



Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

Submitted By:

Date: 7 May 2003

INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to make the following submission to the inquiry into the recent bushfires.

jimdi1@bigpond.com

I was employed by the Forests Commission of Victoria from 1 January 1969 to the end of May 1982 as a Forester and Assistant District Forester, following my training at the Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick. I then joined the State Electricity Commission of Victoria from May 1982 until June 1994 as the Works Forestry Officer of the Kiewa Hydroelectricity Scheme based at Mt. Beauty. I also joined the Country Fire Authority in 1982 and have been an active member for over 20 years, including 10 years as Captain of the Upper Kiewa Valley Rural Fire Brigade and the last 9 years with the Wodonga West RFB.

I have extensive experience at every level in the fire command, including being a Level 3 Controller at many fires. I have a great deal of experience in fuel reduction burning operations and burning of logging coupes in both hardwood and softwood areas. Over the last 34 years I would have attended more than 1000 wildfires and would have been responsible for the outcomes of more than 2/3rds of them.

I am making this submission on two counts.

- A. To highlight some problems with the management of the Bogong Complex Fires, and
- B. To suggest a way of ensuring that adequate fuel reduction burning is carried out each season, whereby everyone is happy with the outcome.

A. BOGONG COMPLEX FIRES

As the Works Forestry Officer for the State Electricity Commission at Mount Beauty, it was my responsibility to protect the Kiewa Works Protection Area from fires. This involved the entire gamut of fire prevention and protection, including training, fuel reduction, maintenance of access, manning of fire towers, maintenance of pumps, tankers and all fire equipment, education of

the public, protection of assets (including townships of Bogong and Falls Creek, the catchment of over 40000 hectares, power stations, etc.) and of course actual fire fighting.

I have spoken to many of the people involved in the fires at Mt Beauty, and I am confident that if I had still been responsible for the fire protection of this area, not one of these fires would have developed to the stage that they did. Travel time maps existed which would indicate that we would have had crews to all the lightning strikes on the Grey Hills and the Diamantina Spur within 2 to 3 hours. Sufficient resources existed which would have been allocated to ensure that the fires were contained within the first 24 hours. Access was such that there was 2WD access to the Bogong Saddle and the bottom of the Diamantina Spur and maintained walking tracks almost to the fires themselves. None of this access has been maintained in the past 9 years.

The SECV successfully managed the Kiewa Works Protection Area, keeping the area relatively free of wildfire for 50 years up until 1994, when the area was handed over to the National Parks Service of Victoria to manage.

It is interesting to note the contrast of management prior to 1994 and after 1994. None of the many kilometres of tracks throughout this important area of Victoria were maintained or even opened up for the fire seasons and no fuel reduction burning has been carried out in the past 9 years to protect major assets such as Mt. Beauty, Bogong Village, Falls Creek Village or the catchment generally.

There is an enormous cost to this lack of fire protection management, amounting to millions of dollars lost in generation of electricity, not to mention the costs of desilting of the dams in the Kiewa Hydroelectricity Scheme, and the problems with water quality as a direct result of run-off from the fire damaged catchment.

A further economic loss which must be considered by this Committee is the fact that there are 10000 hectares of 1939 mature Alpine Ash forest that are currently fire killed. This potential timber resource is able to be harvested without causing anymore environmental problems to the catchment. The trees are not habitat trees as they have not reached the age whereby hollows form for use by native birds and animals. The areas can be logged without affecting the siltation of the rivers and dams, and the small amount of silt that does move from the logging coupes will pale into insignificance as a result of the fire damage to the catchment, every time it rains for the next 5 to 7 years. A major Hydrology experiment was conducted in the East Kiewa over 10 years to determine the effects of logging on the movement of silt from logging coupes to the dams in the scheme. No significant movement of silt was detected, so logging under strict guidelines was allowed in the East Kiewa. That is until the area was handed over to the National Parks.

I believe the main reasons why the 'Bogong Complex Fires developed the way they did is because:-

1. Insufficient resources were allocated to the initial phases of the fires.
2. Those resources allocated were not sent in straightaway.
3. A lack of local knowledge, at the Fire Controller level, prevented crews from being sent to the fires in a timely fashion.
4. Tracks that would have given rapid access to these fires were not maintained.
5. Bulldozers, which could have been used to round up these fires, were prevented from going to the fires due to current policy in the National Parks.
6. Insufficient fuel reduction burning and strategic burning had been carried out (none in the past 5 years) to assist in reducing the impact and spread of these fires.

B. FUEL REDUCTION BURNING

C.

This is the second issue that I would like to address.

A lot of public criticism has been directed towards the Victorian Government Departments responsible for land management, particularly the National Parks Service and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, (and to similar departments in the ACT and NSW). A lot of this criticism is justified.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) since the fires, has been lamenting long and loud in answer to this public criticism, that the reason why the amount of fuel reduction burning (FRB) has not been achieved is due to the fact that Victoria is going through 5 years of drought. Even Premier Steve Bracks has publicly defended the DSE along the same lines. The truth of the matter is that FRB targets have not been met because of economic decisions and priorities and has absolutely nothing to do with drought or its effects.

In a normal season there are an average 10 days available after the Autumn break, when FRB can successfully be carried out. Unfortunately these days are wasted by departmental priorities, such that slash and regeneration burns in the logging coupes of the softwood and hardwood areas are conducted first – using all available resources of the DSE. Once all the slash and regeneration burns are complete, then and only then, are FRB operations carried out. As a result, there is never enough FRB completed. If the burning season is short, ie. less than 10 days, FRB is minimal and if the season is long, instead of picking up any shortfall in areas not fuel reduced in previous years, the DSE stops operations because of budget constraints. Over the past 5 years of drought, there have been more than ten days when FRB could have been carried out – but as stated earlier the DSE and the Premier have used this as an excuse to

0260242855

cover the fact that not enough FRB was done because of purely economic reasons.

There is a way around this impasse, which is to 'contract out' FRB operations to local CFA brigades. These brigades could operate within set guidelines and under the expert guidance of departmental officers (or ex-departmental officers).

There would be a number of benefits by allowing this to happen:-

1. Volunteer fire brigades would be better able to understand fire control and fire prevention principles. They would be better trained as a direct result of getting involved in these operations.
2. Any financial gain to the CFA would be used to replace or upgrade equipment and could save the Government in subsidies to the CFA.
3. The DSE would have their cake and eat it too, as they would achieve their targets in pine and regeneration burns and all scheduled FRB would be completed without having to increase resources.
4. Everyone is happy! ☺

I am more than happy to give evidence in person if requested to do so.


James L. Bates