

FIRE FOR LIFE INC.

(incorporation and tax deductibility status pending)

Chairman: Eddie Liddelow

ABN: 65 670 724 494

Ph/Fax: (08) 9772-4230

All correspondence to:

PO Box 329, MANJIMUP WA 6258

Secretary: Karen Nickels
Ph/Fax: (08) 9776-7367
Email: fireforlifeinc@westnet.com.au

10 MAY 2003

The Committee Secretary

House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires

Department of the House of Representatives

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Submission No. 221

6th May 2003

Dear Sir or Madam:

Australia's National Forest Policy Statement requires a commitment to ecologically sustainable forest management that applies to all forest ecosystems, and includes protection against such threats as fires, pests and diseases. This submission restricts itself to fire and its role in the forest.

There is some evidence to suggest that prior to the arrival of aboriginals, the forest may have been vastly different to that which greeted the first white men to reach our shores. Much of this change can be directly attributed to aboriginal burning practices. Unless for specific purposes or a belief that we can substantially improve the ecology and environment that existed when the colonies were established, then the aboriginal way still provides a sound basis for our management approach.

Sylvia Hallam, Glen Kelly, David Ward, Jurksis & Bridge are just a few of the many authorities that complement each other. They tell of regular discriminate burning by aborigines for a variety of reasons, with the common purpose of increasing their food sources (both plant and animal), for ease of transport, for protection and for ceremonial purposes. Again from a number of sources, we believe that our forests tended to be a more open nature, with less dense shrub and understory, and a grassy floor.

Perhaps because regular burning was foreign to the European background, fire intervals became less and less regular. We are now left with vast areas of long unburned bush with a changed nature and composition. These high fuel loads have proved dangerous to both the environment and people.

While Western Australia has been spared the damage to human life and habitation that has been experienced in the burning season, Conservation And Land Management fire chief Rick Sneeuwjagt wrote that approximately 70 percent of the northern jarrah forests and 65% of central and southern forests would burn intensely and uncontrollably under even mild summer conditions. This has proved to be the case.

The Mount Cook fire (18,000 hectares) was stopped only when it reached recently burned areas with low fuel loads. It was a similar situation in the south. In the Walpole area, 88,000 hectares have been burnt this year in wild fires, stopped only at recently burned areas and by rain.

Additionally, there have been huge fires in other areas – 300,000 hectares at Lake King, 200,000 hectares at Cape Arid, and 100,000 hectares in three fires on the coastal plain north of Perth.

Fires of such magnitude are ecologically disastrous, and the management practices that allows such events requires a massive overhaul. The parks and nature reserves established to protect flora and fauna have instead become vast killing fields. The high fuel loads mean that fires that occur in these areas are intense, widespread, and provide very little opportunity for the fauna to escape the fires. Any animals that do escape the heat and flames face extreme hardship through lack of food and shelter until the bush recovers.

Not only are the fauna severely affected by intense bush fires, the flora is as well. High fuel loads create damagingly high temperatures that in some cases are intense enough to sterilize the ground. We know that fires of such intensity not only permanently scar a large percentage of mature trees, but also kill a significant number. The accumulation of forest floor litter and a dense understory forms 'ladder fuel' that allows the fire to quickly gain the canopy of the forest. Canopy fires kill the majestic and ancient tall trees, and provide the source material for spot fires that can be spread up to 30 kilometres ahead of the fire front. In areas of low fuel loadings, this does not happen. It is essential for ecological health that there is variability in intensity of fire. This is only achieved by regular prescribed mosaic burning.

Data supporting the cost to flora and fauna from high intensity wild fires are available but not included in this submission.

A relationship between the exclusion of fire, and the spread of dieback in New South Wales has been noticed. In other states, a decline in eucalypt health for the same reason has also been observed. There has also been an associated increase in shrub and weed invasion.

Prescribed burning is currently at its lowest level since the 1950's in Western Australia. This has created the situation outlined above. This problem compounds itself, as the greater the fuel loads, the greater the difficulty in being able to carry out the prescribed burning. Among other factors, the time frame available for burning is reduced, as specific and exacting weather conditions are required.

It is a fact that fire is a naturally recurring event, and it is inevitable in the Australian forests. Only King Canute would believe otherwise. Lightning alone starts hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fires annually. Before European settlement these would have burnt themselves out unhindered. Today, 95% are suppressed before they reach 10 hectares.

There are claims from anti-burn green groups that frequent and low intensity fires threaten plant populations and threaten extinction. This couldn't be further from the truth. Any indigenous plant here when white man arrived, thrived under the regular aboriginal/lightning burning regime. Thrived because they would not otherwise have survived the 40,000 or more years of aboriginal habitation. Conversely, there have been many reports of local extinctions resulting from high intensity fires.

We by no means propose that all forests are kept in a perpetually blackened state. Instead, a proper appropriately funded and resources fire management regime should be implemented, based on the principles of aboriginal fire management practices. This means that overall, the fuel loadings in the forests are kept at low levels. This should be achieved from regular mosaic burning appropriate to the flora and fauna species within each area. The burns should be conducted on a small scale, and leave undisturbed pockets of refuge for fauna. Areas of flora susceptible to fire damage should be edged by regularly burnt bush.

There is overwhelming evidence that there is an urgent need to address the high fuel loads in forests across Australia by a rapid and large increase in prescribed burning. This should

be handled by the state authorities, but it does come under the Australian National Forest Policy Statement.

This brief submission is presented by a community group called Fire For Life, and represents some 200 signed up members, and many others concerned about the lack of regular burning in the south west forests and heartlands. We would welcome the opportunity to substantiate and expand on this document either by written material or in person.

We strongly request that this Committee holds a public hearing in Manjimup. This town is in the heart of the country most affected in Western Australia by the lack of prescribed burning. There is a wealth of local knowledge and experience in fire related matters.

Yours sincerely,

Eddie Liddelow

Eddie Liddelow
Chairman