

The Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary,

Senate inquiry into bushfires in Australia

The Bushfire Front appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Bushfires in Australia.

We are an organisation of professional bushfire management and scientists. Cumulatively we have over 400 years experience in the business. Our objective is to lift the standard of bushfire mitigation and management in Australia (and especially in the southwest of WA) to meet the requirement of World’s Best Practice and to ensure that standards are maintained over time, rather than responding to crises and disasters.

We welcome this review by the Australian Senate. There is a need for a national approach to bushfire issues, and Senators are in a good position to push for this.

Bushfire management in Australia is characterized by two great weaknesses: (i) a lack of leadership and policy coordination at Federal, State and Local Government levels; and (ii) a failure by fire authorities to focus on bushfire prevention, preparedness and damage mitigation, as well as on suppression. Unless these two weaknesses are effectively overcome, bushfire disasters will continue to occur regularly.

We now turn to the issues listed in your Inquiry’s Terms of Reference.

1. The impact of bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities

In any discussion of “bushfires” it is essential to first define the sort of fire under discussion. Many fires in the Australian bush are of mild intensity, and have virtually no lasting impact on any human or environmental values. This is so for mild fires used for fuel reduction in well-managed prescribed burning programs, and for most of the “wildfires” which occur in the bush or on farmland.

Approximately 2% of fires occur on very hot, very windy days under conditions when bushland fuel has a low moisture content, often in the wake of drought conditions. Under such conditions, if the fire enters areas of high fuel loads, intensity will be so high that suppression is impossible. These small number of fires do massive damage over very large areas.

Knowing this fact provides a clue to the priority for bushfire management: to prevent really serious damage it is necessary to put in place a system that minimises the risk of a small number of large, high intensity fires. Any other system will only cope with the large number of relatively mild fires that are easily suppressed and do little damage.

This fact is poorly understood by most politicians, fire authorities and members of the public. Because a system that tackles the low number of high intensity fires requires year-in and year-out attention, and cannot be sorted out in a couple of hectic months work at the start of the fire season, it is rarely properly funded or politically supported.

2. Factors contributing to the causes and risks of bushfires across Australia, including natural resource management policies, hazard reduction and agricultural land maintenance.

There are two key issues: (i) the policy vacuum; and (ii) lack of comprehensive fuels management

2.1 *Bushfire Policy*

As Senators knows only too well, government in Australia is complex, with many levels and jurisdictions and many opportunities for policy to diverge or conflict. This effectively splits the forces which potentially could be focusing on developing and implementing effective fire mitigation and management systems.

Australia has no National Bushfire policy and different States and agencies have different policies, or at least different philosophies and priorities. This is exacerbated by the situation at local government authority level, where there is often a different approach to fire management on private land between one councils and its neighbour. The Federal government has not shown itself willing or capable of developing a national policy and State governments are generally not interested in dictating policy to local government.

The Bushfire Front has devoted significant time to this issue over the years. We have offered to assist the Commonwealth to develop a national policy (this offer was rebuffed) and we have drafted a State-level policy for Western Australia (this was rejected as un-necessary). We conclude that governments are happy to operate in a policy vacuum because this means they have nothing to be held to. This is a shocking indictment of Australian governance.

2. *Fuels management*

Bushland fuels must not be allowed to accumulate beyond the level at which fires inevitably become too intense to allow suppression. Unfortunately fuels management has been largely ignored, or has been rejected by many Australian bushfire and land management authorities.

The problem is two-fold:

- Environmentalists and many city-based academics do not like fuel reduction burning and are constantly pushing the message that it damages native ecosystems and destroys flora and fauna. There is no scientific basis for this belief and it should be rejected by responsible governments. Because many governments are dependent on green preferences to get elected they shy away from supporting prescribed burning.
- Prescribed burning must be done professionally, based on fire behaviour and fuels research, and must be conducted by skilled personnel. Many jurisdictions have not done the research, and lack trained people.

The fact is, without fuel reduction, Australia is condemned to future killer bushfires.

3. 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 discussed above there is no effective bushfire mitigation strategy applied anywhere in Australia. This is especially true of bushland in national parks and on private land at the city fringes. Even in WA, where an annual fuel reduction program is implemented, it is inadequate.

4. 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

The following measures must be taken:

- The adoption of policy/strategies that recognize the importance of preparedness and damage mitigation, as well as suppression;
- Funding arrangements that reward successful fire management systems, and do not reward failure;
- Fuels mapping and the development of strategic fuel reduction master plans, coupled to funding;
- Research into fire behaviour and fuels, and the development of burning guides;
- Strong rejection of rubbish put out by green academics who make silly claims about the impact of prescribed burning on the environment;
- Comprehensive community education about fire;
- The development of a template for a fire resilient community;
- Annual programs of audit and public reporting.

The Bushfire Front has developed a template for Best Practice in bushfire management (rejected by the WA government). This can be made available to Senators.

5. Any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented

While we consider that on-going research is necessary, we point out that we already know basically what needs to be done. By coupling effective fuels management with an efficient suppression organisation in communities who understand their responsibilities for their own protection and protection of their own assets, success will result. The missing element is not knowledge, but political will and fuel reduction.

6. The impact of climate change

This is a furbly cooked up by environmentalists and failing fire and land management agencies. In the first place, increased temperature has little impact on fire behaviour. Fires become intense when it is dry and windy and fuels are heavy. A rise in temperature of a couple of degrees will have insignificant impact.

Drought is an important influence on fire, but droughts occur in Australia already and always have done.

Doomsday projections of “unstoppable megafires” and “catastrophic weather” are expressions of defeat. We are not powerless to face up to hotter, even drier conditions. The trick is to prepare and to take steps to minimise fire damage and make fires easier and safer to suppress. Basically this means fuel reduction, not retreating to a bunker in despair.

6. The impact of bushfires on biodiversity and measures to protect biodiversity

Again it is essential here to distinguish between high and low-moderate intensity fires. As far as we are aware there is no evidence to demonstrate that a regime of regular (5-9 year rotation) burning in most Australian forests will have any permanent damaging impact on biodiversity. On the contrary, evidence suggests that more frequent fire, producing a patchy mosaic, will benefit biodiversity.

Biodiversity is completely incinerated by large high intensity bushfires, and may take 100 years to recover.

7. Community understanding of fire

In general the Australian public is poorly informed about bushfire management and bushfire science. The European idea that “all fires are bad” is still dominant, supported by environmentalists with a “leave-it-to-nature” philosophy. Research into fire use by Aboriginal people, or natural fire frequencies in pre-settlement times clearly indicates that fire is a natural part of the Australian environment, but this work is routinely abused by some agency officers and green activists opposed to prescribed burning. As a result there is now a well-embedded mythology about the damage caused to the environment by low and moderate intensity prescribed burns, the result of which is people living in very high risk environments. The poor standard of public understanding about fire has permitted the growing tendency for bushfire policy to be dictated by ideology, mythology and political bias rather than by historical fact, science and actual field experience.

The number and size of damaging high intensity bushfires in forest land all over Australia will always be higher in the absence of effective fuels management. This is because no system of fire suppression can cope with high intensity fires on a bad day, when the fires are spreading through areas of heavy fuel which are generating spotting. This situation is not well understood anywhere outside the small community of Australian bushfire and land managers. This fact leads to opposition to fuel reduction burning, poor planning decisions, and the false belief that if money is poured into firefighting equipment, nothing else is needed to ensure community safety.

A major issue in community education is terminology. It is common in Australia for bushfire terms to be used incorrectly (“back burn” used to mean “prescribed burn”) or vaguely (“frequent fire”). To help overcome this problem The Bushfire Front has developed a standard glossary, a copy of which can be made available to the Senate. There is an opportunity to take a leadership role in this, and to promote the development and provide custodianship for an Australia-wide bushfire terminology, thus ensuring consistent and accurate use of critical words and terms.

8. Recommendations

- (i) This Inquiry should recommend the development of a National Bushfire Policy for signing off at all levels of government, and arrange for input from independent experts and scientists. This should be accompanied by the development of a small Federal agency responsible for implementing policy and reviewing and reporting on bushfire outcomes in the States and Territories
- (ii) Senators should define a World’s best practice bushfire management system for implementation in the Australian environment. This will demand input from bushfire specialists all over the country, plus review of systems being developed and implemented elsewhere.
- (iii) Flowing from both of the above, Senators should seek to define the conditions under which federal funds will be provided to State and Territory Governments for bushfire mitigation and management. For example, Federal funds should be given when it can be demonstrated (by independent audit) that a State government is implementing a Best Practice fire management system, as defined by the Senate. In respect to bushfires, any funding policy must be designed to rewards best practice, not system failure.
- (iv) Senators should seek to ensure the Federal Government continues to provide leadership and funds for bushfire research, and for the transfer of research into operations. From the standpoint of addressing the concerns of people opposed to prescribed burning, a critical research issue is to clarify pre-settlement fire frequency through studies of grass trees and modelling natural fire occurrence and development in the absence of suppression. The most critical operational issue is the development of high quality fire behaviour guides for all forest types.
- (v) Senators should facilitate national officer-level and scientist-level liaison and liaison between Australian and international fire and land management services through the funding and oversight of regular working

group meetings, seminars and study tours. In addition, Senators should review the concept of establishing a national-level bushfire management training facility, which bushfire people from all over Australia can attend, and achieve national-level accreditation.

- (vi) Senators should provide the leadership to ensure development of a public education campaign aimed at informing Australians about the real nature of fire in the Australian environment, and its natural place as well as its threats. In particular, a well-designed national communication strategy is needed to counter the anti-burning propaganda put out by political pressure groups.
- (vii) Senators should sponsor a national bushfire terminology for Australia-wide adoption.

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