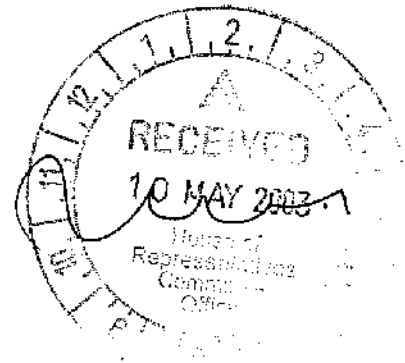


Submission No.192



7th May 2003

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires.

Bushfires have always been a part of the Australian landscape and environment. However, from time to time, particularly large and devastating fires occur which result in a large number of human lives being lost, as well as millions of dollars worth of damage to buildings and industry and immeasurable environmental destruction.

There have been several select committees following such devastating fires. The 1939 bushfires in Victoria resulted in a Royal Commission and more recently there was a South Australian select committee following the 1983 bushfires in this State. The purpose of such investigations have been to analyse the causes of these fires and to draw some conclusions as to how such a tragedy could have been prevented. Likewise, the current Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires has been appointed to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on life, property and the environment.

I hereby submit my comments in relation to terms of reference (b) and (f).

(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.

There are two types of causes of bushfires: (i) natural causes and (ii) those caused by man either through fires lit by man which have inadvertently got away or merely through the mismanagement of the land generally which creates a hazardous environment for bushfires to begin and spread.

Following the recent bushfires in the ACT and NSW, some people were quick to accuse national parks and reserves as the major source of the bushfire tragedy. While I believe that there is no value in playing the blame game, in any event, it has got to be pointed out that these claims are simply wrong!

In respect to the situation in New South Wales, the Australian Conservation Council state on their website (<http://www.acfonline.org.au>) that :

Contrary to popular opinion, the majority of fires start outside parks and burn into them. In National Parks and Wildlife reserves of NSW, between 1974 and 1984, 65 fires began outside reserves and burned into them, compared with 14 fires that began in reserves and burned out on to other land. In this same period, the area of reserves burnt by fires that moved into the reserves from other land was 119,721 hectares compared with 6,439 hectares of other land that was burnt by fires that began in reserves.

In my own state of South Australia, statistics collated by the Department of Environment and Conservation – for the five year period 1997/98 to 2001/02 – tell a similar story: Fires which began outside reserves caused greater damage to reserves than did fires starting in reserves and spreading outside reserves. The total number of fires which began outside reserves was 11 and the damage to reserves was 11,384 hectares burnt. Whereas the total number of fires which began in reserves was 10 and the total damage to areas outside reserves was just 1,059 hectares.

It is clear that some people do not value the preservation of what is left of the Australian natural landscape. Accordingly, they believe that the existence of national parks locks up land, preventing it from being used for other uses. These views have been expressed by a small but vocal group in our community, including some members of parliament.

Australia's environmental record of damaging native vegetation is a bad one. In recent years, Australian legislators have been successful in protecting some of our native bushland and wildlife with the development of National Parks and the like. This needs to continue – and certainly not be restricted simply because bushfires can enter or exit National Parks. National Parks have their own intrinsic worth and are vital for the long term viability of ecological diversity in Australia. We owe it to future generations that such diversity is conserved.

A lot has been said about 'prescribed burning' (or similarly, 'cool burning' or 'mosaic burning') as a potentially useful land management practice to protect native bushland from out of control bushfires. There appears to be merit in this type of burning as it reduces the level of fuel and thus the intensity of fires.

The practice of prescribed burning appears to be practiced successfully in the Northern Territory, with a small window of opportunity being available to them each year when the weather conditions provide the right conditions for safe burning. The Northern Territory has a completely different landscape and weather conditions to the vast southern regions of Australia and while practiced successfully in the Top End, there is little hard evidence on how effective prescribed burning is throughout other parts of Australia.

I also understand that there has been a lot of work done with prescribed burning in Western Australia, which has produced some positive results. Once again, the experiences of WA can not simply be applied to other regions of Australia due to the unique requirements involved in this particularly type of land management practice. Therefore, each State has to undertake its own specific research on prescribed burning for each region. It certainly needs to be done in accordance with ecological principles. The issue of insurance liability also needs to be considered should a fire resulting from a prescribed burn get away.

(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.

In their desire to be surrounded by the Australian landscape, an increasing number of Australians are choosing to build homes, and even schools, in areas that are of extreme fire danger. Decisions to live in such areas are just 'suicidal'. Planning bodies should not be allowing housing developments to take place in these fire-prone areas. This would not only protect those people who make unwise decisions to live in unsafe places but it would also protect other people in the community. It is particularly unfair on the firefighters – both professional and volunteers – who risk their lives saving other people's lives and property. It is particularly concerning that children are put at high risk because of bad planning decisions allowing schools to be built in fire-prone areas.

In South Australia, the advice of the Country Fires Service (CFS) is often ignored. Some local governments in the fire-prone Hills areas choose to ignore the recommendations of the CFS regarding the appropriateness of location and building materials.

Some relatively new homes have been built in the Adelaide Hills whereby its occupants would be at extreme risk should a fire occur which is anything remotely like what the people of Canberra experienced earlier this year. The people in those areas and in some other areas throughout the Adelaide Hills would have no hope at all of escaping from that fire or protecting their homes and property. Removing bushland should not be seen as the expected follow up approach – after someone has built in a high fire risk area – people should not be allowed to build there in the first place!

Moving towards a more commonsense approach to planning decisions is, I believe, a very simple and cost effective of reducing the incidence and impact of bushfires.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my views on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,



Bob Such MP JP
Member for Fisher