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Submission 456

Committee Secretary
Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
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Submission on National Bushfires in the Summer of 2002/2003

The Huon Resource Development Group is a community volunteer organisation in the Huon valley that seeks to promote the sustainable use of our natural resources. With over two hundred members it is part of the network of Timber Communities Australia.

Members have a broad range of skills and experiences related to the management of our forests, and many have first hand experience in dealing with bushfires and the protection of our native forests. Many members survived the devastating 1967 bushfires in Southern Tasmania and were appalled by the bushfires that devastated Canberra, southeast NSW and parts of Victoria.

Tasmania did not escape this summer of bushfires with 23 major fires affecting almost 50,000 hectares of forest, bush and grasslands. The busy season had been predicted by Forestry Tasmania's Fire Management Officer, Dick Chuter, who told staff in the December issue of *Branchline* that "if the wind continues we can expect fires as the vegetation dries out, particularly towards the end of summer.

In Tasmania fire agencies were well prepared to tackle the bush fire risk after a series of combined inter-agency workshops held over winter by Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service and Tasmanian Fire Service. This inter agency cooperation is seen as a major contributor to the success of managing our State's bushfires.

However, members believe that this State and the rest of Australia need to be more pro-active in minimising the risk of major bushfires in our forest. We are alarmed at reports from the major states that very little fuel reduction burning was carried out in

the National Parks and forest reserved for conservation. With over 40% of the Tasmanian land mass now in this category we believe that fire management regimes in these areas must include the adequate strategies for fuel reduction and the management of our forests take account of a number of key issues.

FIRE IS A NATURAL PART OF AUSTRALIAN FOREST DEVELOPMENT.

The aborigines were farmers, who managed the land by the use of fire. Their aim was to open up the country for easy access and for the establishment of grass and other plants to feed kangaroo, wallaby, possum and other animals that made up the majority of their diet.

All studies show that for some 50,000 years before white settlement, the aborigines burnt the country whenever it would burn.

This system allowed for low intensity burns that created natural regeneration and the survival of most of the older trees to the end of their life cycle.

Josephine Flood states in her book *Archaeology of the dreamtime*:
'One of the aborigines most important artefacts was one that is largely invisible to the archaeologist -Fire. Much of the vegetation encountered by the white settlers in Australia was not natural but artificial, an aboriginal artefact created by thousands of years of burning the country-side...Aborigines never put fire out'.

Aborigines did not just burn now and again, or only in autumn, or when birds were not nesting; they burned all the time. Thousands upon thousands of fires were lit on a daily basis and apparently, none were put out.

To the aborigines fire was seen as necessary to clean up the country. They regarded unburnt grassland as being neglected. Apparently for most, if not all groups, every part of grass land, savannah and eucalypt woodland of their territory would be burnt regularly, at least once every three to four years. It was seen as doing their duty by their land.'

Abel Janszoon Tasman, in December 1642 at the north end of Storm Bay in Tasmania, observed.

'Amongst the trees, two were remarked whose thickness was two and a half fathoms and the first branches from sixty to sixty five feet above the ground... The country was covered with trees, but so thinly scattered that one might see everywhere to a great distance amongst them...

Some of the trees were much burnt at the foot ... and the next day after leaving Storm Bay, ... and during the whole day smokes were visible along the coast...'

Nearly all the early explorers remarked on the number of fires and smoke seen from wild fires.

The importance of fire in the evolution of our current forest ecosystems is shown by the work of Dr. Peter Attiwill, School of Botany, University of Melbourne; In his 1991 publication '*Disturbance of forest ecosystems.*' he states:
'.... In many natural ecosystems... of the world, natural disturbance by fire has been the dominant force determining evolution and development.' .(extract page 2)

'... In discussing major fires since 1851... Fires like these...Through European settlement, through aboriginal settlement, and for tens of thousands of years before ... have had a major roll in determining the composition, structure and function of Australia's forests, and the forests are no less natural because of it...' (extract page 3)

All the scientific studies show that in the Australian environment, fire is a necessary part of most eucalypt regeneration processes and the only economic system for reducing the intensity of the inevitable wild fires.

Regeneration and Old Growth

In the Tasmanian forests, regeneration in the southern forests will not succeed without a major disturbance with the removal of understorey and the provision of a mineral ash seed bed. The practice of regeneration of eucalypt forest is well documented and many scientific studies have been carried out since 1950. These include-Gilbert 1950, 1963 Cunningham 1961,1972 and Mount 1964. The system for regeneration in state forest in Tasmania is based on this research.

However, in Tasmania we have some one million hectares of old growth forest in national parks and reserves, set aside from logging with growing pressure to lock up additional areas. The majority of these trees are between 300 and 400 years of age. Old growth eucalypt trees die between the age of 300 and 500 years.
Therefore, the trees will die over the next 50 to 150 years. Unless there are major fires in these areas or a change of management systems our grand children will not see large areas of old growth trees in national parks, as there will be no regeneration in these areas of eucalypt trees without a major wild fire.

In most of the forests now, any fire would cause the death of the majority of the old growth trees, due to the length of time since the last fire (between 50 and 150 years on average). This has allowed a build up of material around the butt and root system of the trees of leaves, branches and bark. Any fire will cook the root systems and usually run up the tree on the loose dead bark and burn out the crown, killing the tree.

Systems of fire Management

The most logical and cost effective way of fire management in these forests would be to log the area over a 100 to 200 year cycle with a system which establishes younger-age trees in strips to create breaks plus some road access to allow controlled burning and access for fire control and fuel reduction burning in the younger forests.
Roading; logging, regeneration and fire control would be paid for by the royalty on timber produced.

If such a system was introduced it could amalgamate with state forest operations to allow swapping of areas and for areas to be set aside for longer rotation. At about age 20 to 25 years the areas regenerated could be thinned which would reduce the number

of trees and the fuel build up allowing low intensity burning every 8 to 10 years which would return the forest to what it was before white settlement.

A major step forward in fire control and the reduction in fuel on the forest floor will be the development of the wood-fired furnace to generate electricity at the Southwood plant which is planned for the southern forests in the Huon Valley .

This operation will remove some 200 to 400 tonne per ha. of waste wood from the forest on cutover areas and will burn it in a controlled system vastly reducing the fuel to be burnt on the ground in regeneration burns .

Conclusion

Since white settlement, experience has shown that most forest areas are burnt at least once every 20 to 100 years regardless of whether it is logged or in a national park. We have the Tasmanian and Australian landscape as it is because of past fires.

Implementing fuel reduction burns and strategic planning can reduce the damage and risk of wild fire. Well trained and equipped fire service of Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmanian Fire Service, backed-up by well trained volunteers in each community working together can be effective in fighting fires once started.

Unfortunately, fuel reduction burns are discouraged by many in the community, who do not understand the place of fire in our environment or that the risk of destruction is far greater if burning is not carried out.

The major challenge to the committee is to develop recommendations that will demonstrate to the public the very strong need for fuel reduction management.

Kind regards,

Basil Hickey,
Vice President
Huon Resource Development Group