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FEDERAL MEMBER FOR GIPPSLAND
PETER MCGAURAN, MP

May 28, 2003

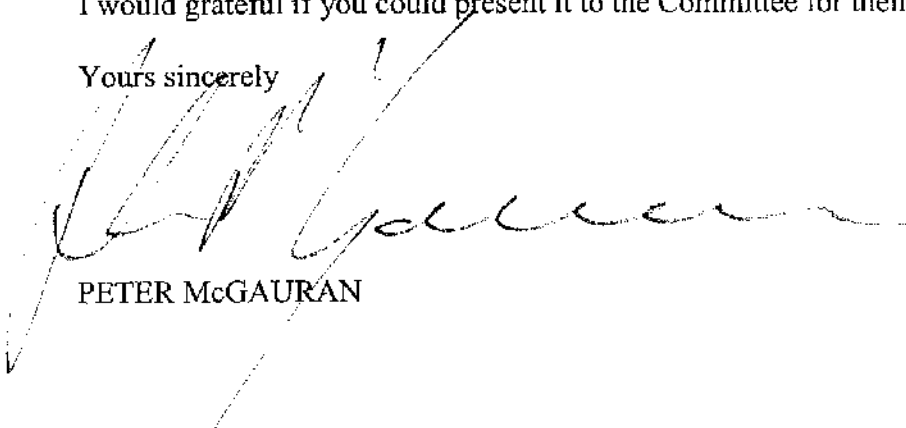
Mr Ian Dundas
Secretary
House Select Committee on the 2003 Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ian

Please find attached my submission to the House Select Committee on the 2003 Bushfires.

I would be grateful if you could present it to the Committee for their consideration.

Yours sincerely



PETER MCGAURAN

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SUBMISSION

From the Hon Peter McGauran

To

**The House Select Committee
on the 2003 Bushfires**

May 2003

Introduction

When you talk to local landholders and firefighters about the 2003 bushfires, there are two common conclusions – ‘it didn’t need to be that bad’, and ‘it could have been a lot worse’.

On the surface, the two comments appear contradictory but they highlight two key points. In the first instance, more could have been done in advance to prevent the intensity of the fires. But once they started, a mixture of determination, courage, resilience and favourable weather in the later stages, prevented a complete disaster.

They are sentiments that were regularly expressed to me in the aftermath of the fires as I travelled throughout the worst-hit areas, meeting with local residents and authorities.

As I did not fight the fires, nor did I suffer any direct losses, I will leave most of the commentary on the direct response issues to people who were there. But from the conversations I had with many locals, I have formed my own opinions that form the basis of my submission to this inquiry.

Key issues

The key issues I intend to address are:

- The need for direct community involvement in public land management;
- Greater emphasis on fuel reduction burning;
- Increased awareness and use of local input during fire situations; and
- Better coordination of recovery operations.

Before I address those issues however, I would like to place on the public record once again, my complete support and admiration for the men and women who put their own lives on hold to fight the fires.

The efforts of firefighters, particularly the volunteers, along with support crews who kept the workers fed and as comfortable as possible, was an extraordinary achievement in extraordinary circumstances.

The resilience of our bush communities was severely tested over the summer months and the men, women and children of the high country were equal to the challenge. The broader community remains indebted to those people who have given so freely during the response phase of the crisis, and again with fundraising and clean up work in the recovery phase.

The dedicated efforts of the local media, particular ABC Radio Gippsland, in providing timely and accurate reports, should also be acknowledged.

The need for direct community involvement in public land management

A core issue in country communities is their lack of genuine involvement in decisions which have a direct impact on their lives.

The Shire of East Gippsland encompasses vast areas of public land under the management of the Department of Sustainability and Environment and Parks Victoria.

There are layers upon layers of bureaucracy – from local government officers to catchment management authority staff and the aforementioned DSE and Parks Victoria workers.

What is missing is community involvement in the decision-making process. I am confident that a community-based board would not have allowed the build up of fuel which contributed to the intensity of the 2003 fires.

Currently, decisions are made in locations which are very remote from the communities that are affected the most. Traralgon and Bairnsdale-based staff, taking orders from Melbourne, do their best to involve the community but without a formalised structure of community input, their efforts are ad hoc at best.

There is great support within the community for more direct community involvement in the management of public land.

A formalised structure of skill-based community boards of management, working in liaison with public servants would break down existing barriers to good communication and deliver many benefits including:

- Better use of local knowledge in public land management;
- Greater acceptance of public land policies and the responsibilities of government;
- Mutual understanding between public servants and private landholders, reducing the current level of antagonism; and
- Increased skill capacity and leadership of local communities through an individual's part-time paid role as a board member.

Without direct community involvement, public land management in East Gippsland will continue to flounder in an adversarial environment of mistrust and local resentment to policies that have a direct impact on their livelihoods.

Removing the top-down, 'government knows best' mentality from public land management is essential to building a better relationship between local communities and public servants. Fires don't acknowledge the boundary between private and public land and our local communities need to be more involved in what is happening on their next door neighbour's property – Crown Land.

Greater emphasis on fuel reduction burning

I have previously touched on this issue with a reference to a community-based board not allowing the build-up of fuel which contributed to the intensity of the fire event.

I will leave it to others with a more detailed scientific knowledge of this issue to make their case but I will stress the importance of listening to local people. Landholders

have warned for many years that burning off on public land to reduce the level of fuel was virtually non-existent and would have a devastating impact when a major fire occurred.

To my untrained eye, it appears that they were right, and public land managers were wrong.

I fear that a politically-based obsession with pandering to the green movement has led to the decline in fuel reduction burning at great cost to our community in the 2003 fire event. Direct community involvement in the management of public land would be an important first step to achieving the fuel reduction burn targets set by the government.

Better coordination between Department staff, CFA volunteers and local landholders is essential, along with greater community awareness of the importance of the fuel reduction program.

Increased awareness and use of local input during fire situations

This issue primarily relates to comments made by fire-hit landholders that crews didn't know where they were going or refused to assist in certain circumstances.

I fully support the need for fire incident protocols to protect the lives of men and women involved in fire suppression. However, there is a criticism that the overly cautious approach in some circumstances was due to a lack of local knowledge and failure to deploy crews to the areas they knew best.

Some landholders hold a view that property losses were increased because of a lack of assistance from fire crews. Balancing that is the fact that only one life was lost (in somewhat freakish circumstances), when the potential certainly existed for greater losses of human life.

Inevitably, in a fire of this magnitude, crews are brought in from throughout Australia and safety must be paramount in the minds of incident controllers. I raise the issue of local input, primarily to stress the importance of keeping the community involved in such an operation and fully utilising the assets – both human and mechanical - that are available.

Better coordination of recovery operations

The 2003 fire event was complicated by the fact that some communities were in recovery mode, when others were still responding to an immediate threat.

Even allowing for the pressure that the dual responsibilities placed on local resources, the State Government's recovery effort was sub-standard.

There were failures of leadership; a refusal to accept responsibility for the problem; and a lack of understanding of the issues faced by landholders after the firefront had passed.

The Premier and his senior Ministers stand condemned for their reluctance to visit fire-hit areas of East Gippsland in the days and weeks after the blaze. Visits by

elected officials, and direct contact with fire-affected communities, helps to boost the morale of locals and gives a better understanding than can be gained from briefing papers.

A lack of leadership from the State Government led to confusion within the community, and local government officers who had no idea whether the government would fund the emergency recovery work they were undertaking.

The problem has been exacerbated since the fires were extinguished with very little direct support in the two areas of greatest need for landholders – fencing and fodder relief.

It has led to enormous voluntary efforts from community groups to fill the void left by a State Government that is accepting no moral responsibility for the fact that the fires started in public land and crossed into farm land.

Conclusion

In years to come, the burnt bush will recover, and pastures will be restored when good seasons return. While the memories of the 2003 bushfires will diminish, they must leave a legacy of improved management of public land in East Gippsland.

We have the knowledge and the capacity to involve the community in better management practices. It remains to be seen whether or not we have the collective will to make it happen.