



## **FOREST INDUSTRIES FEDERATION (WA) INC**

Home Base Expo  
55 Salvado Road, SUBIACO WA 6008  
Tel: (08) 9380 4510 Fax: (08) 9380 4477  
Email: [info@fifwa.asn.au](mailto:info@fifwa.asn.au)  
[www.forestindustries.com.au](http://www.forestindustries.com.au)

15<sup>th</sup> May 2003

Mr Ian Dundas  
The Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives  
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir

**Re: Submission on the Inquiry to be conducted by the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.**

I am writing in relation to your request for submissions on the inquiry to be conducted by the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. The Forest Industries Federation of Western Australia (FIFWA) is the peak representative organisation in WA for companies which work in native forests and also plantations. Our membership is comprehensive and includes the majority of timber industry businesses most of which are located within the South West region. FIFWA is a major non-government stakeholder in issues relating to forest management in WA. We welcome the opportunity to comment and are pleased to provide a submission on behalf of our Members.

FIFWA is particularly interested in the inquiry because of the potential for its findings to affect fire management practices in Western Australia. Despite being geographically separated from the recent devastating fires in the ACT and NSW, forest managers, workers and communities saw the potential for such catastrophic events to take place here in WA. The conditions under which the events took place and the preventative measures that should have been implemented for better control are currently being debated in WA.

WA has a very significant bush fire hazard due to the combination of its hot dry Mediterranean climate and expansive areas of tall open forests. By nature, this forest type sheds large quantities of flammable debris which greatly enhances the effects and

intensity of fires. This poses a serious risk in encouraging high intensity fast moving fires that are a danger to human lives, communities and whole forest ecosystems.

It is true to say that WA forests have evolved in such a way that they are somewhat dependent on fire to maintain diversity. Research has shown that there is no species of plants or animals in WA that do not survive or recover from periodic fires. However, fires of the extreme nature experienced in NSW do have the potential to have detrimental effects on many ecosystem types including those found in Western Australia.

The WA forest ecosystem no longer experiences traditional patterns of fire behaviour due to the effects of European settlement. The formation of the Forests Department in 1919 saw the adoption of a total fire protection policy which existed for 40 years until devastating fires in the 1950's. It wasn't until the Dwellingup fires of 1961 that the Department and Government of the day recognised the value of fuel reduction burning. Since this time WA has been at the forefront of fire research mostly through the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM).

Despite Western Australia being world renowned for good fire management techniques and ongoing research, the level of prescribed burning in WA has reduced dramatically since the 1980's. This is most likely due to a lack of funding and also legislative, administrative and operational constraints. For three of the past four years CALM has achieved only 50% of its annual planned burning program.

Publicly, the use of prescribed burning as a forest management tool is negatively perceived. Community opinion has lead to the government applying restrictions on smoke entering the metropolitan area, which hinders prescribe burning regimes. The Environmental Protection Authority often objects to planned burns due to their potential to create hazy conditions over Perth. Burning is cancelled when forecast winds might blow smoke over the metro area. The result of this has been an excessive level of fuel build up in very large areas of forest in the South West. The Government has to some degree recognised the problems associated with fire management in WA although FIFWA is hoping that findings of this inquiry will highlight the issue to a greater extent.

#### **Issue of decline in Areas Prescribed Burnt**

As mentioned above WA has not met prescribed burning targets for a number of years. The problem is a greater concern in other states where hazard control methods do not seem to be as advanced as those implemented in Western Australia. The Select Committee must seriously consider this as an issue of importance if human and ecological communities are to be protected.

Performance in hazard reduction of land management agencies must be reviewed with the possibility of the committee establishing some form of target for each state. Each Agency would then become accountable for any changes or shortfalls in prescribed burning programs.

### **Protection of Ecosystems**

WA Forest workers and managers are concerned that hazard reduction is being seen publicly as a threatening process to ecological communities. The current regulatory environment is responding to community demands by adopting a policy of doing nothing. The Select Committee should determine and recommend to agencies and State Governments ways in which negative public perceptions can be addressed. In most cases the general public are not aware of the ecological advantages of prescribed burning and an education campaign to better inform people would be of great benefit.

### **Conflicting Advice Between Agencies**

The inquiry should give the government an opportunity to reduce beaurocracy and conflict associated with different government departments and their views on hazard reduction. In Western Australia conflict exists between CALM, the department responsible for burn management, the Environmental Protection Authority and the Bureau of Meteorology.

Prescribed burning does not take place if it will result in smoke haze in large populated areas or if there is significant risk that ash will enter dams supplying water. Despite guidelines for smoke management being developed in consultation with all agencies they are not implemented with the same level of discussion. The Inquiry should determine methods and recommend a process by which full consultation and agreement on implementing guidelines can be achieved.

### **Additional Forest Areas for National Parks**

Recent changes in government policy have significantly affected the state of fire issues in WA. The transfer large areas of State Forest to National Park has reduced fire fighter numbers and skill base within State forest areas. This is particularly true in Western Australia where a large proportion of forest has changed tenure since the implementation of the governments' old growth policy and also its decision to significantly broaden National Park boundaries.

Traditionally, logging contractors have assisted in fighting fires using personnel and equipment at their own expense. The number of contractors has declined drastically since timber volumes available to the industry have been reduced. Many businesses have taken business exits which has effectively reduced the skill and equipment base to a point that is worrying. With such a large decline in workforce, the industry will only commit to providing fire-fighting assistance in areas to which they now have access. This leaves vast areas of forest unprotected and thus creating risky conditions for rural communities.

The next fire season in WA will experience a significant reduction in equipment, experienced machine operators and operations managers in comparison to previous years. Volunteers can not fill these roles and the issue must be addressed prior to

commencement of the next logging season. The next 6 months of planning and resource allocation are vitally important and recommendations made by the Select Committee could help in the restructuring and planning process.

The inquiry must consider the adequacy of fire fighting equipment and training of Rural Fire Brigades prior to the full effects of a reduced timber industry becoming apparent. Improved funding to volunteer fire-fighting groups is also vitally important and FIFWA recommends that this be an area of priority that the Committee should make recommendations.

A reduced timber industry also has other consequences which are detrimental to fire fighting operations. Roads that have been created for access to harvesting coupes have in the past been well utilised and maintained thus providing good access for firefighting activities. With the decline of the timber industry much of the roading network has been closed or allowed to deteriorate which makes access to some areas difficult and dangerous. This problem will become even more apparent as the industry steps down its production.

As a result of government policy logging coupes have become smaller and more disperse. This has lead to silvicultural fire management needs becoming increasingly complex. Regrowth forest areas need a high level of fire protection and with increased complexity of coupe locations and reduced access by traditional roading networks, fire protection will become very difficult with highly strategic planning needs. Improved fire fighting skills, planning systems and good resourcing is critical and should be well reviewed by the Select Committee.

### **Improved Planning**

WA is beginning to experience an expanse in urban dwellings within semi rural areas and areas that have traditionally been managed as bushland. As a result, the issue of property developments on the edge and within areas prone to bushfire is of increasing concern. Fire protection measures in these areas have changed from implementing regimes that protect and enhance ecological communities to an aim of achieving maximum protection of life and property. It is important that the Committee address conflict in objectives of fire protection in these areas to avoid confusion in the event of wildfire. The Committee should highlight the need for fire control methods to be taken into greater consideration when formulating planning regulation and guidelines used to assess development approvals. Planning for fire control should be proactive rather than reactive in all areas not just those which are semi rural.

The issue of community safety for semi rural firefighting operators is of great concern particularly when implementing hazard reduction programs. This is especially true in areas where the general public may not be aware of procedures. This is the case where rezoning takes place and land uses change. It is common for there to be a general reluctance to allow prescribed burning because people do not understand its importance and prefer 'green' surroundings. People living in semi rural areas within WA are in great

need of an effective education program on the role and goals of fire management programs that are conducted in their local areas. The Committee should make recommendations on how this can be implemented to achieve the desired educational benefits.

In the event of wildfire a large proportion of time is spent protecting individual life and property rather than implementing a holistic approach to fire fighting. As a result, fires are sometimes not being extinguished where most strategically appropriate. Improved planning procedures and education is needed in many semi rural areas and the Select Committee should consider this within their report.

### **Integrated Protection Strategy**

FIFWA would like to highlight the importance of an integrated approach to fire management. Despite much of the discussion above being centred on the issue of prescribed burning, there are a number of factors which are vital components of a good fire management system. A combination of the following aspects will help to ensure and maintain the best possible system.

- Highly trained and well-equipped fire fighting teams and land managers are essential. Cooperation between metropolitan and regional (including rural) brigades and land managers is very important as well as information sharing amongst all groups.
- Contingency planning should be in place in the event of fire. This should be coordinated through consultation with all agencies and the general public especially where there is greater reliance on volunteers. A well-planned response will ensure effective, fast and safe fire fighting operations.
- Good communication systems should be in place in the event of fire to ensure that all plans can be effectively implemented and to maintain the highest level of safety for personnel.
- A good education program highlighting fire prevention techniques is important especially in areas where fire poses a significant risk.
- Each State should have an effective fire detection system to ensure minimal delay in implementing fire-fighting plans.
- There is a continual need for research and refinement of techniques as new information becomes available. Sufficient resources should be directed to forest fire research.
- Probably one of the most important aspects of an integrated approach to fire management is a well coordinated resource base including personnel, ongoing funding, machinery, materials, logistical support and up to date information.

The Forest Industries Federation of Western Australia (FIFWA) would like to express an interest in all aspects of the Inquiry by the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. We will gladly participate further in the consultation process or in the provision of additional information where necessary.

FIFWA and its Members would like to thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on the terms of reference for the review. We hope that the Select Committee

will take on board the above comments as they conduct their review. If you have any queries please call Brea Read at FIFWA on 9380 4510 or email [brea@fifwa.asn.au](mailto:brea@fifwa.asn.au).

Kind regards

Brea Read  
Resource Policy Officer