

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia
House of Representatives Select Committee on 2023
Recent Australian Bushfires

The Australian Aborigines here used fire to manage the Australian landscape for thousands of years.

There are four main plant families that dominate the Australian landscape.

Family *Myrtaceae* represents Eucalypt and *Melaleucas* and *Kunzeas* species that have adapted to the drying of the Australian landscape by morphological changes like reduced leaf surfaces and volatile oils to lessen transpiration. They are extremely flammable.

Proteaceous plants like *Banksias* require an ash bed to regenerate and must be burned before seeds are released.

Acacias or *Wattles* also require intense heat for seed dispersal and regeneration. Their dry limbs are highly flammable and combust to further increase fire intensity.

Family *Poaceae* represents the grasses. Ground covers that inhabit forest floors, green valleys are the economic lifeblood of the rural grazing industry. In a dry state, grasses are highly flammable.

The point I am making is that the Australian flora has evolved to burn, seed and regenerate in the ash beds left by wildfires. What we have to come to terms with is the proximity and dangers posed by developing rural, suburban and industrial areas in high risk zones.

On the far South Coast where I lived for 15 years, many coastal towns are surrounded by a wall of *Melaleuca* or *Tea-tree*.

Most of the suburbanites have no idea as to the vegetations flammability let alone the risk to life and property this volatile plant growth poses.

I believe land managers are negligent by allowing the continual growth of extremely flammable vegetation along fence lines, urban boundaries/rural interface.

In the 1980s, I toured the Mount Macedon area after the Victorian fires had decimated many towns.

Apart from the psychological damage from trauma, many people had little material possessions left, only the clothes they were wearing. The resulting impact must have put much pressure on aid organisations and volunteer groups to provide the necessities of life and rebuild community infrastructure like town halls.

I also perceive land management practices haphazard and discynchronious, due to lack of shareholder harmony. On one hand, there are farmers who know the realities of bushfire hazards and continually try to suppress suspect vegetation around their property boundaries. This is contrasted with State Government authorities usually dominated by city chaps, far removed from the necessity of fire hazard reduction. Unfortunately, this prevailing attitude is reflected by State Government. Vegetation policies and restrictions on clearing.

Of course I'm not suggesting the scorched earth policy either. However, there needs to be sensible balance where pockets of endangered and rare flora and fauna is protected while fire prone areas are managed accordingly. Further, I believe many fires can be prevented from destroying townships by using grey waste water and foaming agents. Each town produces waste water which is usually lost once it has been processed to an approved standard. I think Local Government authorities should be encouraged to store and use grey water in times of emergency. The water could then be mitigated along fence lines and road boundaries by use of removable spray bayonets. Communities and Councils should also grow mowable green lawn belts around the suburban/rural interface.

Further, Councils should also publish a list of flammable plant and tree species.

I strongly recommend the use of fire suppressent deciduous trees like oak – *Quercus*, elms-*Ulmus*, American ash – *Fraxinus* which will not support fire when in full leaf. Indeed one timber house in Mount Macedon was saved from destruction because it was surrounded by a coppice of *Japanese Maples* in full leaf.

Many building codes should include the following restrictions. A – That the areas are sufficiently clear of flammable vegetation before building development commences; B – That building materials should include fire shutters, concrete slab, masonry walls and roof sprinklers, independent of mains pressure; C – Boundary fences to be constructed of iron like Colourbond in preference to piling timber; D – Each area is accessed for the fire risks and reviewed periodically.

No amount of water will douse a spotting wildfire in extreme weather conditions.

In the Deva River catchment, west of Moruya in 2000 the only method of fire suppression was with heavy earthmoving equipment.

Sure, water tankers are useful for mop-up and containment operations after the main front has passed, but to try and suppress top fires would only endanger the crews on the fire ground needlessly.

I cannot find fault with commanders in the field. There are many variables such as extreme weather, fuel densities and topographical influences.

Many fire incidents are in a constant state of flux and are unpredictable.

Some forward thinking and historic records should be given close consideration, though.

Particularly interesting, and case in point was an article rewritten in the *Canberra Times* from the 1952 period warning of the need for adequate fire protection and planning.

I see no point being reactive when planning for disasters is the best proactive solution.

Insurance should be levied from ratepayers who choose to live in fire-prone areas. The Fire Risk Levy should cover all types of development – rural, suburban and industrial.

At present, insured property owners are paying for bushfire resources, yet fire services must respond to insured and uninsured properties alike.

After my Fire Captain committed suicide, I realized that all volunteers need some psychological assessment before they commence work. We also require trauma counseling and evaluation after attending stressful incidents. All volunteers should have to fulfil standard training like First Aid and Fire Suppression techniques. Moreover, I believe all volunteers should have a yearly medical check-up to verify fitness for duty.

In conclusion, the best approach is a bi-partisan non-party political review of Fire Suppression and Prediction using historical records and computer modelling.

In the words of George Bernard Shaw: "*What we have learned from history is that we haven't*" (learned).

Let's prove him wrong in this instance.

Yours faithfully,



Andrew Laurie

Ad Fire Fighter Certificate

Horticultural Trade Certificate