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Mr Ted O'Brien MP

Chairman Standing Committee on Environment and Energy Inquiry into Bushfires

Parliament House

Canberra ACT

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Copies to:

Councillor Tony Wellington, Mayor of Noosa Council

Mr Lou O'Brien, MP,

Dear Sirs

## **BUSHFIRES AND THE PROTECTION OF LIVES AND PROPERTY**

How can we resist these fires that are estimated to only increase in intensity with each passing year?

Since moving back to Australia in 2002, I have become increasingly concerned about the potential loss to life and property from bushfires and wondered what measures are needed to protect us and our native birds and animals against the ravages of fire. I was living in Tahmoor NSW in 2004 when bushfires destroyed large areas of bush and caused the Hume Highway to be closed and train services to be temporarily halted.

I don't know how Australia can reduce the likelihood of fires as the planet warms up (whether this is a natural occurrence beyond our control or caused by us is apparently still being debated) but clearly *we have to do more than just have controlled backfires* when the weather permits. When WILL the weather again be suitable for back burning? Where does the money come from to do the work?

I used to work in local government (Wollondilly Shire Council, and before that at Central Otago District Council, NZ) ) and in NSW I had some limited responsibility for liaising with the RFS in relation to the control of vegetation on Council parks and reserves including streets.

I worked in property management and other roles in local government for some 20 years and on one occasion assisted in the control room when a large bush fire took hold in Central Otago. That fire was caused by the arcing of overhead power transmission lines. I do have an understanding of the relationship between local and central governments.

### **Governments must prioritise the protection of life and property.**

I am forming an opinion that **we ALL must take responsibility** to reduce the hazards in our local environment and that central and local governments must step up and fund the protection of life (human and animal) as its first priority then the protection of property (an economic imperative).

Some steps residents of Australia could be **compelled** to do might include:

**Keeping our properties clear of debris** that could burn or impede the passage of fire fighters, eg keep gutters clear, keep tree branches away from rooves, keep trees a certain distance from buildings, keep gardens and roadsides clear of fallen leaves etc.

### **Requiring our Councils to keep public parks clear of debris.**

The current political view is that the debris and understory feed the microorganisms and shelter rodents and lizards etc. While this may well be true, it is a fire hazard and should be cleared back far enough to reduce the risk of fire. The wildlife would surely relocate if the clearing was done in stages.

I live close to a lovely natural park (Heritage Park, Tewantin) where there are literally hundreds of palm trees that constantly drop their fronds blocking the creek below and form a thick dry cover under the canopy. It is tinder dry in there. I am afraid to draw attention to it in the local rag for fear some idiot will decide to set it alight. If it went up, the fire could easily spread to my entire neighbourhood.

**Requiring town planning authorities** (local or state govt) to **ensure that any newly constructed residential subdivisions are separated by a wide margin from the surrounding vegetation.** This year, a number of new residential areas on the Sunshine Coast faced a severe fire threat because the properties backed onto dense native forest.

This is unacceptable. There should be a **wide, clear buffer zone** to protect homes, or none of us will be able to afford future insurance premiums. The buffer zones could in part be used as recreation grounds, golf courses etc or as reserves for power transmission lines and the like, or simply as land kept clear of trees and regularly mown to keep the grass short. Perhaps a high pressure water main might be installed on the perimeter or near forested reserves with sprinklers to be activated if fire threatens properties.

There would be a hue and cry from those wishing to preserve ALL bushland, but this must be resisted to protect life and property.

### **Warn against stupid behaviour**

It goes without saying that wood and coal fires should be banned absolutely as should backyard burns. In the past 18 months there have been some backyard burn offs in my neighbourhood.

People can be stupid. Once, in 2002 in the Wollondilly area where I later worked (and which this fire season saw *devastating* fires and loss of lives and property ) I saw on the side of the road some road

workers (don't know if state or council or private) having smoko. They were *boiling the billy on a fire* they had lit under the trees. I could not believe my eyes. Had they never heard of a thermos flask?

### **Restrict future proposed residential development close to the bush**

While it may not be possible to stop people living in the bush, planning authorities should seriously consider refusing the development of new small rural subdivisions unless there are **VERY STRICTLY IMPOSED conditions designed to protect them from fire.**

### **Protection of roads and bridges**

Lastly, road authorities **MUST review the current policy of allowing trees and undergrowth to grow close to arterial roads and highways.** We are all aware by now that when fire encroaches on roads or burning trees fall onto roads, safe escape routes are denied to people fleeing fires.

In the Noosa area, the Noosa-Cooroy Road and the Noosa-Eumundi Road are *just two* cases in point. Vegetation should be cleared well back from the road to a distance that at least matches the height of the tallest trees close to the road.

As was shown in the Black Saturday fires in Victoria and in the recent fires, fires can restrict road access and contribute to the loss of human and animal life and the further destruction of property.

This is particularly critical when communities have only one road and out and through the trees, common to many smaller coastal communities.

I have in the past privately expressed my concerns about the danger but locals (this before the current fires) all maintained that *Noosa was too wet to burn*. We now know that this is not the case. We got off lightly in 2019. It may not be the case in future.

Yours sincerely

Kathleen McKay