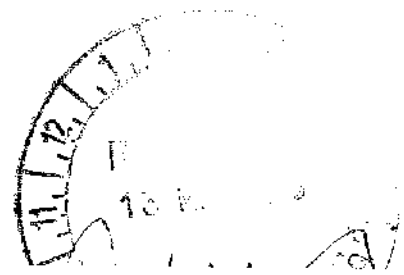


Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Via facsimile: (02) 6277 4424



Submission No.262

Dear Sir

**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

As a long time Beechworth resident whose property boundaries on to a park came dangerously close to being destroyed by the summer bushfires, I am compelled to contribute to the Federal Government's bushfire inquiry so as to ensure that the people of North-East Victoria do not face a repeat of this disaster.

Fires are a dangerous and unpredictable fact of life during summers in North-East Victoria, but there are ways to minimise the risks. The fact that the bushfires spread so quickly across 1.2 million hectares illuminates the fact that there were inadequate firebreaks in place.

On examination of the factors contributing to the magnitude and intensity of the fires it is clear that the Victorian State Government has not done enough to minimise fire risk on public land by removing the high fuel loads. With reference to the attached letter to the Hon John Anderson MP: I submitted this letter prior to the establishment of the Government's bushfire inquiry. I received a response from the Hon Wilson Tuckey MP (letter also attached) encouraging me to make this submission. I feel this letter is necessary to form part of this submission.

In addition and in brief, I draw the following opinions and observations to the Committee's attention:

1. Fuel Reduction Burning is Essential

Fuel reduction burns are essential to ensure the health of the forests and also the safety of those living near them. These blazes do not destroy our forests as fire is an important part of natural cycle of the Australian bush. The Victorian State Governments is lacking in its management practice regarding fire control/fuel load reduction on public land.

It is my understanding that Parks Victoria have not conducted any significant fire reduction burning for the past 15 years around the Chiltern, Beechworth El Dorado and Yackandandah areas in particular. Some pieces of public land in North-East Victoria have had no fire reduction burns for 50 years.

2. The fires referred to (F55, F56, F57) started within a two-hour time frame.

3. Fire Buffer Zones Are Required

While observing these fires, it became very evident to me of the need for a buffer zone around all public land, most especially where it abuts populated areas. This zone should be a minimum of 50 metres wide and be maintained totally clear and readily accessible for fire fighting purposes.

A further distance into the Park reserve should be cleared totally of all debris on the ground and pest weeds. This distance should be governed by the type of forest terrain and proximity of essential services etcetera, with the idea being to reduce to affect of ember attach and wild fire activity.

4. Plants

I believe a study should be carried out into the combustion characteristics of all pest plants and these plants should be assigned a rating with respect to their effect on pollution and heat output. I feel some of these plants contribute greatly to fuel loading and cause of a great deal of respiratory problems, as compared to native plants.

These 'ratings' could then be factored into the measures required to calculate forest litter or 'fuel load'. One of the standard measures used to measure 'fuel load' sitting on the ground in Parks and Stated Forests is:

Lay a piece of cardboard 1m square on the forest floor and assess the amount of leaves, branches and debris which is covered and extrapolate the result. The problem is some pest weeds do not sit on the forest floor, eg black berries can cover large areas and grown up to at least 3 meters high, do not have to be dead to burn and can create intense heat.

The smoke generated in the North-East of Victoria I would put into the 'dirty' category and in my opinion much of this fact could be attributed to the abundance of these pest plants.

Included in this study could be the effect pest plants have on flora and fauna, for example:

1. Pest plants harbour animals such as feral dogs, foxes and feral cats
2. St Johns Wort is know to causes blindness in wallabies
3. Mistletoe if in sufficient numbers on a tree, will kill that tree.

5. Broadcasting Alert System

A recognised media source should be designated nationwide to keep the general public informed whenever a natural disaster occurs. Throughout the period of the North-East Victoria bushfires such a public announcement system was very obviously required. Local residents in this region relied heavily on ABC radio. I found the ABC's radio coverage (106.5 FM in Wodonga) extremely good for the following reasons.

1. A high degree of professionalism in the presentation of these broadcasts
2. Accuracy of their reports was very good. If in doubt they said so and quickly confirmed or negated that report.
3. No sensationalism was evident in their broadcasts
4. All of the above helped to relieve a lot of the tension in the community. In addition local residents were full of praise for the ABC and the role they played in these fires.

5. Review of all boundaries of parks be taken, in particular where these areas are adjacent to populated areas.

Please consider the following:

- a) I firmly believe (particularly in this area) that many sections of the National Park do not meet the criteria set for Parks.
- b) These areas should be revoke and returned to State Forests. By doing so it removes the inhibiting effect the Parks Act/Regulations have on fire control, prevention, fuel

reduction burns and would assist the land management capabilities of the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Victoria.

By excluding these areas, so are the restrictions/bans removed that would benefit many activities such as tourism, recreational activities and various commercial activities to name a few and so help the local economy. If you don't use it you lose it. This particularly applies under the particular land management strategies of fire, pest weeds and animals.

7. The Conservation Movement:

Unfortunately, recent public pressure and the influence of environmental zealots such as The Wilderness Society, has forced authorities to reduce prescribed burning. Certain elements of the conservation movement don't believe in man-set fires, they refuse to accept it is a natural ecological process.

With no cool burns or selective harvesting of timber to keep the forest thinner and green and to keep down the excess loads of fuel, these forests will burn, that's a scientific fact. The communities of the Victorian Box and Ironbark region must not be put in any more future danger because of irresponsible ideology of extreme greens.

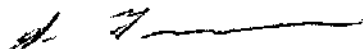
At the very least I expect the Federal Government to compel the States, most especially the Victorian Government, to initiate those changes necessary to ensure we do not experience a repeat of this summer's bushfire crisis. Unfortunately this could happen again in this area next fire season, there is still many areas with high fuel loading adjacent to Beechworth, Stanley El Dorado, Yackandandah and Chiltern.

A suggestion:

The Committee avails itself to the report of the Royal Commission into the 1939 bushfires in Victoria.

It would be a terrible pity if we did not learn from the 1.2 million hectares of North-Victoria that burnt and the deadly fires in Canberra and if these fires did not act as a catalyst for the best management and fire prevention management of our public land in the future.

Yours sincerely,


8.5.03.