



8 April 2003

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

Submission No.12

Dear Sir or Madam:

Submission to the Inquiry into the Incidence and Impact of Bushfires

A website I have developed since the bushfire is included in this submission. The site is a photographic record of some of the impact of the fire in the Wulgulmerang region in North Eastern Victoria. The site can be accessed at either of the following addresses:-

<http://wave.prohosting.com/jitlit>

OR

<http://www.jitlit.150m.com>

Private property damage

My property at Wulgulmerang, along with my neighbours' properties, was consumed by a wildfire unprecedented in intensity and extent. This fire did not burn with varying degrees of intensity, but burnt with the same uniform high intensity across a wide spread area. This wildfire has caused extreme damage to private property and livestock numbers, horrifying devastation to native animal populations, impacted on plant communities, and caused severe erosion and damage to water catchments.

Practically 100% of my 300 acre property was burnt by the fire. The property was a prime beef fattening enterprise before the fire. Since the fire, no cattle have occupied the property because there is no pasture remaining for them to eat. This will be the first time in thirty years that my family has not earned an income from this property. The pasture struggles to recover after the fire and the fire has resulted in a direct loss in earnings – the property is not producing a cash flow now.

My house has burnt down, my cattle yards are destroyed, 100% of my farm fences have been burnt, and cattle can no longer graze on my property because 100% of the grass has been burnt. The East Gippsland Shire Council revalued the property after the fire and the capital improved value has declined by \$42000 dollars.

Government emergency agencies

In the Wulgulmerang area there was a fleet of CFA tankers waiting for the fire on the 30th January. However, their control centre with limited local knowledge indicated to the Wulgulmerang CFA fleet that the fire was three days away. Meanwhile, a Wulgulmerang farmer drove a few miles down the Benambra road and determined that the fire would hit Wulgulmerang that day – this farmer’s judgement was correct. When the farmer returned, the CFA tankers could not be found. Apparently the tankers had gone for a lunchbreak 30 kilometres away. Farm families protected their lives and property by themselves in Wulgulmerang and Suggan Buggan. They had no assistance from any Government agency.

After the fire, there was an area of unburnt pasture on my property. Cattle had just been put back onto my property when the unburnt grass caught fire and was completely burnt. The cattle were moved off my property again. Damage continued to occur after the fire passed. The CFA should do more to secure unburnt pasture and farm assets following fires.

Insurance

I had enough asset insurance to cover an acceptable risk to my business. The Victorian Government seems to be arguing that farmers should have their assets 100% insured. However, this argument overlooks the fact that the cost of 100% insurance is not practical when considering the low prices paid for our food products – responsible farm managers must also keep costs at a viable level. Many responsibly managed farm businesses had their assets only partly insured because they never anticipated that Parks Victoria’s fire would destroy their entire business infrastructure and cash flow within a few hours – Parks Victoria presents an unacceptable risk to neighbouring property. The normal risk insured against would be part asset destroyed and cash flow intact – but this is not the case in this situation. I would like to know what insurance Parks Victoria possessed at the time of the fire – the government points to us and expects us to be insured, but what about Parks Victoria, are they insured? Will Parks Victoria reinstate our boundary fences after burning them down – any other neighbour would?

Flora and fauna

The toll on our wildlife during the fire was horrendous. My land borders the Cobberas – Tingeringy National Park. This park area has not been maintained in the thirty years I have been working on my property. The bush before the fire was so thick that visibility was only four to five metres. The fire did not just burn through the National Park, but the fire incinerated the park. After the fire, I found wombats dead 1.5 metres down their burrows, wallabies dead even in the shelter of rock crevices, possums mummified as the hollow trees burnt around them and many other animals dead. You may not realize, but the famous endangered rock wallaby population lives only twenty minutes walk from my property. The National Park’s dearth of management is an utter disgrace and I will be surprised if a sustainable population of rock wallabies exists anymore. Wild dogs were devouring the native animal carcasses in the National Park after the fire and were coming onto private property. What wild dog damage occurred to a vulnerable, exposed native animal population after the fire?

I do not believe our native animals evolved with extremely intense, uniform burns over widespread areas. I believe they evolved with a mosaic burn with many different intensities and frequencies of burn within each local area. This resulted in sufficient habitat for survivors. It is a myth that native animals evolved with fire and therefore have miraculous ways of escaping fire. The truth is that native animals respond to fire in a similar way to our European cattle - animals panic and luck rather than instinct saves their lives. Birds did not simply fly away from the Parks Victoria's fire. This is because the tornado wind conditions produced by the Parks Victoria's high intensity fire sucked birds into the flames. Native animals continued to die of starvation after the fire. There was nothing left unburnt for miles. These are my conclusions after observing many animal carcasses in the national park.

The fire has damaged plant community soil seed banks. The widespread, uniform intense burn has left an environment extremely susceptible to erosion. Even light rain causes erosion and flash flooding now. The topsoil and ash beds are being scoured off the slopes along with precious soil seed banks. Not just gullies are affected, but sheet erosion is occurring over wider areas. There are no pockets of unburnt or lightly burnt vegetation to reduce runoff and trap soil seed banks. Nutrient rich material is being washed into the waterways.

Again I would like to emphasise that a uniform, high intensity burn is not healthy for our flora and fauna. There are many abstract, fanciful arguments regarding how land is managed in Parks, such as "Erosion is a natural part of forest ecology – don't be concerned about what is happening now." Or "South Eastern Australia is the most fire prone region in the world – we simply have to accept what has happened.". Or "Native animals evolved with fire – they will be ok.". Practical observation over many years and commonsense tell me that widespread, uniform, high intensity burns are very likely to reduce biodiversity – we need to revise current management practices on public land. We need to stop listening to fanciful arguments and listen to practical experience.

Cool season burning and fuel reduction

The Mount Wombargo area was subject to a mosaic type burn of varying intensity and frequency. It is possible to observe intense burns, under story burns, and no burn situations in localised areas throughout the Mount Wombargo region. There is still habitat for wildlife. There is no severe erosion problem. Fuel reduction may not stop a wildfire, but it reduces burn intensity and can vary burn frequencies. This is good for the flora and fauna, and our private properties.

The Mount Wombargo area has been burnt previously at different times. This reduced the intensity of the wildfire and stopped the fire from reaching private land. This is obvious near the Benambra Road at Wombargo Creek. A surprisingly small break can potentially stop large areas from being burnt in the lee side of a wildfire. For example, every dam on my property stopped pasture burning on the lee side. This principle applied to the Wombargo Creek area.

Cattle grazed the Mount Wombargo region before the fire. Cattle do reduce fuel in mountain areas. There is a strange argument that cattle leave the hard fuel and

therefore don't reduce the fire risk. This is an illogical argument because while cattle are eating something, they are reducing the fuel. It does not matter if it is grass or a log of wood they eat – the result is that fuel is reduced.

There is an argument that cattle cause erosion and should be excluded from Parks. However, the intensity of the wildfire was minimised where cattle grazed. And this has minimised post wildfire erosion because there is still ground cover reducing runoff. The National Park's fire has caused unprecedented erosion across the catchment and this could have been reduced with commonsense management.

Access to forests

We have to get away from the notion that humans are unnatural in National Park areas. Humans are a natural part of Australian ecology and have been for thousands of years. Taking the human element out of National Park areas is as absurd as excluding the wallaby, for instance.

Giving people access to bushland is the most economical and “healthy” way to manage large park areas. Too often there is a mound of dirt across a track preventing vehicle access, or a gate is locked. Every time someone drives along a track and removes some branches, they have provided the Park with free maintenance. This principle can apply in many different situations in the Parks, but it is not utilised by Government agencies.

Groups of people build up an intimate knowledge of park areas. Private property owners with crown land boundaries have intimate knowledge of their region. People who regularly manage their cattle on government leases have intimate knowledge of their regions. Similarly apiarists, four wheel drive enthusiasts, forest workers and other people who regularly access our forests have intimate knowledge of local areas. Government agencies who ignore this local knowledge base and who fail to communicate with these users and trust these users to carry out responsible maintenance in parks are acting negligently. The current system must be changed so that Government agencies cease their arrogant independence and begin utilising and trusting people with local knowledge.

Wulgulmerang people with intimate knowledge of the local flora and fauna led scientists into the region. The local Wulgulmerang people laid the foundations for understanding ecology in the region. Government agencies' arrogance and incompetence, I believe, is criminal.

What to do

- Introduce fuel reduction burning into National Parks and increase burning in other areas.
- Avoid uniform, intense burns over wide areas. Encourage burns with various intensities and frequencies.
- Government agencies should encourage users into National Parks and other areas so that the local knowledge base is increased. People such as apiarists,

mountain cattlemen, private property owners, and forest workers should be encouraged – not eliminated.

- Government agencies should cease their arrogant independence and begin utilising and trusting people with local knowledge.
- The emergency services should use people with local knowledge and allow decisions to be made by the crews on the ground.
- We need to stop listening to fanciful arguments and listen to views based on practical experience or we will lose the flora and fauna we trying to protect, cause more unnecessary damage to our catchments, and destroy more private property and peoples' livelihoods.

Yours sincerely

Nick Margetts