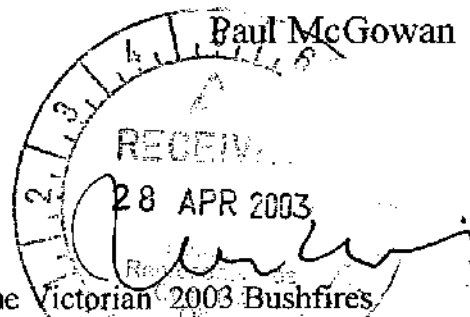


The Bushfire Committee  
Dear Members,



Herewith my submission restricted to the Victorian 2003 Bushfires. I am a farmer in North East Victoria with several kilometers of boundary with the bush. The bush is variously owned, some private, some crown land, some national park and some now designated national reference area but previously state forest.

My involvement in environmental issues has been recognized by being awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for my efforts in this area. I have also been awarded the long service medal for my involvement in the Country Fire Authority and am active in a variety of community activities.

Rather than detail a long list of complaints I hope it will be more helpful to submit just two ideas on matters of principle and then a few suggestions.

Over the years there has been a major change in Government's attitude to managing the bush and the forests, driven by an increasing concern for better management of the whole environment. While many changes are for the better and supported by scientific evidence, some are based only on a political decision to attract the "environmental" vote and have no scientific or economic backing. Since all political parties vie for this vote it must be accepted as a fact of life. However even accepting this, there should be some logic in deciding the appropriate management to achieve the best environmental outcome.

Since there will never be agreement between those who want to revert to pre European settlement and those who advocate multi purpose use there is need for a balance and this is what I hope will be the outcome of your enquiry.

The difficulty of achieving balance is epitomized in the management decision which has to be made when lightning starts a fire in a national park. If we wish to preserve the environment, we recognize that such fires are natural; they have always occurred in the bush and over centuries have made the bush what it naturally is. One opinion is that such fires should be allowed to burn to preserve the natural environment. There is general agreement that fire is an essential input into preserving the bush environment. Should the fire in the bush be allowed to burn until it comes out of the bush and threatens private assets? If this could be achieved it would be probably acceptable but in practice this is most difficult to achieve. In practice the current government policy is to try to extinguish lightning strikes in the bush as quickly as possible and before they become a major problem. Since this is contrary to the natural regime the composition of the bush changes with widespread effects. The plant balance changes significantly, the fuel load increases so that when a fire gets out of control it becomes a fire that changes the traditional nature of the bush. With significant assets at risk when fire is not controlled, the balance for the environment is difficult to achieve. It is widely accepted that the only way to achieve the required balance is to carry out fuel reduction burning when conditions are suitable.

No doubt you will receive many submissions on fuel reduction burning so I will try to keep my comments short. Irrespective of what government may say of their policy, the fact is that even if all the targets were met, at the current rate, specific areas would be controlled burnt only very rarely, perhaps every 80 or 120 years. Even if the necessary resources were made available to meet an acceptable target the problem still remains that it is government policy not to burn such areas as national reference areas