

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

(j) The role of the volunteers in the 2003 Bushfires :-
Without their help, what would have been the loss of life? Where would the holocaust have ended? One envisages an area from Melbourne to Brisbane perhaps?

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) speak to any local rural brigade member, their dissatisfaction with the city-based hierarchy of bureaucrats is a cause of very great concern for its future e.g No CFA units permitted to attend stubble burn-offs.
Does the CEO of the CFA have any idea of the resentment felt by brigade members?
If not, why not?

(g) Benalla Group of CFA were able to have 9 units at an outbreak, within 9 minutes of the fire being reported, hence no major outbreaks in the district since the 1967 Lurg fire.

(a & b) If two-thirds of the Kosciusko National Park and 90% of the Mt Buffalo National Park were burnt, as reported, in the recent fires it certainly calls in to question the land management practices and policies in National Parks, State forests and other Crown land. How much of these policies and practices have been driven by the 'Greenie element,' the plea for biodiversity? I fear the same arguments will continue, unresolved, until the next drought and the next holocaust, but biodiversity for 90% of the Buffalo National Park and two-thirds of the Kosciusko National Park, will be lost, some probably for ever.

(e) There has been so much research into bushfire mitigation, hazard reduction, appropriate land management policies, practices to mitigate damage, protection of life and property, urban design, land use planning, liability, insurance and all other matters relating to bushfires.

I would suggest that all members of the Committee read (as I certainly imagine they have already done) the CFA leaflet :-

'Living in the Bush – Bushfire Survival Plan Workbook' with particular reference to page 26 where they recommend :- CSIRO Book-Building in Bushfire-prone areas.

The Complete Bushfire Safety Book

Joan Webster

Published by Random House 2000 of whom N.P. Cheney, Senior Principal Research Scientist, Bushfire Behaviour and Management Group, CSIRO, Canberra says, and I quote 'I commend this book to every Australian.....it could save your life.'

Bushfires in Australia

Luke and McArthur

Australian Government Publishing Services – 'The' bushfire book before Joan Webster

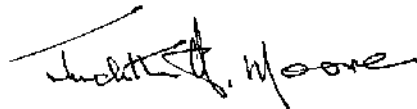
Rural Law Handbook
Frank Golding, Tony Smith, Jan Bowen
Victoria Law Foundation

Bushfire! Looking to the Future
Edited by Chris Brown and Linda Hohuer
Envirobook, Sydney

Trees, Farms and Fires
K. J Simpfendorfer
Conservation Forests and Lands
Bulletin No. 30.

I have enclosed a copy of an article printed in the El Dorado and District Star which outlines details of the public meeting, the 'Great Fire Debate' which took place in Wodonga on 6 February 2003.

Submitted by:

 Judith A. Moore

THE GREAT FIRE DEBATE- Hosted by 2AY & the Border Mail Reported by Roxy Bodsworth

The possibility of creating safety zones of 50m around private land that adjoins public land was one of the many points that came up for discussion at the Great Fire Debate held in Wodonga on the 6th February.

Ed Baynes, Barnawatha resident and CFA member, explained that there are long stretches where public land adjoins private land. Because the fires were unable to be suppressed in public land the control lines were put back into the private. A buffer zone would allow the containment lines to be on public land, protecting the fences that otherwise lie between the fire and the control lines.

Peter Farrell, North East Manager for the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), said there was a precedent for this with flimlar arrangements already in place in the Western District between farmers and overseers of public land.

Mr Farrell gave a general overview and history of the fires which extended from January to March. He said a major contributing factor had been the five years of below average rainfall, noting that the period between April and October last year had seen the highest maximum temperatures on record. By November, most streams were running at less than 10% of their average capacity.

On the 8th and 9th of January, there were 58 fire outbreaks in the Upper Murray, Mansfield, Alexandria and Mt Buffalo regions. By the 3rd day, 38 outbreaks had been contained, and by the 5th day only 15 were still burning. On the 21st day, a new fire started at Eldorado; cause unknown. At the time of this meeting, 57 days later, the DSE and CFA were still having problems controlling the fire on the Western edge of Mt. Buffalo and in East Gippsland.

Graham Armstrong, Region 24 CFA, said the fire-fighting effort had been supported by people from interstate, New Zealand, and the USA. Craig Lapsley, CFA Area Manager for North East, spoke about the effectiveness of community engagement with these fires, including the fireguard, use of pre-plans, telephone trees, and cooperation with the media, especially commending the ABC.

Bill Sykes, National Party MP and VicNats spokesperson for the Police and Emergency Services, commended 3NE and the ABC for their coverage and assistance despite the difficulties. The smoke made it hard to assess the extent and exact location of the fires and it was also difficult for the media to verify information. There were some comments from the audience about the - problems created by media sensationalism.

Dr. Ian Lunt, Senior Lecturer in Vegetation Management at Charles Sturt University, said that around 1.1 million hectares had been burnt out which roughly equalled 1/8th of all bushland in Victoria. However, he was of the opinion that the fires would not cause long-term damage. Australian flora and fauna are well-equipped for recovery from bushfire and would regenerate. Animals would need to recolonize but would have been able to find gullies and patches of bush that weren't burnt.

There were some exceptions, he said. Some rare plants and animals might not recover because of both the fire and degradation of their habitat. Though it might initially seem that trees were recovering well because of the tendency to sprout new growth, they could still die off if there

had been damage to the root structure. Mossbeds and peat bogs in the high country had already been much drier in the drought conditions and had consequently burnt back to mineral soil. This had serious ramifications for the water catchment area.

According to Allan Mull, Mt Beauty resident and CF A member, no eucalypt forest is equipped for such large-scale and intense fire. He said he had watched the parks deteriorate, becoming rank and overgrown.

"The parks were dying for a fire," he said.

Mr Baynes said extremely dry conditions brought out any weaknesses in the land management and accentuated them. He said these circumstances will prevail again and a better co-existence needed to be worked out between the managers of public land and the local communities.

"There's already enough friction in this relationship because of the invasion of weeds and feral animals from public land," he said. "It would be good to use this time to conclude these difficulties and make a fresh start for the future."

At the moment, public managers have no accountability to the private landowners for fire prevention and weed control; the government has been described as the worst neighbour to have in the country. Neighbours customarily share half the costs of fencing, - but not when one is the government.

"There may be no legislative duty for the recovery of this damage," said Mr Baynes. "But there is a moral one."

The fire strategy worked out between the CF A and the DSE clearly states their priorities as:

1. Firefighter safety
2. Community and asset protection
3. Aggressive attack on new outbreaks
4. Ecological and environmental value protection
5. Fire containment and control.

In some regions, there has been a downsizing of DSE staff members so that ex-DSE workers had to be called in during this fire. The comment was made that if this downsizing continues, there won't be the ex-workers to call in the future. Mr Farrell said that the DSE employs project firefighters each year whom they try to re-employ in the following season to ensure some continuity. They also have a major skill development programme for permanent employees in the DSE and Department of Parks and Land (DPL). He considered that this programme had been adequate in the past.

Some people commented that local CFA members should have had more input into fire management from the very beginning because they had a greater local knowledge. There were times when the CFA had been moved out even though they were the ones with the best knowledge of terrain, tracks, and likely fire patterns.

Mr Farrell said he could not speak for the individual situations that were mentioned but there had been a strategic deployment of resources which was scaled upwards as the situation worsened. Aircraft had been deployed

and the DSE and CFA shared the cost of aircraft usage. Teams also needed to be rotated and he recognised that sometimes continuity had been a problem.

Mr Baynes said that the fires would have been a lot worse if not for the large contingent of private equipment and there needed to be some efforts to generalize standards for these; to actually include this as part of the CFA fleet.

"The CFA needs to develop systems to recognise the community's determination to protect itself," he said.

The major discussion around fire prevention related to hazard reduction in Autumn and Spring. Warren Lucas, Bush Users' Group, Wooragee resident, owner of Lucas Mills, and CF A Training Officer, said that barely 27% of the scheduled area for controlled burns had been burnt off.

Mr Mull calculated that it would take 430 years to complete one cycle of hazard reduction if done according to the details provided in a joint media release from the DSE and the CFA on January 24, 2003, even taking into account areas already burned.

"This would seem to me not to be a sound environmental practice," he said.

Mr Lunt claimed that repeated fires at short intervals potentially caused much more ecological damage, and the impact of burning every one, two, or five years was too great. When asked what scientific studies had been done to look at the effects of controlled burns on biodiversity, Mr Lunt said it was hard to make a blanket statement as each environment was different.

Susie Duncan, Chiltern resident, wildlife biologist, and convener of Rural Parks for People said that Greenics had been misrepresented and were in support of controlled burns.

Bob Richardson, Former Forestry Union Official and co-author of "Flaming Parks neighbours from Hell;" said that somewhere around 50 000 years ago, the Aboriginal people arrived and brought with them the firestick which they used to tame the bush. They created a totally different ecology to what had pre-existed and managed it well for their own purposes. If they wanted to protect a certain plant or animal then they created a firebreak of around 1km, not just 50m. Even in early settlement days, you could still see through the bush for miles and ride horses through the trees.

Mr Lucas said woodcutters had kept fire-tracks clear in the past for no cost but now were excluded. "It seems that the park managers are more concerned with catching those illegally collecting firewood than in managing their resources efficiently," he said. This despite the Environmental Consultative Committee's recommendation that the trees should be thinned. Mr Lucas suggested that if wood-collectors had been allowed in, some of the larger habitat trees might still be there.

"If this is sustainability," he said. "Then God help us."

Bill Sykes, National Party MP and VicNats spokesperson for Police and Emergency Services, said there were four stages to fire management: Preparation, Combat, Recovery and Review. He said the combat stage had