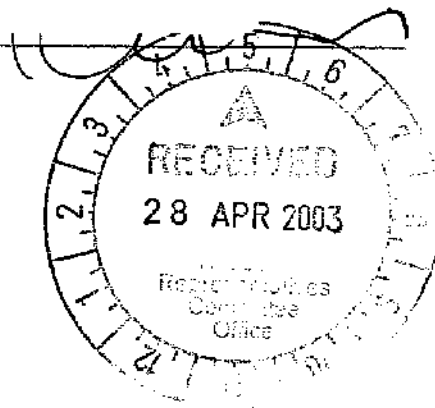


Submission No.47

Newsome, Silvana (REPS)

From: Cribbes [jcribbes@primus.com.au]
Sent: Sunday, 27 April 2003 4:31 PM
To: Committee, Bushfires (REPS)
Cc: McGauran, Peter (MP)
Subject: Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires



Dear Secretary of the Committee,

Attached is a covering letter and my submission to the Inquiry.

Please note that I am unable to sign an email so I have lodged a copy of my covering letter together with the last, signed page of my submission with the Hon Peter McGauran to be deposited into your office.

Following this email I have forwarded some emails to you that refer to my previous lobbying activities that relate to this subject. I would be pleased if you would attach them to my covering letter which is where they belong.

My compliments to the Prime Minister. I wish to advise that a far more effective way of countering wild fire is by reducing fuel before the fire begins. Then the Eriksson Sky Cranes can stay in America where they believe in fire suppression rather than fire prevention. Does it work? Not according to Prof. Stephen Pyne, Arizona State University. Arguably the world's foremost historical authority on fires. I do hope that he is invited to address your inquiry.

I note that CSIRO's Mr Phil Cheney (may he be applauded and lauded) says that when lightning strikes in an area that has had recent fuel reduction the fire will not advance more than 50 metres! Another 'must have' at the inquiry but you must allow him freedom of speech. Because experts like Mr Cheney do not fit in with the thinking of the conservation movement and consequently do not fall in with the policy making that regards the environment as political football he is wary of speaking his mind.

Posterity will see that people such as Phil Cheney know exactly how the bush ought to be managed but are afraid of offending the lords and masters.

Yours sincerely,

John Cribbes,

*The Secretary of the Committee,
Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires,
House of Representatives
Canberra. ACT 2600*

Dear Sirs,

Please find attached my Submission to the Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires.

I make my submission because, for a number of years past, I have been concerned that no Government in the States of Victoria or New South Wales has given adequate funding for the necessary level of management in their remote areas. I am on record as a lobbyist for increased fuel reduction burning, in particular, as well as the abolition of all status titles such as National Parks, State Parks, Wilderness Areas, etc. Please refer to the attached emails since 25th February 2002. I have been lobbying since 2000.

While management of individual areas cannot be standardised, giving one area a different title or status does not overcome the difficulty that all Public Land must be actively managed, not locked up and left to look after itself. Fire prevention, eradication of noxious flora as well as introduced fauna must be addressed with action, not just words in a Management Plan. For instance, the Victorian Dept of Natural Resources Fire Management Plan espoused in their Working Paper 9703 of 1997 has never been given a chance to work because there has never been the required funding.

While I make this submission as a private individual, I have been a member of a four-wheel drive club for twenty-two years. During this time I worked as a volunteer for the Victoria Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs Inc. and the Australian National Four Wheel Drive Council Inc. It was the use of a 4WD vehicle in natural areas that awakened my deep appreciation of our remote lands and a desire to further the cause of its management. Planning for recreation need not be a priority. Effective planning will ensure scope for all activities, including recreation.

As a member of the Victorian ALP's Conservation and Environment Policy Committee in the 1980's, I observed that their policies could have been written by the Australian Conservation Foundation or The Wilderness Society or even the Victorian National Parks Association.

During that period, as an Executive Member, later Treasurer, of the Conservation Council of Victoria (now Environment Victoria) it was apparent that these bodies and CCV had a far greater interest in the preservation of public land for the exclusive use of bushwalkers than any concern for the natural management of the environment. /2.

2.

It became obvious to me that if management of public lands was to emulate the environment that had been shaped by thousands of years of aboriginal management, the hand of man had to be seen in the forests.

My interest led to my accepting a position on the Central Gippsland Forest Management Area Advisory Committee and in the meetings and work of that forum I was introduced to the staff who undertook the physical management of the lands of Central Gippsland. Later, that Committee undertook a change of name and became the Central Highlands RFA Committee. Records will show that on numerous occasions I expressed concern that Environment Victoria was not represented in our proceedings and once I contacted them myself to ask why this was so. I was told that they were not likely to agree with the work of the Committee and wished to hold themselves in a position where they could criticise the results!

Given the natural greed of human beings and the desire of the majority to gain an advantage over someone else, I suppose I am whistling in the wind to continue wishing for a return to the conditions of 1788 in our natural areas. Personal possession has superseded the aboriginal concept of joint ownership and the protection of private property situated in areas of high danger require that management of the total environment must suffer in the interest of the individual.

If I could have my way I would enact legislation for the following.:

- *Management Plans would be formed that would cater only for the benefit of the environment. Whether this be for fire protection, noxious weed eradication, control of feral animals, protection from extractive industries or special conditions for human recreation experiences, the objective would be to restore the land to as near its well recorded condition in 1788 as is humanly possible.*
- *Lands directly linked to public lands would be part of the overall Management Plans. Owners of those properties would have the opportunity to maintain their property at the same level as the public land, otherwise the work done would be charged to them.*
- *Funding for the environment would be a levy, in a similar manner to the Medicare Levy. This, in addition to royalties from extractive industries would finance the proper management of the environment.*

Yours faithfully,

John Cribbes.

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY
INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Preamble.

What has to be achieved is a sustainable, multi use forest.

In the forest environment, the most important factor is the 'fire triangle' – Oxygen, Temperature and Fuel. Because we cannot control the supply of oxygen or the temperature, we must concentrate our activities on the supply of fuel.

When fuel loads are controlled, the incidence of very hot fires will reduce. They will never, ever, be totally extinguished because the effort to provide fuel reduction activities across all public land – and the land adjacent to it – is not practical.

Substantially reducing the incidence of very hot fires will provide financial savings in the cost of

- fire suppression including reduced costs for aircraft use.
- compensation for damage or losses to private property including saleable assets such as stock and timber, machinery, dwellings and other buildings.
- damage or losses of public infrastructure including, but not restricted to such items as bridges, power lines and reservoirs.

Further advantages will be seen in

- the maintenance of established indigenous flora and fauna.
- reduced erosion.
- the value of forest industries including forestry, grazing, apiary and tourism
- the return to Government of royalties for multiple use of the forest thus partly offsetting the cost of fire prevention.

Glossary of terms.

'fire triangle' – expression used to describe the constituents of fire.

'fire suppression' – term used to describe the fighting of a fire that already exists.

'fire prevention' (also prescribed burning, fuel reduction, et.al) – terms used to describe measures to prevent extremely hot fires. These measures can include:

1. Using fire in the cool months of the year to burn off any build up of forest debris.
2. Using grazing of cattle in summer time to keep the height of grasses and weeds controlled.

Reading.

1. The history of fire in Australia – ‘The Burning Bush- A Fire History of Australia’ author Professor Stephen Pyne, Arizona State University, USA.
2. A private individual’s account of the 1939 Bush Fires. ‘Ordeal by Fire. The Week a State Burned Up’ by W.S. Noble a Melbourne Journalist.
3. The official Report on the 1939 Bush Fires. ‘Report of the Royal Commission to enquire into (the 1939 Bush fires)’ by Judge Leonard E.B. Stretton.
4. Special report No 16, April 1992 ‘Fire Protection’ by the Auditor General, C.A.Baragwanath.
5. Illustrated article on Ponderosa Forest fires in the USA. ‘Fire’. Pages 116 on in the National Geographic Magazine, September 1997. Available on CD.
6. An assessment of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment’s Bush Fire Plan, ‘An Economic Evaluation of Bushfire Prevention and Suppression in Victoria’. Working Paper 9703, June 1997, published by the Performance Evaluation Division of the Department of Natural Resources & Environment.
7. Wilderness Special Investigation Terms of Reference. Proposed Recommendations April 1991. Published by the Land Conservation Council.
8. Conflict between competing recreations. Australian Conservation Foundation Policy Document No 26. (available on the Internet) Motorised Vehicular Recreation in Natural Areas.

Terms of Reference.**(a) The Extent and Impact.**

The extent of destruction in Victoria is known to be in excess of 20% of the Alpine National Park and Premier Bracks has put the cost of fighting the fire as being in excess of \$200 million.

This figure cannot include

- the future costs relating to the restoration or replacement of infrastructure such as bridges or reservoirs that fill up with burned soil.
- financial compensation for all the heartache and pain of loosing your memorabilia in the loss of a home.

The damage that has been done by these recent fires is really catastrophic, mostly because of the extent of the area and the extremely high consumption of surface fuels which have occurred in areas that have been burned by both high and low – intensity fires. Areas in Kosciuszko National Park that were burned by similar fires in 1965 recorded erosion rates that were more than 10,000 times the base erosion rates and persisted for more than 6 years above the basic level. We can expect the erosion rates and persistence levels from these current fires to be even higher.

That a lot of destruction has taken place in New South Wales and the ACT is of course known, but neither its quantity nor its cost is known to the writer.

(What is known is that the scale of destruction across the whole of the south eastern corner of Australia is a disgrace. This can be attributed to successive State Governments over the past twenty years. Either because of deliberate cost cutting (Kennett in Victoria) or because they wished to pander to the environment voter, (Carr in NSW and Bracks in Victoria) State Governments have been seemingly unaware that the environment of Australia has been under the hand of man for thousands of years, long before 1788. Meanwhile, it would appear, while almost one half the population of Australia is under the delusion that the environment can manage itself without any input from man, the other half approves of it being locked up as the preserve of physical recreations. In 1992 a report on Wilderness by the Land Conservation Council of Victoria actually stated, in its Terms of Reference, that consideration should be given to the needs of those who, while having no intention of visiting such an area, liked to know that it was there. I repeat, Management Plans and practices in relation to publicly owned remote lands in the last two, maybe three generations have not been formed to reflect the care of the environment. They have been devices to garner the political support of constituents who, ill informed, have been lulled into believing that locking up remote areas of natural land and preventing access by all except bush-walkers is the correct prescription for management.)

When deep organic soils that have accumulated over thousands of years have been destroyed, it is hard to imagine any other professional or land management practice that could do so much damage. The consequences from erosion alone will be a degradation of soil fertility, the decimation of all aquatic life and the reduction of the life of water storage reservoirs which, in many parts of Victoria, are a non replaceable asset.

(b) Causes and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the fires.

The cause of fires of this magnitude was a state of almost total lack of fuel reduction burning over the past twenty years. Talks with the Chief Fire Officer for Gippsland over one year ago revealed that the annual, budgeted, fuel reduction burn, an effective equivalent to a total burn every fifty years, was never quite reached. Conditions are so stringent and funding so short, it was not possible very often to have everything just right to achieve the inadequate target. My three year lobbying campaign, for an increase in funding for fire prevention, was accepted only by the Opposition in Melbourne. It was totally ignored by the Minister, the Premier and every ALP Member of Parliament.

State Governments in their desire to achieve re-election, backed by a belief that a lack of hands on management costs less to fund, have been pleased to create an ever increasing area of dedicated parkland without any intention of funding its management! Also, because of some city dwellers need for vicarious pleasure, access to huge areas has been denied to any class of citizen other than bush walkers.

The consequence of this pandering to the conservation/bushwalking movement is a reduction in funds for Land Managers. The result, as has been seen in recent years, especially in New South Wales, is that there has been little fire prevention activity. Forest multiple use has been reduced or totally extinguished and the previously, little cared for environment, has degenerated even further. In its place is a matted, tangled mass of foliage with masses of new, spindly growth, noxious weeds, feral animals and plants. The environment is now no longer a safe haven for native animal species. When fire happens, as it has, either by the hand of man or by natural causes, they have little hope of escape.

If our forests were meant to burn so hotly and with such extreme intensity, the native flora and fauna would have adapted to it over the many thousands of years of their creation. The soil itself would have adapted to such ferocity. The fact that the fuel load was so great as to provide fires of the magnitude encountered over such a vast area indicates that hazard reduction practises were inadequate. Indeed, it can be confidently predicted that in many places fires will continue to smoulder for many months if there is no heavy rain to finally extinguish them. Of course, when these heavy rains come, massive erosion will occur!

The issue of fuel reduction burning, given that the targets that were set were woefully short of what was needed and, even then were not reached due to a lack of budget that borders upon the insane, has to be of paramount importance.

(c) The adequacy of hazard reduction and other strategies.

There has to be a quantum leap in thought and action regarding hazard reduction planning and its funding. Prescribed burning, hazard reduction burning, whatever term is preferred, it has to be the very backbone of any Australian Fire Protection Policy and must be assured of funding. It is no longer valid that access tracks in national or any other parks are closed or made into Management Vehicle Only access. They are needed so that fuel reduction activities can take place. I accept that incendiary devices can be dropped from a helicopter, but to keep the ensuing blaze from wandering from its intended target area, ground influences are required. Access tracks, where previously closed, must be reopened.

There is an unhealthy and totally unwarranted belief among many of the general population that throwing more and more dollars at the problems of bush fire suppression is the way to combat it. Because in this area they are totally uneducated, they don't know that the cheaper, simpler and more environmentally friendly option is hazard reduction burning and cattle grazing.

Higher fuel levels mean hotter fires, hotter fires mean more terminal damage to flora, the destruction of seeds, the death of animals that are not equipped to stand the high temperatures and finally the destruction of the earth itself. This last point will be seen soon when the drought breaks and burned soil is eroded. It will wash into rivers where it will choke most aquatic life and eventually fill reservoirs causing a severe loss of drinking water for human beings. For many thousands of years the ecology of Australia has been entwined very firmly with fire. It is as much a part of the environment as earth, water and air. Despite the protestations of Mr C.E. Lane-Poole, European Forestry trained Western Australian Chief Forester, when giving evidence to the Stretton Enquiry in 1939, fire cannot be kept out of our environment. It has to be fully considered and all Management Plans for the remote areas of southern Australia have to recognise its importance.

It would do well for authorities to consider intensifying grazing and forest industries so that a work force is kept in employment permanently, thus enabling fires to be fought quickly and efficiently.

(g) The adequacy of current response arrangements.

In Victoria, as far as the preparedness of the Department of Sustainability and Environment is concerned (leaving for the moment the issue of fuel loads in the forest) the majority of their responsibilities were well prepared and adequately ready for action. Vehicles are of good quality, training is of a high standard, communications are excellent and the crews were ready for the task. The Department was very well supported by the Country Fire Authority who, after the criticism of the Linton Enquiry, have significantly lifted their training, communications and overall professionalism.

However, under extreme conditions, there is no amount of coordination, emergency management procedures, multi-agency response, coordination and resources deployment that will control fires. This was demonstrated in 2000 when the USA requested assistance from Canada, Mexico and Australia. If the biggest and most powerful country in the world cannot control bush fires under these circumstances, what hope have we when we rely upon fire suppression. I note that suppression costs climb steadily every time we have a major outbreak. Hiring Eriksson Sky Crane helicopters is wonderful from a Government's point of view because of the PR value, (look! Your taxes are at work – they are flying high!) but the prohibitive cost combined with its inability to put out the fire, points, in practical terms, to a waste of taxpayers funds.

Another essential point is that, in addition to fuel reduction, successful wild fire suppression requires (A) rapid initial attack unhindered by jurisdictional boundaries, (B) easy access for manpower and machinery and, (C) most importantly, the early use of bulldozers and other earthmoving machinery.

The current enthusiastic trend of extensive use of helicopters has demonstrably failed. When they are able to fly, the best that they can do is slow down the fire. It must be remembered that the basic tenet of fire suppression is that fire will not be controlled unless it is surrounded by a mineral earth firebreak, then mopped up and patrolled for several weeks after the event.

In Victoria, the response time indicates that the DSE plans worked well (excepting the hazard reduction problems noted above). There is some criticism of CFA volunteers at Headquarters level who acted in such a manner as to open themselves to a charge of being over cautious in their decision making. This is probably an after effect of the Linton Enquiry and, no doubt, in time, there will be legislation to protect volunteers who, given a choice, make the wrong decision. In at least one case at Benambra, those on the ground made sensible recommendations in regard to backburning but those at HQ were slow to implement those recommendations. Maybe there is a need to give more autonomy to those actively fighting the fire. It was obvious that Occupational Health & Safety Rules were being heeded.

(i) The role of the volunteer.

There always has been a huge commitment by volunteers in fighting fires. It has long been recognised by all rural citizens that if the job has to be done, there is no one else to fix it.

I believe that there is just as important a role for vehicle recreation enthusiasts to assist with Land Management. In Victoria, a Seasonal Track Closures Policy closes many lightly constructed fire access tracks in June each year. In November, over the Melbourne Cup weekend, they are reopened and this seems to be an opportunity for volunteers to traverse every seasonally closed track to clear it of obstructions and to report to the Land Managers where major blockages have occurred.

In this way, when fires need to be suppressed, the Fire officers will know if there are any blocked tracks to be avoided. In addition, if these volunteers were trained, they could be used for fuel reduction burning in the cooler months.

Physical work would be restricted to pick, shovel, axe and where qualified, chainsaw. In return, vehicular recreation would be invited to play a part in the management of the funds available for track repairs, much as is done in Victoria at present. These tools are sufficient to build "cocky drains" across tracks, assisting with the drainage that otherwise does a lot of damage to lightly constructed fire access tracks.

Historical footnote.

'He who knows not the lessons of history cannot prepare for the problems of the future.'

Fire was a natural part of the ecology of Australia when Captain James Cook and many other early explorers sailed around the south and east coasts of Australia. They all remarked upon it and archeology since then confirms that fires formed a natural part of the environment of Australia. (The Burning Bush – A Fire History of Australia, Prol Steven Pyne)

The Stretton Report on the 1939 Bush Fires go to some lengths to promote Fire Prevention as the best way to avoid Hot Fires. The Auditor General's 1992 Report on Fire Protection supports the view that Fire Prevention is a preferred way of avoiding very hot fires. In his book, 'Ordeals by Fire – The week a State Burned Up' Author, journalist, W.S. Noble makes the same point.

All of these sources go to some length to explain that if very hot fires can be prevented the resulting environment is of benefit to man and nature. The National Geographic Magazine of September 1996 illustrates (with full colour) that cool fires burn, but also regenerate. While the Ponderosa forests of North America are not found in Australia, the principal of their management is identical. Hot fires destroy and make the resulting environment one of massive change.

Conclusion.

We will never ever be able to keep all the forest in perfect condition permanently. That is not to say we should not try to achieve that dream.

In an article to "The Australian" dated 20th January 2003, Prof. Stephen Pyne concluded ' Australia does not have a fire problem; it has many fire problems. Some have technical fixes. Most involve political choices that will express social and economic values. But as debates swirl, it is wise to remember that fire is not listening, that it really doesn't care, that it will respond only to the logic of wind and fuel and terrain. If a proposal does not see the problem as fire does - then those implacable flames will ignore it.

John Cribbes. Sale, Victoria. April 27, 2003.