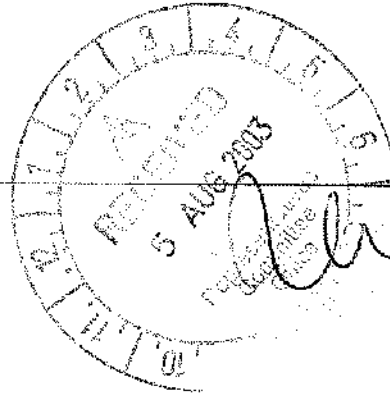


Mrs Kim M Van Dyk



29 July 2003.

**Submission No.471**

Secretary,  
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires,  
House of Representatives,  
Parliament House,  
Canberra,  
A.C.T., 2600.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission after the expiration of the advertised closing date.

I am making this submission as an involved individual.

I would like to make the following comments and ask the following questions;

1. Why did Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment set up their staging area in the Buchan Caves Reserve?
2. Why are Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment stating that money for fencing will only be allocated if the fence is a 'Dog Fence' built to Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment specifications?
3. There is an obvious need for controlled 'cool' burns.
4. A lack of communication with local persons and ignoring local information and advise.
5. The lack of telecommunication infrastructure in the area.

## **Expansion of the above points;**

### **1. Why did Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment set up their staging area in the Buchan Caves Reserve?**

In my opinion (and that of many others) the Caves Reserve would be the most dangerous place (within this immediate area) to be in should the fire hit. It was also a very poor public relations decision.

I offer the following rational for this opinion;

- THERE IS ONLY ONE ROAD INTO AND OUT OF THE RESERVE.

I am not a fire fighter but basic commonsense would indicate that you should always have at least two points of exit.

- THERE ARE TWO BRIDGES ALONG THE ROAD WITH ONLY ONE LANE.

There was potential for accidents with fresh, eager crews exiting and meeting with exhausted returning crews on the bridges.

- THE RESERVE IS PLANTED WITH EXOTIC, SOME HIGHLY FLAMABLE, TREES AND ABUTTED ON THE MOST PROBABLE FIRE APPROACH SIDE BY NATIVE FOREST, TEA-TREE AND BLACKBERRIES.

The Country Fire Authority Command Center was in a cleared recreation reserve with the Buchan River running alongside. Minimal fuel to burn - easy control of any spotting.

With the Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment Command Centre any spotting would be extremely difficult to bring under control.

- A PARKS VICTORIA LOGISTICS PERSON CAME TO THE BUCHAN RESOURCE CENTER TO REQUEST USE OF THE FACILITIES AS HE HAD BEEN ASKED TO SET UP ON CAVES RESERVE BUT FELT IT WAS A DANGEROUS OPTION.

I was a volunteer at the Resource Center when this gentleman came in. He was shown what the Center had to offer and offered full use of it.

He was impressed by the site position and facilities in place. He requested use of a phone to ring Dennis Matthews (Parks Victoria Incident Controller) who would have to approve the change of site.

Permission to change the site was denied. Why?

- THE COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY SET UP AT THE BUCHAN RESOURCE CENTER AND ABUTTING RECREATION RESERVE. MANY STATED THAT THEY WERE GLAD THEY WERE NOT IN THE CAVES RESERVE.

I believe this comment requires no elaboration.

- THE CAVES RESERVE IS SURROUNDED ON THREE SIDES WITH STEEP TO VERY STEEP HILLS.

If the Reserve road were blocked it would not be possible, even with four wheel drive, to exit by vehicle. Only persons with above average fitness would be able to walk (let alone run) up the hills with stopping for breath. The stated 'plan' was to run to the Royal cave which would be the safe refuge.

Allowing that people were able to get to the cave entrance/exit it is certain that they would not suffer any affects of flame or heat however the smoke is an unknown factor.

Caves suck air in and blow it out depending on atmospheric pressure and other factors.

There are documented cases of persons dying of smoke inhalation in caves due to smoke above being sucked into the cave.

There is evidence in our local caves of past severe smoke periods.

The topography of the Reserve means that non wired communication is difficult.

A Parks Victoria staff member told me that during the fire period communication into and out of the Reserve with the exception of wired telephones and including SMR (State Mobile Radio) was almost non existent. Due to fear of job reprisals this person will not state this for the public record but it is still a point worth considering.

- PARKS VICTORIA / DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT NOT INVOLVED IN PROTECTION OF PRIVATE LAND.

There has been for many years now some animosity between Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment and local residents.

This is evidenced by public meetings with Department representatives and locals in an attempt to discuss issues. There is still evident in the community a 'them and us' feeling.

Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment staff were asked to set up in the Buchan Recreation area in an attempt to help alleviate this feeling. They did not, and as local residents many of us feel betrayed by the Departments. One of the most common comments around town was that they were;

"Protecting their own little empire and leaving us to fend for ourselves"

During this fire I witnessed Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment working alongside the Country Fire Authority in both Omeo and Swifts Creek.

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My work involvement meant I spent a minimum of ten hours a day for several weeks at or close to the staging areas. It was very harmonious with an immediate information flow between the authorities.

Local residents in these areas were seeing the Authorities working together in the centre of town. By being visible in the towns, residents felt very much more secure with both Authorities there to protect them, their towns and surrounds.

A stark contrast to the opinions expressed by Buchan and district residents.

I witnessed considerably higher levels of stress in my local community than I witnessed in either the Omeo or Swifts Creek communities and believe that much of this is directly related to the lack of visible Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment presence in our town.

Why the segregation at Buchan?

## **2. Why are Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment stating that money for fencing will only be allocated if the fence is a 'Dog Fence' built to Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment specifications?**

My husband, John Van Dyk, was employed to survey existing fences separating Park and State forest boundary and private land in 2000.

The reason for this was to possibly fund a dog fence. The Department to supply some money and the landowner to supply the fence.

Call me cynical but it could be seen that the Department is using the fires to complete a program that had already been budgeted for.

They say they are offering the current fencing offers to assist in fire recovery and are trying to appear to be very generous but in reality the fence money was already budgeted for and they are not offering anything at all in actual fire recovery.

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### **3. There is an obvious need for controlled 'cool' burns.**

I study micro-chiroptera (insectivorous bats). I was in Omeo working when the first fire hit the town. Thousands of bats were flying about, tens more lay on the ground either exhausted or burnt. There was nowhere for them to go with fire on three sides and heavy ash and ember all around. The death toll was extremely high.

If an animal that is relatively fast flying and able to fly long distances had an extremely high death toll then what of the majority of other animal species who are slower moving. Even those that managed to survive the fire itself would continue to die with no habitat for them to re-locate to. No shelter, no food, no life.

What of unmoving flora who didn't stand a chance.

With a cool burn the vast majority of animals have the time and areas to re-locate.

Trees recover quickly from a cool burn. Trees were totally destroyed in this inferno.

Soil seed banks withstand cool burns. They are totally destroyed when cremated.

### **4. Lack of communication with local persons and ignoring local information and advise.**

Local residents informing Parks Victoria / Department of Sustainability and Environment of fire sightings were almost totally ignored and often told there was no fire where they said there was. We may be country folk, and are possibly not as highly educated as those who had authority over the fire, but I think we know what fire looks like. The vast majority of us are well able to read maps and we know our area intimately.

If a local tells me that they have spotted a fire at xyz location I believe them.

They are there, they are seeing it.

They are not sitting in an office a long way distant.

Local knowledge can tell you that the fastest route to a site is not necessarily the one that appears the quickest on the map.

They know which bridges can hold what weights and areas that a tanker may bottom out and other intimate details about tracks.

They know where to go and where to avoid.

They know who lives where and where dams and other water sources are.

This intimate knowledge cannot be learnt in a quick briefing.

## 5. Lack of telecommunication infrastructure in the area.

This disaster highlighted how poor (mostly non existent) our mobile telecommunication is.

Telstra installed temporary towers during the fire (thank you Telstra) but in this area we have the potential for many smaller disasters.

Bush users, cavers, river users, bush workers and local residents can and do have accidents.

It can take hours and possibly days to reach a place where help can be called for.

Time delays in reaching help have resulted in death where life could have been saved had help been called faster. Rapid response MICA ambulance officers, road ambulances with MICA and/or ALS Paramedic and/or paramedic and/or CAO officers and/or Helimed ambulance rescue can get into our remote areas quickly but they have to first be notified.

This applies to all police and emergency services. Time is always a crucial factor in any emergency.

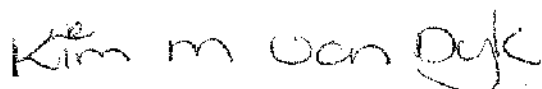
I realise that in our area it would be unfeasible to have 100% coverage but we should have at the least some coverage.

Thank you again for this opportunity to make comment. If it is possible to get an answer to the major question (point one) I have asked I would be most appreciative of receiving an answer.

The Parks Victoria staff member taking questions on our local ABC radio avoided answering this question when it was asked by a caller.

I and many others still seriously question this decision and would like an answer.

Yours sincerely,



Kim M Van Dyk