

**Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires
Submission to House Select Committee**



Submitted by: ' _____

Submission No.177

Introduction: I am a forester, graduated from Australian National University, with 26 years experience in forest management and observation of fire regimes and environmental changes in New South Wales. I have worked in both management and research of native forests throughout the State, mainly on the far north coast, the far south coast and the western plains. Based on my experience and observations, as well as reviews of scientific literature, I have published articles on fire management, fire regimes and vegetation changes in peer reviewed scientific journals and proceedings. I have presented papers on fire management to international conferences and I have had an abstract accepted for presentation to another international conference to be held in October. Although I am employed by State Forests of NSW, this is a private submission representing my personal views on an issue that concerns me very deeply.

T OR (h), (c), (d) Land Management, Hazard Reduction Burning, and Protection of Life, Property and Environment:

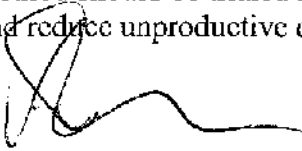
The attached papers 'Fire management in Australia: the lessons of 200 years' and 'Fire management for conservation: reconciling theory and practice' deal directly with these issues. It is my view that some public land management agencies and academics have misinformed the public and influenced fire management policies and practices to create the dangerous, socially and environmentally damaging fire regimes that we are currently experiencing. The perceived conflict between life and property protection as against biodiversity protection is a product of this misinformation. We can have both with sensible fire management and broad area, low intensity burning. The alleged negative impacts of hazard reduction burning are based on false assumptions and unsustainable theories constructed by fire ecologists who have largely extrapolated from observations of wildfire. They mostly have little or no knowledge of prescribed burning or of fire control.

Philosophical and aesthetic objections to prescribed burning have influenced governments to abandon sustainable land management in favour of emergency life and property protection. Social and environmental disasters then become heroic triumphs. The recent fires in Canberra were an unfortunate exception, but the advocates of these new policies are able to use exceptional climate and weather as excuses to cover unsustainable management practices. The fact is that we have relatively few extreme fire days and it is usually what happens in the lead up to those days that makes the difference between fire control and disaster. Current fire management policies and practices are creating an environment where it is increasingly difficult to control fires in the days preceding the 'blow up days'. The result is that there are large active fire fronts when the bad weather arrives, and disaster is inevitable.

The ecological theory that prescribed burning is an environmental threat doesn't hold water. Studies of prescribed burning show that supposedly 'sensitive' plants aren't extinguished. Unlike relatively uniform high intensity fires, prescribed fires are patchy, and that they don't cause the vegetation structural changes and increased fuel accumulation that result from wildfires. Nor do they cause the extreme soil erosion and water pollution problems that usually follow wildfires. Furthermore, eucalypt dieback, weed and scrub invasion are a result of current management. It is not well appreciated that fire exclusion and high intensity fire reinforce each other in a vicious circle of environmental decline. The consequences of not burning are not properly considered in environmental planning and assessment.

TOR (e) Appropriate research

The attached abstract 'Assessing the ecological impacts of prescribed burning: Where do you start?' highlights one of the basic problems with current research into fire ecology. Exclusion of fire from ecosystems that evolved with fires started by lightning and Aboriginal people over tens of thousands of years is not 'natural'. Long fire free periods have been advocated by ecologists to conserve grassy eucalypt ecosystems. This is nonsense. Ecologists even classify scrubbed up ecosystems as natural vegetation and say that it is threatened by fire. Research needs to measure and recognise impacts of fire exclusion and high intensity fire regimes rather than attributing all differences between different fire regimes as 'impacts of prescribed burning'. Also, research into pre-European fire regimes has, until recently, relied on methods that cannot detect low intensity fires. Recent work on grasstrees in Western Australia has vastly improved our knowledge. This method should be trialed in south eastern Australia. It may be able to clear up some misconceptions and reduce unproductive debates about pre-European fire regimes.



Vic Jurskis
8th May 2003

Attachments:

1. Fire management in Australia: the lessons of 200 years.
2. Fire management for conservation: reconciling theory and practice.
3. Assessing the ecological impacts of prescribed burning: Where do you start?
4. Eucalypt dieback in eastern Australia: a simple model.
5. Vegetation changes since European settlement of Australia: an attempt to clear up some burning issues.