

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires.
Department of the House of Representatives .
Parliament House .
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia.

Causes risk factors , contributing to the impact and severity of Bush fires occurring 2001/2002.

While there are a number of factors that contribute to the severity of bush fires and their impact on the bush fire related community, drought, weather, (wind , humidity, temperature, soil dryness etc) the bottom line is simply this fire will not burn without fuel, the more fuel the more severe the fire .

Fuel is anything that has the ability to combust, in a remote National Park fuel is vegetation alive, dead, standing and fallen.

In the Canberra suburbs and the Blue Mountains, fuel has been actual buildings and their contents.

Heavy fuels feed intense fires , intense fires have high flame heights, intense radiation, move faster, throw burning fire brands further, decrease visibility , reduce oxygen availability, create fire storms and resident fear and panic. Simply put intensive fast moving fires fed by heavy fuel loads decrease the ability of the fire fighters to control these fires , increase personal danger to the fire fighters and residents in villages adjoining large areas of bushland.

In the Blue Mountains, Sutherland, Central Coast, Snowy Mountains, Canberra and other areas where large areas of unmanaged bush land interface with urban development an extreme risk exists to residents and their property.

The major landholder in this scenario is the National Parks and Wildlife Service who through long and continuing land acquisition programmes have moved their original land boundaries closer to and in some instances into the actual adjacent Village/ town boundaries .

This applies to a lesser degree to State Forest, Crown land, Council Reserves and in some areas large tracts of privately owned land .

However NPWS. Stands out as the agency with the largest amount of problem land with its heavy vegetation and accumulated fuel loads.

Phil Cheney from the CSIRO. Is often quoted as saying " Whoever owns the land owns the fire " and subsequently the responsibility for its control and management, and the damage and loss it incurs .

The NPWS claims responsible land management practices with regard to its adjoining neighbours at the Park/ Village interface.

Proof that this is not the case is the NPWS. own hazard reduction figures claiming point .6 of a per cent of their own estate hazard reduced in 2002/03, no proof has been offered by the NPWS that this small amount of hazard reduction was all carried out at the bushland urban interface to protect residents and their property.

It is my belief that much of this hazard reduction was carried out deep within National Parks to protect areas containing special vegetation communities or the habitat of endangered fauna.

If we remove such activity from less than one per cent of area hazard reduced by NPWS. It is plainly apparent that huge tracts of National Park land abutting urban development is not hazard reduced or in fact given any responsible management by those responsible for its overall management.

It is difficult for Fire Fighting agencies , residents, and community members to understand the NPWS doctrine which since the inception of the NPWS. In 1967. has changed from the land management Policies of National park Trusts , some that had existed from eighteen seventies, which preserved areas of land for limited controlled use by the taxpayer who funded them, at the same time these Trust Parks conserved both Flora and Fauna,a reasonable balance between recreation and conservation was achieved and although Trusts differed in their management approaches , they certainly had fuel management policies that were aimed at preventing large uncontrollable bushfires from burning through National parks and wreaking havoc on adjoining urban areas.

With the introduction of a State Government National parks and Wildlife Service in 1967, existing staff were transferred , down graded and in some cases encouraged to move to other areas of employment , Academics replaced hands on long term Rangers and slowly and surely a new interpretation of Conservation filtered through the National Park system.

Supposedly endangered plants and animals were given priority over the people who lived near National Parks and whose taxation funded the flawed NPWS system.

Flawed simply because the staff of the NPWS were Judge, Jury and Prosecutor, where no avenue of appeal existed.

If their "experts" said a plant or animal was endangered then this was gospel, if they said frequent burning destroyed them, then this was indisputable. This totally ignores the fact (born out by carbon dating on charcoal beds) That the present Flora and fauna of NSW has been subjected to thousands of years of uncontrolled bush fires, started by lightning and Aboriginals.

Fire started during droughts, like the one we are experiencing now, would have burned for weeks even months, burning from inland NSW to the Pacific Ocean.

Many of these fires would have matched the intensity of some of our recent holocausts, others would have been of less intensity as they burnt over ground previously burnt, one, two or three or more years previously. It is evident that any plant surviving in National Parks is in some way fire regenerative by seed, lignotubers, epicormic shoots etc, if it exists in our landscape today it has been burnt many times (snowline Alpine Plants excepted).

If a bird reptile or animal exists within National Parks today it has evolved with and bred through many fires, so that the myth that fire, wildfire or managed fire (prescribed burning) will destroy our national parks and their occupants growing or living is just that, a myth, a miscalculation of facts designed to baffle the less educated, the NPWS criteria that "We" the National Park Experts "are the only ones with the expertise and therefore what we say is Gospel. Our land management policies must therefore be right.

What has occurred last summer has of course proved them wrong, even if we factor in the extended drought, the soil and fuel dryness, low humidities, and high temperatures, the huge areas burnt and the damage caused within parks and their neighbours could have only happened if large areas of bush contained heavy fuel loads. The simple mathematics of fire behaviour is this, double the fuel, double the fire intensity, if all the other factors remain static. If Land Management agencies allow the fuel to build up over long periods of time then when drought or long dry spells occur, the heavy dry

fuel accumulation will, if ignited carry unmanageable wildfires, that not only endanger Town Villages and farm properties that border these Parks But cause incredible damage within the actual Parks.

High intensity wildfires are in most cases unmanageable even with large numbers of fire fighters, using modern equipment.

The danger to fire fighting personell increases proportionally with the intensity of the fire, low intensity fires, low personal danger, high intensity fires great danger to fire fighters.

High unmanaged fuel loads have many disadvantages not only to fire fighters but also to flora and fauna, for instance, wildfires running in heavy fuel loads cannot be fought successfully with conventional fire fighting methods (water, foam, directed onto the fire), they can only be controlled by back burning, burning out the fuel between a road or a dozed trail and the approaching fire.

These back burns are often lit as a last resort in an effort to stop that wild fire destroying houses in the fires path, they are often lit in the heat of mid day or early afternoon when the fire danger is greatest, within minutes they assume the intensity of the approaching wild fire, they trap and destroy any and all wildlife between two intense fires, they destroy vegetation sensitive or otherwise, they throw burning fire brands great distances (5 to 8 kilometres in Blue Mountains) they are subject to erratic fire behaviour on wind changes or up gullies on updrafts, created by the fire creating it own fire storms.

This type of fire behaviour occurring so close to fire fighters creates an immediate and grave danger to the fire fighters using this method of fire control, numerous lives have been lost and many injuries have occurred while implementing this "last ditch" method of stopping an oncoming wild fire.

The chance of success of back burning is governed by the fuel loads, the effectiveness of control lines, the man power available, the weather conditions and the time of day, the planning and management.

Back burns always increase the size of the fire, sometimes doubling or trebling it, they often spread it outside the control lines, they may increase the danger to adjoining urban areas, they always pose a danger to fire fighters, they increase the final financial cost of fire control.

Having established that heavy fuel loads in areas adjoining urban development create unmanageable fire problems to fire fighters and residents adjoining Parklands. The solution to the problem is remove the

Offending fuel at a time of year (autumn , winter) when it can be burnt off under controlled conditions (hazard reduction, prescribed burning).

WIEN , WHERE, HOW, WHO.

WHEN. Burnt off when reasonable burning conditions prevail.

WHERE At the bushland urban interface where the parkland meets the urban development , from the backyard outwards into the Park for 500 to 1000 metres(Buffer Zone).

HOW Regular burning as required to reduce and maintain fuel loads at a level in the buffer zones so that an approaching wild fire under extreme weather conditions can be fought by direct attack with reasonable safety to the participating fire fighters irrespective of what badge they wear.
(5 to 6 tonnes per hectare in forest (bushland) 2 tonnes in grass land)

WHO Only the Rural Fire Service has the man power , the intent, and expertise, to carry out the necessary large scale fuel management across the state. This could be with the co-operation of the NPWS. Or other agencies but only with Government Legislation giving the authority to the RFS. , after all the 70000 RFS Volunteers throughout the state are expected to fight the out of control wild fires in the State National Parks when the NPWS. Has no hope of doing it for themselves, why shouldn't they manage the fuels to allow themselves a reasonable chance to extinguish summer fires with some degree of safety.

Finally the use of Rural Fire Service Volunteers on large scale hazard reduction should incur some financial adjustment of State Government Funding and some monetary reimbursement to the Volunteers undertaking the work.

While it is acceptable for Volunteer Fire fighters to fight bush fires for free, the large work input doing fuel management in some one else's area of responsibility should be met from the budgets of these agencies.

Not the \$30 to \$50 per hour paid to their own staff but a reasonable flat rate of say \$11-\$12 per hour, perhaps tax exempt.

Yours faithfully

Kevin Browne

Kevin Browne. AFSM.