

The Stretton Group

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July 29, 2009

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agriculture and Related Industries
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Parliament House
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Dear Secretary

Bushfires in Australia

On behalf of The Stretton Group I wish to submit a range of material that has been compiled by The Stretton Group over recent years. It is relevant to the Senate's Inquiry about bushfires in south east Australia.

- Submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (*May 14, 2009*)
- The Green Inferno (*November 25, 2004*)
- National Parks: Lock 'em up and let 'em burn. Grampians and Anakie Fires 2006 (*February 23, 2006*)
- Fire – Flood – Mud – Water (*May 28, 2008*)
- Fire in Water Catchments (*November 19, 2008*)
- The Catastrophe Australia Had to Have Which Crippled Victoria (*March 18, 2009*)

In particular, I draw the Committee's attention to our submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. This sets out our assessment of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

The seminar conducted by The Stretton Group on March 18, 2009 with Mr Roger Underwood as the speaker is a very enlightening document about fuel reduction burning and preparation for future fire seasons.

Being a Federal Parliamentary Inquiry The Stretton Group urge the Committee to consider a recommendation that the Productivity Commission make a full inquiry on the impact of bushfires on the economy and the social impact of such catastrophic events on local communities.

Government policy makers have created national parks without any proper evaluation of their fire potential and their consequential destruction after a major bushfire event. For instance, The Stretton Group predicted that the Grampians National Park would suffer a major bushfire which unfortunately happened in February 2006.

A genuine cost benefit analysis should be undertaken in relation to public lands that are under the jurisdiction of Government agencies. All too often national parks are created to suit political imperatives rather than being established on their environmental merit.

The Stretton Group have always been concerned that these good intentions to create national parks result in a catastrophic event such as Black Saturday when huge fuel loads and extreme weather conditions ensure that “locked up national parks” are destroyed by very hot fires which also puts their long term recovery in doubt.

Over recent months the public policy issue of management investment schemes (MIS) has been before the Parliament and unfortunate investors who have lost their funds. The Stretton Group brings to the Committee’s attention that these very large blue gum plantations do not have a vigorous fire extinguishment and fire prevention component looking after these investments. Quite simply, these MIS schemes are in liquidation with no resources to maintain their fire services. This constitutes a threat to local communities in western Victoria, south east South Australia and south west Western Australia.

A report in The Age, Wednesday, July 29, indicates that “State faces worst ever fire season, record dry sparks dire new forecast”. This report has been written by DSE but not officially released, according to The Age newspaper. The Senate Committee may be interested in the details of this report as it foreshadows a possible horrendous 2009/10 fire season.

The Stretton Group strongly recommend to the Senate Committee that land management agencies need to vigorously address the problem of fire prevention over the next two decades. It is no longer good enough for the State of Victoria to lose 172 human lives in 2009 and not take proactive steps to reduce the fuel load in public lands.

Experience in Spain, Greece and California also supports the policy position that heavily fuel laden forests are a recipe for huge national and human disasters.

The Senate Committee will observe from our earlier seminar “Fire in Water Catchments” that the impact of hot wild bushfires on water catchments would have a huge impact on the long term water supply of major city populations. In the case of Victoria, Melbourne’s water supply could be reduced by up to 30% if Melbourne’s catchments were totally burnt out.

The Stretton Group are of the view that bushfires are a long term problem in the Australian environment. Whilst the fires of 2003, 2007 and 2009 have concentrated the public’s concern on particular events, the policy imperative facing State and Federal Governments is to prepare in the long term and develop strategies that will mitigate bushfires. The Stretton Group appreciate that bushfires will always be part of Australia’s natural landscapes. In the twenty first century there is sufficient science and fire mitigation practices to bring about sensible policies which will help reduce the impact of hot, uncontrolled, devastating bushfires.

The Stretton Group which has over 200 years of hands-on experience would be happy to meet with the Senate Committee when they visit Victoria to share some of their wisdom.

We look forward to this participation.

Yours sincerely



Stewart McArthur
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