

The Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January Bushfires.

Select Committee Inquiry

Please note these reflections about my previous submissions.

After a quick glance through the published Select Committee submissions on the www seeking support for my alternative view of bushfire in Australia, I see some interesting trends.

- 1) There are thousands of citizens who wish to burn the bush for a variety of reasons.
- 2) There are hundreds of volunteer fire fighters who are now frustrated by red tape in their desire to conduct hazard reduction burns.
- 3) Many people have inflated expectations of radio communications during bushfire emergencies.
- 4) Management of the environment is very political.
- 5) Elders in the volunteer community have no authority at ground zero.
- 6) Very few submissions are looking at the true history of bushfire in this country and there is not much data about what actually happened while the indigenous owners were in charge.

I am still confident in my view that the frequency and intensity of wild fire is on the increase and it's probably all due to us. It may even be proportional to our population growth.

In my first attempts to outline this view on bushfire I was thinking about a history of a thousand years or so which is the about limit of my knowledge based on old trees, those which have been around for a long time. Then I thought about my forebears some six generations back, what were they doing with the native forests and I know a little about that. I can say we have lost a lot of timber and this place does not look like what it was then. I also think we have a problem understanding what is going on today with our rural landscape as a consequence of extensive clearing and grazing.

When I saw this article on bracken fern and blackberries there amongst other submissions I knew it was right because I too have found those same pests everywhere, from Hobart to the Brindabellas, and mostly hidden from public view. I grew up fighting those pests with either a slash hook or fishing rod. We should add the scotch thistle to this lot however no foreign species grows quite as well here as pinus radiata. Fivety years ago at Sisters Beach in Tasmania this other introduced potential fire hazard was well established on peat bogs and sand dunes after a private forestry experiment. This very tall weed grows almost anywhere and competes with all local species; perhaps the only exception is blackberries.

If the dead pine needles from a lone tree by my drive are gathered after a stiff breeze there is up to five buckets full and if we count every pine in the district that is a lot of fresh airborne fuel in a storm. We suffer from a legacy of failed rural experiments, which have dramatically increased ground fuel loads during severe drought. I said a sacrifice had to be made somewhere close to town, as the threat from wild fire could be from any direction in this much-modified environment. We must consider ignition sources other than lightening too.

In my first submission to the McLeod inquiry I thought the rural grass fire hazard was the greater risk of fire spread relative to Canberra suburbs considering the mix of dominant vegetation and loose ground litter after drought. Dead weeds add greatly to the airborne fuels in high winds and much of this is not from native forests. My other concern is that any hazard reduction program including burning off dry horse adjustments or local farms must address the longer-term issue of our changing landscape after repeated burning. More fire, more weeds!

We have lost control of the bushfire hazard because we can't see the weeds just over the fence. The big push by dozers and graders round Canberra after January 18th was a pathetic attempt to cover up neglect near by and it would not have stopped that firestorm anyway. What happened after this summer and "dry" lightening storm is another issue. Did anyone document how many extra fires were lit during the campaign to save pine forests on the way to Canberra?

We should wonder about the wisdom of fighting fire with fire after so many recently disasters and ask the general question, what have we created? I refer to all aspects of bushfire management over the recent decades and suggest we could be worse off today compared to other times since European settlement. Bushfire is now very common and the rate of new developments makes our town interface more venerable.

National disaster planning has done little to contain these events and stop wildfires from spreading into towns generally. Its time we had some new standards for measuring response at the grass roots and we should give up waiting for directions from above when the ground litter is blown up side down and in your face from a furnace. At this point it's too late for radio messages to help deal with the situation.

Community involvement in bushfire prevention is an issue for all governments. Local knowledge is a priceless resource and where is the budget for that? We could do well by going back to each little group that responded to this last event and ask them to elect a fresh lot of leaders to advise us the public or perhaps the governments of the authorities tasked with managing resources during this season and the period before. With their experience and hindsight, all practical matters in dealing with fires in their location can be addressed. This is my solution to the political debate.

Common sense in a bushfire is a valuable but variable quantity and every citizen at the fire front needs lots of it to survive when the professionals are missing for whatever reason. I remember burnt out vehicles from other disasters along roadsides and tracks. In this mobile society no one is immune to bushfire danger while travelling or working during in a long hot summer and a good old-fashioned standby is your car radio tuned to an up to date ABC.

Unfortunately we expect too much from our modern two-way communications. Depending on the frequency band they can be as useless as your hand held home extension phone used out in the bush or around town. Any system can be chocked with calls at a critical moment. It's a question of spectrum availability, power, terrain, and base station location. There are many ways we may set up systems and allocate channels in equipment too. There are no guarantees when everything is mashed together in a hurry. This is where local knowledge is most important though. I used to say to police officers in a new operation, if you can't see your radio tower there may not be enough signal strength for a UHF digital links with their hand held radios. Its about the same for mobile phones and TV but both employ more powerful bases or aerials in their given area.

We must stop and reflect, how did past generations cope with bushfire with out our modern technology and how did the native populations survive before our time on this drought prone continent. They watched for smoke signals every day. They and every other creature knew what was about to happen depending on the type of smoke in the sky. I try to observe bushfires this way too and my submissions relate to using this visual process over many years. I have watched a number of firebugs working round the horizon during my life, seen many storms but not one lightening ignition in daylight so I wonder if these inquiries will make any difference to the prevailing attitude, it's not our fault that all these fires occur.

Gavin Bugg.

Quantity (1) Part Submission Gavin Bugg

The Committee Secretary
Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2615.

Dear Sir.

In all my other documents I failed to raise my perception of quantity regarding the January 18th fire. There was too much fire out there on that morning and I reckoned it was unnatural because back burning was so extensive during the previous days.

I said from my previous experience big fires tend to burn parks and reserves from end to end regardless of fire fighting efforts. I knew that the all fires were out of control between 10 and 11 am that day when I last looked from my hill in Macgregor. It was everywhere in the Brindabella range then. Much of it was from old control lines.

My mistake was to leave my vantage point and have lunch at old Parliament House before seeing the Barry Humphries exhibition. We all wanted a diversion.

The alarm brought us outside some time after 2 pm and I was shocked into action by the sky. We went east instead of west along the parkway to get home and start hosing down.

My first alarm was the day I saw a very long line of "controlled" fire along a ridge to the north of Mt Coree. At a guess it was in the Two Sticks Road and Baldy Range area. It was too late in the day to be safe and I should have packed my bags then. I ignored my feelings and said it was all none of my business. After all I was retired.

What a stupid thing to do, I had a weeks notice to fix the garden instead of watching fires in the distance.

You may ask where I get my opinions from; I have a long history of watching fires in the distance and wondering what we were doing there.

I spent my early years watching a big patch of Tasmania in the Valentines Peak area behind Burnie as APPM expanded timber and paper operations. Every season they fired a few dozen fresh coupes to get natural eucalypt forest regeneration. That was systematic burning of very large amounts of dried wood in rough country. This was my reference for all other bushfires; I had to determine the quantities of fire only by the smoke relative to my maps as public access was totally denied. I needed several flights to in light aircraft for any photos to confirm the progress of their extensive forestry work.

Before many government foresters could spell the word "chip" I was splitting fire wood with my uncles deep in that same myrtle country as it was cleared for potatoes at a place called Parrawe. The owner Uncle Joe a major government contractor was also clearing and draining the blackwood swamps in the far west for new dairy farms

after WW2. We had massive fuel there too. Old government pine plantations in between were considered just rubbish by comparison, nobody bothered to collect the trash after the logs were pulped for paper. It was also burnt before replanting. About 30 % of the pine wood is wasted each time a pine coupe is fired and its all over in a just few hours. The same applies to the rainforest sections burnt for regeneration further south. I did not see many breakaway fires in the forests there during those controlled burns. My old company was completely successful in dominating the forests.

In my humble opinion the fires here were made uncontrollable long before they exploded on January 18th. It was partly a function of the area lit during back burning operations several days prior to Saturday. None of it went out properly and the rate of fuel consumed intensified some of the burns on the slopes pouring bits over the edge. The main fires became less obvious as the days wore on. They made a bad fire worse by scattering the fronts and enlarging the hot area on the north end at least. I still wonder if the wild fires were best left alone to find and destroy the heavy fuel over more time.

I said in other parts of my submission the control lines should have been near home and on smaller fuel loads to have any chance of completion. If you can accept that all parks and reserves will burn on till the fire has been right through then we lost the plot about the third day when the available crews failed to extinguish the initial strikes. They had to hit the ground deep in the bush very early but missed the chance. Retreat to safer ground and stand back was the only option later on.

By waiting to amass an armada we lost more valuable time. The best option was to grab the imitative and burn out the few low fuel areas adjacent to the hills. I mean mostly private property and they had to get into that overnight and every night there was no breeze to get maximum blackout. By burning outwards from known positions such as the farms and dwellings, extra time clearing breaks could have been avoided and I suggest stock could have been shifted around there over several days. This is my alternative view again that fuel has to be eliminated at home first but I hope I am discussing a much smaller quantity of fire here.

The major offensive had to be put into operation on the eastern side of the Murrumbidgee River on those few days when the winds allowed. I can say that because I witnessed the fires around Canberra the season before. The Molonglo valley and the Stromlo forests were still an open invitation. Every horse paddock should have been burnt off way before the event on January 18th. We did not make any sacrifice in favour of the city and paid the penalty.

In a wide range of industries it was my job to know relative quantities of elements in many processes and face the challenge when the mix was questioned. I spent long hours staring at events and considering the source of errors. Could our instruments be wrong or was I playing with a white elephant and there were a few over the years also an explosion or two. We all make mistakes and we let off the results in the environment. It's time for correcting our bushfire assessments, methods of attack and rate of response and we don't need a computer for that. Ask the locals.