

15 July 2009

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

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Bushfires in Australia

I respond to the invitation to provide a submission to the Inquiry and offer the following comments in relation to the incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia as per the Terms of Reference.

- a. **the impact of bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities**
 - Promote greater awareness of the cost of bushfires, in lives and property and ecological damage.

- b. **factors contributing to the causes and risks of bushfires across Australia, including natural resource management policies, hazard reduction and agricultural land maintenance**
 - Collate and maintain comprehensive statistics regarding the cause of each bushfire.
 - Do not rely on fire breaks; they are needed for access but fires like Black Saturday do not just burn along the ground.

- c. **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**
 - Adopt cool burn strategies, based on solid ecological research.

- d. **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**
- Instigate rapid response units to get to the fire **quickly**; early intervention can be the key.
 - Change the law regarding levies on insurance premiums so that **all** residents and property owners pay an Emergency Services Levy, as per South Australia, so that **all** citizens contribute to the adequate funding of emergency services, including fire fighting, not just those who insure!
 - Extend burn offs (cool burns) in high fire risk areas.
 - Use cool burns as part of the training regime for emergency services personnel and allow their organisations to charge for any burn off.
 - Cool burning, also known as mosaic, pattern or prescription burning, is not only useful for training purposes but, by decreasing volatile fuel loads, also reduces the chance of bushfires and risk to properties.
 - Biodiversity and ecological issues must be a consideration.
 - Cool burns could, in the long-run, prevent greater ecological damage if carried out properly and based on proven science.
 - Review legislation to clarify responsibilities regarding burn-offs, including stipulating the extent of liability and the penalties if the burn-off should get out of control.
 - At the moment private land holders are reluctant to burn off because of the risk of damage to other properties and life if the fire 'escapes'.
 - Ensure that restrictions on the creation of smoke do not get in the way of an extensive cool burn program.
- e. **any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented**
- Introduce a scheme similar to South Australia's Operation Nomad where police patrols visit convicted and suspected arsonists on days of high fire risk, placing them effectively under surveillance, as well as conducting regular patrols through high risk areas. Members of the community are also encouraged to report any suspicious behaviour or activities.
 - On the day of the Victorian bushfires, in South Australia 120 officers were involved in Operation Nomad.
 - South Australia had no major fire on Black Saturday, 7 February 2009, and the program has been credited with reducing by half the number of fires that are lit deliberately in the Adelaide Hills.
 - In the previous year, police apprehended 173 people.
 - South Australia has imposed the harshest penalties in the nation for this crime, up to 20 years imprisonment for a conviction.
 - Extend the program, conferring legal authority to confine convicted or suspected arsonists in their homes or to a local area, say a town or suburb, at times of extreme fire risk.

- Display prominent highway electronic signs warning against entry into fire risk areas, in the same way as those on some freeways, to inform motorists and offer a further deterrent to people entering a fire zone.
 - Implement education/awareness campaigns - 'survival skills' - to inform children, particularly those living in bushfire areas, about bushfire risks and best practice in preventing and/or dealing with life-threatening conditions.
 - Review bushfire safety relating to schools in the light of recent fire storms.
 - Revise the categorisation of bushfires, including that of fire storm with its exceptional conditions, very high winds, likely ember attack, etc.
- f. the appropriateness of planning and building codes with respect to land use in the bushfire prone regions**
- Introduce more stringent building and planning laws in order to quarantine potential housing sites in dangerous and high fire risk areas.
 - Require householders to sign a tear off statement on their council rate notices for properties in bushfire risk areas, confirming that they have undertaken the necessary bushfire prevention measures.
 - The statement to be returned at the time of payment of rates.
 - Proscribe sites with poor vehicle access and egress and extreme and unavoidable fuel loads in order to reduce the risk to life.
 - Allow councils to veto dangerous sites in the first instance which would eliminate a substantial burden from the emergency services.
 - Investigate thoroughly the proposition that fire bunkers should be incorporated when rebuilding areas devastated by bushfires, as well as in new dwellings in fire prone areas.
 - While the concept of such a shelter may seem a ready solution to protect people in unpredictable, extreme fire situations, the validity of claims of safety should be tested rigorously to ensure people do not suffer fatal temperatures or are not asphyxiated due to lack of oxygen.
- g. the adequacy and funding of fire-fighting resources both paid and voluntary and the usefulness of and impact on on-farm labour**
- If a proper Emergency Services Levy were introduced, organisations could then afford to employ more full time and part time fire fighters.
- h. the role of volunteers**
- Create school-based junior CFS/CFA units, similar to cadet units, to encourage links and volunteer feed into established CFS/CFA units.
- i. the impact of climate change**
- Information and awareness to be included in the total package to the community, ie canvass issues and research in the wider community.

- j. **fire – its causes (accidental, natural and deliberate) and remedies**
- Make children and the wider community aware of the causes of fire, its behaviour, etc, at school and in the community as part of life skills.
- k. **the impact of bushfires on biodiversity and measures to protect biodiversity**
- Provide funding for research to ascertain best practice regarding ecological management.
- l. **insurance against bushfires.**
- See d. above: there should be a compulsory Emergency Services Levy, similar to the scheme in South Australia, which means all pay and fire brigades are properly equipped and funded.

Yours sincerely



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Member for Fisher