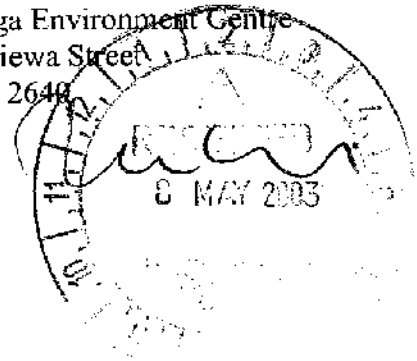


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May 8, 2003

Committee Secretary  
 House Select Committee on the  
 recent Australian bushfires  
 Dept. of the House of Representatives  
 Parliament House  
 Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires

Please accept the following observations related to the Committee's first five Terms of Reference:

a. *Extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment.....*

It is too early to gauge the overall environmental impacts of the fires, which will vary considerably depending on the relative severity of burns locally. It is obvious, however, from personal observations and preliminary post-fire research in north-eastern Victorian forests and in the Alpine and Mt. Buffalo National Parks that in many areas the burns were of low intensity and very patchy. Forest, heathland and grassland communities are recovering very quickly in these areas.

b. *The causes and risk factors.....*

It is clear that the climatic conditions leading up to the recent fires were unusually extreme, following an extended period of drought and supported by prevailing weather conditions. We believe that the severity of these fires was a direct result of these extreme conditions and had little to do with fire management practices in or the conservation status of the areas burnt. Severe bushfires over extensive geographic areas are infrequent, natural consequences of ecological conditions found on the dry Australia continent. These fires spread in many areas regardless of recently reduced fuel loads on the forest floor (pers. com., Mt. Buffalo Parks staff).

c. *The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction...*

Would increased efforts for hazard reduction and other strategies have influenced the outcome of the fires? We believe very little. There is no doubt that increased funding by government agencies for more personnel and equipment would augment hazard reduction efforts, but this would have had little effect given the nature of the fires in question. In any event, the desirability of frequent prescribed burning, the most common method of hazard reduction, is still a contentious issue from an ecological perspective.

d. *Appropriate land management policies and practices.....*

Government agencies are currently managing natural areas in regard to bushfires with a number of outcomes in mind, often compromising the maximum benefits to individual stakeholders. Their's is not any easy task. Given their many

responsibilities, the limited resources available to them and the constraints imposed by prevailing weather conditions to carry out hazard reduction practices, they do what they can reasonably be expected to do in most instances. They will never be able to achieve the maximum desired outcome for everyone involved, and the extensive recent criticism of their efforts by landholders and the anti-environmentalists is uninformed and unwarranted.

e. *Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation.....*

Given the various impacts of bushfire in this country and the complexities of the problems involved, more research in this area should be a priority. The recent establishment of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre in Melbourne is an important step in this direction. CSIRO researchers and academics such as Kevin Tolhurst from the University of Melbourne also need to be encouraged and supported financially. Perhaps some of the energy of those that are critical of environmentalists and current management practices would be better directed at lobbying to support this end. The solutions are not quite as simplistic as they would like us to believe.

Dr. Dennis Black, Convenor  
Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre