

I SUMMARY OF PEOPLE'S COMMENTS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 SUMMARY OF PEOPLE'S COMMENTS

A Review such as this invites and encourages comments from the people, and it will inevitably draw out far more responses that are critical of the system than responses that endorse the system. We must ensure that these criticisms are taken in context. Underlying it all is the feeling that Victorians at every level have done a good job in fighting fires under difficult conditions. The criticisms then aim not to destroy the system, but to see how we can improve our efforts, not just in fire suppression but particularly in fire prevention.

The comments covered a huge range of topics. While we have not attempted an accounting system, it is clear that there is a very great similarity in comments and responses across the State. We emphasize here and elsewhere that we have recorded the comments accurately, and they are available to everyone on CD; however we do not see it as our duty to check that the comments themselves are accurate. Whether accurate or not, they demand our attention; if they are shown to be wrong, then the authorities must act to correct the people's perceptions.

THE DOMINANT THEMES FROM THE PEOPLE'S REVIEW ARE:

- The use of fire—prescribed burning—to maintain low fuel loads has decreased dramatically in area around Victoria since the early 1980s. This decrease is due to:
 - A huge reduction in the number of forest workers, both government and private, employed in the country to look after our forests;
 - Lack of expertise, skills and local knowledge;
 - Bureaucratic control, far removed from the bush;
 - Too much concern with litigation and Occupational Health and Safety.
- The main cause of the mega-fires is the high fuel loads that have accumulated. Accordingly:
 - We should increase asset-protection burning to about 30% of the land each year, and broad-scale burning to about 10% per year;
 - The cost is of the order of \$20 million per year, a small cost relative to the money spent on the mega-fires of 2002-2007;
 - Prescribed burning should be in the hands of locals who have the knowledge and the skills, and who are on hand to take advantage of the right time to get a cool burn
 - Prescribed burning is invaluable as training for fire-fighting.
- We are not prepared for fire:
 - Fuel loads have accumulated to dangerous levels, as discussed above;
 - There has been a huge reduction over the past 25 years in the number of forest workers, both government and private, employed in the country to look after our forests;
 - There is a lack of expertise, skills and local knowledge;
 - There is a lack of equipment and infrastructure in forest areas;
 - Many tracks and roads have been closed, denying access for fire-fighting;

- Many fire towers have fallen in to disrepair, or are simply not manned over summer;
- Firebreaks have not been maintained;
- Water-points have not been maintained, directing a dependence on water for fire suppression to privately-owned water supplies.
- Immediate and aggressive first-strike to extinguish fires as soon as they start has not been effective.
 - Local people and fire crews with local knowledge and expertise have been refused permission to enter the forest or national park;
 - First-strike can be very effective if it is immediate—hand-tools are often sufficient.
- Fire suppression is very bureaucratic. Centralized control is poor because:
 - It does not make use of local knowledge;
 - It is cumbersome, and cannot take advantage of immediate decision-making on the ground.
- The government uses inexperienced staff in leadership positions, including the fire front. This means that:
 - The best people, with the greatest expertise and local knowledge, are not always used to direct the attack;
 - Back-burning is not well-planned (again, due to bureaucracy, might have to wait days to get permission to burn);
 - Briefings are often hopelessly inadequate, and are often a waste of time.
- Cooperative arrangements between Country Fire Authority, Department of Sustainability and Environment, and National Parks are often unsatisfactory:
 - Pay (including overtime) for government staff is always of concern to CFA volunteers. There is a strong feeling that government staff have little incentive to put a fire out quickly;
 - CFA volunteers do not want to sit around, sometimes for days, waiting for orders from a distant, government bureaucracy;
 - There is little sympathy for the competencies of many of the staff in Parks Victoria;
- Many people who have lost their properties or livelihoods in fires that swept out of the forest have found the government to be unconcerned or even unsympathetic.
 - There is no proper costing of damages and losses due to bushfire;
 - The partnership between CFA, DSE and Parks Victoria is one-sided. CFA works on fires in the forest. However, once the fire is controlled, DSE and Parks Victoria do not come out of the forest to assist CFA to fight fires on private property.

1.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The people reported on a wide range of inadequacies in fire prevention and suppression and these are reported in this document in considerable detail. We cannot make recommendations on every detailed issue; our recommendations are broad and general.

This report deals with both fire prevention and suppression, but the main focus of our recommendations is on prevention; it is obvious that it is better to prevent fire than to have to suppress it.

This Review will not only assist in resolving problems that arose during the fires of the early 2000s but perhaps more importantly will assist in setting in place mechanisms designed to avoid problems occurring in future fires. More particularly, our recommendations will head Victoria in the direction of reducing the incidence of fire or at least in preventing small fires becoming large, feral fires.

1.2.1 FUEL REDUCTION BURNING

For many years, governments in Australia have been requested, urged and encouraged to increase the area of prescribed burning to reduce fuel loads. While governments have to some extent accepted the need to undertake more prescribed burning, there is increased scrutiny of its purposes, goals and achievements. The people report overwhelmingly that prescribed burning is grossly inadequate and must be increased.

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.

Prescribed burning in the bush and along roadsides provides excellent training opportunities for the training of young and new volunteers in larger-scale fire-fighting, as well as increasing the health and safety of our forests.

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.

1.2.2 PEOPLE AND RESOURCES IN THE BUSH

There is increasing concern about the drastic reduction in the number of government people employed to work in the bush. Twenty-five years ago, many government departments maintained offices, staff and equipment in country towns throughout the State, whereas these services are now centralized in regional centres. Having people in the bush provides the local knowledge about topography and conditions that is essential in the prevention and suppression of fire.

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.

1.2.3 RESTORING AND MAINTAINING INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads and tracks and other facilities and structures must be restored and maintained to allow quick and safe access to fires.

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 track open and in good condition.

1.2.4 AGGRESSIVE FIRST STRIKE

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.

1.2.5 FIRE SUPPRESSION

Fire suppression is complicated by multi-departmental organization of the control and management of Crown lands, by relationships between government and volunteer fire-fighters, by bureaucratic control versus local knowledge and expertise, by occupational health and safety regulations, by privacy legislation and by concerns about litigation.

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.

1.2.6 PEOPLE'S FUTURE INVOLVEMENT - PEOPLE'S FIRE FORUM, FIRE POLICY GROUP, AND LOCAL CONTROL OF PRESCRIBED BURNING

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.

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.

1.2.7 THE CONSERVATIVE USE OF RESOURCES ON STATE LAND

A major perception across the State, right or wrong, is that governments have progressively restricted the conservative use of resources, not just in national parks but across all tenures. The perception that government has a 'lock it up and leave it alone' policy for forest management is strongly and widely held. Exclusion of the conservative use of forest resources has resulted in the land being largely left to itself not only by the government, but also by timber workers, graziers, bee-keepers and others whose livelihood was the forest but who have now been displaced. Meanwhile, the problems of deteriorating infrastructure, the spread of pest plants and animals, and the accumulation of forest fuels continue to escalate.

Recommendation 12: The People's Review recommends that the government investigate ways in which forest workers can be employed, not solely for economic gain, but so that the bush is once again cared for.

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.



Dingo Hill Track, near Licola, 2007