



Timber Communities Australia

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Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Spijon'.

May 2003

Submission No.297

Dear Sir,

The Rushworth branch of Timber Communities Australia would like to submit the following to the Federal Bushfire Inquiry.

Background

Timber Communities Australia (TCA) represents regional communities throughout Australia who depend on the forest industries. TCA has an extensive national, regional network with 60 branches and a database of around 13000.

The primary focus for TCA continues to be the socio-economic well being of the communities, families and individuals it represents.

TCA is a grass roots organisation supporting families that depend on the forest and forest industries. Inextricably linked to the bush we are acutely aware of land management issues.

The Rushworth branch is situated in Central Victoria and is surrounded by Box and Ironbark forest. It formed 6 years AGO due to the Environment Conservation Council Investigation into the Box and Ironbark Forest and Woodlands which covered an area from Wodonga to Stawell, including Rushworth.

During this 6 year investigation we constantly foretold of the risks in locking up such a large amount of land without adequate management nor funds.

We are acutely aware that we stated on numerous occasions the folly of not maintaining fire-tracks and allowing large forest areas to become overgrown. We pointed out the option of selective harvesting to keep the forest healthy and reduce fuel loads.

The consequence of a lack of fuel reduction and ecological burns in parks and reserves were also points we pushed. To little effect.

On recommendations of the ECC, the State Government increased the Box and Ironbark reserves system to 190,000 hectares. With inadequate funding and no management plans.

This State Government brags about creating more National Parks in just 3 years than any other Government in Victoria's history, yet it has failed to protect the environment and the people of Victoria. It has not giving the resources nor management direction to adequately protect them.

It has made a mockery of Parks Vic's own Statement of purpose which includes to –
conserve, protect and enhance environmental and cultural assets
contribute to the social and economic well being of Victorians.

Over a million hectares have been burnt together with how many species of plants and animals?
41 houses, 200 other buildings, machinery, tools, hay etc. 3000 kilometres of fencing and
11,000 head of stock have also gone.

It will be impossible to put a price on the economic loss of the people affected by these fires let
alone the full economical cost to Victoria.

How do you measure the social cost??? The emotional and health costs are incalculable.

The devastating fires that raged across Victoria did not directly affect us, but like all of Victoria,
the ramifications certainly will.

We watched in horror as the tragedy of the fires unfolded, all our fears had come to be.
And always in the back of our mind was the selfish thought that our turn would come.

The government must not be permitted to continue to bury its head in the sand/ash. Its lack of
management, particularly with regard to fire protection, has been constantly brought to their
attention.

Warnings from the users of the forest and pleas from those living alongside the National Parks,
to improve the management, together with the lessons of 1926, 1939, 1944, 1965, 1983 and
the Linton enquiry, surely should have taught them something.

The 2003 fires were not unexpected and yet they had learnt nothing.

We can only pray that they are forced to listen and learn.

Victorians and indeed all Australians must not be put in danger because of irresponsible ideology of eco fundamentalist and the inaction and cowardly response from an arrogant government which is more prone to look after the green vote than the welfare of people, forests and communities.

Severe bush fires occur every 5-10 years. Our turn will come.
Living surrounded by forest, we are deeply concerned that Governments do not learn lessons, or choose to ignore them as they choose to ignore scientific proof in search of green votes.

It is statements such as

'the idea of a major fire in the box and ironbark forests is actually only a myth'

which was from the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) in a radio interview in 2001 discussing the collection of firewood, fuel loads and the risk of fires in the Box and Ironbark forest— that are of the gravest concern.

The fallacy of this ridiculous claim was shown to the direct detriment of the people of Chiltern, Barnawatha, Eldorado etc

Government funded eco fundamentalists such as the VNPA and the Australian Conservation Society are still dismissing the importance of fuel reduction burns to safeguard property and lives.

Statements that the area burnt in the 1939 fires compared to 2003 was proof that harvesting and cattle grazing actually increase the fire is absurd. (ACF VNPA website, and letters to the editor)

They ignore the fact that in 1939 the fires were basically fought with Hessian bags on sticks whilst 2003 there was around 40 aircraft, over 250 specialised vehicles, nearly 100 bulldozers, and a major commitment from the Gippsland based timber industry. They ignore the use of satellite imagery, technology and communications.

What's more, in 1939 the drought had been going for an extra 10 years, and with a war on man power was reduced, whereas in 2003 the following agencies were involved-

The Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Primary Industries, Parks Victoria, the Country Fire Authority, local plantation company brigades, forest industry crews and equipment, the Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology, local municipalities, Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB), NSW State Forests, New Zealand fire and conservation agencies, The Salvation Army, Red Cross, Rural Ambulance Victoria, St John Ambulance, Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, State Emergency Service, Victoria Police, WICEN (Wireless Institute Civil Emergency Network) and several United States land management agencies. Joint Media Release From the Department of Sustainability and Environment and CFA Feb 21 2003

And **still** it couldn't be put out!!

Yet it would appear Governments pay more attention to these types of dangerous ramblings than to the real concerns of the men and women who live and work in the bush and who risk their lives to fight these fires.

Unlearnt lessons and ignored evidence

There is indisputable evidence that the only way to safeguard against the severity of bushfires is to reduce the fuel load. The DNRE and numerous scientists have documented these facts and we will certainly not attempt to list them all. However we felt that the following were worth quoting.

The Environment Protection Authority discussion paper March 2001

Wildfire prevention through fuel reduction burning is a fundamental component of comprehensive fire prevention programs. These programs broadly aim to:

- * *reduce the number of unplanned fires;*
- * *assist the rapid control of fires that do start by creating fuel reduced zones and increasing safety for fire fighters; and*
- * *assist the community to survive those fires that impact on them.*

The only avenue available for fire managers to reduce the incidence of wildfires spreading is through modifying the fuel available to a wildfire. Reducing the amount of fuel available reduces the potential for wildfires starting. In addition, when wildfires do start, fuel reduced areas enable them to be more readily brought under control by fire fighters as fire intensity generally decreases within fuel modified areas, and fire fighter safety is increased.

IN 2000-1 PARKS VIC CARRIED OUT FUEL REDUCTION BURNS OVER JUST 0.7%. OF THE 3 ½ MILLION HECTARES IT MANAGES.

It is long established by foresters in other parts of the world that in conditions such as exist in many parts of the Board's areas - burning is the only effective safeguard. (Page 14)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

JUST 0.7%. OF THE 3 ½ MILLION HECTARES OF LAND PARKS VIC MANAGES HAD FUEL REDUCTION BURNS CARRIED OUT IN 2000-1

Its failure to recognise until recently a truth which is universal. Namely, that fire prevention must be the paramount consideration of the forester. (Page 15)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

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It has already been recommended that the Forests Commission must recognise the necessity of protective burning in its areas. It is not suggested that the practice be followed in mountain ash country, except to a small extent, where necessity demands that it should be done. In all other parts, where less valuable timber, less susceptible to fire, occurs, this method of prevention of outbreak and spread cannot, either in the public or private interest be ignored. (Page 31)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

NRE only plans for an extremely modest 200–220 fuel reduction burns each year which would involve a total area of between 80,000 to 120,000 hectares, just 2 to 3% of land under Parks management.

According to the annual report, in 2000-1 Parks Vic carried out fuel reduction burns over just 25,052 hectares of the 3 ½ million hectares it manages. 0.7%.

Failure to listen

TCA is also a member of the Bush Users Group (BUG), which is an umbrella organisation of various public land users and groups, including prospectors, dog walkers, farmers, apiarists, horse riders etc, people who have lived in the area for generations, and those that have expert knowledge of their 'bit of bush'.

The Bush Users Group is a completely unfunded volunteer group, which lobbies for better Land management practices.

We have actively contributed to BUG's efforts to inform the government of land management issues, including the threat of fires, track closures etc on Victoria's public land. BUG released a

document early last year entitled 'Flamin Parks. The Neighbours From Hell', which foretold of the devastation which was to ensue.

At a rally in Bendigo in March 2002 in which over 3,000 people marched to protest the extent of proposed parks in the Box and Ironbark region of Central Victoria, we presented a list of community demands and letters of support by groups representing 100,000's of people, amongst which was a letter from the Victorian Rural Fire brigades Association Region 22. This letter outlined the fears of the volunteers of access issues relating to BIB parks.

Additionally, the Licola community which was devastated by fire in 1997-8 put out an information sheet in December 200, 'Caledonia Track closures' slamming the departments lack of fuel reduction burns. The government chose to ignore it and they put out another in 2002 'Living beside a National Park'. The government also ignored this one. (Both are included)

These are just a few examples of instances when community groups have been compelled to make their concerns public.

The fact that the government failed to listen, is a bit like déjà vu.

I take the liberty of quoting from the Stretton report to the Royal Commission into the 1939 fires in Victoria.

....have ignored the advice and supplications, however well informed of the private landholder whose interests have for years past been paced in jeopardy by the refusal of these bodies to protect him against the danger which they have brought to his door (page 10)

Inaction

Australia is prone to fire. No one disputes that. Bushfires are a natural part of our ecology. However, the intensity of the wildfires as we have seen, are not natural. Lightening may start them, but the ferocity and degree of the fires is up to man.

Fuel on the ground is the only component of wildfires that we have any control over, yet the State Government is ignoring evidence and the pleas of locals to reduce the amount of fuel.

On average NRE plans for an extremely modest 200–220 fuel reduction burns each year, which would involve a total area of between 80,000 to 120,000 hectares, around 2 - 3% of land under Parks management.

Yet even this miniscule target is not reached. According to the Parks Vic annual report, in 2000-1 Parks Vic carried out fuel reduction burns over just 25,052 hectares of the 3½ million hectares it manages. Just 0.7%.

The same year NRE management completed fuel reduction burns over 54% of their target area. (DNRE annual report200-1 page 27)

If governments chooses to ignore scientific evidence and neglect the preventative fuel reduction burns required, they should at least carry out the recommendation of the Stretton Royal Commission in order to protect the public and public land.

Lands of Forest Commission, Board of Works and other Public Authorities-

Such bodies should be obliged by law to clear margins of their lands wherever such margins are considered to be sources of fire danger to adjacent settlement. Their failure to do so should subject them to the same procedure and obligation as would apply in case of other occupiers.

The width of such margins should vary to accord with margins fixed by Statute. It may be found necessary to clear a width of a half-mile in some places. It is suggested that a half mile limit would cover all cases (page 22)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

Prescribed burns

The use of ecological and fuel reduction burns are imperative for the health of both the ecology of the forests and humans.

Unfortunately, recent public pressure and the influence of eco fundamentalists have forced authorities to reduce prescribed burning. Certain elements of the conservation movement don't believe in man-set fires, they refuse to accept it is a natural ecological process.

Parks Vic planned to conduct approximately 1,200 prescribed burns covering an area of 294,000 hectares, only 415 burns were carried out over 71,000 hectares. (Parks annual report 200-1)

Tim Flannery scientist, writer and director of the South Australian Museum stated on January 29 2003

Fire management in national parks is as much about ecosystem health as it is about firebreaks, and the very sick marsupial ghost towns that pass as parks today need urgent attention. It is also about managing the plants. Some botanists contend that we don't know enough about the ecology of many species to burn parks without damage. My response is that we have no choice but to learn as we go.

Over the years prescribed burns in the Box and Ironbark forests have become non existent. This has lead to their being identified as the forth highest priority for ecological burning in *Analysis of Disturbance by Fire on Public Land in Victoria*, a publication by Parks Vic and DNRE in March 2002 by the Fire Ecology Working Group.

These results suggest that the threat which fires frequency poses to species composition and community conservation in Victoria is in fact from under exposure to fire ie fire frequency is to low across the landscape.

Education.

The Government must take a strong stand and conduct a radically more realistic level of fuel and ecological burns, knowing that the inevitable smoke from fires and eco fundamentalist opposition to man set fires will cause opposition from some people.

However the attitudes and understanding of people to the essential requirement of prescribed burning must be addressed.

The education of the masses to the importance must begin in schools and carry right through to adults. As pointed out by Tim Flannery-

*...the damage inflicted by fire can certainly be minimised by appropriate management. But in order to do that we need to learn about our environment and the Aboriginal management of it. It is we, the non-indigenous Australians, who have created the real terra nullius – the unmanaged lands where the wildfire breeds – and it is up to us to tame it. **To do that will take a huge commitment to learning, to experimentation, and a lot of political and environmental bravery.** (our bold type)*

But this is nothing new. The Stretton Royal commission has highlighted this very notion.

Education of children and adults in this matter is vitally necessary As no scheme of prevention or safeguards can be brought to a state of effectiveness in this State without education, goodwill and the expenditure of money and patient labour. The day is yet distant when we may be able to say that we have not a condition of perfect safety, but at least a working plan and the knowledge that the plan has earned the approval of the rural populace. Without their approval and goodwill, there can be no real plan, because a it is man who causes the fires in all years,

as he caused the fires of 1939. A law which is not acceptable to the many is a made to be broken. (Page 7)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

Abandoned responsibility

The farmers of the North East have been deserted by the State Government, these fires came out of State managed forests and devastated private land. It is the government's responsibility to compensate people disadvantaged due to mismanagement or lack of management.

Compensation for Damage by Spread of Fire.- Where the spread of fire from any land, by whomsoever occupied, or if unoccupied, by whomsoever owned, is caused to adjoining or adjacent land or any property thereon, whether real or personal, by reason of the fact that such first-mentioned land was in a dangerous condition, the occupier or owner (as the case may be) of any such first-mentioned land shall be liable to compensate the occupier or owner (as the case may be) of such last-mentioned land. Provided that where such last-mentioned land was in a dangerous condition, no such liability to compensate should arise. (page 24)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

The only compensation thus far offered is for just half the cost of material, not labor, of expensive 'dog fencing', nothing else. And yet ironically these dog fences are only needed to stop the wild dogs coming out of the government controlled land.

Over 3,000 kilometers of fencing was lost. No mention for compensation for stock, feed, sheds or anything else.

Bureaucracy gone mad

Far be it for us to criticise the heroic efforts of the many 1000s of fire-fighters, particularly the volunteers, but we are alarmed and fearful of the bureaucratic bungling that was evidenced by the north east fires as addressed in *A Case of Burning Neglect A Report from the North East Victorians Regarding the 2003 Bushfire Crisis the Fires.*

The horror of the fires was traumatic enough, but the apparent ineptitude and 'holier than thou' arrogant attitude of the bureaucracy will leave permanent scars on the hearts and minds of those involved.

It is inconceivable that obvious systems were not in place. As outlined in *A Case of Burning Neglect*, and anecdotal evidence, these few simple measures like communications, a uniform radio frequency, the need to eliminate the ridiculous wait for permits to cut essential firebreaks in parks, adequate debriefings, allowing local tree fellas to fall tree in emergencies, eliminating the idiotic regulations of 'exact blade sizes on bulldozers which are available, localised incident controls, maximising fire-fighting time by conducting changeovers at fire-front, issuing maps and even pencils would have made untold difference.

Dismissing the invaluable local knowledge of those from the areas is downright criminal.

As sure as we are that we will eventually have to again face fires, we are equally as sure that the empire building of the bureaucracy must cease.

For the future safety of Victoria we hope that this investigation will do what the Stretton report apparently failed.

.....to expose and scotch the foolish enmities which mar the management of the forests by public departments who, being our servants, have become so much our masters that in some respects they loose sight of our interests in promotion of their mutual animosities. (page 7)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

No person or department can be allowed to use the forest in such a way as to create a state of danger to others. If conformity with this rule cannot be brought about, the offender must be put out of the forest or in the case of a public department, its authority curtailed (page 7)

The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires

Clearly all governments must heed the warnings and learn from the mistakes of the past.

It is a fallacy to suggest that because Australia and in particular Victoria is prone to bushfires we there fore just have to put up with it.

We don't.

We can control the ferocity and we can minimise the effects.

It is criminal neglect for any government to negligently endanger the lives of the people, property and the environment it has been entrusted to protect, through sheer arrogance, or worse still, through the illogical pursuit of the green vote.

Nor can we can't afford the bureaucratic nightmare which occurred in the North East to be repeated.

Unfortunately people don't hold out much hope that anything will change.

Please prove us wrong.

Prepared by
Tracee Spiby
Secretary
For the Rushworth Branch of
Timber Communities Australia

References:

1. The Stretton royal commission report into the 1939 fires
2. *A Case of Burning Neglect* A Report from the North East Victorians Regarding the 2003 Bushfire Crisis (attached electronically)
3. Parks Annual Report 2000-1
4. Department of Natural Resources and Environment Annual Report 2000-1
5. Community demands Access For All Rally media kit (attached with hard copy)
6. Living Beside a National Park, (attached with hard copy)
7. Caledonia Track Closures (attached with hard copy)
8. Joint Media Release From the Department of Sustainability and Environment and CFA Feb 21 2003
9. Analysis of Disturbance by Fire on Public Land in Victoria, by the Fire Ecology Working Group. For Parks Vic and DNRE March 2002