



SUBMISSION

Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries **Inquiry into Bushfires in Australia**

July 2009

The National Association of Forest Industries (NAFI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia.

The tragic and devastating impacts from the 2009 Victorian bushfires as well as other recent conflagrations, such as the 2003 Canberra and New South Wales bushfires, highlight the urgent and important need to develop long lasting and effective bushfire mitigation and management strategies for Australia.

NAFI has consistently advocated for significant reform of public land management policies to ensure effective fire management practices are put in place across all land tenures, including most importantly fuel reduction burning and other measures to minimize the risks of high intensity fires from the build up of fuel loads.

The inadequacies of public land management for long term fire prevention can be summarized as follows:

- an increasing trend over the past few decades for large increases in the area of formal conservation reserves with a passive approach to fire management;
- a shift in emphasis from fire prevention to fire suppression (i.e. failure to address long term causes); and
- legislative and land use policy impediments, such as barriers to fuel reduction burns, road maintenance and innovative commercial utilisation of biomass for fuel reduction and other benefits (e.g. bioenergy).

These concerns have been raised by NAFI with respect to a number of recent inquiries related to bushfires and the adequacy (or inadequacy) of public land and conservation management policies. These inquiries have included the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009), Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria (2007) and the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Bushfires (2003).

Further detail with respect to key underlying issues and recommendations for more effective bushfire management can be found in the most recent submission by NAFI to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (refer Attachment A).

NAFI argues that significant bushfire policy reform is needed at a national level, given the significant risks posed by large scale fires to human populations and the overall health, productivity and biodiversity of the forest estate in Australia.

While acknowledging that fire is an inevitable part of the Australian environment, the challenge will be to move from a passive approach to fire management with high uncertainty to a more active management approach across all land tenures that shifts the focus and outcomes from extensive high intensity fires to more frequent but controlled low intensity fires. Such an approach can produce multiple environmental, economic and public safety benefits.

Given the magnitude of future fire risks, and complexities of multiple jurisdictions and land management responsibilities, fire management should be developed through a national process such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), in a similar way as to the treatment of water policy issues.

NAFI recommends that a national government strategy or blueprint be developed and implemented to assist with the reform of public land management for effective fire management. Such a process should build on the initial review commissioned by COAG in 2004 as part of the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management and start with the development of key national principles that would underpin policies and practices for reform and implementation.

Key principles could revolve around:

- Protecting communities
- Protecting the environment
- Sustaining the economy

A national bushfire summit could be the catalyst for bringing together all relevant stakeholders, with the aim to develop a national and comprehensive approach to fire management.

NAFI appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry and would be willing to expand on its submission by taking part in any further consultations as part of its deliberations.

Attachment A: NAFI submission to 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, May.