

**The Secretary,  
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries.**

## **SUBMISSION ON THE IMPACT OF BUSHFIRES**

### **Preamble**

I have substantial contact with CFA volunteers in both Western Victoria and Gippsland, and have acquired an interest in the subject as one with rural origins, although I now live in suburban Melbourne. My experience and knowledge of the problem and politics of wildfires is limited to Victoria, but I have no reason to believe that the situation is much different in other states. In the course of my work, I visit Gippsland each month, and have followed with some concern the proceedings of the Teague Royal Commission, both in the press and online.

Since 2002 I have read the recommendations of each inquiry after devastating wild fires, and marvelled that the Victorian government was not held accountable for not carrying them out. Only last June (2008) an all-parties parliamentary inquiry made a number of recommendations to the Victorian government, to which a response was issued in early December – two months prior to Black Saturday. The government accepted every recommendation, *in principle*, subject to further ecological studies, meaning no action if it meant endangering its Green credentials.

With regard to food security, fire ranks with water as a critical problem facing Australia. Farms are at risk, especially those bordering on or close to National Parks, state forests and reserves. My friends were nearly ruined when a fire break-out near the Grampians in Western Victoria burned out their fences, grass, hay and some of their stock. Insurance and other compensation did not nearly cover the damage, and other friends in East Gippsland two years earlier had a similar experience. Only an emphasis on fire prevention rather than attempts at containment can protect such properties. In the same vein, lunatic local and state laws preventing clearing the verges of country roads and removing dry timber also contribute to the danger.

### **Fuel Reduction**

Most important among the recommendations from each inquiry has been the need to dramatically increase fuel reduction in forests. At this moment, in East Gippsland, it is estimated that there are in substantial areas 60 tonnes per hectare of forest floor tinder to fuel the next fire season.

Time and again, the Victorian media report the observation that on Black Saturday a combination of intense heat, high winds and abundance of dry fuel turned areas of Victoria into a giant bomb that no preparations could have dealt with. Over only one of these three factors can humans exercise any control – and that is **fuel reduction, by controlled burning**. This is distinct from **back-burning**, a term often misused by the media, which refers to burning fire-breaks in the face of fires, in order to hinder their spread and defend property by depriving the oncoming fire of its fuel.

### **Controlled Burn Targets**

In Victoria, we were told after Black Saturday that the state had *exceeded* its fuel reduction target for 2007-08, by conducting controlled burns on slightly more than the Department of Sustainability and Environment's (DSE) own modest target. Actually, the government's spokesman, Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin, had himself led an inquiry after the 2002-03 fires, which recommended much increased

resources for all year round fire prevention. Every inquiry for decades has recommended a target of about 400,000 hectares per annum, which was achieved regularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The DSE's current target has been little more than 100,000 hectares, and has been achieved only three times since 2000.

The paucity of these targets has been due to both the constraints of budgets and a strong conservationist ethos in the Department, which fears for loss of "bio-diversity" during controlled burns. How "bio-diversity" fares when more than one million hectares of forest are destroyed by wild fires in a single week, these conservationists have been unable to explain, but no doubt they are cheered by the folksy photographs of survivors like Sam the singed koala survivor, which excited sympathy around the world.

### **Fire Fighting Resources**

In spite of the good press enjoyed by Victoria's CFA volunteers, the number of trained and able-bodied fire fighters in their prime has decreased. The lady members also make admirable contributions to EO principles, but as a close friend among them in Western Victoria confided to me, "We have our limitations."

Contrary to government statements in Victoria, the DSE's fire-fighting capacity has not been enhanced after the – it seems that some of the government's unanticipated extra expenses of about \$400m in February alone are being recouped via some false economies. According to a recent piece in *The Australian*, by Australian Workers Union secretary Cesar Melhem, the DSE's allocation has been cut by \$47m in the current Victorian budget and its number of permanent fire-fighters has actually fallen from 257 (2002-03) to 239 (2008-09).

### **Priorities**

It would seem, at least in Victoria, that photo opportunities for the Premier at times of crisis are more important than prudent management and investment in prevention. It is estimated that every single dollar invested in fire prevention has a \$22 pay-off in avoided costs of damage caused. It is also rumoured that John Brumby slept in a yellow CFA jacket and hard hat for the whole of February, but it is a fact that his languishing scores in the polls throughout January suddenly soared after saturation TV exposure in the fire-devastated scenes. Similarly, helicopter water-bombers like Elvis make great TV news footage, but have only a limited impact on overall fire-fighting.

### **Conclusion**

Lives, livelihoods, whole communities, businesses and farms are all in peril every fire season. The Victorian royal commission has so far looked only at communications, warnings, the question of evacuation, and chains of command and responsibility. No real focus has been seen on the causes of fires and how they might be addressed. The issue is even being used as a vindication for theories on global warming and anthropogenic climate change. Unless governments treat the issue as a serious practical problem, rather than a mere political one to be solved with spin and stunts, we will all go on suffering.