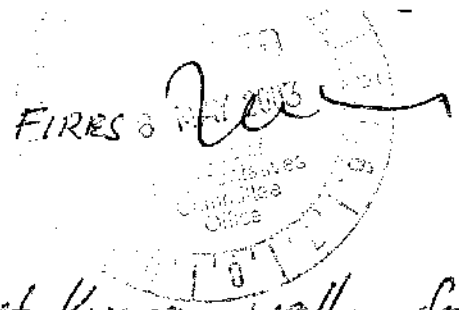


RE THE FEATHERTOP FIRMS



I have been residing in the West Kiewa valley for the past 25 years and prior to that, a school holidays visitor from 1958 to 1963.

I was on site on Jan 8 when the dry thunderstorm came through and talked to the hikers who had seen the lightning strike and had reported it around 10 AM per mobile phone to PARKS VIC.

The battery site on lease ML 5263, directly confront the east face of Mt Feather-top five kilometres line of site North of ML 5263.

As I was on the south side of the lightning strike I was able to observe the progress of fires under a South wind for at least 4 nights of the 7 I was on site.

On many occasions my travels took me past active fire fronts and so I had direct contact with C.F.A. DNRE, PARKS VIC and various contractor machine drivers in the area.

So following the lightning strike a small party of Parks summer crew presented at mid afternoon. I took them 2 hours to reach the strike from the valley floor.

There was no decisive action, no aerial water bombing then. A party of men + women with rake hoes in steep scrubby country accomplished little. Eventually a fire break a metre wide was put on a part of Diamantina spur following the hikers pad. Despite 4 days of South wind this was never back burnt. I have photos which show the futility of this fire break.

Through the courageous efforts of the CFA through the night and the daytime assistance of DNRE the fire was successfully held on the west side of

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the West Kiewa for a distance of 5 Kms North at which place the road diverted from the river to being 250 metres to the east and 80 metres above it. This raised position was the control line perched above very thick scrub in steep country.

The failure of DNRE to clear with a bulldozer one kilometre of an old track along the valley floor to the Dungey track turn off made the higher position as an alternative impossible to defend. The fire jumped the river, then up the hill and over the heads of the firefighters and so up to the Boyong High Plains, upper west Kiewa, Cobongra, Dinner Plain Omeo & on. Bringing in 'Elvis' that night was too little too late.

That Night I had to take Les Phoney, a level one DNRE operator back to Mt Beauty. Both of us had thought that they DNRE must be putting a break through on the old track. Later I examined both sides and found a 35 metre start on the south side and a brushing by a bulldozer on the north side but the 1 km untouched and unpatrolable.

Eventually these fires reached my leases burning 90% of the buildings, crusher, compressors, trucks backha causing hundreds of thousands of \$'s worth of damage.

No backburning was allowed to be done on this an active mine and Vic Heritage listed site.

There have been no fuel reduction burns by Parks Vic or DNRE in the Diamantina, upper Cobongra or West Kiewa valley in the past 25 years.

When the fires started I had confidence in Parks and DNRE fire fighting abilities. This was misplaced. The principle problem lies in management taking too long to make decisions and act, an innate inability to share information readily with

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their 60 firefighters and the concerned public.

It is now May. I have not received one phone call from either Parks management nor Dept. Sus. & Env. re our disposition here. Only the mines dept. wrote and offered help. This was not defined however.

Back when the fires were at the Battery site I asked Chris Rose (Parks) what the damage was. Later he told me he wanted me to be the first to know that the Crusher had burnt and so also had my stone building. This fortunately was only half right. Parks Vic had not wanted the stone building included on the Vic Heritage listing but it was and still is. Vic Heritage visited ^{day before} yesterday.

Between the Red Robin saddle ^{and} Mt Loch lies 2 km of 4wd track. Following the laying ^{underground} of a 22,000 volt cable a \$450,000 revegetation of the centre of the road was completed by TXU having been ordered by Parks Vic.

By the time of ^{the} fires this revegetation in the centre of the road was strong enough to facilitate the fire across the road. Supporting photos show ^{some} the fire stopped at the first ~~cut~~ rut in the road, some the second rut and occasionally straight across.

This road should have been treated as a Fire break and no reveg allowed on the centre of the road.

Ken Harris.