

Submission No.472

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES.

TO

The Secretary of the Committee
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

FROM

Graeme Llewellyn Evans

PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGE

I do require this submission and any future evidence to be protected by Parliamentary Privilege.

APPENDICES TO SUBMISSION

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| Appendix A | Major Bushfires in South East Australia from Media Reports in Forest Glen Diaries - 1 January 1990 to 30 June 2003 |
| Appendix B | Summary of Major Bushfires in South Eastern Australia |
| Appendix C | Credentials of GL Evans |

Wilson
7 August 03

This Submission to the House Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires is prepared to the Terms of Reference of 10 June 2003, but with apologies for some over-lap of terms (a) to (j) which is unavoidable as the individual Terms of Reference cannot be separately and clearly defined.

On Term of Reference (a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities:

The devastating fires at Canberra from 18 January 2003 that destroyed 419 houses, killed 4 people and injured 100, and threatened my daughter and family's home in the Western suburb of Pearce, have forced me to make this submission. I am also encouraged to write in response to Minister Wilson Tuckey's call for this inquiry into the recent Australian Bushfires.

The extent and impact of bushfires in South Eastern Australia from 1 January 1990 to 30 June 2003 is shown on Appendix A, and is summarised on Appendix B. Details are from all Media sources except for the Mt Canobolas State Recreation Area fire which was observed and recorded in Forest Glen diaries, but not reported in the media.

Those Appendices show a disturbing trend. Over the 13 1/2 years covered, bushfires and damage incurred are as follows:

Number of bushfires	747
Area burnt	2,286,108 ha
Number of houses burnt	1248
Deaths of humans	17
Injured humans	107

From the Summers of 1997/98 to 30/6/2003, a period of 7 years covering 6 Summers, when major bushfires have occurred each Summer, those results are as follows:

Number of bushfires	591
Area burnt	1,286,108 ha
Number of houses burnt	691
Deaths of humans	13
Injured humans	107

These results show that for the latter half of the recent 13 1/2 years covered, 80% of bushfires occurred, about 1/2 the total area was burnt, but 55% of houses were burnt, 76% of deaths occurred, and all of the injuries occurred. The increasing rate of damages occurring corresponds with the build-up over the same years of combustible material principally in National Parks with inadequate hazard reduction and a further dedication of National Parks, to the present day with the announcement this month of the Paroo Darling National Park and Currawinya Wetlands.

On Term of Reference (b) The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property:

The need for the acquisition of land by Governments through their departments, in particular National Parks & Wildlife Service in New South Wales, should change. What is now shown to be that Service's mismanagement, incompetence and excessive cost has resulted in loss of life and property on a massive and unacceptable scale. These losses cannot be tolerated at this level, when the Authorities have been advised for a decade that a disaster of this magnitude was inevitable.

On the 31/1/2003 the Coroner stated at the Inquiry into Goobang National Park fires of 19-23/1/98 and 25/12/2001 that the National Parks and Wildlife Service was 'incompetent'.

In December 2001 during bushfires of similar verocity surrounding Sydney and on the North and South Coasts, Premier Bob Carr's words were '...this is like wartime...'. Bushfire destruction is progressing at an accelerating rate due to the cause of build-up of flammable material in National Parks, but no corresponding hazard reduction.

Australians now find themselves at war, not with nature, but with the Green and Conservation movements claiming to be stakeholders, that have been successful in convincing Governments to acquire vast areas of productive land for National Parks and Reserves, totalling about 7% of Australia's land mass. By 20/11/2002 National Parks and Wildlife Service held 6,000,000 ha. of land.

The Canberra fires that raged in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania are the climax of 20 years of land being locked-up from farming and grazing. Those productive lands have been acquired in the name mostly of National Parks, where fire hazard reduction has been 5% of what was planned, proper fire breaks non-existent, and only narrow fire trails, that have been suicidal to use remain in some places in a non maintained condition. Removal of trees, shrubs and some grasses in rural and residential areas is prohibited or limited by Local and State Governments in the name of conservation and protection of the environment, endangered species and bio-diversity.

The attack on Australia by bushfires has developed up, particularly in NSW, since the introduction of the National Parks & Wildlife Service in the mid 1960's. Land was acquired in the 1970's continuing to the present. Farming and grazing were prohibited in them until recent months when grazing of Kosciuszko National Park by cattle to reduce combustibles was mentioned to test reaction. The build-up of fuel has occurred over the last 10 to 20 years depending upon when land was acquired, to its climax of the last six Summers. Fuel build-up was awaiting ignition, mostly by lightning and favourable climatic conditions. Devastating bushfires of last Summer are NOT natural - they are unnatural because of the unnatural build-up of fuel that has been permitted under the current management of that land.

Conversely broad-scale private lands used for primary production, mostly agriculture and grazing, and lands controlled by Rural Lands Protection Boards are subject to fire ignition after favourable seasons, but fires are extinguished on them readily. State Forest lands fit between these two land uses, as though susceptible to fire ignition, provide some level of controlability due to production and harvesting.

On Term of Reference (c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control:

There is only one successful way to reduce bushfire hazard adequately with environmental acceptance to maintain Australian land in the condition that it was at British Settlement in 1788. That is to graze the land at appropriate stocking rates. Some farming in higher rainfall areas where there are superior quality soils is acceptable, with the pressure for production from the ever expanding urban areas near cities.

The narrow and so-called fire trails that have been constructed around and through State Forests are inadequate. National Parks and Wildlife Service oppose any firebreaks on policy. Experience has shown that on the fire trails existing a fire truck cannot turn around to escape an oncoming fire.

If the policy of nil hazard reduction in National Parks continues, firebreaks 100 metres wide would be required to divide Parks into 300 ha. (750 acres) blocks depending on the nature of country. Firebreaks around boundaries and for intermediate access should be 50 metres wide. Adjoining farms and other cleared or grazed lands have and will provide adequate firebreaks/trails around their boundaries, a requirement of Local Government Acts.

At present volunteer firefighters' attitude and practice is to wait until a bushfire burns out of a National Park, and fight the fire on adjoining farm or cleared land for effectiveness and safety. Unfortunately some of that adjoining productive land with its stock and improvements is damaged before the fire can be brought under control.

This was the policy of volunteer bushfire brigades, but the policy of National Parks was nil hazard reduction nor fire control on the Parks. However, at the Goubang National Park fire of the summer of 1997/1998, volunteer firefighting brigades were directed into the Park to fight the fire. The firefighting effort was halted before the fire was fully extinguished to the volunteer firefighters' satisfaction. In the meantime some productive land, stock and improvements were burnt out before the fire was extinguished.

The National Parks & Wildlife Service's policy on fire protection and control that existed up until the recent bushfires of the Summer of 2002/2003 are now proven to be unsatisfactory. That policy should be altered to the recommendations above.

On Term of Reference (d) Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.

The National Parks & Wildlife Service ethos that is being cultivated by the Green and Conservation movements, some politicians and media, is taking some Australians and indeed some other countries in the world down the wrong path. Land cannot be locked up but must receive a use for which it is capable, preferably a productive use.

Locking up large areas of land with little land management, to return to its pre-1788 condition is attractive in theory, but unworkable in practice. Noxious weeds and animals have and will overcome the native species and bushfires will occur regularly. Already we are seeing noxious and damaging animals breeding out-of-control in NSW National Parks, including dingoes, dingoes crossed with vicious domestic dogs, foxes, pigs, goats, deer, brumbies, cats, rabbits and wedgetailed eagles.

Noxious weeds in a near-by State Forest and Nature Reserve to here include blackberry, serrated tussock, biddy bush, St. Johns wort, and Tree-of-Heaven present in many areas as an impenetrable wall. Adjoining farmers can be heavily fined to a charge upon their lands if they permit this sort of land degradation and can be similarly treated for the lack of bushfire prevention measures.

For 60,000 years from recent DNA testing when aborigines migrated from West Africa, they kept the whole of the continentant burning to maintain ground cover at a minimum for hunting kangaroos and emus, their main food source for 200,000 people. All the native fauna and flora we now possess survived that firestick farming, and evolved from regular burning from pre-historic times and agriculture to the present day.

Over the 200 years since settlement in Australia of white man from Great Britain, land was divided into portions for farming and grazing. Farmers and graziers controlled fuel build-up by their land use and activities. Large scale bushfires were limited to periods only following wet seasons and were predictable. In my lifetime they occurred in 1939, 1952, 1974 and 1983, that is each 10 to 20 years. Some of the worst years include

- 1983 Ash Wednesday fires in South Australia and Victoria, 2000 homes lost with deaths and injuries.
- 1997 Bushfires in 50 National Parks.
- 2001 December, January, bushfires surrounded Sydney, 20,000 firefighters, 100 bushfires out of control.
- 2002 December to January 2003. Canberra bushfires destroyed Canberra Pine Forest, 419 homes. 80 bushfires in NSW including Kosciuszko and other National Parks. Fires also burning in Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia.

In 1983, through the 1990's and to date, with the proliferation of National Parks and their nil hazard reduction, large scale bushfires are occurring most years and every year since and including the 1997/1998 Summer. Bushfires are ferocious and uncontrollable, destroying residential areas, property, native and productive animals, and loss of human life. Native flora and fauna are what the Parks are meant to preserve.

As shown in Appendices A & B, major bushfires in South East Australia in the period 1/1/1990 to 30/6/2003 have occurred approximately 747 times, destroying 2,286,000 ha. of land and 1,248 houses, and have been the cause of deaths of 17 persons and injuries to 107 persons.

Costs have been massive. By 30/12/2001 damage bill for that month's fires was \$50,000,000 with 1,000 insurance claims lodged.

The figures from Appendices A & B from 1/1/1990 to 30/6/2003 should be taken as a minimum, as many including small fires are not reported but show an unacceptably high level of damage.

Farm activity not only reduced bushfire occurrence and severity. Farm production gave Australia in my lifetime the highest standard of living in the world during the 1940's, 1950's, 1960's, and early 1970's with full employment. On 28/11/2002 NSW Farmers Association said 'primary industry is worth \$33 billion per year to the national economy'.

Since then proliferation of National Parks and the restrictions on primary production have lowered the standard of living in Australia to the second lowest of the OECD countries, with unemployed between 7% and 14%. There are other outside influences.

Promoters of National Parks canvas their opinion that tourism will bring in the economy's income that has been lost by primary production. That is incorrect and misleading. A recent publication showed that the Western Division of NSW, 2/5ths of the State, would require 10,000,000 tourists each year to bring in the wealth equal to that created by farming and grazing, and that is obviously 'pie-in-the-sky'. A recent study of Cabonne Shire in NSW showed primary production provided 10 times the income that tourism was bringing, and Cabonne known as the Food Basket of NSW.

Land without farmers would have no watering places other than rivers and major creeks. Kangaroos, emus and other native animal numbers would reduce to minimal due to the loss of man-made watering places, and the breed-up of the predators dingos, foxes, pigs and wedgetailed eagles and pressure from introduced animal species.

Conservationists and the Green Movement continue to be successful in having land locked-up for National Parks and Reserves under Threatened Species or Native Vegetation Legislation. Private lands held under freehold or perpetual lease tenure are not exempt.

Premier of NSW Bob Carr announced the proclamation of a number of new National Parks earlier this year. There is now a move to acquire the State Forest of the vast Pilliga Scrub in NSW for National Park, which has to date not suffered devastating wildfire because of timber industries use, and to declare farming restrictions on the so-called North Brigalow Bio Region, another vast area that extends from the Queensland border to Dubbo. If both these areas are so proclaimed there would be 2 more massive areas prone to regular uncontrollable wildfire.

The cost of acquiring land for National Parks, the cost of funding the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the NSW Fire Brigades, Rural Fire Service, SES, aircraft hire and purchase to fight fires in National Parks and Forest land must also be taken into account.

For example, already 7% of Australia's land mass is declared National Parks, much of it purchased. On the 1/1/98 bushfire control in New South Wales was costing \$1m per day.

From the NSW Treasurer's Budget Speech of 29/5/01.

Money for NPWS to acquire additional lands		\$ 45m
NSW Fire Brigades		\$ 39m
NSW Rural Fire Service		\$ 115m
NSW SES		\$ 27m
NSW NPWS Budget		UNKNOWN
In July 2001 the RFS staff doubled	cost	UNKNOWN
Purchase of 3 water crane helicopters	exceeds	\$ 9m
Hire of water bombing helicopters and fixed wing aircraft		UNKNOWN
Estimate bill for 530 houses destroyed – insurances' payout, at this stage		UNKNOWN
		<u>\$ 235m + UNKNOWN</u>

From the NSW Treasurer's Budget Speech for 2003/2004, funding appears to be:

NSW NPWS	\$ 227m
NSW Fire Brigades	\$ 38m
NSW Department of Rural Fire Service	\$ 125m
NSW SES	<u>\$ 1,678,000</u>
	<u>\$ 164,688,000</u>

The cost of administering National Parks and Wildlife Service and firefighting capability from the above appears to be \$ 391,678,000 pa.

Obviously fire fighting capabilities have been increased to protect fire prone National Parks and Forests, lands and property that are burnt with them.

Loss of income by volunteer firefighters and their employers, including 4000 firefighters in Southern areas of the State last Summer, have not been included in the above.

Minister responsible at the time for National Parks & Wildlife Service and fire fighting Bob Debus had been poorly advised when he said:

1. 'Only 10% of fires started in National Parks'. Where they started is irrelevant, as all fires start somewhere, mostly by lightning. What is important is the type of land they burn on, available fuel and climate. Once into most National Parks they are virtually uncontrollable as we experienced last Summer in Kosciuszko National Park and Blue Mountains National Parks.
2. '\$35 per ha. are spent on management of National Parks.' A very modest amount, only achieved with virtually no fencing, little noxious weeds nor noxious animals control, and no hazard reduction. Farmers spend 10 times that amount on those matters.
3. Quoted areas of hazard reduction carried out. That area is 5% of the total area planned for hazard reduction for last financial year.
4. 'Hazard reduced land also burnt'. So did bare backyards and parkland in Canberra. Hazard reduction will not prevent burning in wildfire conditions, but will help to reduce the ferocity of fires and provide control/backburn/working areas for firefighters to suppress or put out fires.

The Commonwealth Government's policy on Drought Proofing Australia versus the NSW Government's limit of catching 10% of run-off water for downstream irrigation and environmental flows requires comment. Droughts are a natural phenomenon in Australia, as are floods and bushfires. Of those only the occurrence of bushfires can be managed.

Drought-proofing Australia is the proper policy, and drought-proofing each farm as the unit of rural Australia, is each farmer's ambition, as he/she can afford to catch the rain that falls on that farm for stock and domestic use and fire protection. Farmers should be encouraged/helped to instal water containment dams/tanks/licenced bores to provide adequate water for those purposes.

The Coronor's Enquiry of 28 February 1996 following the January 1994 bushfires surrounding Sydney made recommendations to the NSW Government including, for both metropolitan and rural areas, fire-fighting services.

'...to achieve objectives of identification of fire hazards and reduction by a permanent service within the limited windows of opportunity ...' Experience has shown that this activity is resisted by National Parks & Wildlife Service and Forestry.

TYPICAL CASE OF GRAZING LAND NOT HAVING SUFFERED BUSHFIRE, CONVERTED INTO NATIONAL PARK.

As an example, the case of 'Caiwarro' and 'Currawinya' in South West Queensland, adjoining the NSW border, is typical of productive grazing lands being converted to National Park.

'Caiwarro' and 'Currawinya' were 2 adjoining properties located between Hungerford and Eulo in South West Queensland. Area totalled 1/4m acres, and together comprised the Paroo Pastoral Company as the Paroo River runs through them. Those lands were purchased by the AMI & F Co. in about 1950 with an expiring lease tenure.

I was transferred there in early 1953 as Jackaroo/Bookkeeper, where I worked for 2 1/4 years until a promotion occurred.

Land was in its pre-grazing condition with scattered trees and shrubs, trees mostly eucalypts, and a good variety of grasses and associates. This land was grazed only with no cultivation nor irrigation. 'Caiwarro' alone carried 30,000 merino sheep, 1,000 cattle, and a self-replacing stock of working horses.

Rabbits had been virtually eliminated by myxomatosis in 1950, dingos were excluded by the State border and Barrier and private dog-proof fences. There were no pigs. Native animals were abundant, including kangaroos, emus, brolgas, many water-birds in canegrass and lignum swamps. I witnessed my first brolga dance and kangaroo 'prize fight' from horse-back there.

Water supply was adequate from the river, with mostly bores in each paddock and some tanks. The large water-hole in the river near the homestead was deep and wide.

About 30 people were employed on the 2 properties, about half whites and half aborigines. Of those, five were married with families, living on the properties.

Mustering of sheep and cattle was continuous for various reasons, and I often rode out in the early mornings in a team of 10 to 15 horsemen.

Those properties were grazed by sheep and cattle, employed 30 permanents, plus many shearers, water supply contractors, carriers, purchased stores and material locally, and made a profit for the owners together with a substantial contribution to the State and National economies. Land was not over-grazed, eroded, salinated nor denuded. All of the flora was in virtual pristine condition – none at risk nor 'threatened'.

In contrast, since acquisition of those 2 properties for National Parks, all productive stock have been removed, structures including houses, sheds, woolsheds, yards, fences and I believe windmills and tanks over bores have been bulldozed down or removed. 50 resident persons were removed. There is now NO income generated for local villages, State nor Federal Governments from these lands. Native fauna numbers will rapidly decline with removal of structural watering places, and the breeding up of the predators dingos, wedgetail eagles, foxes, cats and most likely pigs.

On Term of Reference (e) Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;

As shown above, under Terms of Reference a, b, c, d, the proper bushfire mitigation and prevention method is for all non urban land to be used for primary production, where noxious weeds and animals and bushfire hazard will be controlled.

Primary production use should mainly be provided by resident family farmers as was the case in the Eastern and Central Divisions of New South Wales under the Crown Lands Consolidation Act of 1913, and for the Western Division the Western Lands Act of 1901. Both Acts have been amended in the last decade.

For lands that are not occupied and managed by resident family farmers, those lands should be divided into blocks surrounded by cleared firebreak strips. A successful example of this land and fire management practice is the Mallee Bushfire Prevention Scheme of the early 1970's covering a large area of land West of Hillston and Euabalong. Under the Scheme large areas of dense mallee land were divided into blocks by cleared firebreaks, 100 metres wide, then divided further by access trails two to three chains wide. The Scheme was originally managed by the member landholders and Cobar, Carrathool and Central Darling Shires, but is now controlled by a Fire Control Officer under the Bushfires Acts.

On Term of Reference (f) The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires.

Planning codes are deficient on both North and South Coasts of New South Wales, where clearing of discreet areas of dense timber have been permitted for urban residential development in large areas of dense coastal timber. This type of residential development incurs an unnecessarily high fire risk and appears to be compromising environmental protection.

Building codes should not permit the retention of large trees, particularly eucalypt and pine species, on residential or industrial allotments, as these trees are liable to ignite in extreme fire conditions, and can be blown over by strong winds.

Uncleared nature/walking strips should not be permitted in suburban residential areas as they are in some suburbs of Canberra. Bushfires can extend into those strips.

On Term of Reference (g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting:

Response arrangements for firefighters are adequate due to the use of telephones, pagers, and radio. Mobile telephones still lack coverage in many rural areas. However, there is an overlap of response required to Volunteer Fire Service Captains and to the professional Fire Control Officers, which should be corrected.

On Term of Reference (h) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions:

Resource sharing between volunteer brigades and Government agencies has difficulties. Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members have historically been land owners or managers and their employees, motivated by the desire to protect their assets, livelihoods and families. Volunteer firefighters have little confidence in the firefighting capabilities of the National Parks & Wildlife Service in their level of experience and responsibility for effort and use of resources.

On Term of Reference (i) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters:

Liability for fire control actions is an area that must be clarified. No person will take the responsibility of directing fire control actions if there is a risk of legal action against him for those directives.

Regarding damages caused by fires in lands including or adjoining National Parks, there is a great risk of class actions by sufferers for recovery of losses.

On Term of Reference (j) The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors:

1. The Old System Under the Former Bushfire Council of New South Wales.

The old system of Volunteer Bushfire Brigades administered by the Bushfire Council of New South Wales worked well and successfully until changed to the Rural Fire Service in the 1990's.

The Bushfire Council provided some firefighting equipment to Brigades and paid for fuel used by most equipment. There were no Government bushfire fighters. When a fire started, mostly by lightning, some by cigarette butts, some by accident, and none in my experience by arson, brigade volunteers got their water tanks and pumps onto their privately owned trucks, hurried straight to the fire and put it out. Communication was by telephone, CB radio, some other radio equipment and Royal Flying Doctor Service Radios in the Western half of New South Wales.

Volunteer young men often came from towns to the fires for a little adventure in assisting to extinguish fires, and that helped.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND REMEDIES.

The remedies for Australians with our low rainfall, dry-land environment are as follows:

1. Accept the fact that bushfires are endemic, require large volumes of flammable material in dry, hot and windy conditions, are started by lightning, arson or accident; and are not caused by drought, location of the start, percentage of fire hazard carried out, nor money spent on hazard reduction.
2. Accept that in South Eastern Australia it is not possible to control bushfires on land that has been locked up to preclude any use, including grazing, farming and forestry, as the vegetative growth that has evolved over the millenniums with fire must be constrained.
3. Understand that the cost of maintaining National Parks is massive, which includes land acquisition, maintenance of parks and National Parks & Wildlife Service bureaucracy, New South Wales Fire Brigades, Rural Fire Service, State Emergency Services, Insurance claims, and priceless loss of lives. From July 2001 to December 2002, 1,000,000 ha. had been destroyed in National Parks. Most of this destruction was previously prevented by farmers' land uses at no cost to taxpayers and no loss of endangered species nor bio-diversity beyond that which will occur naturally. Farmers also make a substantial contribution to the economy pumping \$9b. per year into New South Wales coffers.
4. Revoke National Park and Nature Reserve status from all State parks, and make that land available for application by farmers for grazing purposes under Freehold or Leasehold Tenures, similarly to that which existed under the Crown Lands Consolidation Act of 1913, and Western Lands Act of 1901.
5. Retain State Recreation Areas, Zoos and the like under management of National Parks & Wildlife Service.
6. Require managers of all forests, remaining parks and reserves to maintain adequate firebreaks around their boundaries, not on neighbouring properties, and at least 50 metres wide for firebreak and working area for firefighters, and 100 metres wide elsewhere to divide large areas. Further that forests, parks and reserves be treated similarly to the Mallee Bushfire Prevention Scheme over a large area West of Hillston and Euabalong. That Scheme commenced in the 1970's, managed by affected landholders and shire councils.
7. Roads and firebreaks should be cleared to 100 metres wide as are some roads in Bourke Shire for fire control, kangaroo and emu evading by motor vehicles.
8. Take evidence from experienced people at this Inquiry. Those experienced people should be the true stakeholders who own land or lease land in perpetuity, have been active members of rural volunteer bushfire brigades, and are or have been active farmers or graziers.

My credentials are shown on the attached Appendix 'C'.

Yours faithfully



Graeme Llewelly Evans

28 July 2003