

31st July 2009



Senator Heffernan
Chair
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator,

RE: Inquiry into Bush Fires in Australia

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) thanks you for the opportunity to forward a submission to the Inquiry into Bush Fires in Australia.

As background, the Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is the State's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation. WAFarmers represents approximately 4,000 Western Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

In this submission, WAFarmers reminds the Committee that it was as recently as 2003 that the parliament conducted a significant inquiry into Australian bushfires. That inquiry, conducted by a House of Representatives Select Committee, was initiated, as was the current Inquiry, by tragic fire-events which saw significant loss of property and life.

The Inquiry's findings were published as 'A Nation Charred' (October 2003). In the publication's Forward, Inquiry Chair Gary Nairn comments "It is my view that there must be serious and sincere recognition of the need to change the culture and practices within many of or public land managers and fire fighting agencies. For never again can we afford to be a Nation Charred."

Unfortunately less than six years later, large parts of the Australian landscape were.

The Terms of Reference for the 2003 and the current Inquiries are, in many areas remarkably similar, certainly in the areas of (1) the impact of bushfires, (2) the contributing factors, (3) bushfire mitigation strategies, (4) policy development, (5) planning and building codes, and (6) the role and contribution of volunteers.

In this submission, WAFarmers takes the opportunity to again raise issues which were consistent messages heard by the 2003 Inquiry, these being:

- there has been grossly inadequate hazard reduction burning on public lands for far too long;
- local knowledge and experience is being ignored by an increasingly top heavy bureaucracy;
- when accessing the source of fires, volunteers are fed up with having their lives put at risk by fire trails that are blocked and left without maintenance;
- there is a reluctance by state agencies to aggressively attack bushfires when they first start, thus enabling the fires to build in intensity and making them harder to control; and
- better communications between and within relevant agencies is long overdue.

WAFarmers considers that the 2003 Inquiry identified key strategic objectives in the preparation and response to fire events, and therefore, a pivotal activity for the current Inquiry must be to review the level of implementation of the 59 recommendations of the 2003 review.

The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia website identifies that in the 2007-08 financial year, over 6600 landscape and vegetation fire incidents were attended by the States 26 000 career and volunteer fire fighters. Many of these volunteers are WAFarmers members and as such we request an opportunity to address the Inquiry, should you be holding a public hearing in Western Australia.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Norton', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mike Norton

President