



Submission No.188

Date: 06 / 05 / 2003

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

Dear Sir / Madam,

This is a submission to the federal government inquiry into the recent Australian bush fires.

Regarding the terms of reference the areas that I have concern with are in regard to 2B, 2C, 2D & 2F.

We were not directly involved with the fighting of bush fires this season, nor was my property burnt. However we were burnt in the 1983 fires. My concern is with land management issues and fire prevention as they relate to our area; the upper Rose River area of the north east of Victoria in the Rose River Valley. We have farmed in this region since 1982 we have noted in particular properties to south of us where there has a gradual deterioration with the overgrowth of blackberries. The land management principles and practises do not appear to be adhered to. There has been no obvious enforcement of these by the respective authorities. There has been a withdrawal by the Department of S & E of spraying river frontages, whether leased or not and partly along roadsides since the late 1980's. In this area it would appear that many people have acquired land principally for a change of lifestyle, not for farming. They generally have little income to be able to put land management practices into effect. I believe the authorities, in particular the Department of S & E have sufficient power over landholders to give notice to what should be done. If this is not complied with then they have the authority to bill them for the work done on their behalf. If not paid they then have the power to sell parts of their assets to effect payment. Since 1982 several hundred acres of country in the upper Rose River valley south of us have gradually become infested with blackberries. These have grown so vigorously that they have totally covered fences and are 10 feet high in areas and growing through the trees. There does not appear to have been any effort what so ever to control these. There have been a lot of verbal mutterings about the problem but nothing significant has been achieved. Several properties were completely blackberry free in the early 80's. They have grown vigorously and out of control and constitute a major fire threat. They cause a major financial impediment to their neighbours who are trying to control their blackberries with the influx of fruit and seeds via birds and other animals.

It is quite clear that there has been no attempt to control blackberries in this region for at least 20 years, despite the fact that the powers are in place for this action to be undertaken. If the authorities do not have these powers then consideration should be given into reviewing this. If they do have the powers then why have they not been implementing them? Consideration should be given to land holders in terms of some kind of encouragement, either rewarding those who adopt good land management practises or penalising those who do not. The other significant issue is hazard reduction which no doubt would be a significant thrust of this enquiry. It is to be noted that there has been no significant hazard reduction in terms of controlled burn offs in our region for over 20 years.

With regard to the existing planning and building codes I find it concerning that people who like to live in a forest setting generally tend to get a building permit for a house on the highest point within that forest. They tend to leave all the trees around the house and of course the first major fire that approaches shoots up the hill and takes out the house. Blackberries of course just help fan this. It is to be noted that we have this problem in the valley, with inappropriate sites for houses. I feel that this is another area that should be reviewed.

It has become established practise in Australia to leave trees along side the road outside the fence line. I think this causes considerable difficulty. When there is a fire it is quite often impossible to get access up the road as was the case in the 1983 bushfires at Rose River due to trees and debris lying across the road. In my job as a surgeon I have had to certify a lot of people dead over the years who have run a car into a tree at the side of the road. If they have not been killed it is often the case that they have become a quadriplegic or ended up with a significant disability. It would seem that we should give some consideration to clearing the trees from the sides of the roads, bringing the fences closer to the roads and putting the trees further away in the paddocks. I thank you for your time.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Martin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "R".

ROB MARTIN