



FEDERAL MEMBER FOR GIPPSLAND  
PETER MCGAURAN, MP

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**Submission No.20**

April 10, 2003.

Mr. Ian Dundas,  
Secretary,  
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires,  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ian,

I wish to make representations on behalf of Mr. Fred Ward, 17 Scott Street,  
Bairnsdale.

Mr. Ward has prepared the enclosed submission for consideration by the  
Committee investigating the recent Australian bushfires.

I would be grateful if the Committee would take on board Mr. Ward's  
comments when conducting the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



PETER MC GAURAN

28-3-2003

Hon Peter McGauran MP

PO Box 486

Salé

Vic. 3850

Dear Peter

*I heard you refer to a National Inquiry into the Bogong Bushfire Complex on the electronic media. Could you please see that the enclosed submission reaches the address of the group conducting any such inquiry.*

*Gratefully and sincerely yours*

*And S. Ward*

## WILDFIRE SUMMARY

BY

FRED G WARD

The third damaging wildfire began on ANA weekend, 2002, in what was to become The Bogong Bushfire Complex. It began with a series of lightning strikes on Mt. Buffalo and Feathertop, and to this date has defied all efforts by a large force of CFA and DSE fire-fighters, backed up by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Also, fleets of CFA Country Fire Brigade water-tanker pump-equipped trucks and bulldozers. Many paid CFA and DSE and volunteer fire-fighters, many of whom were desperate farmers, fighting to save stock and property.

During this harassing period of near record drought, over most of Australia, wildfires have caused millions of dollars worth of damage, and too many human deaths. However, though more forests and farm areas burned exceed that of the worst fire on record, Black Friday, the thirteenth of January 1939, and at this point in time, the loss of life by some miracle, has been much less. See ("FIRE SHOCK REVISITED" Bairnsdale Advertiser January 24<sup>th</sup> 2003).

This Summary has been written with the intention of providing an account of the overall ravages of this unmanageable 'bushfire'. This being a typical example of fire in the bush, which is out of control, and should not be referred to as anything but WILDFIRE, in view of what I have written. This Summary also includes eye-witness accounts and damage by all wildfires referred to, and some opinions. To see the fire damage at Omeo and Benambra for ourselves, we drove over both the Great Alpine Road to Mt Hotham, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2003, and the Benambra/Black Mountain Road through Gelantipy and Buchan, then back to Bairnsdale on Wednesday the 19<sup>th</sup>. The last trip was done with Mr Michael Cambell (President of the High Country Bushfire Relief) and his grandson. Aboard, Mr Cambell carried donated funds for banking at Omeo for the Fire Relief Drive.

### Omeo/Mt. Hotham recce.

The first fire damage was seen at Ensay, where blackened paddocks and fire breaks showed where the fire-fighters had been operating. In view of the condition of drought-affected pastures, it was strange to see that fire had swept those drought- bare areas, just as it did at Omeo in 1939. I remarked then, that we thought the trefoil seed in the dust, and extreme heat with strong wind, had accounted for this. At Tongio, we saw more burnt paddocks, but no visible stock casualties. At the turn-off, onto the Old Omeo Rd, not far from the top of the Omeo Gap and on the right, I took photos of the ruins of the old Alvin Jones's cottage to the east. At Black Camp, we were relieved to see that Mr. Fred Sam's place, had been saved.

Viewing the Mt. Sam and Mesley Range through heavy smoke, we next saw the many ruins of Smith's farm on our right. At the town cemetery, we turned right and looked down to the left to see the fire had swept past the Rodeo-saleyards ground, and made the Recreation Oval less of a refuge. This opinion had been expressed to CFA and the East Gippsland Shire Fire Emergency Officer. My choice of refuge was, from experience on Black Friday, the Swimming Pool Park. To assure myself on this point, we drove down to the swimming pool on Creek Street, and found that toilets were indeed provided there. With plentiful water and shelter from heavy wind, I insist on this refuge being safer than the very exposed and frightening one at the Recreation Oval, where people had to take shelter from the flames, in the dubious cover provided by a highly flammable building.

On the Mt. Hotham/Great Alpine Road, we saw plenty of burnt bush. The fire having gone across the road in the direction of Mt. Livingstone. Further on the way, we saw much fire still burning south-west of Jim and Jack Creek crossing. Cobungra Cattle Station, on our left, had suffered substantial burning damage. No visible sight of dead animals. Ruins of houses on the northern side and downstream of the Victoria River Bridge. These had been caught in a hot fire. At the summit of The Big Hill, the forest of mainly snow-gum and peppermint, had been burnt in patches. Noting as we paused on Sharpe's Hill, to check the Commemorative Plaque, placed in recognition of the death there of Ernie Richards, on Black Friday 1939.

The saddening sight of burnt ruins of the historical huts of the Rundell family at Horsehair Plain, where they sheltered there in 1939, and saved their dwellings by bailing water from a shallow well onto the hut walls, and themselves. Mr C. Rundell, advised Ernie Richards to stay with them, as he considered that it would be unsafe for him to try to race to his house at Darbalera, a few miles further on. Mr Rundell found the body of Richards, his horse and dog, a couple of miles along the road, the next day. We placed the Commemorative Plaque on a big rock beside the road, close to where he perished, on that terrible day. His elderly wife, since remarried, was present at the ceremony, unveiled by his son James, only two weeks old at the time of Ernie's death – but today, many years later.

On a smooth, sealed road, barely gravelled in 1939, and unbelievably rough and narrow then, we drove on through heavy growths of snow-gum timber, noting as we went the patches of the fire's path, here and there. At Dinner Plain, we marvelled at the escape of that Resort from destruction. The structures clad with western cedar, and extremely vulnerable to fire, in an area where all green timber had been totally killed by the 1939 fire. Most of the heavily timbered bush from Dinner Plain to the Hotham Ski Fields, has not been affected much by the fire, and at the Alpine Club and University Ski Club Car-park, where we pulled up to check on the Bill Spargo Commemorative Plaque, we spent some time trying to locate Spargo's hut across Swindlers Creek valley. We could not see if it had survived, mostly because of the thick growth of trees around it.

At the Ski Village we turned around. I directed our driver, Mr Rob Grant, to the back of the Lawlers Flats, where we could look across the deep gorge to the south face of Mt. Hotham, and see the summit Ski- lifts, and down the awesome valley, to where the Alpine road to Harrietville, winds around Little Baldy. The general view from the village area, took in the Red Robin Mine Road, along the Lock spur, and to the left Mt. Feathertop and the Diamantina Creek at its foot. It was in these areas, and Mt. Buffalo, where lightning started in the huge blaze that came to be known as the Bogong Wildfire Complex. The Ovens Valley, so smoke-wreathed by fire from that other lightning- strike fire on Mt. Buffalo, that it was hardly visible.

As we drove down towards Omeo, we caught a glimpse of Spargo's hut over the valley. I was delighted to see that it really had survived. To the east, with Cobbras Mountains behind them, we could see fire-blackened parts of Smith's Wattle Top paddocks. And as we drove on to Bairnsdale, I reviewed what we had seen.....

### **Reminiscent of 1939.**

#### *Black Friday at Omeo!*

To compare the wildfires of 1939, particularly that terrible day when it seemed the whole world was on fire, the heat up to 114 degrees Fahrenheit across the State, 8% of humidity, and God knows what speed the wind! Roaring across land that was drought-stricken as on this very day, it is a very difficult one to make, now so long ago.

That Black Friday, a day of fire culminating at the end of a week of smoke-wreathed days and rising heat. A week when fires were being fought in many places. Fires that had been lit in many cases by cattlemen, bushmen, timber workers, prospectors, and now, how many lightning strikes!? Most lit by men, defiantly obeying long-held beliefs that burning the bush kept the scrub and fire-fuel down. But it was all at a bad time! The weather turned against us, and from Healesville along the Dividing Range, those little fires joined up into one massive blaze, that swept all before it, to the NSW Alps. And more than 70 humans died in the holocaust. See "*Black Friday Document*".

### I try to compare 1939 to 2003.

To many who survived 2003, there will be no comparison. Wildfire at any time is sheer terror. A crushing event, hard to bear, and as hard to forget. And as hard to survive. But, there was a difference, and it was a very big one at that.....

The wind force was a huge gale. In places, it tore great trees from the ground. See "*Ordeal By Fire*" by W.S. Noble – ISBN 0 7256 0202 3. This book, written by an author with such detail and truth, that it made me cringe. Shrinking from the horror, brought back from that evening at Omeo, when the fire exploded across the western end of Omeo. Mr Noble's story of "*The week the State of Victoria Burned Up*" portrayed the overwhelming shock of a real fire-storm. It tells a story of a broad front of fire, from ground level to tree tops, racing across the mountains from the west, like "the red horse of the apocalypse" and laying waste all before it. Few cattle or sheep survived. The snow-gum and peppermint, stripped of all small branches and leaves, rode the crest of the ridges like stalks of wheat reaped of its grain. For 14 years I camped in a hut at Dinner Plain, there beside the road opposite the present flash Resort, clearing the road of snow in winter and working a Grader on construction-work in summer. I listened to the drumming gales, raging through the fire-killed forest of snow-gum, rattling the dry limbs and bringing some crashing to the ground. Sometimes I wondered if the green would ever be replaced, those gaunt snow-bleached white trees. But, in a year or so, green shoots began to appear at each tree's base. In winter, they thrashed about in the wind on the surface of the snow, until they vanished with the drift. Then one year, they topped the drifting snow, and bent over to the wind gusts, a new forest had been born. Where once a single tree stood, and was used for firewood in the district, there grew up to five new ones. And so grew the fire-fuel, for an even bigger holocaust, some time in the future, or so I thought.

When each dry tree fell, rotted off at the base, and those multitude of new ones grown from seed, were even jostling for room to grow, my concerns about fire grew each year. This was only here on the snow-fields though. Down below in the State forests, everywhere I went, the mass of unburnt fire fuel increased. Eventually, I made contact with an old man of the mountains. And now there were two! On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1994, on the Dargo High Plains, we formed the Bush Fire Task Force. After that we talked about the growing threat of fire. But none would listen. Eventually we went into recess, awaiting a time when people's minds might be focused on wildfire. As Public Officer, I laboured at this keyboard, trying to raise support. But it stayed like that. Through years of wildfire – Ash Wednesday in 1983, and on another time, the wildfire in the Caladonian Park. I came home from prospecting and trout fishing, and found my lawn covered with scorched leaves. All dropped there by thermal up-draught, lifted high above from that fire's heat. I knew it was from there, because there amongst the leaves were some from snow-gum trees. But still the Bureaucrats took no heed. And still, the ineffective fuel-reduction burning went on in the cool of autumn, when dew-fall doused the flames each night. This is how it went on, and the 2002/3 time came around, and now we must write of this big blaze. And include in passing, that of Ash Wednesday – 1983.

Ash Wednesday - with Stewart Stastra – a survivor from that wildfire. His report to be included at a later date. ....

## THE BOGONG COMPLEX WILDFIRE

### Bairnsdale/Gelantipy/Buchan recce.

Five weeks of uncontrolled fire. When it all came together, and is not quite finished yet. The fire and the heated comment – that is!

The first house wrecked by fire, was that in Fosters, over the Old Omeo Gap road. It was there that I took my first photo of fire damage- at the place where fire had forked at the road-junction. When we got to Charlie Smith's burnt-out house and sheds, I waved the driver on, not wanting to share in a friend's upset, much as I felt for an old acquaintance. I could not take a picture of his misery. So we drove on by the Town Cemetery, where my Dad and Mum lay buried together there. In the town, I felt proud of the way they had tended it. The buildings, old and all as they are, were neat and spruced up with new paint. Each one displaying the pride they felt in their pretty little Alpine town.

At Omeo, we took Mr Cambell to the Bank and then onto Benambra, past the ravages of fire along the way. Along the hill-climb, we noticed where fire swept up from the Livingstone Creek valley, blackening paddocks and scorching trees as it raced up those forward facing slopes. Across to where we could see the range from Bingo gap to our left. Along there to Mt. Mesley. Smoke-haze blotted out the view of mountains to the west. So too, all that in front and around to the south-east. Even in the car, we could smell the harsh odour of burnt bush. Looking down into the valley to our left, I was pleased to see the intact homes of those I once knew so well. On the top of the Hinnomunjie Hill, where we were pleased to see the Race-course intact, we glanced across at the Brother's Mountains, but found them shrouded in smoke. At the turn-off, at the Mt. Leinster road, I saw no damage to "Long Bill's" Burnside home, and was again glad to see an old friend's place. Patchy burns on the way to the Leinster Gap, where we found Bill Hollonds waiting there. With him stood another ute, well loaded with fencing material. There was Mrs Burston. To me, better known as Alison Condon, and greeted her with the remark, "Last time I saw you, you were in my rucksack, on the way from Dinner Plain to Hotham!" A short while later, her husband Geoffrey, drove up in a front-end loader.

Getting in with my old mate Bill, we went down to Bob Pendergast's burnt-out farm, where I took a couple of pictures of ruins of the Stock-yards, built by Ned Ward, Charlie Parks and I, so long ago. On then to the site of the old Mt Leinster settlement, where the pioneer family lived, away back. The two stone chimneys built in 1853, still stand there today. We listened to Bill Hollonds tale of 'Weary' Pendergast's account of his buck-jump ride on an unbroken-in horse. Bill told it like 'Weary' would have. "Well, that horse started to buck! Each buck was a bit higher. Until once, when I looked over, I found I could see right over McFarlane's Lookout to the Omeo Lake!" You can see this great high rock from Cameron's flat, to the south east from that flat. It's about 800 feet high. But horses could certainly buck in those times!

We left Bill at the Gap, and drove on towards Limestone Creek. On the way, we looked up to our right and saw Mr & Mrs Sinnot's Tram-carriage Accommodation, but we didn't call in. The burn had been pretty hot along there, and in patches from there on to Mt. Wombargo, to that bit of road I shaped up behind "Wap's" big dozer. Near Buff Rogers place, we drove onto Gordon Moon's house, where we had a cup of tea, and yarned to my cousin. I asked him about fuel-reduction by the Authorities, and he said "None!" It had been hot there, and bush to the west had burned hot enough to make us wonder how lucky, or desperate, you have to get to save your property in such conditions.

But, as we drove past Sykes's place, the fire certainly had got much hotter, and near Seldom Seen Road-house, we saw bush burnt to the same degree as all that on the Alpine Road, and everywhere around Omeo on Black Friday, 1939. The fire had crowned in both instances, and that is the most

significant difference between the 1939 and the 2003 wildfire. See again "*Black Friday at Omeo*". In this area, it must have been subjected to the same hurricane-force winds (in comparison to 1939) for many limbs and trees were uprooted or blown down. From memory, I recall noticing many fallen snow limbs (broken off by the weight of snow) when grading this surface, before it was sealed.

Fire seems to have swept across near Tulloch Ard. And from this point on down Butcher's Creek, we saw little sign of fires. Or at Murrindal. For that matter, no more that day.

### **My Analysis.**

Though harsh in criticism, I have come to this conclusion, to suppress an opinion gained over many years of experience, mine and that of the people from whom I descend, with bare honest facts as it all appears to me, would be less than honest to suppress any thoughts. It is with respect to all who struggle against fire that I offer this analysis....These last serious wildfires that I write of have angered me, to the limit. Angered because I cannot see them as anything but the result of a series of bureaucratic bungling, over years of inept land management.

Firstly, we failed to recognise Australia as a dry land, often beset by extremes of climate, droughts and flooding rains, and bushfires. The very forests were evolved to a regime of such dryness, and burned fiercely when dry conditions prevailed, which was almost a natural state. We treated it exactly as we did those countries from whence we came. We still do, to some extent. The eucalyptus tree contains inflammable oil, but we saw this only as a medicine to ease our colds, and smelt strongly on the hankies of those who believed in it. So we cleared away the sparse forest-growths, down on the lowlands, where we needed to tend our domestic stock, or grow our grain and other foodstuffs. The sparse lean soil was small cover for the mainly igneous and sedimentary rock beneath it. Only on the alluvial plains was the rich dark soil there in cultivatable depth, but we covered that with a cheek by jowl city of a concrete jungle.

It was there, where we grew our Bureaucracy. A Dictatorship of urbanity. And the Power Brokers took control of this majority voter system. Urbanites, living as they must, gained little real knowledge, and sometimes real understanding of the struggles of those who live in the Bush. Out there, they were the country people, and they smelled of eucalyptus leaves. Often seeing us depicted by City cartoonists, as the bush person with a straw in one corner of his or her mouth. I wonder what city people would do if they could see into our minds. First, brushing aside the corks hanging around the rims of our hats!

The first mistake we all made, was to agree to the total exclusion of fire from the bush. Over the years of such exclusion, and the natural stimulant provided by the equally natural action of wildfire, the forest-floor accumulated a massive excess fire-fuel. That which we have yet again recently battled to control. We once again, repeat- *again*, battled against a fire-initiated re-growth of at least 80% over and above that which existed before the great fire. The wildfires chosen as examples in this summary are -Black Friday, Ash Wednesday and the Bogong Bushfire Complex. The Urban Bureaucracy was responsible for the exclusion of fire from the environment.

With the same urbanised attitude, the authorities took over from the experienced rural fire-fighters. And now we have a wave of complaint from those who have been burnt out too, in this last wildfire. From a recce of the so-called Bogong Fire Complex (typically urbanised terminology) I have to report this blaze as a very different event from either the 1939, the 1983 Ash Wednesday wildfire, or any preceding this 2003 fire which apparently did not earn the distinction, in my opinion, of becoming a

wildfire. Excepting on about three days of acute fire danger (heavy north or north-west wind, very high temperatures, and low humidity). During these few days, the fire front advanced and broadened quickly, over very rough country. Over the rest of this fire's history, its advance was due to large fuel loads. Most of the blaze occurring in very difficult, steep and extremely rough country. Much of which I skied over, in my more able times. The vegetation is typical alpine tussock, low snow-grass species, bossiaea scrub, and some stunted snow gum trees, along the tops of ridges where the snow does not collect deeply. Below the alpine peaks at the usual level, there are stands of alpine ash. Much of this high ground used to be grazed by cattle, which kept the snow-grass close cropped on lesser slopes.

Complaints in the press, and on TV and radio, as well as among the pages of Correspondence to Editors, have in most cases, been of inept management by people with no experience of high country fire control. Often complaining of a generally high level of forest-floor litter. Lack of effective fuel reduction by any method. A number of these complaints have included fighters being ordered out of situations where experienced fire-fighters have been sure of success.

The large cost of fire control to this date, has been enormous. Undoubtedly though, providing an apparently effective fuel-reduction. Much of the fire, in the forest, has cleaned up the leaf and small limb litter, by burning only at ground level. In very few areas is there any sign of Crown Fire. The heads of trees have only been singed, as is usual in such burns. Only in the area of the Seldom Seen Roadhouse, have the small limbs, below thumb size, been totally destroyed. Along with the top branch leaves.

Accordingly, the lack of crown fire, leaves most of this whole area temporarily fuel reduced. Given acute fire-danger conditions, a timely warning of near future wildfires is thus given.

### **In Conclusion.**

Referring to "*State Of Fire*" a History of Volunteer Fire-fighting and the Country Fire Authority in Victoria, in particular Chapter 10- "Testing years:1945 to 1950".. This refers to the time in which I was Equipment Officer for the Omeo Fire Brigade. With Mr Jack Pollard, the District Officer.

This chapter followed number 8, which dealt with the dreadful wildfires of Black Friday, my account of which is included in earlier pages. This account attracted the attention of Mr Phil Cheney, Research Scientist with Forest Products of CSIRO. Together with Mr Cheney and his wife, Mr Stewart Stastra and I, were given a seat in their 4x4, from Bairnsdale to beyond Mt Hotham, on a Recce of the 1939 wildfire, over remaining evidence of some of the hottest parts of that fire. I believe Mr Cheney gathered some valuable research information on wildfire from that Recce.

I was extremely interested in the CFA's book, particularly the references to the Judge Stretton's remarks regarding his report made to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Black Friday Fires. This inquiry was with one exception very well researched. But I was disappointed with his remark, relating to *ignition of fire by lightning strike*. Experience of five points of ignition near Wy Yung, seen by myself from my verandah, and subsequent fires lit in many areas by lightning, I cannot agree with the Judge's opinion that fires lit by lightning were at any time, as he put it, "*rare*". In fact, it is my opinion that much of the rapid spread of fire on Black Friday, could have been, to some extent, responsible for this holocaust. I remember hearing thunder to the north of Omeo about the time the town was being overwhelmed by fire. This does not detract from my respect for the Commissioner's Report.



It is obvious that the path of the CFA has not been a smooth one, judging by its history. I understand from recent experiences, that its path is still rough. But it has been said that each journey begins with one step. Hence, my earlier criticisms. And those of numerous others, during this last fire episode. However, it is not fair to question CFA and DSE fire-control efforts without acknowledgement of the good work done. So please bear with me while I make some suggestions. Suggestions that are possibly worth noting.

- Some effort should be made to reduce the level of bureaucratic control over fires, or at least give experienced fire-fighters a larger degree of autonomy. Though the supervision seems efficient, complaints are being made about their resolve in the face of difficulty.
- With regard to the level of fire-fuel control, this is seen to be inadequate. In both State Forests and in particular National Parks, and other Reserves under Parks control, complaints are being made about fuel reduction, weed control, feral animal control and lack of attention to the decline of species, flora and fauna. It is often said that if Parks cannot manage their ever-increasing scope of Crown Land, they should return some Parks to Crown Land status to enable these resources to be managed efficiently. I draw your attention to Page 68 – “*Alpine Area, Proposed Management Plan 1989*”. “In general, fuel reduction burning will not take place in alpine and subalpine vegetation (Conservation A zone). Reference zone. Policy Re Conservation A zone. On page 56 of “*Gippsland Fire Protection Plan – Department of NRE 1999*, under heading “Vegetation that should not be burnt” .Subservient to Department CF&L !!!!!!!?
- **Advice:**  
Governments of any persuasion should select Ministers controlling environmental matters with a view to their experience and expertise in accord with their Portfolios. Very few of such Ministers reveal a high level of natural experience or practical ability.
- So serious has the matter of inept land-management become, that I hereby suggest that a Royal Commission of inquiry be held into Land Management. With all possible matters of land-management to be included.

### Comment

Regarding TV program: Catalyst – “*Canberra Fire Storm*”.

This event had many similarities to the fire storm at Omeo on Black Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January 1939. Fire fell upon the town with the same explosive force. I have always thought the overwhelming effect was the result of explosive eucalyptus gas settling in the lee of Mt Mesley. It has occurred to me that research along the same lines could be conducted into the possible collection and ignition of such eucalyptus-gas originating from the range-fire behind the pine-plantation. Or even, and also from the pine-plantation. The nature of the Canberra incident was too violent to be anything but something of the same effect as that of an explosion in action. The sudden displacement of air by blast, and then the equally violent replacement of air into a created vacuum.

