

Monty Skehan

Tuesday, 20 May 2003

Dear Sir/Madam.

I am the owner of a 41ha property situated in the newly gazetted Chiltern-Mt. Pilot National Park. Prior to last year it was known as the Mt. Pilot Multi-Purpose Park. The property is situated on Honeysuckle Creek Road and is known as Honeysuckle Farm (REF CFA Map 263C Property 1).

I have owned this property for eight years. When I bought it, it was overrun with scrub wattle and bracken, which was also very thick around most of the three kilometres of boundary. After a lot of hard work and expense, I had cleared up the property, I then approached the NRE about their responsibilities around my property and the area in general. After a lot of negotiation and intervention by the Wooragee Landcare Group, I was able to access the 'Good Neighbour Scheme', where I was supplied with herbicide to control the bracken as it was a rabbit haven and a fire threat, and also to stop it spreading back to my property as it is toxic to stock. I did this for six years at my own expense. Alas, on the area being made a National Park, although being assured nothing has changed as far as management was concerned, I was denied herbicide by the Ranger in charge and told I could no longer continue to do this very necessary prevention work, as it was now a National Park.

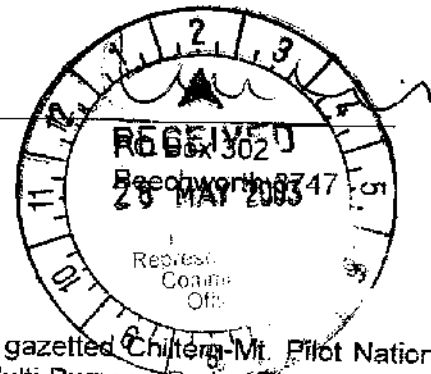
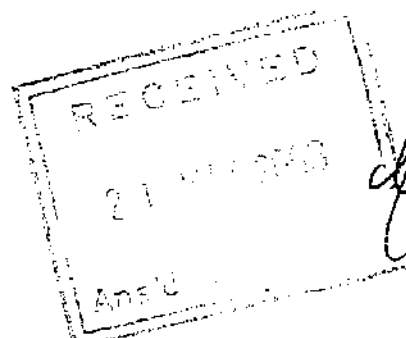
In the eight years of ownership, until the 21st January 2003, when the farm was obliterated and totally erased, there has been absolutely NO FUEL REDUCTION burns within many kilometres of my property.

After the fires, I had a meeting with the Manager of Community Safety from the CFA Regional Office in Wangaratta; I have enclosed the report I presented to him for your perusal.

At a subsequent meeting with him and the DGO's referred to in the other report, I was informed by the DGO's that they saw me on my tractor fighting the fire in my paddock and decided it was too dangerous to send the tankers to back me up. At the time, the main fire front was nowhere near my property and the DGO's had never been on my property to assess the danger, which was negligible within the property boundaries for an equipped fire fighting unit. At about the same time, there were approximately 30 CFA tankers sitting on the Chiltern- Beechworth road awaiting orders, but command had been taken over by people in the Beechworth Incident Centre who lacked local knowledge.

As far as future management strategies are concerned, I believe that there should be a cleared buffer zone on the park side of private property and a lot more local knowledge be acknowledged by the CFA and other authorities. This may sound like sour grapes but my home and property have been destroyed, and my business and livelihood totally annihilated. And the much-publicised State Government assistance to affected farmers is a figment of their own imaginations.

Michael John Skehan



SEQUENCE OF EVENTS LEADING UP TO AND DURING BUSHFIRE ON THE
PROPERTY OF MONTY SKEHAN ON 21.1.03

Brother and family arrive approx 1315 hrs.

Carol Case, Black Dog Creek Road, alerts of fire approaching 1339

Ring to check insurance status 1349

Ring Bob - already gone to Eldorado 1454

Friend rings to say Phil and Jack will come. Ring to tell boys to bring compressor 1532

Ring to tell boys I'm now going for compressor 1536

Car passes quickly travelling north to south - unable to see clearly

Leave to get compressor approx 1540

Spot fire approx 1km away 1542. Return quickly to house and ring 000 - 1546

Told that nothing is available immediately. Decide to go to spotfire with old Fordson & Farm fire fighter. Brother follows in 4WD with shovels

Have spotfire virtually extinguished as Lucas Chev arrives.

Geoff Lucas says within hearing of brother "Monty's done a good job". Chev does virtual blackout

Barnawartha truck arrives - not much hose. Want to borrow more from Chev but no go as they need it themselves.

Barnawartha truck called away by ?? and leaves. "Gully behind alight" - "Get Out!" is message

Chev leaves as Barnawartha truck heads towards Old Coach Road.

Head off home on Fordson, bolt drops out and trailer drops off back of tractor. Landcruiser stops to help me lift and bolt on again. Return to dam and refill firefighter tank, continue with fire plan and ready hoses and inform brother and his wife and three young girls what to do.

Decide to have another look around, brother and myself head south on Honeysuckle Road.

Spotfire has reignited, decide to check out Deep Creek and Link Roads. Travel up to Old Coach Road and into Deep Creek Road travelling at approx 60kmh while we scan our respective sides of gullies and ridges - enter Link Road and continue to Honeysuckle Road and back to farm - see no other fire activity.

I head out on Fordson again, arrive at spotfire and turn around and attempt to get Fordson into bush, but cutting on edge of road too steep. Brother arrives in 4WD and starts on far side with shovel and rake hoe, start pump and run out hose and control as well as possible until I can do no more for lack of water. Pack up hose as police sedan arrives to inform us of fire. They ask brother his name as he puts shovels, etc into back of 4WD. They ask for "Monty", brother points to me further on at Fordson. They pull me up and tell me about approaching fire from Mt Pilot. I say "we know" and point to what is left of spotfire. They take off and turn right off track and down around trees before trying to head uphill in sand. They begin to bog down, passenger alights and starts pushing. They call for our help. I go over and tell them that we have to push as far uphill as we can as my 4WD could get bogged in the sand if I tried to tow them. Call brother over and tell him we have to lift and push as rear end is grounding. Get it close enough to road to reach with 9 metre chain, run down to Fordson and while dropping chain over side of loader arm, yell to brother to get them out and come home. I race off home on Fordson in 6th gear and when swinging in gate notice brother right behind in 4WD. I ask if he got police out of sand, he replies "No, where is the chain?" I jump off Fordson and into 4WD and tell brother to go back. Arrive back at fire scene, policemen both in car with windows up. I jump out and tell brother to lock in hubs as I drag chain over to car and try to crawl under car to attach chain. No hook-up points, so crawl out and throw chain over front wheel

position and tell police that I will get them out of bog but suspension doesn't look too strong and may damage their car. Fortunately no damage as we get them out and untie chain. They are VERY GRATEFUL and I nearly have to push them into their car and send them out so that I can get back home to fill firefighter again.

Refill fire tank and tell brother and wife that the girls had better leave and go to friend's place in Beechworth. Tell brother he doesn't have to stay and should go with his family but he says "no way, there's no worries yet". Geoff Lucas arrives and asks "what did you do with those coppers?" and I laughed a little and said "maybe I saved their lives", and told them of the bog incident and the trip through Deep and Link gullies. He said that he'd been there too and would send the Chev back through and would finish off the spotfire. I thank him and as he leaves I take Fordson to front paddock and park about 150metres in from gate. Decide to jog up to fire and try to slow it down with shovel. Am at fire position scraping in the edges when brother and family arrive and say that they have been looking for me. I tell them we need my 4WD also so I jump on bullbar as brother heads back to farm, stop at my 4WD and tell girls to be very careful as the Chev is coming in again, but don't rush or panic as no real danger yet. Go into house and ring friend to say girls are on their way. Turn on news and watch report 1759hrs on fire and say to brother that the main front will miss here by a kilometre and we have to stop that spotfire as the main front will go more toward Elligate's and I have to watch for spots from north west corner, just as I'd been told years ago by Indigo Valley volunteers, while they looked around my place and checked my dams for copter access.

DSE employees in Toyota with slip-on arrive and one asks to use phone as mother in Beechworth was worried or ill (1821 hrs). Tell them of events to date and tell them Chev is on way again. They say that they will try to flit between my place Geoff Bayes'. They leave to check Bayes' property and we ring friend in Beechworth to see if girls had arrived. Hadn't arrived at 1826hrs. Have smoke and ring again at 1834hrs and they are there. Have a quick look around but see no change or sign of an approaching fire. Ring parents in Cobram to tell them the girls are out and safe and I had no real worries as Chev would get spotfire and we only had to watch for more spotfires from back paddock which was fairly bare. Head off to see what was happening at spotfire and found Land Cruiser bogged and grounded, trying to get up to fire. I attempt to push it up with bullbar but bullbar not strong enough so turn around as they tie on chain. Land Cruiser stuck on hi-lift with logs under wheels. I jump on tray and kick it over as someone hooks chain onto my 4WD. Pull out very roughly as a guy digs a ramp in further down slope.

Chev has swamped it's pump on way down and takes a while to start. About 8 of us going at it and holding well when green Toyota with CFA DGO's arrives. I approach and look in at map and pinpoint position while noticing my property was not marked on map. Tell them there was nothing in Deep or Link a while ago and this one will take me out if it gets away on the ridge. They say that they will send in two tankers and a dozer!!! to put it out, and take off. Both Chev and Land Cruiser nearly exhausted of resources and decide to get out also as it only needed to be mopped up. Offered to fill them up at my dam but it was decided old Chev would get out easier empty and two tankers were coming. They were to get out in case needed at Lucas place. They turn around and leave, followed by Land Cruiser and we follow a bit to find place to turn around and head home.

Suddenly rear of spot fire hits the side of ridge and is starting to move towards home. We race back and go up drive to paddock gate. I get out and go towards Fordson when I notice the fire

coming quickly along underside of ridge then spot into very front paddock. Yell to brother to ring 000 and get pump going on dam and to watch out (1954hrs). Start pump and hold hose over mudguard as I jump on Fordson and race to fire. Go through both fences as I circle fire before noticing another spot north east side of dam and well, race around there and extinguish on east side as I head toward back shed to get around towards house. Douse koala sitting in path and continue through gate and around shed to tennis court. Fire entering trees to south east of house as I go around over dam wall and through new shed, into garden to help brother who is hosing down back of house as fire approaches from east south east. Can't do any good there so out through shed and into paddock south of house. Get between fire and house.

Jump off and race to pump which has stalled. Pump has tipped over and flooded and won't start so have to get Fordson out and park it in front of shed and race to back of house to help brother. He's doing fine then starts to lose pressure before all water stops. No resources left as fire reaches back fence and I drag brother out. I go for 4WD and notice fire racing in front gate and over paddock towards us. Brother comes through hessian around verandah as house ignites and jogs up to 4WD with our wallets and his new esky. Head up drive - no way out front gate so go around through paddocks. Pick up koala who bites thumb and I bundle it up in doona. Get to rear shed and look over to house - huge fire.

House gone, workshop blazing and looks as though new shed burning too. Discuss staying but with no phones or water decide to go to Black Dog Creek Road while we can. Out back gate and on to track through Honeysuckle Creek crossing and have to remove log from track, continue on until have to cut tree off track. Continue again with broken branch falling out of tree across car breaking windscreen, etc. Get to Elligate's, stop and look around. No sign of any fire since leaving farm.

Go to Kevin and Carol Case's place where dozer is making fire break in paddock. Carol asks if I've decided to abandon and I tell her I'm already burnt out. She's shocked as there is still no real sign of fire in sight (20.45hrs). Watch and recover for a while before many NSW trucks arrive and get ready to protect properties on Black Dog Creek Road. Later watch main front of fire approach about half a kilometre each side of Elligate's road, about midnight.

21.1.03: Terry Ashworth tells police in wagon on Chiltern Road about my property. Sedan visits Kate and Jenny Lucas' properties and they tell police about my property. Geoff Lucas sees sedan leaving after I pulled them out during fire.

26.1.03: On Sunday while looking at damage DGO tells of regret about no help, citing 3 police vehicles at corner of Honeysuckle and Elligate's in line of fire. 4WD, wagon, sedan.

28.1.03: Con. David Richards accuses me of lying and imagining police car bogged. Inspector Todor not going to enquire about any police vehicles citing "you will subpoena me for class action". Must have read paper as I made no mention of kind.

No DSE or Parks personnel near property yet. First and only CFA vehicle 10.30 hrs Monday 27.1.03 - six days after fire. Why was property not on maps??

pay fire levy in insurance cost.