commitment by the land manager to regular prescribed burning
- Creation of strategic low fuel zones
- Roadside fuel managed to provide safe escape routes for communities
- Stronger community involvement in decisions on fire management

These meetings have typically passed resolutions directed to the Victorian Premier, Mr. John Brumby:

- The community is very concerned at the condition of areas of public land which are a fire hazards for the local community. We call upon you to direct DSE/ Parks Victoria to undertake all necessary fire prevention works without delay to minimise the risk of wildfire to the community.
- We request that your government provide direct financial and administrative support, without delay, to CFA brigades to enable sufficient roadside fuel reduction burning to provide firebreaks and safe fire escape routes for rural communities.



The VLA has found these meetings have been attended by hundreds of local people concerned about their safety and the protection of their assets from fire emanating from public land.

Without exception, the meetings have expressed concerns about the poor management of public land in Victoria.