

SUBMISSION TO SENATE BUSHFIRE ENQUIRY

From 1938 to 1965 I lived at Ensay in East Gippsland. After the 1939-45 war, a feature of towns like Ensay was that most had one or more timber mills. Omeo had at least two mills, Swifts Creek two, Ensay one, Bruthen three or more, Nowa Nowa two or three, Combienbar one or two, Bonang, Cann River up to four, Orbost up to four, Bairnsdale and district several. Central Gippsland towns such as Heyfield and Yarram and others had several and so on across the state. These mills had teams of workers who knew the bush backwards, with many working in the bush building roads, surveying, falling trees and delivering timber to their mill. They had access roads to their town. Should a fire break out, these experienced workers were close by with adequate equipment and roads which enabled them to quickly get to the scene of the fire. They had the knowledge and experience of both the bush and bushfires and were able to quickly assess the situation and often put the fire out before it was able to gain momentum. If the fire was getting out of control, they could call for help from other nearby teams. They also had clearfelled areas and access roads to slow the fires.

Beginning around the seventies, campaigns began to save the forests. The creation of large national parks with logging banned and access roads closed, timber jobs were decimated and timber workers had to leave their home and town. Many small communities began to die and those experienced teams of workers and their vital equipment was lost. The result was that millions of hectares of bush was locked up and fuel to feed bushfires began to accumulate. Should lightning spark a fire it was often out of control before teams of men and equipment could arrive to fight the fire. Many access roads had been closed and fire breaks along remaining roads were discontinued, thus limiting roads as possible firebreaks. In what was entirely predictable, millions of hectares of forest became fireboxes ready to explode and threaten life and property. Environmentalists had convinced Governments to lock up the bush and throw away the key. Many now validly argue that more fuel reduction burns should be activated each year. However, the reality is that there is now so much inaccessible bush, these burns have limited application.

While this reality is clearly evident to those who want to see, I appreciate that it is difficult to reverse what has happened. I believe that more of the bush must be opened up and access roads restored. It is vital that no more national parks be created to add to the tinder. To this end the Brumby Government must be pressured to reverse its decision to create yet another firebox national park in the Barmah Forest. Meanwhile we wait in trembling fear waiting for the next holocaust to decimate our communities.

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