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**Submission No.407**

## **Submission**

**Committee Secretary:  
House Select Committee on recent Australian Bushfires**

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## **Contents**

**Introduction  
Background of writer  
Acknowledgements**

### **Section 1 CALEDONIA FIRE ISSUES**

**Caledonia Fire 1998  
Flash flooding and Erosion  
Water pollution  
Landholder harassment  
Grazing ban  
Caledonia Track closure  
Confusion Rally  
Small business losses**

### **Section 2 OVERALL CONCERNS**

**Ecologists  
Fuel reduction  
Extinctions threat  
Vegetation degradation  
River erosion  
Melbourne's water supply  
Heyfield's future ???  
State Coroners Office  
Lives at risk  
Stretton Royal Commission ignored  
Campfires in park**

### **Section 3 LEAD UP AND 2003 FIRES**

**Preparedness  
Great Alpine Park Fire 2003  
Other fire fiascos**

## **Section 4 AGENCIES AND GROUPS**

**Police**  
**Weather Bureau**  
**Government**  
**DSE**  
**Parks Victoria**  
**CFA**  
**Environmental groups**  
**Licola Brigade**

## **Section 5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Recommendations**  
**Website**

### **Introduction**

**The 2003 fires, like most previous big fires have all eventuated for the same reasons - the people in the cities with the power thought they knew better. The present policies virtually insure much of the rest of the State of Victoria will be finished off.**

**Risk reduction in the Wellington Valley of the Alpine National Park has been zero for the last 7 - 8 years. In a perfect year like this for cool burning, nothing has happened. DSE ground crews have been on vegetation recovery work for a fire eventuating from inadequate cool burning.**

**The fuel levels along the Wellington Valley are so high and the country so steep and rough that an escaping fire could be uncontrollable within minutes. So fearful is our Brigade of the National Park and especially the Wellington Valley, it is unlikely we could get a crew into the area unless there were mild conditions. A fire escaping from this area has the potential to trap over 1,000 people whose escape could be cut off by spot fires. It could also threaten private landholdings around Licola where the DSE has thrust plans on us for the two previous park fires that involved burning out large tracts of private landholdings for a break. This is when better and safer approaches would have been more appropriate. All the Government has done is increase the penalties for landholders who try to protect themselves by back burning.**

**For the last three summers nothing has been done by Parks Victoria to address the danger around fire places in the Wellington Valley, my complaints have been falling on deaf uncaring ears. I have been extinguishing fires on total fire ban days, abandoned fires, excessively large fires, unattended fires, fires lit and abandoned against box logs which could smoulder for days and many fires with substantially insufficient clearances to surrounding fine fuels.**

There has been fire after fire involving National Parks, the Caledonia (1998), Grampians (1999), Big Dessert (2002), North East (1993) and Mulundung (1993), that all had one or more of the following similarities.

(1) All originated from either a National or State Park with a ridiculous fuel build up that they could not successfully fight a large fire amongst, then came out onto private land.

(2) There was a blackout of information from the DSE to other agencies, surrounding landholders and public, at the beginning of the fire.

(3) The fires could have been extinguished at the beginning.

(4) The control centres were too far from the scene, out of touch, uncooperative, un-supportive, uncoordinated with other agencies while lacking and avoiding local knowledge. So bad was the lack of cooperation at Licola in 1998, most of the CFA packed up and relocated elsewhere. This was when we could see a large fire developing.

(5) The fire fighting operations were often inadequate, shoddy and questionable to say the least.

(6) Private landholdings were not adequately protected, unnecessarily sacrificed, or just left to burn.

(7) These big fires cost a phenomenal amount of money, most of which could have been saved with proper fuel reduction from a competent Department.

In spite of these huge fires nothing is still being done to reduce the risks. There has been over a month this autumn with day after day when cool burning should have been carried out for community safety and environmental protection around Licola. If they cannot address the issues in a year like this it is unlikely they ever will, it would be hard to imagine better conditions for cool burning.

The future of Melbourne from the risk to water supplies from a fire in the catchments would have to be one of the most serious threats this State is facing. This is not being taken seriously it may be years before opportunities like those at present come around again to address the 64 year fuel build-up in the catchments.

Judge Stretton made the following comment in his scathing report after the 1939 fires: "*to expose and scotch the foolish enmities which mar the management of the forests by public departments who being our servants, have become so much our masters that in some respects they lose sight of our interests in the promotion of their mutual animosities.*"

Little appears to have been learnt by the people with the power since then, nothing is likely to happen until body bags start leaving the area.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and their forbearers, along with Parks Victoria, apart from isolated examples have never successfully managed the environment since before 1918. This is quite long enough to see if any experiment is going to work.

## **Background of writer**

L.Ralph Barraclough (54) grew up at Licola. His late father was a rabbit trapper, Mountain Cattleman and Captain of the then Licola North Fire Brigade. Ralph travelled much of Australia during 11 years in the Mining Exploration industry. He was heavily involved with the campaign to save the Franklin River, the huge Marquee tents seen at the blockade were made in his lounge room at the time in Werribee. Through much of this period he has been involved part time, with the bushwalking industry (since 1973) and was for a while one of the partners in Outgear, a Melbourne based bushwalking equipment manufacturer. This industry is close to his heart and he still has an involvement building and maintaining specialised machinery. Ralph has lived back at Licola since November 1987 and is now the Licola CFA Brigade Captain.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank all the wonderful people from Licola and the many dedicated supporters from outside who have stuck by me as a Brigade Captain and member of the Community. This has not been an easy task as it has seemed so many powerful Government agencies sole desire was to silence this small Brigade and Community trying to stop the disaster that has subsequently happened with the 2003 fires.

## **Section 1 Caledonia fire issues**

### **Caledonia fire 1998**

The Caledonia fire of 1998 was a disaster that should never have been allowed to be repeated on a larger scale. Little was learnt and taken on board from the disastrous management and environmental problems resulting from this fire in the Alpine National Park. Government policy would seem to have been to try and hide the truth and deny the problems, while capitalising on just about any way they could to use the disaster as excuses to push political agendas. This has been while falling down at just about every level to rectify the dangerous life threatening problems highlighted by National Park fires leading up to 2003.

The Fire originated from a stump burning for 2 - 3 days beside the track with grass and dirt placed around it. It is common knowledge a Government person was camped nearby and responsible for placing dirt around the stump.

It is common knowledge that Parks personnel were in charge on the ground at the initial fire fighting effort, on the afternoon of 31 December 1997, and were not trying

to put it out. Two opportunities to contain this fire were lost. When the fire got out of control, thoroughly inaccurate and misleading information was given to the public to try and conceal a raging bushfire in the Alpine National Park.

The fuel build-up in the Alpine National Park from the lack of cool burning and reduction of cattle grazing was enormous. When the fire went through much of the alpine area, it was very intense. At the beginning Park Rangers were in charge. The organisation was so bad fire fighters complained about the lack of food and water for up to 15 hours, in some cases longer. A Government bulldozer was not allowed into the Caledonia Valley for hours, because it might cause environmental damage. Another private dozer driver was told to just remove the leaf mould and not disturb the soil. It is no surprise the fire got away.

Parks Victoria came in and took over Licola. Local residents, the CFA and our Police were not being told anything. This hurt us enormously to see the Police we respected and adored being treated with such contempt. The Licola community was aghast to see first hand the lack of co-operation from Parks with local people and emergency services. During attempts to cover-up, the serious fire out of control in the National Park the Village power supply was denied to the CFA communications caravan. The Licola fire truck, with almost no communications and no warning, was to enter a frightening inferno with flames over the roof, that Parks/DNRE were evacuating from like scared rabbits. Our crew on board considered themselves lucky to have survived.

The police, broadcast a message from the park in early afternoon on New Years Day, that the Park should be evacuated immediately of campers and bushwalkers. Permission was denied by Parks\DNRE to evacuate. Local landholders assisted Police to remove visitors from private land where they could do this without the permission so stupidly denied. It was the following day, with a raging bushfire going, before evacuations started. It was only sheer luck and the outstanding work of the Police and helicopter pilots that avoided casualties.

Small private land holders on the Bennison Plains, surrounded by the park, were burnt out on Jan. 2, without warning from Parks/DNRE that a fire was coming in. The properties were burning as messages broadcast over ABC Radio from the DNRE advised they expected to contain the fire in the Caledonia Valley and private land was not being threatened. The fire was being fought by Parks/DNRE kilometres outside the Caledonia Valley the previous day. The DNRE would have to have known the inaccuracy of the fanciful information they were sending out.

It would be hard to convey the effect on a small frightened community to see most of the C.F.A. pack up and leave, with us all knowing full well it was because of the lack of cooperation from Parks who had taken over Licola. This was when we could see a huge fire developing, that had the potential to burn us out. None of us could blame the CFA for leaving, the Community knew full well from the information gathering network we had put together, that the fire fighting effort in the park was an utter shambles. We also knew that only rain would stop this fire and none was in site.

**Bulldozer drivers complained about lost bulldozers (at least 7) and poor supervision by people who had little idea of what they were doing from Parks/DNRE. One dozer spent several days needlessly pushing over ancient snow gums in the park along the side of the main road. Highly skilled local people working for the Department were given menial jobs like refuelling aircraft well away from the fire front. Hoards of people (Parks/DNRE fire fighters) stood around for hours on end, day after day, in the fire area. Local people found it difficult to find anyone who had the experience, who understood, or cared that spot fires going outside control lines were serious and needed to be addressed. Thoroughly inaccurate and untruthful information was given out to try and dismiss these legitimate concerns. It is unfortunate that at a time when dealing with a fire, DSE middle management stoops to the levels of Parks Victoria, where local people and visitors just expect to be frustrated, misled and lied to when dealing with them.**

**On Monday 5 Jan. I attended a group Fire brigade meeting at Heyfield. A grim picture of the potential of this fire was painted, and we were all told that there was no rain in sight. I heard our Group Officer John O'Brien make the comment that at last he had a map of the fire area. When I returned to Licola I was given another map that showed spot fires to the west of (Lake) Tali Karng, I did not remember seeing these on the Heyfield map.**

**In a crucial area, with a ridiculous fuel build up on Riggalls Spur, near Tali Karng at 4-00am on 6 Jan. I witnessed no patrolling, no blackening out and no foot prints along a bulldozed control line. Fires burnt in logs, trees and stumps, on the edge of the burn. A break-out escaping to the massive fuel build-up in the Avon Wilderness, under the right conditions to threaten East Gippsland, would have been a certainty. Of approx 600 people who came into Licola for tea on the evening of 6 Jan. only approx 30 were counted as dirty (like with charcoal and ash on them). The count was organised after local people noted for several days the lack of dirty Departmental personnel coming in from the fire ground. Fighting fires is usually a dirty business.**

**The most devastating news came when we found that a big fire break was being constructed to the West of Licola along Cobb Spur. Land-holders were horrified to find that if control lines failed, the fall back position was to the west of Licola, when the fire was in the park to the north east. None of us had been advised of this by Parks/DNRE. Local people were tipped off this was happening.**

**When Land holders confronted Parks/DNRE, they were told the story that a computer in Melbourne had selected the fall-back position. The locals said the CFA should be in control, as this involved private property. A representative from Parks advised, that as this fire had started in a park, Parks were in charge and under Displan, Parks if they wished could burn out private property for a break. The land-holders complained further that there were 5 safer and better fall-back positions, one being the Macalister River bordering the park. This saved private property and probably Licola as well, it also had a far better chance of working. They were told that someone has to suffer, so**

as others can benefit. Overall there was an appalling lack of localised fire behaviour knowledge and how dangerous this fall back position could be.

None of the people at Licola had any illusions about the potential of this fire to get away. With what we knew about the control lines, a break-out was a certainty if the right weather conditions came along. The news about just who would be in charge if the fire came onto private property at Licola was unthinkable. We knew that we might not be able to expect any more than a C.F.A. tanker to protect our houses. We knew that this fire was fightable, if done properly, as some of our ancestors had been doing this since the previous century. None of us could see anything other than a disaster if Parks were involved. Especially if they were going to fire up to the west of us for a fire coming from the north east, we would cop it from both sides. It would be hard to imagine a more stupid ridiculous or irresponsible position to try and stop a fire coming in from the park.

As soon as we found out about these westerly control lines we went through the proper channels and informed John O'Brien who assured us he was working on the problems. It soon became apparent nothing was being done to rectify this. Local people discussed our concerns and it was decided that we were on our own, and I should approach the Media. We saw this as our only real hope of changing our situation. We did not want to be treated the same as the land holders burnt out on the Bennison Plains and it was so obvious the people planning this strategy had no idea just how dangerous it all was.

ABC radio did a short interview and was keen for this to continue but I soon found that it was almost impossible to get on again. John O'Brien told a brigade meeting after the fire that he had gagged the media reporting. John O'Brien also failed to pass on these serious concerns of Brigade members and landholders to the CFA Regional Officer at the time, Euan Ferguson, who was horrified to find out about our plight in May!

It was not the fire fighting effort as has been claimed by Parks/DNRE, it was cool weather and rain that put this fire out. Had this blaze started A month earlier, it would have burnt into N.S.W., consuming all in its path with considerably more severity than the fires of 2003.

During the fire, 1,000 ha of control lines and helipads were cleared by bulldozing. The Tali Karng track, which was just starting to grow back, was bulldozed, spoiling the environment for bushwalkers. Ancient single trunk snow gums of enormous historical and scientific importance, protected by years of cool burning and grazing, were burnt and bulldozed. Ian Christie, Parks Victoria Executive responsible for fire liaison, in a letter to me dated 9 Sep 98, described the fire fighting shambles as an "outstanding effort". Ian Christie has since been promoted to Parks Regional Manager, Eastern.

Areas burnt out, like Charlies Country, to the west of the Wellington Plains, had so much fuel they produced a fire so hot much of the seed-stock was lost and is not regenerating properly. Sphagnum bogs were destroyed, large rocks cracked,

vegetation along creeks (Riparian Zone) that should never be burnt was lost. Parks themselves admitted whole eco systems were destroyed. The fire burnt to near Tali Karng, killing much of a magnificent woolly butt stand that should have been preserved at all costs. The devastation of dead trees in the park, can be seen to stop at the boundary fence of Kevin Higgins property that practiced traditional cool burning and grazing. Only a few weeks after the fire you had to look to see what had been burnt on his land.

The only thing that appeared to have been done well during the fire was the manipulation of ABC Radio into reporting what a good job Parks/DNRE had done.

The Government has been made fully aware of the serious concerns this fire highlighted and appears to have ignored repeated warnings and requests that communities needed to be protected from Parks/DNRE management and fire fighting efforts. Hundreds of documents are involved.

There are Community members who suspect the Caledonia fire was deliberately lit.

The Caledonia fire fiasco in the Alpine National Park demonstrated:

- (1) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE were completely incapable of fighting a large fire in the environment created with excessive fuel in a National Park.
- (2) That in 1998 other agencies and the public were in danger from information blackouts from the DNRE at the beginning of a fire.
- (3) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE were not extinguishing fires when this should have happened.
- (4) That in 1998 it was un safe to rely on Parks/DNRE's fire fighting effort.
- (5) That in 1998 the Parks/DNRE control centres were out of touch, uncooperative, un supportive and lacking local knowledge.
- (6) That in 1998 the fire fighting operations were un coordinated, shoddy and questionable to say the least.
- (7) That in 1998 it was unlikely much more land would have been burnt out in a large fire if there was no fire fighting effort at all.
- (8) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE were completely incapable of organising a large scale fire fighting effort.
- (9) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE obstructed and treated other more responsible and competent agencies with utter contempt.



**(10) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE showed little concern for the risks to human lives by failing to evacuate non essential people.**

**(11) That in 1998 Parks/DNRE treated local landholders and the community with almost complete disregard.**

**(12) That in 1998 small land holders were at serious risks when Parks/DNRE were in charge of a fire fighting effort.**

**(13) That in 1998 private landholdings were at risk of being not adequately protected, unnecessarily sacrificed, or just left to burn.**

**(14) That in 1998 fire Brigades should be there to protect their communities from out of control fires, not out of control Government Departments as well.**

**(15) That in 1998 these big fires cost a phenomenal amount of money, most of which could have been saved with proper fuel reduction from a Department run more competently.**

**(16) That in 1998 and the succeeding years some of the relevant authorities and Government appeared incapable of learning much from a disaster to stop it happening elsewhere.**

**(17) That in 1998 and the succeeding years Governments could not care less about the safety and well being of remote communities.**

**(18) That in 1998 and up until now the environment has been nothing more than a political football to be exploited for political gain by all parties.**

**(19) That in 1998 there was serious problems with the media being used to try and hide a bushfire out of control in a National Park and spin doctoring to try and paint a rosy picture of what was going on.**

## **Flash flooding and erosion**

**Massive erosion followed the Caledonia fire. A thunder storm hit the Caledonia Valley on January 12, 1998 (this put the fire out). Kilometres of deep channels were gouged from erosion with unstable banks falling in and landslides developing. Over 50,000 tonnes of mud and filth washed out of the park in the first mud-flow. This deposited alluvial boulder fans in the Caledonia Valley with rocks in excess of a tone, the likes of which none from our community has seen before. These fans will be around for hundreds possibly thousands of years. The Geology text book "Holmes" describes boulder fans as a product of new mountain chains such as the Andes and Himalayas. Ours is the oldest surviving mountain chain in the world. If these were natural, there would be more of them. Local people are not aware of any erosion or boulder fans in our area outside the Caledonia Valley. Similar alluvial boulder fans to those resulted**

from a previous hot fire following similar type of management in the Mt Buffalo National Park.

The following is an extract from a statement, nearly two years after the fire, from the late William Harper north of Licola, just below the Park:

*In all the time I have been associated with Glencairn, I have enjoyed fishing in and walking along the Macalister River. Nothing compares to what I witnessed in the river on December 9 & 10, 1999.*

*What I saw was like a river of melted chocolate. When this water hit rocks it never broke the surface, or even produced a ripple. I have never seen anything like this before. This is obviously a mudflow coming from somewhere. It was thick mud. I walked through there on Sunday 12th, the evidence is still on the bank.*

It is unlikely even the youngest members of our community will live long enough to see this erosion stabilize and the Macalister River run clean after summer thunderstorms in the park.

The serious problems of mud and filth coming down rivers from the 2003 fires was predicted if this management continued. The Government has shown no concern for a similar disaster in the Melbourne water catchments (or elsewhere) with over 60 years fuel build-up managed by Parks Victoria.

A FOI request to Parks Victoria dated 30-10-02 asking for information on what action they were taking to address the Caledonia erosion and prevent a similar occurrence again revealed they had no documents on this. This is while trying to remove groups from the fire area like 4WD's and Mountain Cattlemen because they might cause problems.

Instead of trying to protect other water catchments from a similar disaster, Parks described the mess in the Caledonia Valley as an entirely natural process and tried to hide the mess. I was told on December 9, 1999 by Mr David Young, General Manager Conservation that we had not provided a shred of evidence of the mud (like 50,000 tonnes in the first mud flow) polluting the river or erosion in the Park, and that statutory declarations and community letters were nothing more than opinions and accusations. Parks would not be taking any action until we came up with proper scientific proof. Parks were also at the time refusing to answer letters asking them what type of environment they were trying to create in the park.

The Government has been repeatedly made fully aware of the serious erosion problems from the Caledonia fire and the potential for this to happen elsewhere and appears to have ignored repeated warnings.

The Catchment and Land Protection Act of 1994 states:

*"In relation to his or her land a landowner must take all reasonable steps to conserve soil; and protect water resources;"* (section 20.b & c). Parks Victoria is a landowner under this act.

The Caledonia Valley erosion has demonstrated:

(1) That in 1998 flash flooding, massive erosion and mud polluted water supplies, followed fires that were too hot in the environment being created and allowed to exist in National Parks.

(2) That in 1998 erosion and boulder fans of this nature were unnatural as they are unknown elsewhere in our area and have resulted from failed management practices - which continue.

(3) That in 1998 other water supplies, especially Melbourne's were at serious risk of similar events.

(4) That everything reasonable effort should have been done to reduce fuel to avoid further hot wildfires and flash flooding.

(5) That fuel should be managed in the environment as far as possible the Riparian zones are not burnt out either from wild fires or fuel reduction burns that are too hot. The country should be burnt in a year like this.

(6) That the Government placed a higher priority on hiding serious environmental concerns rather than addressing them and trying to stop recurrence elsewhere.

## **Water pollution**

The water that came out of the park after the Caledonia fire was very toxic. Approx 57.5 tonnes of Phos-Chek, a highly corrosive phosphorous based fire retardant, was used in the Caledonia Valley. A thick, smelly, black oily sludge washed down the river that reacted with plastic containers it was sampled in. This was left on the bottom and banks of the river. Trout, Carp (who survive in a manure pond at a dairy), eels yabbies and tortoises died along the full length of the river from the Caledonia Junction to Lake Glenmaggie. Hundreds of dollars in veterinary fees were spent on dogs burnt from just wading in the river. This was the first time in living memory, the Macalister River was undrinkable. Blue-green algae grew for the first time in Lake Glenmaggie, a trail of blue-green algae followed fire debris from the Mitchell River through the Gippsland Lakes.

On Jan 16, 1998, in the Macalister, iron was measured at 2333 times over WHO guidelines for drinking water, with Manganese 350 times over and lead 15 times over. The high electrical conductivity, 280 microsiemens/cm, indicated that there was a very high content of dissolved mineral salts. As little as 3 litres (probably less) of the water that came down the river could have been lethal to a child. There is every reason to believe that considerably higher results were recorded, but not released. No testing

was released on organophosphate contamination from fire retardant breakdown products, or the tonnes of black greasy mud.

All the State Government agencies worked together to cover-up the problems. The DNRE told us that all that had washed down the river was charcoal, ash and topsoil (leaving the retardant behind). Over 9,000 people using fire tainted water were assured it was safe by government people who refused to drink it themselves. The people at Licola and along the Macalister and the towns of Glenmaggie and Coongulla, complained bitterly about health problems and the safety of run-off from the park. There was a spate of health problems dermatitis, itching, sore eyes, ringworm like sores, insomnia and possibly unsettled children, with various individuals after using this water. It was particularly bad above Lake Glenmaggie in Licola, with supplies direct from the river.

Coongulla and Glenmaggie residents were describing and in some cases showing many of these symptoms through much of 1998, and into 1999.

It is common knowledge there were 5 pregnancies along the Macalister where the mothers used fire run-off in 1998. Three of these pregnancies are believed to have got into serious trouble. Two women are believed to have lost babies, one at Licola very late in her pregnancy, with possibly as little as two weeks to go.

The mother of the surviving baby from these three, also from Licola, was flown to Melbourne by aerial ambulance. She spent approximately 8 weeks in hospital to deliver a premature baby that underwent tests for internal problems.

I am aware of two pregnancies in our valley, away from the Macalister during this period that did not use the water. Both would appear to have been perfectly normal.

Then Minister Garbutt told the Northern Grampians Shire Council in a letter dated 10 Oct 2000, after Phos-Chek was used in their water catchments during the Grampians fire of 1999, that *"Phos-Chek's components can be considered to have low short term toxicity and very low risk of long/delayed toxicity to humans. With the exception of one component for which there was no known data available on its environmental fate, none of the chemicals in Phos-Chek are considered to have the propensity to accumulate in biological systems."* ..... *"you should consider the findings of the CSIRO Report and the experience of land managers and water authorities over the last three decades in relation to retardant use who have recorded no demonstrable impacts on water quality or the environment."* This was in response from a request for a ministerial assurance from the council on water safety. When as Shadow Minister, Sherryl Garbutt was so concerned about the problems it was causing she asked that information, containing health problems of the people along the Macalister stopped being faxed, as it was running her machine out of paper.

Minister Garbutt has also said (when in opposition) in a letter (3 June 1999), *"As you would know, I have written several letters to the Minister for Conservation and Land*

*Management (Marie Tehan) and raised this issue in Parliament, and I have not received a satisfactory reply either." After repeated attempts to find the Hansard record and repeated requests to Minister Garbutt for the Hansard reference, she admitted in a letter (11 Apr 2000), "When I wrote to you earlier last year it was my intention to raise these matters in Parliament. Unfortunately, the opportunity did not subsequently arise. I apologise for any subsequent confusion on your part."*

Most of the Phos-Chek dropped in the Caledonia Valley was in an area known as the "Long Spur." Several creeks, in particular "Stirrup Iron Creek" receive a substantial amount of run-off from this spur. At the junction of Stirrup Iron Creek and the Caledonia River, there are dead and dying eucalyptus trees. This devastation is clearly visible and what is so striking is the dead and dying trees main water source is Stirrup Iron Creek. Trees that have access to an alternate water supply seem to be healthy. It is obvious that some powerful toxic cocktail of chemicals came down that creek and killed most of the trees that had no choice but to use this contaminated water. These giant dead trees are silent witness to the "benign" effects of chemical fire fighting in the Australian environment. The Government and chemical supplier Solutia Australia, had tried to tell the Licola community that Phos-Chek would actually benefit vegetation.

Gippsland Water who is responsible for domestic water originating from the Macalister River failed to reopen files, after they could only supply grossly inadequate test results and opinions on water safety that could not be substantiated. The EPA did not do relevant tests before issuing water assurances and continues to avoid the issues. West Gippsland CMA still has not released a report or any official information on the Macalister pollution. Premier Bracks has displayed little concern for over 50,000 people using fire run-off, we are unaware of any action being taken by him to address a community letter with over 50 signatures outlining tests that should be done on Phos-Chek. No official reports have been released from any testing in the Macalister River. Reports done for the DNRE, have gone from completed to unfinished when they were asked for.

In the first community letter drop in August 98, to the 9,000 people using fire run-off down stream, entitled "IS YOUR WATER SUPPLY SAFE," it was stated that two of the likely degradation products of Phos-Chek would be phosphoric and sulphuric acids.

In a reply to this letter drop from Mr Michael Taylor, Secretary of DNRE (letter dated June 3, 99), he said:

*"I have referred this matter to the State Chemical Laboratory for advice. They have advised me that the explanation of the fire retardant mechanism and the chemical reactions proposed by the chemist you consulted are not an accurate reflection of what is likely to occur during a bushfire. They advise me that: The reactions proposed for the formation of phosphoric acid and sulphuric acid would not proceed to any significant extent."*

In a report commissioned on Phos-Chek by the Government (CSIRO Research report No. 50) the CSIRO however thought otherwise:

*"In high intensity fires the retardant will be exposed to temperatures in excess of 675 C. At these temperatures the ammonium salts are likely to be decomposed to oxides of nitrogen and sulphur dioxide and P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>."*

(page 9, paragraph 5)

In the paper by George C.W. et al, in 1971, the authors propose a similar chemical pathway ( $2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{P}_2\text{O}_5 \rightarrow \text{H}_4\text{P}_2\text{O}_7 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow 2\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$ ).

Of great concern is the interaction of sulphuric acid (H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>) with the environment, especially the soil minerals forming water soluble salts such as ZnSO<sub>4</sub>.6H<sub>2</sub>O (zinc sulphate), CuSO<sub>4</sub>.5H<sub>2</sub>O (copper sulphate), FeSO<sub>4</sub>.7H<sub>2</sub>O (iron sulphate), MnSO<sub>4</sub>.5H<sub>2</sub>O (manganese sulphate) etc. These water soluble salts would find their way into the water supply and at high concentrations would pose a serious health risk to water users.

Also of concern from the CSIRO Report:

*"The decomposition products of some of the performance additives at high temperature are unknown."* (page 9, paragraph 5)

*"Performance additives: From the list made available, it appears that some of the additives will have a significant effect on biological processes in soils..... No information was available from Solutia Inc. on the interaction of various components with soils or their effects on soil processes."* (page 17, paragraph 6)

*"Unfortunately no information was provided by Solutia Inc. or is available in the literature on oxidation mechanism (complete or partial) at temperatures these materials can experience in fires, or on the products formed during heating, their solubilities or potential toxicities. This is a key gap in available information."* (page 17, Paragraph 8)

It must be asked how on earth a Government Department is allowed to use chemicals for fire fighting in the environment that contain components whose effects on the environment are unknown, or will have a significant effect on biological processes. (67.25 tonnes used in the Macalister catchment, 57.75 tonnes in the Mitchell catchment, 20 tonnes in and around the Grampians catchments, and tonnes this summer in the headwaters of the Goulburn.)

The CSIRO report identified these main areas of concern:

*(1) Nothing was known about the transport (dispersal) of retardants under Australian conditions. High nutrient inputs were likely to effect plant communities, especially in Australian ecosystems that are generally nutrient poor. The main threat could be to rare and sensitive ecosystems.*

*(2) Information on the effect of retardant components especially the "secret" performance additives materials in the environment was nonexistent.*

- (3) Effects of some components in the retardant, on soil biology, is unknown.*
- (4) Effects of retardant decomposition products such as phosphoric and sulphuric acids on the various Australian soil types was unknown.*
- (5) There was no data on the effects of Phos-Chek on Australian aquatic systems.*
- (6) Some of the additives in Phos-Chek D75R, were potentially harmful to biological systems and human health. Very little was known about these in natural environments. The studies so far conducted overseas had involved limited testing of the full chemical, but had not examined the importance of individual components. Nothing was known about the effects in Australia.*
- (7) Phos-Chek D75R was not effective in retarding hot wild fires with intensities greater than 2MW/m. It performed no better than water.*
- (8) No information was provided by Solutia Australia Inc. the manufacturer and supplier, or was available in the literature, on oxidation of the "secret additives" at temperatures these materials can experience in fires, the product formed during heating, or the potential toxicities.*
- (9) Nothing was known of the chemical interaction which might occur between ash and charcoal material and the retardant residues.*
- (10) Nothing was known about short and long term effects on human and animal health as a result of contamination of water ways by Phos-Chek chemicals and its degradation products.*
- (11) Nothing is known about the effects on human or animal health as a result of Phos-Chek chemicals and its degradation products, finding their way into the human food chain.*
- (12) Toxicity testing using LD50 (Lethal Dose 50%) values as an end point, was completely inadequate to assess the true toxicity of Phos-Chek and its chemical degradation products. By using such an extreme value for the end test point (LD50), many long term pathological conditions would be masked, that did not cause a quick death.*

These were just some of the comments highlighted in the CSIRO report. Underlining all these concerns was the urgent need for a high quality independent research study to examine all the above issues in the Australian environment, in a professional, unbiased and scientifically accountable way. This should have been undertaken and the use of this retardant should have been suspended until the findings were known. A letter from the community was sent to Premier Bracks on 15-6-2000, with 400 signatures asking for this, I am unaware of any independent research eventuating.

A Press Release of March 20, 2000, from DNRE Chief Fire Officer Gary Morgan was headed *"Report Eases Concerns Over Impact Of Fire Retardant"* it went on to say *"The Key findings were that the potential risk to public health from Phos-Chek was considered to be very small and the components of it had low short-term toxicity and a very low risk of any long term or delayed toxicity in humans"* Gary Morgan also wrote the forward to the CSIRO report and the DNRE published it.

CSIRO Research Report No 50, which Mr Morgan was referring to, highlighted many of the concerns on the use of Phos-Chek expressed in community letter drops. This report clearly identified the lack of scientific knowledge about the effects of Phos-Chek and the various degradation products in the environment.

What Gary Morgan was using as the basis for his Press release was based on the following quotes from the CSIRO Report:

*"From the information so far available, Phos-Chek components can be considered to have a low acute toxicity (based on LD50 tests) and very low risk for long term/delayed toxicity to humans."* (page 23 paragraph 1)

The above was a remarkable conclusion, considering there is virtually no scientific evidence available to support this.

*"It is known that all organic compounds in Phos-Chek decompose into simple compounds which would probably be indistinguishable from those produced in vegetation fires."* (page 28 paragraph 3)

The above statement was quite amazing when considering Phos-Chek D75R was made up almost entirely from inorganic compounds (they do not contain carbon) of ammonium sulphate, and phosphate salts.

When an author of the CSIRO report was contacted to find out how on earth this sort of material got into a scientific report, with the CSIRO's name on it, the name of a person outside of the CSIRO (and DNRE), who did not appear on the list of authors, was said to be responsible.

The "Low acute toxicity of Phos-Chek chemicals is based on LD50 test studies done mainly by Solutia Inc, the manufacturer and supplier. The only chemicals tested were the primary ingredients. These tests would also show plutonium, asbestos and DDT as perfectly safe. Using tonnes of a highly corrosive chemical of this nature in water catchments on the basis of these sort of tests is hardly satisfactory. The following quote from the CSIRO Report obviously went right over Gary Morgan's head:

*"However. Lethal Dose (LD50) is very insensitive (extreme) measure of impacts on biological systems, where health and fecundity are also of fundamental concern."*

Premier Bracks and about 40 other Government people have been sent letters starting from May 2000 advising of serious concerns from tests done on the breakdown



residues of Phos-Chek and cellulose from UV light and the effect these had on *the inhibition of an essential enzyme called "CHOLINESTERASE."* This is the enzyme organophosphate insecticides target.

It is virtually impossible for organophosphates of an unknown toxicity, not to form from the breakdown of Phos-Chek and cellulose in the Caledonia environment. The government appears to have ignored these warnings and continues to allow this highly corrosive chemical to be used by a Department who displays so little chemical knowledge that explanations on how Phos-Chek works have involved the creation and disappearance of whole atoms.

A two generation test carried out in Feb 99, on Phos-Chek G75F (a similar product) by Vyas, at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center on white-footed mice, resulted in a significant delay in the onset of reproduction and fewer pregnancies of mice exposed to diets mimicking field application rates. So far no similar tests have turned up on Phos-Chek D75R which uses much of the same chemistry and nothing on the risks to pregnant women using diluted run-off over a longer period, or what might eventuate with their children.

The Macalister River pollution from fire run-off after the Caledonia fire demonstrated:

- (1) That tests that would show plutonium, asbestos and DDT as perfectly safe, are inadequate for fire fighting chemicals.
- (2) That tests done by George C.W. et al, in 1971, should have stopped the world wide use of Phos-Chek until proper tests were done on the toxicity of breakdown products in the environment.
- (3) That it is unacceptable for pregnant women to use fire run-off unfit for dogs to even wade in.
- (4) That there needs to be proper warnings to people down stream after a fire where Phos-Chek has been used, like along the Goulburn River at the moment.
- (5) That no chemicals of any risk should be used for fire fighting by a Department who displays less chemical knowledge than a year 7 High School student.
- (6) That there needs to be proper tests for all fire fighting chemicals and their breakdown products in the Australian environment, as outlined by the CSIRO report.
- (7) That the environment should be managed so as the use of fire fighting chemicals is mostly unnecessary.

**(8) That the Government Authorities need to be there to protect the public and not just the Government.**

## **Landholder harassment**

**Kevin Higgins along with other small land holders on the Bennison Plains, surrounded by the Alpine National Park was burnt out by the Caledonia fire on Friday January 2, 1998. No warning was given to Kevin (or the other landholders), that the fire was out of control, to allow him to evacuate the 10 people on his property or any of his valuable animals from his trail riding business.**

**At no stage did any person from Parks/DNRE visit Kevin's property to see if they had survived, or needed help. As Kevin and his helpers searched for burnt animals to destroy, hordes of people (fire fighters) from Parks/DNRE stood around idle, for hours on end, day after day, not far away.**

**Three days after the fire went through, the sky crane (Elvis) came to Kevin's creek, without any warning to collect water (there had been plenty of opportunity to have warned Kevin). His frightened animals were more terrified of this than they were of the fire and as the fences were burnt, made off into the Park.**

**The first contact Kevin had with Parks Victoria was on Sat Jan 17. The second was the following day. He had his rifle (legally registered) - used for putting down injured and dying stock - confiscated by Rangers. He was in their Park. Kevin was told to take his dogs home. He was faced with the impossible task of trying to muster scattered cattle in the mountains from his neighbours fire without dogs. As Kevin no longer had a good firearm, it subsequently took 10 shots from a worn out .22 rifle to put down a mobile beast with septicemia. Septicemia around hooves is a problem in burnt livestock that requires animals to be monitored and put down for up to two months after the event.**

**Kevin's place was later raided after he lent horses to a party with a reporter to look at dead trees killed by chemical contamination and erosion in the Caledonia Valley. Parks were trying to pretend this did not exist and it had been hidden by track closures. Kevin was prosecuted for stock outside his property, in the park. No money was ever given or offered Kevin to help replace his fences for a fire amongst the appalling mess in the National Park and a shoddy fire fighting effort where Parks had been in charge.**

**The treatment of Kevin Higgins before, during and after he was burnt out by the Caledonia fire in 1998 demonstrated:**

**(1) That in 1998 landholders are at risk of being kept in the dark over a fire in a National Park likely to burn them out.**

**(2) That in 1998 Parks Victoria couldn't care less about the victims burnt out by their failed management.**

**(3) While a Council can force landholders to address serious fire risks to neighbours, no suitable mechanism is in place to do this with Crown and Public land.**

## **Grazing ban**

**Cattle grazing was targeted before the Caledonia fire was even out, as Parks were worried they may cause damage to burnt sphagnum bogs. This was part of an amazingly well oiled plan that suddenly materialised and included 4WD's and other groups Parks wanted to remove.**

**On Jan 4, 98, I returned from a visit to the Wellington Plains and saw a person who said he was responsible for planning in the Licola fire control room. I asked if they could take care to preserve grassed areas not burnt on the Wellington Plains where cattle had survived. I was told it was policy for all unburnt areas within the fire perimeter to be burnt out. The planner seemed to care little about the plight of the cattlemen and I subsequently found that the fire perimeter had been drawn to take in un-burnt grazing areas. One would have to question these motives.**

**Two days later I was told by David Tainsh, the Fire Manager who was Incident Controller, and a Parks official with him, that they had no idea about the galaxias (native fish) in Nigothoruk Ck. or their significance, or the risks they were exposed too from erosion if a storm hit the grazing areas planned to be burn out. I was appalled to see they seemed to have little understanding of erosion problems that can follow a hot fire in the mountains (this was before the storm of Jan 12, in the Caledonia Valley).**

**Grazing was banned for the first season after the fire by a group of three (two were from Parks). Stuart Ord, Regional Manager, had already said on ABC radio on Nov 2, 1998, that grazing would not go ahead, this was before both sides of the argument were in. Another was David Young, General Manager Conservation, a recent arrival to Australia, the fellow who denied there was a problem flowing from the Park (like the 50,000 tonnes of mud). This same fellow expressed a worry that cattle might cause erosion problems.**

**An "expert" panel was set up by Parks Victoria to advise on grazing. I suspect this was mostly a collection of people with known views who hated alpine grazing. Overall I suspect it was made up of many of the same sort of people who gave the type of advice that lead to the environment that caused the disaster in the first place.**

**Monitoring plots were fenced off around rocky outcrops, dead limbs, fallen bark and places where grass never grew in the first place, then monitored to see how they would grow. From what I have seen and from what other Brigade members have told me. I could only conclude many of these were deliberately placed to give deceptive results.**

**Bench marks were set from vegetation surveys on Bogong, a granite monolith, with loose soils and applied to vegetation on soils derived from rhyolite and shales at a considerably lower altitude on Bennison. As the vegetation returned, the benchmarks**

were changed assuring cattle did not return. "Expertise" was also bought in from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife service - who have been repeatedly burnt out.

Decisions on grazing in burnt areas were made with vegetation surveys consisting of two drafts and a summary, all unsigned. A "Draft Internal Working Paper" was passed off as "scientifically credible information needed to determine management options for the area." This had no finding or conclusion, no indication of who did the work, or their qualifications, and no references from approved text books on the methodology used which in some places could have been little more than guess work.

When the grazing dispute went to an "independent" disputes panel, then Minister Garbutt tried to put a former president of the Victorian National Parks Association on the panel.

The science was so bad that even their own people on the "Expert" panel were critical *"is the PV draft proposal a joke? Its appalling! I have read both drafts of the proposed methodology and, in their current state, neither would pass as first year biology assignments"*

(An extract from an e-mail 26 Sep 2000 from Dr Henrik Wahren to Sally Troy Convenor "Alpine Ecology Scientific Review Panel" obtained under FOI).

Professor Nancy Millis, who chaired this "Expert" panel of Alpine Ecologists was Chancellor of Latrobe University, and up until recently Chair of the Government Gene Technology Regulator's advisory committee. Professor Millis had this to say about criticism of genetically modified foods:

*"It has never been scientifically proven that genetically modified food is dangerous. The misinformation out there really is very naughty. They are saying things they know it their hearts are not true and that's not fair."* (Herald Sun Weekend April 26, 2003)

It is a pity the "Expert" panel Professor Millis chaired has not applied the same philosophy.

Parks did not warm well to a Captain of a fire brigade wanting to observe their vegetation recovery monitoring, I stated my concerns to Mr Murray Rankin, Acting Regional Manager, Parks Victoria, on 15 October 2002. I advised Mr Rankin that my Brigade covers Private landholdings surrounded by the Alpine National Park. I was extremely concerned about the safety of landholders and visitors to this area from a hot fast moving fire fuelled by the massive grass fuel build up after the Caledonia fire of 1998. I told him I held grave concerns about the quality of the scientific work said to be taking place up there, and would like to observe and talk to the people doing this the following day, and would be filing my concerns with the State Coroners Office.

The following are extracts from Mr Rankin's faxed reply of 15 October:

*"The measurements are solely concerned with the recovery of the licence area in regard to the re-introduction of cattle grazing. The assessment is not concerned with fuel loads. None of the measurements relate to fuel loads.....Please note that some of the access*

*tracks are closed except for management vehicles. You may have to proceed to some of the sites on foot."*

This was for a Captain of a fire Brigade in a Captain's Vehicle collecting evidence to go to the State Coroner concerning serious risks to life and property from the management practices. The vehicle was also equipped with a trunking radio in a remote area of the State where I am called on to do first aid for such things as vehicle accidents. I was warned I would be left outside locked gates while Parks vehicles went through. Fortunately this never happened as none of the monitoring areas I wanted to observe were behind locked gates.

So incompetent were Parks Botanists doing this monitoring that I witnessed a number of areas where they were assessing vegetation recovery that had been missed by the Caledonia fire and not burnt out for decades. I observed transect lines beside active wombat and rabbit burrows.

Little would appear to have changed since the 1939 Stretton Report: *"Committees of Management of Park Areas.- As far as your Commissioner is informed, it is improbable that these committees have any satisfactory plan of fire prevention."* (page 10)

The burnt alpine areas of the park from the Caledonia fire have become a fire trap with large areas in excess of the extreme fire category for grass fuel build up. So serious is the problem, with so many areas so far off the fuel measurement scale, it was necessary to record the fire risk in how many times the extreme category it was. The measurements are in fuel volumes, not fire intensities. Fuel volumes of double the extreme category would lead to a fire of approx 4 times the extreme intensity. Fuel volumes of four times the extreme category would lead to a fire of approx 16 times the extreme intensity. Overall this is a most unsatisfactory, imprecise and cumbersome method of trying to quantify the fire danger in a National Park for something so far off scale.

In some areas on the open country on the Wellington Plains where grazing had been banned up until last year, because Parks botanists claimed insufficient recovery. On 17 Dec 2002, I measured in excess of approx 4 times the extreme category of grass fuel build up in one of their own monitoring plots (SAG 15). This was a plot missed by the Caledonia fire. I became suspicious one marked transect line on burnt ground (SAG 31), had been deliberately placed, so I did parallel measurements 10 meters on either side and recorded approx 50% higher grass fuel accumulations to approx double the extreme fuel volumes.

With the quantity of grass growing after the fire it was very unlikely a handful of cattle would halt this fuel building up, even on the small areas now grazed. I believe the walking track into Tali Karng over the Wellington Plains is now so dangerous there are times when it is unsafe for humans. This should be closed during the summer fire danger period until common sense prevails and the fuel build up is addressed by people more competent than those the Government has listened to.

**Parks Victoria were not able to produce any relevant documents from an FOI request for material they held on actual damage done by cattle to alpine bogs in the Bennison and Wellington Plains area. This was previous to the fire that would justify the ban on grazing which has significantly contributed to the present dangerous grass fuel build up. So little do Parks know about managing their environment a Park Ranger was telling local people before the Caledonia fire that snowgrass would not even burn. Parks Victoria appeared to have learnt little from their mistakes and appeared to know little about what they were doing with the monitoring of vegetation recovery. The reintroduction of grazing was too little too late. Mistake after mistake has been made that local people warned would happen. Parks seem to care little about the dangerous environment they have created and how it threatens the environment, water supplies, the timber industry, local people and most of all park visitors. I have seen little or nothing that I would consider scientific about their approach.**

**Judge Stretton had the following to say after the 1939 fires:**

***"No person or department can be allowed to use the forest in such a way as to create a state of danger to others." (page 7)***

**The closure of a 140 year old historical stock route, that lead from Licola to Bennison, was stopped by local people (none were cattlemen) blockading the park until it was reopened. There had been no consultation or warning of this closure from Parks Victoria.**

**So much money was needlessly wasted trying to remove grazing after the Caledonia Fire (I suspect in excess of \$500,000), that serious fire safety issues, like clearances around fire places along the Wellington River, remain a disaster just waiting to happen.**

**There just is no evidence to show the environmental damage claimed from cattle grazing from the lobby groups who seem oblivious and unconcerned for the environmental destruction from their own recommended policies. On Kevin Higgins property, grazing and cool burning has continued with no apparent erosion or damage to the numerous sphagnum bogs. Grazing and burning should return to the whole alpine area for environmental reasons.**

**The ban on cattle grazing and the "Expert" Panel established after the Caledonia fire demonstrated:**

**(1) That in 1998 Parks Victoria and the Government was more concerned with pushing political agendas, than the fire risk to landholders, visitors and the environment.**

**(2) That Parks Victoria and the Government learnt little from the fuel build up that caused the severity of the Caledonia fire and have repeated many of the same mistakes again.**

**(3) That Parks Victoria and the Government have called the most questionable practices - scientific.**

**(4) That Parks Victoria and the Government have little concern for the victims of their management.**

**(5) That there is an urgent need to bring back traditional grazing and burning to protect the whole of the Alpine area from more environmental disasters.**

**(6) That if the type of management continues in the Alpine National Park a more satisfactory means of expressing extreme fire hazards needs to be developed.**

**(7) That grazing in the Alpine regions should be encouraged to be a family tradition to preserve the skills necessary to protect the environment.**

**(8) That a committee of cattlemen and local CFA people should be set up to oversee this in each local area.**

## **Caledonia Track closure**

**Tracks to the Caledonia Valley did not reopen after the Caledonia fire. Signs were put up and huge excavations bulldozed to stop vehicle access.**

**Stuart Ord from Parks stated: *"The Caledonia River track was partly washed away by the Caledonia River and adjacent creeks, i.e. Stirrup Iron Creek, following the heavy rain after the fire. At this stage it is uncertain whether it is feasible to rebuild it."***

**While Parks were telling people at Licola we had not supplied any evidence mud was coming from erosion in the Park, they were telling 4WD users the track could not be reopened because of erosion and turbidity (dirty water). Parks were concerned 4WD's might stir up mud at river crossings.**

**In November 1998 I visited the Caledonia Valley on horseback to see where all the mud contaminating our water supplies was coming from. There were minor problems with the track along the river, but massive erosion to creeks and gullies on the sides of the valley. Stirrup Iron Ck. was not washed away at all, just covered by a boulder fan. The erosion to the track Parks were claiming may not be feasible to repair, was made safe and useable with 10 minutes pick and shovel work and an hour and a half throwing rocks into holes, all done by one person.**

**The Dingo hill track remains closed, but at this point in time the barricades have been dug through. Nobody has been able to find the serious erosion claimed to be along it. The Link and Caledonia tracks have now been reopened with needless environmentally damaging bulldozing, displacing far more dirt than was eroded from the track after the fire. A lot of this soil will wash down to further pollute Licola's water supply. I suspect this unnecessary work was done as a tail covering exercise to**

try and justify all the lying over the closure. Much of this needless work has been carried out nearby to where the Caledonia fire escaped because Parks would not allow the dozer to cut a fire break.

The needless drawn out closure of the Caledonia Track and subsequent unnecessary reopening work demonstrated:

(1) That bulldozing in sensitive areas to stop a fire is ridiculously restricted, but does not appear restrained when Parks want to frustrate and stop legitimate user groups they dislike.

(2) That Parks Victoria was quite happy to use a fire as an excuse to push agendas that discriminate against a large section of legitimate users who supply thousands of tourist dollars to local businesses.

(3) That the waste of money was no problem on agenda issues while serious issues like the clearance of combustible fine fuel around dangerous fire places goes wanting.

(4) That Parks Victoria could not care less about how much mud and filth washes out of their park to effect community water supplies down stream.

## **Confusion Rally**

The Caledonia fire was used as an excuse to ban a respected and well organised motorbike rally that had been held for years in the park. This had strong local support from Licola and surrounding communities. The organisers were told by Parks after the fire that all roads were closed along the Wellington River. When the lack of truth with this was challenged by local people, they were told the Wellington was unfit for human consumption. This caused serious concern to the local people trying to truck water from the Wellington, as Licola had no other water supply. This was found to be just as untrue as the road closure.

The rally went ahead when the excuses from the fire failed, but the following year Parks banned the "Confusion Rally" blaming them for not using toilets, littering, impacts to the soil, illegal as well as large campfires with excessive use of fire wood.

Statutory declarations from local people subsequently described the campsite in the park before most of the bikes arrived, "as being heavily littered and like walking through a minefield of human excrement." There was no indication of excessive fires, and an abundance of fire wood just two minutes walk away. This wood badly needed burning to clean up the Park to reduce the fire risk. Local CFA members attending, were not aware of illegal fires. Soil impacts were minimal, doing little more than flattening St. Johns wort, a noxious weed. When Statutory declarations were presented to Parks, they said they were only opinions and accusations that were completely irrelevant, "as the decision had already been made." This rally had been bringing in thousands of tourist dollars annually to local businesses already suffering badly from the fire.



**The overall treatment of the Confusion Rally organisers and participants demonstrated:**

**(1) That Parks Victoria was quite happy to use a fire as an excuse to frustrate and mislead legitimate user groups they disliked.**

**(2) That Parks Victoria could not care less about the effect on local businesses who were desperate for tourist income after suffering massive losses from a serious fire in their park.**

**(2) That Parks Victoria could not care less about the concerns they caused for a small community struggling for one of the basic essentials of life - a useable water supply.**

### **Small business losses**

**Small businesses have suffered particularly badly from the Caledonia fire. Takings at the Licola General Store dropped by as much as 70% after the fire. Parks Victoria actively discouraged visitors with inaccurate and misleading information and unnecessary track closures. Other small businesses in nearby towns have also suffered badly as a result. I am not aware of anything done following the fire to help lessen the impact on small business from Parks Victoria. Around 98% of all visitors to our area are now prepared to sign letters critical of park and forest management.**

**The Caledonia fire, needless track closures and overall frustration of visitors, along with the disruption of local economies, demonstrated:**

**(1) That the implications from National Park fires impact on more than the park environment.**

**(2) That businesses and the general public were being misled that proclaiming National Parks would boost tourist numbers - and this all happened before the last round of new National Parks.**

## **Section 2 Overall concerns**

### **Ecologists**

**Ecologists, who only a few years ago were saying fire was not part of the environment, are now saying after the failure of their policies, that this environmental disaster is a natural process. It is most disturbing, as repeated failures have already cost the community lives and millions of dollars. The concerning part is that what we have already seen may be the thin end of the wedge with the potential of these policies to threaten hundreds of lives and the future of Melbourne's water for decades to come like has already happened to Adelaide and the Murray Darling irrigators.**

Ecologists giving advice to Parks Victoria, and assisting with decisions on alpine management, appear to have little understanding just how serious things are. Trying to recreate the middle canopy vegetation, where it did not exist before European settlement, along with the fuel build-up, is not going to fix problems, or protect the environment and I would suggest very little else.

A letter to the Gippsland Times Nov. 20, 2001 from Arn Tolsma, PhD candidate (Alpine Ecology), School of Forestry, Melbourne University, was highly critical of my stand on the serious risks from a hot fire in the Alpine environment, which has subsequently eventuated.

Some extracts from Mr Tolsma's letter follow:

*"I am no longer able to sit back while L. Ralph Barracrough continually spouts unfounded nonsense about Alpine National Park Management."*

*Can Mr Barracrough explain the following?*

*If millions of years of ongoing erosion formed the deep valleys of the alps, why should Parks Victoria spend resources in a futile attempt to control it in every gully?"*

I have already covered the serious erosion following big fires previously in this submission - if what has happened in the Caledonia Valley is natural, where are the Boulder fans in our area from previous events?

Mr Tolsma further went on in his letter:

*"How has a snow gum ("of enormous scientific importance") remained single-stemmed when the controlled burning that he advocates would have caused lignotuber growth to lead to multiple stems?"*

*How would streamside thickets and snow gums be protected from burning by employing burning?*

*Why does he claim the area has been "protected" by burning and grazing when dozens of refereed scientific reports and PhDs since the early 1900s have shown that these disturbances have actually been detrimental to the alpine communities?"*

John Dennis Guy, a grazier from Dargo held the Mt Howitt lease where many of these magnificent ancient single trunk snow gums have survived that I have been trying to save from the type of management people like Mr Tolsma support. The following is an extract from the testimony of Mr Guy to the Commissioner and council assisting the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission:

(Transcripts begin page 1188)

Mr. Gowans: *When is the best time to burn up there?—I would say up until October in most years, after the snow. A lot depends on the season.*

The Commissioner: *Do you generally get a burn there in October?—we get patches*

*Do you support the views put forward by other witnesses about controlled burning where possible, in order to clear up forest?—Yes.*

The Commissioner: *Is there anything you would like to put forward at all. We are anxious to learn from your experience?—The only feed we have left is in the patches that we burnt in October. That saved the big fire going over the lot.*

Even more disturbing was some of the comments in a letter dated 27 Nov 2001, from Professor Roger Cousens, Head, School of Resource Management, Forestry & Amenity Horticulture, where Mt Tolsma was studying:

*"Indeed I find little in the article with which I would disagree: most of his points are backed up by intensive scientific research (much of it done by staff from various Universities).....He has been studying Alpine Ecology for several years and, in my opinion, has some useful views that should be taken into account, along with those of others."*

We have now had over 1,000,000 hectares burnt out from a hot fire originating in this type of environment claimed as natural. Huge areas of snow gums have been burnt, there is erosion and rivers are undrinkable, all of which was clearly indicated would happen by the Caledonia fire.

There is a very serious problem with the so called scientific material being produced on the Alpine ecology, and I would suggest many other areas. The question has to be asked, where is the scientific evidence of the type of erosion we are now seeing from previous hot fires before European settlement? Where are the ancient multi trunk snow gums to support the theories that the types of hot fires we are now seeing have been natural with Aboriginal management? Why did early explorers and pioneers describe a totally different landscape than we now have?

Mr Arn Tolsma's name appears on documents I have obtained under FOI as one of the "Expert" panel of Alpine Ecologists who advised Parks Victoria on the return of grazing after the Caledonia Fire. Another scientist on this "Expert" panel was Dr Dick Williams.

In an interview on ABC Radio, 31 Jan 2003, Dr Williams was described as specialising in Alpine Ecology and a CSIRO Fire Ecologist. Dr Williams said he had focused some of his research on the Bogong High Plains (more than 20 years) and made some interesting comments:

*"The most flammable parts of the landscape in the alpine country, the treeless country, are the heathlands. The impact of cattle grazing on those in reducing fuel is very minimal indeed, because there not the preferred grazing community. The shrubs themselves are not eaten. The cattle prefer to graze in the more open type of country, the grasslands and the herbfields and the open heath. Reducing the risk in the most flammable parts of the*

*landscape which cover about 50% of the high country, of the treeless country, cattle are not going to do that, they're are not going to deliver the sort of fuel reduction that people are talking about."*

The "Country News" just after a fire carried an article on Dr Williams:

*"He (Dr Williams) said scientific evidence had shown cattle changed the composition of ground cover and created more bare area between patches, which created greater opportunities for shrubs to colonise areas."*

A photograph taken this summer of a Bogong monitoring plot established in 1947 clearly shows the heath vegetation almost out of control and stopping at the boundary fence where grazing starts.

The ABC broadcast of 31 Jan 2003 also carried the inspired thoughts of Dr Williams on fuel reduction burning:

*"The lesson for us all is that fuel reduction is not necessarily the universal panacea, the universal cure all that will deliver safety to the bush and to the country..... To my mind I think of it not as necessarily more fuel reduction burning but smarter fuel reduction burning in strategic areas that will have the best effect. One consequence of high rotation, high frequency fuel reduction burning is that some elements of the biodiversity get it in the neck. There are plants and animals both vertebrates and invertebrates that are not particularly well adapted to a fire regime of frequent low intensity fires. Though it might sound as if they are benign fires but they do have a fairly disastrous biodiversity consequences for just about all major elements of the Australian bush."*

The question has to be asked as to what major elements of the Australian bush do not get it in the neck from these hot fires. The whole pea family has essentially disappeared from large areas North of Briagolong following the 1965 fires. Huge areas of eucalypts disappeared around Tanjil Bren following hot fires too close together in 1926 and 1939 before the trees were old enough to set seed. In an article in the "Gippsland Farmer" April 98, Parks themselves admitted all components of some eco systems had been totally destroyed by the Caledonia fire. Where are the multi trunked snow gums from hot fires pre European settlement? Where is the river erosion, and boulder fans? How could the galaxias (native fish) survive mud flows in cut off streams?

For years Universities have been doing Australia a great service by turning out world class Chemists, Mathematicians Engineers and many other scientists. I think it is doubtful they have had the same record with Botanists and Ecologists.

Managing a National Park or large area of public land on the advice from Ecologist and like minded people has demonstrated:

(1) That Governments taking advice from "Scientists" who don't let the truth stand in the way of well failed theories leads to disaster after disaster.

**(2) That under no circumstances should the Ecologist experiment of Fairyland philosophies be further pursued on Crown and Public land.**

**(3) That the environment has little hope of surviving hot fires if the Government continues to manage large tracts of public land on the advice of Ecologists and like minded people**

**(4) That an environmental disaster in our area from a hot fire is far worse than a wood chipping operation and has eventuated from advice from Ecologists and like minded people.**

**(5) That it is unacceptable to have disaster after disaster from hot fires and passing it off as natural with inadequate science to support this.**

**(6) That the environment needs to be protected from hot fires and managed by practical people who know what they are doing, are capable of learning from mistakes, and the Universities seem incapable of turning them out.**

**(7) That to reduce the risks of hot fires in the interest of public safety, biodiversity, water supplies, the timber industry and the tourist industry, the whole Alpine area should become an Ecologist free zone.**

**(8) That if Universities wish to continue turning out people supporting the type of well failed management that fuels these National Park fires, while backing it up with bogus science they should come under the banner of a Fantasy Degree and not a Science Degree.**

**(9) That the money currently wasted on Universities turning out Ecologists and like minded people would be better spent helping rebuild the infrastructure burnt from the failure of their advice and employing people with a record of quality science, as consultants, like David Packham and Dr Phil Cheney who between them have over 80 years bushfire research experience, mainly with the CSIRO.**

## **Fuel reduction**

**I am unaware of any crown or public land bordering private property around Licola that I consider safe. The accumulated fuel is so serious that the windows of opportunity for addressing this are decreasing annually. Brigade members have been telling me that they believe little will change until body bags start leaving the area and the luckier ones of us will be those carrying them.**

**Fuel reduction of any value around Licola has been non existent for years. Even if the DSE achieved all they plan to do around here this year, they would be at the point they were trying to achieve around 7-8 years ago. So far this year they have done nothing for safety around our community when for weeks local landholders have been successful burning off private bush blocks. In a year like this when there is so little risk to anything, especially the riparian zones, there should be continual fuel reduction over**

large tracts of land as it may be years before opportunities as good as this return. It is just criminal this is not happening.

Last year (2002) it came in wet before any burning could be done, but the previous year (2001) demonstrated the need to do as much burning as possible during favourable times. The lower half of the Wellington Valley, in the Alpine National Park, has been down for fuel reduction burning for at least seven years. The person in charge of this on the ground (2001) was a Park Ranger. I think a less than adequate job was done. They appear to be inexperienced, bound up by stupid regulations and lacking adequate funding for the way they are supposed to carry out the burning. As well as this I suspect Parks were put in charge because they did not want to do any more than token burning. Claims that they could not get the area to burn were utter fantasy. I suspect that obstacles have been put in place to try and accommodate the non burning lobby.

The risk reduction around Licola for about the last 10 years has been about zero. I cannot see the work over the last five years supplying any protection of any value to even the small areas burnt. This burning has been of no value for the safety of people visiting and camping in the area. A fire escaping from the Wellington Valley has the potential within minutes to be in very rough country up wind from the Avon Wilderness, an appalling disaster in the park just waiting to happen. From here it would threaten Valencia Ck, Briagolong and East Gippsland.

The opposition to cool burning that has caused these problems is now blamed on the Green movement, but this opposition has been around since before 1918, and originated from the timber industry's desire to have logs without rot, caused by fires that were too hot around the base. The rationale behind this is most questionable. After the 1939 fires the timber industry moved to the areas where cattlemen regularly reduced fuel. This was all long before the late seventies influence of the Green movement which started from the Franklin River campaign (where I was heavily involved).

William Frances Lovick, of Mansfield, who held a Crown Forest Lease from 1910, had the following to say to the Stretton Royal Commission: *"We burned for 25 to 30 years. We were told by the Forests Commission that we were ruining the forests, but this year three mills have been put into the country that was said to be ruined, and they have 50 years timber to cut....The fires that have gone through the forests this year have ruined more timber in two hours than all the cattle men of the east ruined in 50 years."*

Following the 1965 fires, fuel reduction burning did return to much of Gippsland. Environmentally this burning left a lot to be desired as the then Forests Commission knew little of the environmental considerations and just used burning to stem public outrage from people who had been threatened or burnt out.

For the first few years after 1965 it was mostly burnt in spring. There was quite a local backlash on environmental grounds and more traditional autumn burning followed.

This autumn burning was much better, but still often done when the environment was too dry and almost always years after it should have been. The results of this were fires that were mostly too hot and fires burning into areas like riparian zones along streams that should never be burnt out as they protect not only the streams, but also fire sensitive vegetation.

The Botanists and Ecologists following the type of burning I have outlined have also fallen down badly. After years of neglect, vegetation from riparian zones started to grow on the ridges and places that were open grassland, or open grassy forests at the time of European settlement. The Botanists and Ecologists have shown scant regard for this material from the early pioneers and explorers and paintings of what the country was like and pushed their own flawed theories as to how the land should be managed. The fires in National Parks over the last 5 summers have been the result of this type of management.

Harry Lewis Treasure told the Stretton inquiring:

*"We have been burnt out in 1918, in 1926, and in these fires. Prior to that we never had a bad fire....Prior to 1918, before there was much restriction on the lighting of fires."*

We are repeatedly hearing from the environmental movement and others that fuel reduction burning would have made little difference to the fire. Much of this comment is coming from the very people who supported the management that has been resulting in one disaster after another.

Gavan Michael Molphy told the Stretton Royal commission:

*"I am a grazier living at Glenmaggie. I have leases in the Mount Useful and Mount Selma areas.....We were up there ..... We got in a patch of mountain ash that had been burned last October, and waited until the fire went past us. The fire never touched that patch at all.....It was very hot. As far as we could see, the fire on the tops of the trees seemed to be hundreds of feet ahead of the fire.....That was on Wednesday, two days before Black Friday.....It was very choppy wind up there; the wind came from the gullies. The wind was strong enough on that day, but nothing like the wind on the Friday. (The Transcripts started on page 1187)*

Judge Stretton had the following to say following the breakdown of burning before the 1939 fires:

*"Burning.- It has already been recommended that the Forests Commission must recognise the necessity of protective burning in its areas. It is not suggested that the practice be followed in mountain ash country, except to a small extent, where necessity demands that it should be done. In all other parts, where less valuable timber, less susceptible to fire, occurs, this method of prevention of outbreak and spread cannot, either in the public or private interest be ignored." (page 31)*

The failure to reduce fuel to satisfactory limits in the Alpine National Park has demonstrated:

- (1) That huge hot fires are inevitable from this failed management.**
- (2) That massive environmental damage follows huge hot fires.**
- (3) That an unsafe environment is created for life and property.**

## **Extinctions threat**

The arguments put up by the Bracks Labour Government, "Forests Campaigner" Jason Doyle, the National Parks Assn and others, for more National Parks with the management that comes with them just does not stack up with what has happened at Licola and the recent 2003 fires. While there were claims that 350 species are endangered in the box iron bark forests nothing was being done to stop a far worse threat of extinctions, demonstrated by the Caledonia fire from the excessive fuel build up in the Alpine National Park. The widespread cool burning prior to 1939 by farmers and Mountain Cattlemen to promote growth and reduce fuel to safe limits (this was illegal) created pockets of vegetation that were not burnt in a hot fire. This burning now has mostly stopped and bushfires like we have recently seen are leaving little.

Parks Ranger, Peter Lawrence admitted to the "Gippsland Farmer" in April 98 that "all components of some eco systems had been totally destroyed." by the Caledonia fire. A fast moving hot fire over a bigger area I believe has the potential to cause extinctions, as few, if any pockets of habitat would survive.

It could take thousands of years for the environment to stabilise if crucial birds and animals became extinct. There is already problems with bio-diversity. Bog skinks are listed as an endangered species in the Park, yet these small lizards can be easily caught just through the fence on Kevin Higgins property with low fuel, because of grazing and cool burning. This Park is not environmentally sustainable.

The Alpine National Park is an environmental disaster that is not protecting this magnificent area and not working for any user group. There is a responsibility to pass it on from one generation to the next without the sadness we see in the faces of old timers describing just what the mountains used to be like in their youth. This sadness can now be seen in people under 40.

It should not be necessary for any small community like Licola to have to blockade or picket a National Park to try and stop environmental mismanagement that threatens the very existence of the environment it is supposed to protect.

## **Vegetation degradation**

When the first explorers and settlers came into Gippsland, they described an open grassy forest with large old trees. There were frequent references to the annual aboriginal burning (little of which is carried out now). This is supported by a paper from 1890, by Alfred Howitt. While forests were open, the watercourses and damp gullies, were almost impenetrable thickets of middle canopy vegetation that was not burnt by aborigines. Explorers and settlers had great difficulty crossing these.



Because of the management, we now have an environment with thick small timber, where middle canopy vegetation is growing on much of what was once open grassy forest with large old trees. Howitt was complaining about this very thing in 1890 when it was far less a problem, than it is today. The lack of cool weather burning has resulted in a massive build-up of ground litter. The universities and places of higher education have been turning out people (like Ecologists) who have shown little understanding of the environment or the problems. They have been advocating that if the environment is left long enough with no burning the fuel will disappear to restore the open grassy forest here when the first Europeans arrived. This would necessitate a Fairyland environment where trees and bushes stop dropping sticks, bark, leaves and seed pods. These institutions seem to be learning little from the fact that it is not happening in most places and one disaster follows another from the failed management policies they have advocated.

The ancient single trunk snow-gum trees from Howitt's time have survived on the Howitt Plains, in areas grazed and burnt in the past, by cattlemen. Many younger trees elsewhere, are multi trunk, as they have grown from suckers where tops have been burnt off in fires like 1939. Fuel has accumulated to a ridiculous level, as grazing and burning are no longer practiced. All these old trees will be lost in the first hot fire.

Ancient snow gums that would have to be hundreds of years old were killed by the Caledonia fire at the top of Charlies Country (and plenty of other places). What is so interesting about these trees is that they would not have survived any hot fire coming out of Charlies Country, the most severely burnt area of the Caledonia fire. Not only did this fire kill these trees it was so hot it fractured the Wellington Rhyolites (a volcanic rock) so badly the evidence will be around for hundreds of years. I have not been able to find any evidence of similar rock fracturing remotely as severe from any previous fire.

Big hot fires, are clearly not natural. It is essential the vegetation along watercourses and damp gullies be spared from hot fires and DSE fuel management from fuel reduction burns that are done when it is too dry. This protects the streams and gullies from erosion and preserves fire intolerant species. Controlled burning now is mostly restricted to regenerating logging coupes, with grossly inadequate to protect the fire sensitive vegetation in the environment.

There were areas in the Alpine National Park where the fire was so hot the wolleybutt was killed over large areas. Some of these trees were not old enough after logging operations to set seed. These were not reseeded after the Caledonia fire, I understand because of the cost. There are also large areas in the Carey State forest where wolleybutt has been replaced by wattles, because the explosion of grass choked it out.

An experiment to bring bush back to a natural state on a private landholding north of Licola deserves consideration. With just two carefully managed cool burns close together a healthy grassy understorey was restored to this area for all to see. This

experiment had a lot going for it. It was a reasonably switched on family owning the land, high quality advice from local Aborigines, no involvement from Parks Victoria, no political string pulling from environmental groups and above all it was an ecologist free zone.

The Licola experiment returning a grassy understorey to a forested area has demonstrated:

- (1) That it is not difficult, complicated or expensive to restore a natural grassy understorey in a relatively short time span.
- (2) That it helps considerable returning an area to a more natural environment if the place is an Ecologists free zone with common sense prevailing.
- (3) That the fairyland approach that the environment if left long enough will rectify the problems, as spouted by Botanists, Ecologists and like minded people, is better left to fairyland.

## **River erosion**

Serious bank erosion along the Macalister River followed 6" of rain after the 1939 fires, which resulted from a high fuel build-up also. An example of this can be seen downstream from the Licola bridge. Old timers described the Macalister River bed was about a third the size it is now, with gentle banks and virtually no erosion. Floods were slowed considerably, spreading over the flats. Most of this damage has continued to worsen over the subsequent 64 years from flood water just roaring down the river.

It has become abundantly clear that the serious river erosion and Caledonia boulder fans are a result of environmental mismanagement as they are not here from pre European settlement. It is just unimaginable what a subsequent event similar to the 1939 flood will do to our river when it happens again if this ridiculous management continues. Old timers sadly describe our river now as just a drain.

The Macalister River erosion after a major fire demonstrated:

- (1) That in 1939 massive flooding can follow a major fire that has been too hot.
- (2) That in 1939 massive river erosion was unnatural as there was almost none in the Macalister prior to the flood.
- (3) That after 64 years there is only minor improvement and in some areas the river would be at serious risk of further massive erosion from a following a future large hot fire.

## **Melbourne's water supply**

Melbourne's water Catchments would have to be the most at risk part of the State. These areas are at serious risk from erosion and mud pollution, similar to the

Caledonia Valley and is now happening after the 2003 fires. A hot fire through the fuel build-up of over 60 years in the Melbourne catchments has the potential to reduce Melbourne's water by approx 40% from lack of run-off, as Alpine and Mountain Ash forests regenerate 20-30 years after the event. The run-off from the Ash forests drops to around 50% and approx. 70-80% of Melbourne's water comes from these forests. This happened after the 1939 fires and a fuel build up less than half the present.

Up until the recent "Great Alpine Park Fire" of 2003, it has only been good luck that has stopped a disaster as bad, or far worse than Black Friday (1939) from happening again. If Ash Wednesday (1984) had started two and a half hours earlier and if the Caledonia fire had started three weeks earlier, they would have been completely uncontrollable. As we have seen with the recent fires. Melbourne would now have around 40% less water running into its catchments if they had been burnt out on Ash Wednesday. Given that they have around 40% in their storages, Melbourne is struggling coping at the moment and will find it even harder with a reduced inflow.

This luck will not continue. It is inevitable the Melbourne catchments are going to be burnt out as they were in 1939 and 1851, from fires which resulted from fuel build-ups, considerably less than half the present. Extra water storages would have to be built just to supply the shortfall for irrigators as well as Melbourne. It is hard to imagine where additional storages would go as it would be most likely potential areas would also be burnt out.

A submission I sent in early August 2002 warning Melbourne Water of the serious risks to their catchments from a large fire in the mountains seemed to almost disappear down the gurgler with a verbal acknowledgment only of receiving it. This was while their website ([www.watersmart.vic.gov.au](http://www.watersmart.vic.gov.au)) was overflowing and awash with submissions from green groups. Professor Nancy Millis is the Chair, "Water Resources Strategy for the Melbourne Area Committee," she was urging people to *"contribute to the development Strategy."*

I believe it would be impossible to find a more incompetent or unreliable managers of our water catchments than Parks Victoria or the DSE with the present policies. The universities and places of higher learning have supported a fairyland approach for fuel management that Judge Stretton was so critical of and appear to be learning little from repeated failures. The Environmental movement seems to be learning even less and are advocating trees should be left to form hollows for animals while advocating policies that has trees at risk of not surviving long enough to even set seed. It does not stop there though, the environmental movement seems hell bent on using the lack of run-off to try and stop logging operations in selected areas. This is while advocating policies that will almost certainly lead to the loss of whole forests and lead to serious run-off problems over a wider area 15-40 years after the event.

Judge Stretton was scathing in his criticism of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works for the type of management that lead to the 1939 fires and has prevailed in

the Melbourne catchments. *"...the Board refuses to use burning as a general preventive method. It is long established by foresters in other parts of the world that in conditions that exist in many parts of the Board's areas - burning is the only effective safeguard.*

*Thus the water supply authority (Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, now Melbourne Water) has, in many instances, in the furtherance of its desire to give full supply of uncontaminated water, allowed its area to become a menace to the rest of the forest. Similarly the forester, in his desire to preserve every tree and to refrain from destroying even a negligible portion of his estate has runked himself, in point of creating danger, with the water supply authority. Each curiously enough, is so narrow in his view, that he looks at the other as a creator of danger and an enemy. Each excuses the unsafe condition of his own territory by protesting that his own undertaking is of vast importance, and that he must aim at perfection of production or supply, as the case may be. Each is in the position of a trustee who, being charged with the management of a business, diverts to the purchase of a little more stock the money which might have been used to pay a fire insurance premium. Both have ignored the advice and supplications, however well informed, of the private landholder whose interests have for years past been placed in jeopardy by the refusal of these bodies to protect him against the danger which they have brought to his door. Both have, in turn been exposed to the danger which the landholder has caused by the illegal measures of self-help which have been forced upon him by the inflexibility of the law." (page 10)*

*"It was this state of affairs which the Forests Commission and the Board of Works were facing in the summer of 1938-39. The law was inadequate, ineffective and flouted. The people were hostile to these authorities. The Forests Commission was hampered in its intended preventive and safeguarding operations by lack of money. Nevertheless, the lack of money cannot excuse some of its failures to protect life and private and public property." (page 14)*

*"The Board of Works.- The Board has permitted a condition of great danger to exist in its areas. ....*

*The difference in substance between the methods of these two bodies is that the Board refuses to use burning as general preventative method. It is long established by foresters in other parts of the world that in conditions such as exist in many parts of the Board's areas - burning is the only effective safeguard. (Most of this has not been burnt since 1939).....*

The policies from Parks Victoria, the DSE and the environmental movement, with the support of the universities ect, has resulted in more problems with water supplies than any wood chipping operation in our area, I think these people should be bought into line or share some responsibility.

In a letter to me of 14 Feb 2000, then Minister Garbutt said. *"Because of the potentially serious impact of fires, Melbourne Water has developed a comprehensive and very effective management program to reduce the risks of fires in its catchments."* In a

subsequent letter of 30 Aug 2000, the Minister said. *"Appropriate fire prevention strategies are adopted for these catchments and all public land."*

It would be interesting to know what these management strategies are and where these fire prevention strategies disappeared to when the 2003 fire burnt out so much public land last summer.

Adelaide, a City already with serious water supply problems and the Murray Darling irrigators, can look forward to even more serious problems to come as the result of the 2003 fires burning out Ash Forests in their catchments and the massive drop in run off that will follow.

The burning out of the Ash forests in the Adelaide and Murray Darling catchments has demonstrated:

(1) That the sort of management in the Melbourne catchments is also a disaster waiting to happen.

(2) That they just cannot fight a large fire amongst 64 years of fuel build up in major water catchments in the mountains.

(3) That this Government and preceding Governments have been most irresponsible and should have taken on board the findings of the Stretton Report after the 1939 fires.

(4) That in cool dry years like this there should be an all out effort to address the 64 year fuel build-up in the Melbourne catchments.

(5) That Ministerial ravings do little to suppress a major fire in water catchments.

## **Heyfield's future ???**

The township of Heyfield, a timber town with 2,500 people, has had much of its future livelihood further reduced by the Caledonia fire. 7,000 ha of regrowth (young timber), the Heyfield saw mills, and Heyfield itself, was dependant on, was burnt when the Caledonia fire came out of the National Park into timber reserves (this will now be on top of the 40-50% cut in quotas from DNRE miscalculations). This is 20 - 30 years timber cutting in the Carey State Forest surrounded by the park. Much of the timber on this area has been lost for a further 60 years because so much grass grew it choked out young trees. I personally witnessed Parks/DNRE being warned by cattlemen on Nov. 20, 1998, that if the grass was not controlled, this could happen. There was no boundary fence to stop cattle wandering into the burnt areas of the National Park.

Nothing is being done to stop a similar fire or worse from happening again. It is unlikely that timber towns such as Heyfield have much future if this type of management is allowed to continue.

The 1939 fire caused a relocation of the timber industry to areas not controlled by the Forests Commission where traditional burning and grazing had continued to be practised, something that is no longer allowed.

I quote the words again of William Francis Lovick:

*"The fires that have gone through the forests this year have ruined more timber in two hours than all the cattle men of the east ruined in 50 years.....We burned for 25 to 30 years. We were told by the Forests Commission (now DSE) that we were ruining the forests, but this year three mills have been put into the country that was said to be ruined, and they have 50 years timber to cut."* (Transcripts began on page 694)

The serious depletion of Heyfield's timber reserves from the Caledonia fire, and the management that followed, demonstrated:

(1) That Parks Victoria could not care less about the future of neighbouring towns and communities.

(2) That towns and communities are at serious disadvantage from the fallout from National Park management.

## **State Coroners Office**

As the Brigade Captain I lodged the concerns to the risk to over 1,000 lives from a fast moving fire during the summer holiday period, just around Licola, with the State Coroner's Office (Oct 1, 2001) along with accompanying documents to the DNRE, CFA, Police, SES, MFPO and a Community Letter (CL40) with 43 signatures from people each with over 30 years association with the mountains:

**CL40            *The fire risk***

*To whom it may concern.*

*Dated 11-2-2000*

*As people associated with the mountains for most, or all our lives, and some being descendants of families who have been here for generations, we wish our concerns be known.*

*It is our opinion that the fire risk in the mountains is far more serious than before the devastating fires of 1939. An air of false security and complacency has been allowed to develop over the years.*

*We believe it is only good luck that has stopped a disaster as bad, or far worse than Black Friday from happening again. If Ash Wednesday had started two and a half hours earlier and if the Caledonia fire had started three weeks earlier, they would have been completely uncontrollable. It would be irresponsible to believe this luck will continue. It is inevitable the mountains are going to be burnt out with a big hot fire, similar to 1939 or 1851, which resulted from fuel build-ups, less than half the present.*

*Little of the Stretton Royal Commission recommendations after the 1939 fire, are being taken on board with fuel control to create a safe forest. Far too much reliance is placed on fire fighting as a tool of suppression, when it was clearly demonstrated with the Caledonia fire that they could not stop break-outs even on cool calm overcast days. It was only cool weather and rain that stopped this fire.*

*Before the 1939 fire, there was widespread cool burning by farmers and Mountain Cattlemen to promote growth and reduce fuel to safe limits (this was illegal). This created many pockets of vegetation that were not burnt in a hot fire. Logging operations after 1939 relocated to these areas, as Forestry Reserves had been destroyed. There is almost none of this burning now in alpine areas and minimal below. Most or all timber reserves would be lost, similar to what has happened in the Carey State Forest. There would be very few pockets, if any, in the mountains, for many mammal and bird colonies to survive, to re-populate.*

*Many water supplies, including Melbourne's, are at serious risk from erosion and mud pollution, similar to what has happened in the Caledonia Valley. A hot fire through the 60 year fuel build-up in Melbourne catchments has the potential to reduce Melbourne's water by approx 40% from lack of run-off, as forests regenerate 20-30 years after the event.*

*The potential for many people do be burnt to death in a fast moving fire is very real. This would be even worse if it happened on a long weekend.*

*There needs to be a full and open public inquiry to examine the Caledonia fire fighting effort, and why Park and Forest management have not followed the strong recommendations on fire prevention to create a safe forest by fuel reduction burning. These were outlined by the Stretton Royal Commission after the 1939 bushfires, and are just as relevant now.*

**Copies of the above listed correspondence were sent to the Premier. So concerned was the Premiers Department they passed the documents onto the Justice Department. It appeared that the Department Secretary, Mr Peter Harmsworth was less than careful in preparing his reply and a fanciful response eventuated from inaccurate, incomplete and inadequate information from agencies trying to cover up the serious bushfire risks and looking for excuses to deflect the blame to myself for not commenting on the draft (DNRE) Gippsland Fire Protection Plan. Not only had I commented on this plan I was scathing in my criticism of it and had a letter Ref: 94/2610 dated March 31, 1999, from Mr John McDonald, Fire Management Officer, DNRE Bairnsdale, who prepared the "Gippsland Fire Protection Plan" thanking me for my comments and "literature pertinent to the plan."**

**I am unable to see how replies of this nature are of any help whatsoever with the concerns of lives at risk with the situation that has developed in and around Licola from the serious and on going neglect of public safety.**

A letter to Premier Bracks (2 Dec 2001) critical of the attempts to avoid these very serious issues and the letter from Mr Peter Harmsworth were all subsequently lodged with the Coroners Office (3 Dec 2001) with a request that any future inquiry should look at just how far up ladder the cover-up extended.

I have not been advised of any action taken before the 2003 fires by the Premier or the DSE to address these risks after the failure to discredit me.

The Premiers handling of serious concerns lodged with the State Coroners Office demonstrated:

(1) That in 2001 there was more concern placed on discrediting a CFA Brigade Captain warning of serious concerns to human life from a serious fire in the mountains, than addressing the issues.

(2) That in 2001 after a CFA Brigade Captain could not be discredited, the serious concerns appeared to be ignored.

(3) That in 2001 the Premier could not care less about warnings from a Captain of a fire Brigade and knowledgeable experienced people, warning a big fire was inevitable in the mountains, as we have subsequently had.

## **Lives at risk**

As a Brigade Captain I have repeatedly warned that over 1,000 lives are at risk, just around Licola during the summer holiday period, from a fast moving fire like 1939 and 1851, that resulted from fuel levels less than half those in many areas of the mountains at present. I have been told as Captain of the Brigade at a meeting with the DNRE at Licola on Monday June 3, 2002, that the dangerous environment around Licola from the ridiculous fuel build up will not be addressed, *"as there were people who liked it as it was and they (DNRE) had monitory restraints."* This is not the local farmers, or the residents at risk, and as stated before, over 98% of all visitors coming to Licola on long weekends and holidays have been prepared to sign letters critical of this type of management.

I have had reliable reports that the Caledonia fire, under quite mild weather conditions, lit spot fires on Mount Taylor, the other side of Bairnsdale on February 2, 1998. This was from fuel build-ups of probably around 30 years. Up wind from Licola is the Melbourne water catchments that have had fuel building up for over 60 years. Old timers have described spot fires landing in our valley that they believed originated from around Woods Pt. from the 1939 fire and a 13 year fuel build up. The Melbourne catchments are a terrible threat to communities like ours and the environment down wind from them. There has been serious problems getting the relevant authorities to take these issues seriously when advising on Community safety at Licola, especially school camps.



I have advised the Municipal Fire Prevention Committee (Wellington Shire) in a letter dated 21 May, 2002, and the CEO of Parks Victoria, Mr Mark Stone, in an unanswered letter dated 6 Dec 2001, that there should be large notices warning of the dangers, and directing people in a fire in the alpine area of the park to the Snowy Plains airstrip and the center of Kevin Higgins property (with his permission), as I think these are the only places, with low enough fuel, for people caught in a fast hot fire on Bennison, to have any reasonable hope of survival. The ongoing denial of the serious risk to lives around Licola by the relevant authorities needs to be addressed with proper fire refuges and notices advising of the risks to lives on Crown and Public land, as there is no indication that the dangerous environment is going to be addressed.

As a result of the Parks policies after the Caledonia fire, Kevin Higgins and the other small land holders surrounded by the Alpine National Park now face an even more dangerous situation after the fire (Parks were well warned that this would happen). As the Brigade Captain covering this area I have had to advise Kevin Higgins that it would be too dangerous to bring in a crew, or the fire truck, if there is a fire with a wind behind it, coming in from the Park. These people have done everything reasonably expected to protect their properties, they also fought the Caledonia fire to save many of their assets. It is to be noted that the buildings most threatened are abutting the National Park on the Western boundary of Kevin's place, this risk is considerably less in the center of his property.

Before the 2003 fires I have been told I should not be preparing people at Licola for a worst case scenario, when what I was describing at the time from a fire at Licola in 1938 (not to be confused with 1939) was nothing like a worst case scenario. Years ago a land holder gave me a graphic description of what it had been like racing the fire in a V8 ford car to a tin hut and how he and a companion (possibly two) had a struggle to survive inside with bag insulation repeatedly igniting from heated tin. The 1938 fire killed about 75 head of cattle from hot air and lack of oxygen in a creek about 1k away from the edge of the fire in bush too wet to burn at the time. I was being told there would never be another fire like 1939, they would have planes overhead, crews to protect us and water supplies at the Licola Village were safe in polythene pipe as it would not burn if it had water in it. There has been little understanding shown of the severe localised weather conditions that have developed in the valley and especially around the Licola Village from previous fires and this knowledge being passed down.

There were however good people within the CFA framework like Bob Langridge our Operations Officer and quite a few others who understood and offered sound advice on the need to protect crews from such an event. Unfortunately these people were not always the ones handing out advice especially to school camps like the Licola Village and Camp Welcola in the National Park, who were at the highest risk and had the least understanding of the dangerous nature of the advice being handed out.

While I have been critical of the CFA and DSE, by far the worst to deal with has been the Municipal Fire Prevention Officer. A big concern is what is being passed off as a

**"Fire Refuge" at the Licola Village for handicapped, under privileged, school and aged groups as well as the staff, and visitors to the area. I think this refuge as it stands, is more akin to a Nazi death oven, than a safe fire refuge because of the fibre glass roofing sections and the failure to fit appropriate sprays to make this safe.**

**The following is part of a taped transcript of the MFPO inspection of the "Fire Refuge" and Licola Village, 1 Nov 2002:**

*Captain - "The bottom line is - if we get a serious fire, especially in a year like this, the luckier ones of us are going to be the ones carrying bodey bags out, and I will be personally asking for your help, if I'm not one of the people in the bodey bags."*

*MFPO - "Let me ask you a question. What the hell do you do to stop it, its going to happen, Ralph we cant stop it."*

**The MFPO then continued to look for ways of avoiding the very serious safety issues I was trying to have addressed. He was refusing to put relevant things in writing and refusing to give me copies of some of the recommendations he had put in writing. I found this a deplorable situation for a Captain who could be in charge trying to stop a human disaster in a school camp for hundreds of children.**

**A meeting has been held with the "Director of Corporate Services," Wellington Shire, MFPO's Superior, and myself at Licola. This meeting was very frank, friendly and productive. This came about after concerns with the way the MFPO was handling the issues were filed with the State Coroner. It remains worrying to our Brigade that we still may have to deal with the MFPO in the future at Licola. Past dealings have been so bad the only way we will do this is if his visit is videoed and tape recorded, then filed with the State Coroner, so as there can be no further disputes over just how he has been operating. We have not taken this approach with the MFPO's superior, I have found this man prepared to deal with concerns.**

**All the old timers who witnessed the 1938 fire considered Licola to be an utter death trap. There has been a serious problem getting the relevant Authorities assessing the risks to take seriously the welth of passed downe local knowledge.**

**While I have been outlining concerns about inadequate safety of school camps, it has to be remembered that there are three other camps in the Licola area that the Brigade does not have problems with. The safety of occupants in these well run camps has not been a concern, it would be very sad if any fallout impeded on Wollangarra, The Maoris Brothers Chalet and Melbourne Grammar's camp.**

**The CFA has gone a long way to trying to rectify some of their shortcomings. We have had a very productive meeting over these issues at Licola after the fires and are looking at initiating local area fire plans. If this is a genuine plan and not just another way of creating loopholes for the Government to try and avoid litigation, like I believe we have seen with Local Area Weed Plans, then this approach should be applauded.**

This needs to be a genuine plan assisted by competent knowledgeable people from the CFA, DSE and the Shire, all prepared to take into account the accumulation of passed down local knowledge.

The problems in addressing the safety to human lives at Licola has demonstrated:

(1) That there is an urgent need for all Government agencies to take safety concerns in the mountains more seriously.

(2) That there is an urgent need to address the whole operations of school camps in fire prone areas.

(3) That there is an urgent need for all Government agencies to take on board local knowledge for areas with unique bushfire problems.

(4) There should in the interests of public safety be new blood in the Municipal Fire Prevention section of Wellington Shire.

(5) That there needs to be an independent place of appeal for Brigade Captains (and others) where Government or Semi Government agencies have seriously fallen down addressing public safety concerns. The Coroners Office has informed me they can only investigate after the event.

## **Stretton Royal Commission ignored**

Little of the Stretton Royal Commission recommendations after the 1939 fires, are now being taken on board with fuel control to create a safe forest. I believe most of the recommendations are just as relevant now as they were in 1939. Far too much reliance is placed on fire fighting now as a tool of suppression while ignoring the fuel build up that causes the severity of the fire in the first place.

Harry Lewis Treasure from the Dargo High Plains told the Stretton Royal Commission inquiring into the 1939 fires: *"I have been there for 60 year, practically all my life....We have been burnt out in 1918, in 1926, and in these fires. Prior to that we never had a bad fire....Prior to 1918, before there was much restriction on the lighting of fires, that country was populated with miners, diggers, fossicking along the rivers for gold. There were up to 100 diggers working along the Dargo River and each man had his hut. They had no fear of ever being burnt out and they never were burnt out. If they had been there during the recent fires, not only would their houses would have been burnt but men themselves would have been burnt to death....The country was burned regularly whenever it would burn and that stopped any fires from getting hold and going a long way."*

*"There is not a living tree left along the Dargo River for 60 miles, and all the logs and debris washed up by the water is scorched right out. With reference to erosion, I think the mountain country is lucky this year. Erosion is bad after heavy rains. It washes the soft soil down into the rivers. Had we got heavy thunder storms after the January fire, the*

*valleys would have been practically filled up. However rain came down very steadily and nothing worth speaking of has been washed away. There is little or no erosion after a light burn, but it is different with heavy fires such as we have had. They not only burn the debris and wood on and above the surface but they burn into the soil itself. There are acres of ground that has been burnt right down to the grass roots and if we get heavy rain on top of that it will cause much erosion. Luckily, we did not have it this year."*

The Government and Department was advised before the 2003 fire by the Community and myself as Captain of the brigade, that it was the opinion of every old person approached from the mountains that a big fire was long overdue and could easily be worse than 1939 and 1851 (this would depend on the weather conditions at the time). There was an ever increasing lack of understanding and apathy amongst the relevant authorities that has been putting hundreds of lives at risk from a fast moving bushfire like 1939 which old timers have describe to me as going from Bright to Omeo in under 3/4 of an hour. Little from the Stretton Royal Commission finding of 1939 was taken on board to create a safe forest. In spite of my protests the current fire protection plan and its implementation has been of so little value in our area that it would be unlikely to even protect the areas they have supposedly reduced fuel in.

Then Minister Garbutt said that the "Fire Protection Plan" balances the need for protection of life and property with the need to protect the natural features of the park." She was pleased to note the land holders on the Bennison Plains had carried out everything reasonably expected of them.

It is unacceptable that the Government has fallen down in just about every area to do the same in spite of it being made so obvious time and time again that their policies were simply flawed and not working.

The failure to take on board the Stretton Royal Commission recommendations after the 1939 fires, with fuel control to create a safe forest has demonstrated:

(1) That big hot fires will continue to be a risk no matter how much fire fighting equipment is on hand.

(2) That the warning Judge Stretton gave to the Board of Works (now Melbourne Water) is more than applicable to the rest of the forests :

*It (the Board) relies upon the growth of forest canopy to suppress inflammable scrub. It admits that in large tracts of its territory the canopy is impaired and cannot be restored until many years have passed and that, while the restoration is proceeding, we may expect at least two abnormal seasons which will bring with them abnormal bush fires.*

*(page 14)*

## **Campfires in park**

Absolutely nothing of any value has been done in the Alpine National park around Licola to reduce the danger around fire places I have been complaining about for the last 3 summers. I have been extinguishing fires on total fire ban days, abandoned fires,

**excessively large fires, unattended fires, fires lit and abandoned against box logs which could smoulder for days and many fires with substantially insufficient clearances to surrounding fine fuels.**

**I have become concerned about the saucer shaped concrete fire places Parks have built along the Wellington Valley. I have been hearing reports from the Grampians and campers along the Wellington, that because of the aerodynamics from the shape, wind blows sparks out of these worse than a fire on bare ground. This is not helped by clearances less than 3 metres, even where Parks have constructed the fire places.**

**Risk reduction in the Wellington Valley has been zero for the 7 - 8 years this area has been down for fuel reduction burning. The fuel levels are so high and the country so steep and rough that an escaping fire could be uncontrollable within minutes to head towards the Avon Wilderness, another park disaster area waiting to happen. So fearful is our brigade of the National Park and especially the Wellington Valley, it is unlikely we could get a crew into the area unless there were mild conditions. Even if we did get in there, with the topography it is unlikely we would be able to do a great deal to halt a major fire by the time we got the message.**

**A fire escaping in the Wellington Valley has the potential to trap over 1,000 people whose escape could be cut off by spot fires. Also threatened would be private landholdings where plans thrust on us by the DSE for fires coming in from this direction, the Caledonia fire of 1998 and Great Alpine Park fire of 2003, both involved burning out large tracts of farmland and I would suggest Licola itself, for a break.**

**Amongst the campsites on the Wellington River is Camp Welcola, a school camp that accommodates up to 75 people. The safety of this camp and visitors to the park, has been of great concern to our Brigade.**

**Parks Victoria constantly falling down on enforcing fire regulations is another disaster waiting to happen. I cannot see the varying excuses for the ongoing failure to safely reduce fuel, and hiding behind the "Gippsland Fire Prevention Plan" with fuel reduction targets they constantly fail to achieve saving as much as one solitary life.**

**While the serious campfire safety problems fail to be addressed, Parks would seem to have an endless supply of time and money to push political agenda issues. It took me about 20 minutes to find any mud, in a supposed sphagnum bog Park Rangers wanted fenced following the return of grazing after the fire. I was not able to find the alleged cattle tracks referred to in this so called bog. What concerned me greatly as Captain of the Brigade that covers nearby landholders threatened by the fuel build up of locked up areas was the campfire situation. To get to this so called bog, the Ranger had to drive past a campsite with a very conspicuous fire place and half the clearances necessary. It was even worse when I arrived there, the campers had an enormous log on this fire and were planing to depart the next day, well before this log would have burnt. I politely spoke to the occupants of the site, who were horrified when the danger**

was pointed out and promised to insure the fire would be properly extinguished. I subsequently returned with the fire truck to insure this had been done properly.

The failure to address serious fire risks from camp fires in the Alpine National Park has demonstrated:

(1) That there is more concern for spending vast sums of money on politically motivated agenda issues, rather than the serious safety of visitors, the environment and surrounding communities.

(2) That Parks Victoria and the Government could not care less about fire safety in the Alpine National Park.

## **Section 3 Lead up and 2003 fires**

### **Preparedness**

Our Brigade was probably more prepared for a fire in the mountains like the recent one than most. We knew from 5 years previous that the DSE's fire fighting effort could pose more risk than most bushfires would. We were also aware most of the CFA Career Officers knew far too little of what might confront us or how to successfully combat it. We were also acutely aware that both these groups had a poor opinion of us and our concerns. It was for these reasons we kept our fire plan secret

We were most concerned for a fire coming in from the north or north east from the risk of DSE burning out large tracts of farmland from the west for a break, while refusing to let us use traditional burning back techniques that had protected whole farms very successfully in some of our valley since 1863.

For years the DSE had concentrated its efforts around the gravy train that followed large fires with a policy of throwing money at the fire until it rained. This was propped up with careful media spin doctoring and scathing attacks on anyone trying to expose the truth. As we have since seen on the Captain of the Dartmouth Brigade who I believe has exposed what needs to come out. We were only too aware landholders would be prevented from back burning if the DSE could and when things got too hot for them we would be abandoned by the DSE and possibly the CFA to back burn when the conditions were much worse.

To address the DSE plans I purchased a fax machine, got on the internet and made friends with responsible caring media contacts who could expose the gross injustice and stupidity of an approach such as this. This would hopefully be in time to hunt the DSE management from the job and allow us to use traditional means to save our properties. Brigade members were continually reminded that the media was the most important tool in saving properties from a fire.

The information blackout and misleading information about what was going on at the beginning of a fire burning in from the National Park was also a big worry. This was

addressed by having a wide range of contacts, all in the know as to what goes on, who could supply information back to a central point so as we could work out ourselves what was taking place. This was put in place with the recent fires so as we were not reliant on DSE information.

Our worst fear leading up to this summer had been Camp Welcola run by the Traralgon High School. How a place with the problems this camp had was ever allowed to function over summer defied belief. After repeated efforts failed to rectify the problems, brigade concerns were lodged with the State Coroner and given to the Education Minister. This bought about a speedy end to school children being left with no transport over summer in a place so dangerous our Brigade would have been reluctant to enter for a fire even in mild conditions.

Our biggest concern for personnel safety was at the Licola Village, owned by the Lions Club and run by the YMCA. This is a camp that accommodates up to 250 people. The Village is at the base of a steep hill covered with very high fuel. Old timers repeatedly warned us this place is an appalling fire trap that should never have been allowed to be built where it was after what they witnessed in 1938.

I had been regularly frustrated in cleaning up the serious risks at the Licola Village. The relevant people just refused to accept the concerns. The Municipal Fire Prevention Officer had been by far the biggest problem with the CFA Manager Community Safety only marginally better. After I started filing concerns with the State Coroners Office there was an improvement in attitude and we were dealing with different people, but far too few of the risk problems were addressed before this fire season.

Brigade members were so concerned about trying to defend the Licola Village we were adamant none of us would face a fire with any intensity there. This would be further complicated if the place was full of children, handicapped or aged people. Unlike the Camp Welcola staff, the Village staff were very much on side, the problem was higher up within the management. I consider the Licola Village unsafe for human habitation in its present state during the summer fire danger period when there has been an abundance of spring growth.

There was concern how to defend the village from a fire coming in so as to stop casualties there. If we had no outside help and were left to our own devices this would have been a relatively easy procedure. A drip torch was kept at the back of the store and the plans were to start a fire line from below the Village run around the base of the hill well before it was threatened and just let it all burn from there. It is most likely that a considerable proportion of the Village would be lost from this, as there was so much leaves and debris under most buildings and in some spoutings. The water supply would go down very fast as it would be drained from ruptured plastic piping. Liting the hill would have stopped the whole place all going up at once allowing the staff a reasonable chance to survive in what was being called a fire refuge.

If we had outside help it could have been very serious as we had been almost completely un successful in convincing anyone, with any power from authority, of the very serious localised fire weather conditions that had been known to occur at the location before. There would have only been one Brigade member, at the Licola Store, as we would have all been protecting our own properties. This brigade member would have been protecting his shop and caravan park and been able to do little to avoid what I think could have ended up a very sad ending.

The preparedness of the CFA for defending property in the mountains left room for improvement. The following comments I make with some degree of sadness, as most of the people in the CFA are well intentioned and I am almost certainly criticising genuine decent people who I believe have fallen down when trying to deliver the best they can. I think the shortcomings will most likely be rectified. I feel however that I have to put these comments on record, to try and stop the same from happening again when the next generation comes along in 25-30 years time.

I believe there was a serious lack of overall knowledge of fire potentials, fire fighting and the very basics for survival in the mountains from too many paid CFA staff, in the lead up to the 2003 fires. The following is an example, of the person the CFA held up to me as their Alpine fire expert. This fellow was in charge of a strike team during the Caledonia fire.

The strike team was stopped at a staging area surrounded by thick bush on Benison Saddle on the morning of Jan 2, 1998. A Glenmaggie Lieutenant, the sixth generation of his family to hold grazing leases in the area, drove down the road and told them to get the hell out of where they were, as the fire was almost upon them. He was told to calm down and take it easy and not to panic. It was fortunate the strike team did shift, as this was near the area about ten minutes later that the Licola Tanker got caught in a frightening inferno and considered themselves lucky to have survived.

The problems with this strike team did not end there. They pulled into a school camp and instead of doing a back burn that was sucked back onto the main fire, they waited until the fire was upon them. So hot was it that truck tyres caught alight, firemen collapsed behind fog nozzles, as paint melted on the walls of the building they were protecting behind them. While all the crews survived, just a minor change of wind conditions and fire intensity in the few minutes the fire was going through could have resulted in a different story. The Licola crew were at the camp when the fire came through. At the end of the day when they returned, they made it clear they would be doing there own burning back for safety next time.

It is important to point out that the basics of sucking a control burn back on the main fire has been used for survival and as the front line defence for personal safety, to protect houses and farms by local people in the mountains since settlement. I had this instilled in me from an early age when I was simply not allowed to venture into the bush during summer without matches. There was of course considerably less fuel then.



It is an ill wind that blows no good and the 2003 fire is no exception. I am very encouraged with what I have since seen within the CFA for understanding our problems in the mountains with unique fire conditions. Prior to this Licola felt very lonely as far too many CFA policies and procedures were based on open grassland and our concerns were too often just a voice in the wilderness.

As far as our Brigade is concerned I think the CFA has done a remarkably good job in assisting and preparing our Brigade for this fire season. The standard of equipment supplied and backup we have received at Licola simply could not be faulted. A lot of very good work was put into the new personal safety gear. I was happy with the working relationship with the Operations Officer Bob Langridge and our previous Regional Officer David Sherry, who we were sad to see leave. David has been held in the very highest regard at Licola, as during the Caledonia fire he treated us so honestly and with such respect that none of us have forgot. I hold our Gippsland Regional Manager Ian Symonds in high regard. I am still getting to know the new RO. The Training Officers have always been made welcome at Licola for Minimum Skills, even when many other Brigades did not respond this way, their work has been simply outstanding and should be continued.

## **Great Alpine Park Fire 2003**

The Great Alpine Park fire of 2003 started in many areas along the Great Dividing range from lightning strikes. There was anywhere up to 20 lightning strikes around the Licola area, I think they were all on Crown land as they were all extinguished within 48 hours. Our Brigade assisted in this.

As this fire progressed I became acutely aware from the information filtering back to me that the overall management had frighteningly similar problems to what I was aware of over the previous 5 years with, information blackouts, not trying to put the fire out, inadequate protection of farmland, lack of coordination, long periods between DSE shifts when they were not on the fire line, lack of cooperation, out of touch control canters and most of all lack of local knowledge. I did not need to be told that once the fire built up size amongst the mess in the Alpine National Park the only thing that would put it out was rain.

It was not long before I was hearing reports of gaps being left in rake-hoe lines and the failure of back burning on areas that could be used to push political agendas to remove cattle grazing from Mt Bogong.

On the request of a Captain from the North East, we despatched an under cover crew and equipment from Licola to secretly slip in to protect strategic areas on Mt Bogong after dark. This is where it was alleged from people up there they were being deliberately left to burn out. As it eventuated our crew did very little as these areas simply would not have burnt unless there was extreme conditions which fortunately never eventuated.

Premier Bracks by this time was claiming in the media that the weather was the reason for failing to properly reduce fuel, This was nothing more than a Premier misleading his people. This has continued at Licola as there has been none of the cool burning the Premier promised on a prefect year for it like this.

At a meeting in Heyfield on Jan. 27, of all the local brigades threatened by the recent 2003 fires, I was horrified to be presented once again by the DSE, with a plan for our community that showed the control lines to the west of us, for a fire that would likely come in from the east or north east. I was told that it was easier to stop a fire on cleared land than in the bush. More concerning was that there was no plans to use natural barriers like the Macalister River, which would save farmland. I was told that the river could not be used for back burning as there were no tracks along it. This was so similar to the secret plan our community discovered 5 years previous to burn us all out for a break as a fall back for the Caledonia fire. There is simply no excuse for such stupid, ridiculous and dangerous plans like this to come along a second time round. I just cannot accept the DSE and Government learnt nothing from the Caledonia fire.

A brigade meeting was held at Licola on Jan 28, 2003. Brigade members were horrified with this plan and unanimously rejected it. We formulated our own secret plan how we would tackle the fire on tha basis of knowledge passed down from our forbearers.

I warned Brigade members what had been happening with the North East fire and in the Big Dessert. I also warned members to be on the lookout for suspicious fires starting around private land adjoining the National Park and to take the details of all Government vehicles if they suspected suspicious activity.

Motions passed at the Brigade meeting Jan 28, 2003:

*(1) The Brigade calls on Premier Bracks to stop misleading Victorians that the weather is so much to blame for the failure of proper fuel reduction on Crown and public land that has lead to the present bushfire disaster.*

*(2) The Brigade calls on Premier Bracks to protect communities from Department of Sustainability and Environment's management of fires in the 1.6 kilometre zone surrounding Crown and Public land, when it has been repeatedly shown local people and properties are seriously disadvantaged by this Department in charge.*

*(3) The Brigade totally rejects the DSE proposal for "Fire Strategy Plan" for a fire entering Licola from the Crown and Public land, as outlined at the meeting of Jan 27, 2003 at Heyfield and demands they present a plan with a more realistic approach.*

*(4) The Brigade believes the present "Fire Strategy Plan" is so bad it will threaten life and property that has been repeatedly saved from bushfires since settlement of the Licola area in 1863.*

*(5) The Brigade wishes it to be known that they are unaware of any houses sheds or outbuildings (apart from 2 unoccupied bush huts) ever being destroyed in the Licola area from any previous bushfire since 1863.*

*(6) The Brigade is concerned the present "Fire Strategy Plan" is more about protecting the Government from litigation than protecting landholders from being burnt out.*

*(7) The Brigade demands that any earthworks to protect private landholdings from a fire, amongst the ridiculous fuel build up, coming in from Crown and public land, should be on the Crown and public land and not on private property.*

*(8) The Brigade expresses concern back burning is not being considered as a major tool of suppression in the Licola "Fire Strategy Plan."*

*(9) The Brigade believes that traditional back burning techniques would be even more effective if used in conjunction with modern water carrying air support.*

*(10) The Brigade expresses alarm at the allegations of unacceptable treatment of landholders and lessees in or bordering Crown and Public land, on the Bennison Plains 5 years ago, the Grampians 4 years ago, the Big Dessert fire before Christmas, and the North East, Bogong and Benambra areas from the present fires.*

In a phone call to the DSE "Contingency Fire Line Manager" on Jan. 30, it took him three goes before he was able to give his title. He showed virtually no understanding how fires had been fought here in the past to save properties and laughed at Brigade motions that we had never lost houses from previous fires since 1863. He told me this was most unlikely as we would not have had tracks around the area, or bulldozers and would have needed hundreds of tankers. The old buildings are still here as proof and the post and rail fences were rotting apart when I was a kid.

I was told that all we can expect was "asset protection only" (that is homes and little else), when since 1863 many (not all) local landholders have been able to protect whole farms using traditional fire fighting involving back burning, which he said would not be permitted as there was too much risk of it getting out of control.

There still has not been any reply from the DSE to our rejection of their "Fire Protection Plan," apart from what the Stock and Land news paper managed to extract out of this Department.

A fire like this should be the responsibility of the Department to keep it off private land. They should not be looking at farmland as an easy fire break because they have allowed their country to become too dangerous to fight a fire on. This fire was coming in from their land, from their fuel, and out of control because of their inability to control it, none of which were excusable. Further more it was repeatedly warned this would happen and was not addressed. Brigades should not be presented with plans that would insure they were burnt out from all angles.

The sole objective of a Brigade should be protecting the Community from a bushfire. Government Departments should be there to assist not be one of the biggest problems. No Brigade should ever be forced into having to formulate secret plans that they could be threatened with jail for, to save landholdings that had been repeatedly saved for over 140 years with little more than matches.

Judge Stretton made the following comments in his 1939 report:

*"Compensation for Damage by Spread of Fire.- Where the spread of fire from any land, by whomsoever occupied, or if unoccupied, by whomsoever owned, is caused to adjoining or adjacent land or any property thereon, whether real or personal, by reason of the fact that such first-mentioned land was in a dangerous condition, the occupier or owner (as the case may be) of any such first-mentioned land shall be liable to compensate the occupier or owner (as the case may be) of such last-mentioned land. Provided that where such last-mentioned land was in a dangerous condition, no such liability to compensate should arise."* (page 24)

There was a big improvement in ABC Radio coverage of this fire compared to the Caledonia fire. This came from the reporters like Mark DeBono on the ground at the scene, who won a well deserved award for his efforts. I still think the overall reporting from fires is heavily based around DSE spin doctoring with far too little getting out that would be necessary to save communities from being burnt out by Parks/DSE's fire fighting effort.

The distrust of information on the fire remained a serious problem throughout the fire, though after about the second week the quality of information did improve considerably. At no stage was I prepared to rely on official information. All reports coming in of something that could be of concern to us were routinely checked when possible with someone at the scene like bulldozer drivers, DSE ground staff (most of whom we trust), Police, local farmers and Brigade personnel. I trusted this information far more than anything official. On one occasion I noted a contingent of Parks/DSE vehicles with nobody around in a car park on the Howitt Plains. While there was no reports of a spot fire in the area, I had to warn local land holders that there may be one as it would have been irresponsible of me to do otherwise.

The "Great Alpine Park Fire" fiasco of 2003 demonstrated:

- (1) That in 1998 and again in 2003 Parks/DSE were completely incapable of fighting a large fire in the environment created with excessive fuel in a National Park.
- (2) That in 1998 and again in 2003 other agencies and the public were in danger from information blackouts from the DSE at the beginning of a fire.
- (3) That in 1998 and again in 2003 Parks/DSE were not extinguishing fires when this should have happened.

**(4) That in 1998 and again in 2003 it was un safe to rely on Parks/DSE's fire fighting effort.**

**(5) That in 1998 and again in 2003 the Parks/DSE control centres were out of touch, uncooperative, un supportive and lacking local knowledge.**

**(6) That in 1998 and again in 2003 the fire fighting operations were un coordinated, shoddy and questionable to say the least.**

**(7) That in 1998 and again in 2003 it was unlikely much more land would have been burnt out in a large fire if there was no fire fighting effort at all.**

**(8) That in 1998 and again in 2003 Parks/DSE were completely incapable of organising a large scale fire fighting effort.**

**(9) That in 1998 and again in 2003 Parks/DSE treated local landholders and the community with almost complete disregard.**

**(10) That in 1998 and again in 2003 small land holders were at serious risks when Parks/DSE were in charge of a fire fighting effort.**

**(11) That in 1998 and again in 2003 private landholdings were at risk of being not adequately protected, unnecessarily sacrificed, or just left to burn.**

**(12) That in 1998 and again in 2003 fire Brigades should be there to protect their communities from out of control fires, not out of control Government Departments as well.**

**(13) That in 1998 and again in 2003 these big fires cost a phenomenal amount of money, most of which could have been saved with proper fuel reduction from a Department run more competently.**

**(14) That in 1998 and again in 2003 some of the relevant authorities and Government appear incapable of learning much from a disaster to stop it happening elsewhere.**

**(15) That in 1998 and again in 2003 Governments could not care less about the safety and well being of remote communities.**

**(16) That in 1998 and again in 2003 the environment has been nothing more than a political football to be exploited for political gain.**

**(17) That in 1998 and again in 2003 there was problems with the media with DSE spin doctors to paint a rosy picture of what was going on.**

**(18) That this fire eventuated after the Government ignored warning after warning that it was going to happen.**

**(19) Fire fighting tactics, like back burning, should be able to be made by the people in control on the fire ground.**

**(20) It should be a criminal offence for responsible people from the relevant authorities to deliberately mislead or conceal the risks from a wildfire to the public or other agencies.**

**(21) The DSE spin Doctoring and self praise from this Department that overflows over ABC Radio in times of fires needs to be curtailed with a more factual down to earth account of what is actually going on.**

**(22) All DSE fire fighting plans should be available to other agencies, landholders the media and public.**

**(23) Private landholdings should be protected, from the DSE and not seen as an easy place to stop a fire because the Government has failed to manage its own land safely.**

## **Other fire fiascos**

**Little appears learnt by the DNRE from the Caledonia fire of 1998 and the Grampians fire of January 1999, which also came out of a National Park suffering many of the same problems.**

**The DNRE already with a pile of Statutory declarations and statements on their desk outlining the health problems that were trying to be cover up along the Macalister River - dropped Phos-Chek in and around the Horsham water catchments. DNRE Fire Officer, Mr Geoff Evans assured Roses Gap residents in the Grampians that the retardant would not adversely effect the communities water supply. He went on to say that 20 tonnes of Phos-Chek was applied which amounted to about four kilograms per hectare (Wimmera Mail Times, Jan 20, 1999).**

**After a damning Melbourne Age article Mr Evans told the Wimmera Mail Times 31-5-2000, that they could not have fought the Grampians fire if they had been denied the use of Phos-Chek and said it was only dropped in about one hectare.**

**The organisation of the Grampians fire fighting effort was not a great deal better. The Wimmera Mail Times of 1 Feb 1999, carried residents concerns how the two brigades, CFA and Parks Victoria, had not operated Harmoniously. The residents advised that communities living on the periphery of a National Park needed to insure they had two dams as the two bodies had difficulty sharing one pump. When I queried this with the residents I was told Parks Victoria had set up a quick-fill on a farm dam for tankers and were refusing to fill CFA tankers operating to protect private landholdings.**

Our Community was horrified with what we witnessed with the Caledonia fire, not amused with what went on in the Grampians in 1999 and disgusted with what we were hearing from the north east, but the very worst stories have been from the Big Dessert National Park fire of December 2002.

Only sketchy reports have got down to Licola, but we have heard tails from CFA personnel there that relate to the following:

The landholders there were subjected to the all familiar information blackouts, these went to the extent of trying to ground their own private plane overhead advising ground crews on farms where they needed to be. Just before the fire came onto farmland, their tankers including their own brigade unit, were removed to an unknown location leaving the landholders to fight a ferocious fire coming in from the Big Dessert National Park onto farmland with private appliances which included farm utilities with water tanks on the back. A search was mounted over the countryside to try and get at least their own tanker back. This was eventually located, it had been secretly slipped back into their own shed without telling any of them while they searched for it. So traumatised were some of the farmers in this incident they asked for counselling.

Things got worse with this fire. On, or about Dec 20, CFA fire fighters at around 10-00 pm on farmland put out all lights to see where the fires glow was coming from. As they were observing this (private land) the lights of a vehicle came into the foreground and stopped not far in front of them. The vehicle then drove away and a fire sprang up. Personnel at the scene gave chase and ran this down - a Government vehicle, with a Government person and a passenger inside. The occupants were held until the Police arrived, but they refused to lay charges.

The Mulundung fire came out of a park to burn out farmland. I am hearing allegation after allegation from media people, landholders and CFA people that this fire was just allowed to burn for about eight hours before anything was done about it. This is when CFA units wanted to go in and put it out.

William Francis Lovick of Mansfield told the Stretton inquiry in 1939:  
*"The Forests Commission (now DSE) has fallen down on the job in this year, at any rate. If I had a manager and he had three bad crashes in 13 years, I think I would sack him."*  
(Transcripts began on page 694)

## **Section 4 Agencies and groups**

### **Police**

Of all Government agencies we deal with at Licola, our Police, across the board, have the most impeccable record of serving and protecting our small community. They have always worked to the highest standards with our community. They are respected and trusted by all, and we don't get away with much either.

**(1) The Police are the most competent of all Government agencies.**

**(2) The Police should have the power during a fire to override DSE and CFA if they think evacuations of non essential personal with out a pecuniary interest is warranted.**

## **Weather Bureau**

**There are two distinct types of weather forecasts we receive at Licola during emergencies.**

**The most concerning is a tail covering forecast that gives dire warnings that never eventuate. These are frustrating, damn dangerous and a bloody nuisance. With these forecasts hours have been waisted doing needless preparations and checks, all taking us away from other important duties. After a number of such forecasts we have gone into making our own. We simply cannot afford to waste valuable time in these situations. This is hardly satisfactory as when something of real concern comes along it may be ignored or missed, as we simply do not have the necessary expertise.**

**The weather forecasting from the Sale RAAF base and Ward Rooney from the Melbourne Met during the fires was simply outstanding. These people tried with all their heart to give us what we so desperately needed, a decent no nonsense, no frills forecast. They worked long hours and weekends, always being there when most needed. It would be impossible to say just how grateful we have been for all the help over the years from the Sale RAAF for high quality forecasting in times of emergency.**

**Every now and then a serious weather situation is not forecast involving localised conditions in the mountains, as happened at Wulgulmerang. While the authorities blamed the forecast for not adequately addressing the situation, the local people in the area have told me they had no problems working out that a serious fire situation was developing.**

**Around the middle of the fire, a forecaster from the RAAF Base, with the sound of exhaustion in his voice, told me they were just trying to do the best they could. I felt for this person as I could see this man was putting his heart and sole into trying to get it right as he had done so often for us at Licola. I would not have wanted his responsability for anything.**

**Weather forecasts for emergency situations at Licola over the years have demonstrated:**

**(1) That a weather forecast is exactly that, a forecast, and should not be used as an excuse for not seeing a dangerous situation developing especially in the mountains with variable localised weather conditions, that further change with a fire coming in.**

**(2) That overboard tail covering forecasts are far more dangerous than a forecast falling short of the mark, as un skilled people are forced to do their own forecasting.**



**(3) That we have a wonderful team at the Sale RAAF base who cannot do enough to help us in times of fire, flood and other emergencies.**

## **Government**

**The Government has an appalling record of selling the environment, safety and well being of country people down the drain while grovelling for green city votes. This uncaring management is just waiting to come back and bite them on their own behinds as the most at risk group now is Melbourne itself from the serious risks to their own water catchments.**

**We now seem to have policies where farmers are being forced to plant hundreds of native trees for clearing just a handful while replacing boundary fences. This is when the Government has policies that lead to the destruction of millions of trees in National Parks and are not even bothering to reseed areas.**

**We are having carbon credits and green house gas issues rammed down our throats and how we have to plant more trees while Government policies virtually insure millions of trees will die and the soil will be burnt so hot much of the carbon will be removed.**

**While farmers are regularly blamed for environmental damage from land clearing, most of this occurred decades ago and most farmers are now acutely aware of environmental concerns for their own survival. Government incompetence and policy has now become the single most destructive environmental factor we face in the mountains and the Government is showing little indication they have any genuine concern.**

**It is very easy to blame Departmental staff, but the Government has been made more than aware of what would happen from management policies thrust on us in the mountains while they continued to push agendas and falling down at just about every level to rectify the problems.**

**We have a Minister spouting that more fires burn into National Parks when we have much of the State being burnt out from fires originating in parks and coming out. As far as I can remember back, there has only been one Government Minister covering forest management I would consider worthy of praise. He came from the ALP of all places, but unfortunately did not stay around long enough to make an impact. We desperately need a Minister again of the calibre of Rod McKenzie and there appears none in site.**

**The failure of the Government to address the serious bushfire threat demonstrates:**

**(1) That the Government should initiate an all out effort from all agencies to try and save the Melbourne water catchments from almost inevitable destruction from a hot fire.**

**(2) That the Government should initiate a realistic and proper fire prevention strategy rather than propping up a fire suppression strategy that is falling down badly.**

**(3) That the Premier should be a bit more truthful and stop trying to mislead Victorians that there has not been the right weather conditions to burn off and reduce fuel.**

**(4) That the Premier should initiate a proper public inquiry into the recent fires that exposes the facts to try and stop this all from repeating itself again elsewhere.**

## **DSE**

**The "Great Alpine Park Fire" and the forthcoming disaster with the Melbourne water catchments were preventable if the right advice had been taken from Judge Stretton after the 1939 fires.**

**There is still a large part of Victoria to still burn in a hot bushfire. The sort of people giving advice revolving around the philosophy that something like 1939 will never happen again have been exposed. To claim that the extreme weather conditions of 1939 will not re-occur is also a fallacy, as they were exceeded in the Hobart fire of 1967.**

**While I have been highly critical of DSE management, I can only find compliments for their on ground staff. Our Brigade has worked most harmoniously with these people over the preceding years, and have been treated with the highest of respect. If the present top management was reviewed and these sort of people went up the ladder, in stead of the present empire builders, I think many of the problems with this organisation would be eliminated. At the very least the top management need to come up to the standards of the ground staff. It has been an on going concern to see so many very good experienced people in management positions frustrated and leaving this Department over the years with many of those replacing them failing to preform.**

**The DSE management apart from one period when Brian Sharp was in charge in Heyfield has mostly been out of touch and showing little sign of improving. I can remember very clearly in the late 50's, a Forestry Officers telling my father, the Captain of the Licola North Brigade, that they did not accept lightening started fires and demanding to know what locals were around the Butcher Country, a very remote area at the time, for a fire burning after a thunderstorm. They just would not accept lightening started fires. So incompetent was this Department that this appalling behaviour of blaming local people for lightening strikes went on until the early sixties.**

**The Forests Commission, is now the DSE, they came into being sometime before 1918, apart from very minor periods, it has never worked protecting the community or the environment from fires. This experiment has gone on for over 85 years which is quite long enough and needs to stop.**

**The serious fires on Crown and public land has demonstrated:**

**(1) That the management of the DSE needs to be brought up to at least the standard of the ground staff.**

**(2) That the emphasis of this Department desperately needs to shift from fighting fires to preventing them. It is totally unacceptable to claim that this will not work when witness after witness told the Stretton inquiry prevention had worked before they took control.**

**(3) That the gravy train approach the DSE has of just throwing money at fires until it rains needs to stop. Fires need to be fought 24 hours a day. No shift should leave the fire ground until another is there to replace them.**

**(4) Fire Managers need to be replaced if they continually fail to reduce the fuel, especially if they continue to fiddle the figures to make it look as though they have.**

**(5) The above Managers need to be protected from cool burns escaping, as it is inevitable this will happen from time to time. This protection should never be extended to cover scenarios like the 1964 fire at Licola where it was just lit up and the Forestry just went home for Easter to let it burn out a large area including farms without any warnings.**

**(6) The stupid regulations placing many un-necessary obstacles in front of protective burning need to be removed, they appear to be there for no other reason than to please the anti burning lobby.**

**(7) People like Brian Sharp who had a good track record of reducing fuel, around Licola before he took an early retirement package, need to be bought back as consultants to supply the much needed enlightenment for senior DSE management falling down on the job.**

**(8) There should be a full and open on going public audit of all DSE activities including contracts etc. especially where the money goes with big fires.**

## **Parks Victoria**

**This organisation is so seriously flawed at every level it is hard to contemplate how it could be cleaned up, it appears to be seriously lacking accountability. Parks Victoria is held in so little regard by the visitors to Licola, that in December 2001, over 600 visitors signed a letter stating people expect to be misled, frustrated and lied to, when dealing with Parks Victoria. Over 98% of visitors to Licola over long weekends have been prepared to sign letters critical of Park management.**

**The environmental degradation and utter mayhem associated with high fuel levels in National Park management is nothing short of a national disgrace. Parks Victoria needs to learn how to protect the environment from hot fires, and not be the single most**

environmentally destructive element we now have. National Parks with the present fuel management, are not sustainable.

(1) All National Parks should have a local management committee of local people living around the park to advise on fire management.

(2) The influence of environmental groups should be removed from National Parks until it has been clearly demonstrated they have the knowledge and desire to see these areas manage in an environmentally sustainable way.

(3) Policies should be put in place to remove the "Little Hitlers" that abound throughout Parks Victoria so as we can get some fire prevention in place.

## **CFA**

The politics need to be removed from the top of the CFA, this organisation is just costing far too much money. It would seem that the bigger the administration becomes the more dissatisfaction is through the volunteer ranks. The CFA should have more power over Crown and Public land when a fire is coming in.

(1) The top management of the CFA needs to be replaced by a committee of elected volunteers, with an administration staff.

(2) Landholders surrounded by Crown and Public land should be entirely under the control of the local CFA Brigade Captain with power to override the DSE in protecting private landholdings and be able to back burn Crown and Public land if and when the Captain thinks appropriate.

(3) Fire fighting tactics like back burning should be able to be made by the local Captains on the fire ground.

(4) Local area fire plans should be put in place that take into account local knowledge and known fire behaviour. These should be supported and agreed on by all agencies.

(5) CFA training programs are excellent at the moment, and should be extended to further train Brigades for fire fighting in environments removed from their home ground. The Licola Brigade could use more training for grassland fires and Brigades from the Gippsland Plains could use training for Mountain fire fighting.

(6) People like John Cook from Swifts Ck who successfully saved his community from the recent fires hold a wealth of knowledge that needs to be recorded and included in training programs.

(7) The CFA should be looking at ways of reducing paper work and procedures while concentrating on putting fires out.

**(8) There should be a full and open on going public audit of all CFA activities including contracts etc.**

## **Environmental Groups**

**Environmental groups deserve a lot of the blame for the recent spate of environmental disasters from hot fires. It would appear from my observations that these groups primary interest is pushing political agendas and not in protecting the environment. In some cases huge sums of money would seem to pass through these organizations.**

**There needs to be an open and thorough public audit of all environmental groups that specifically look at all donations and expenditure. These audits should be published and on the public record.**

## **Licola Brigade**

**The Licola Brigade has actively fought for the long term well being of all Victorians. Brigade members have said over and over that we have a moral responsibility to expose the serious environmental and community concerns from a uncaring Government pursuing policies that will bring the State to its knees.**

## **Section 5 Recommendations**

**I make the following recommendations:**

**(1) There should be major review to see if we need two agencies (Parks Victoria and the DSE) when both are falling down badly managing Crown and Public land that is not sustainable while endangering life and property and how this can be rectified by including local input.**

**(2) There needs to be a major shift from fire fighting to fire prevention.**

**(3) There needs to be an all out Government effort to try and save Melbourne's water catchments and the rest of the State from the type of Public land management that has caused wildfire disaster after wildfire disaster.**

**(4) There needs to be a review of the CFA structure, and expenditure. This should be aimed at cutting costs, streamlining the organisation and placing control back into the hands of the volunteer fire fighters.**

**(5) There should be a Coronial Inquiry into all fires over 5,000 ha. This should be conducted along the same simple lines of the Stretton Royal Commission.**

**(6) There needs to be a public education program on the benefits of bringing Crown and Public land back to a more natural state using regular cool burning and common sense.**

**(7) All Political Parties needs to stop using the environment as a political football.**

## **Website**

**For more details and photographs of the park, check out the Licola Community website: <http://groups.msn.com/LicolaCommunity>**

**I would like to give verbal evidence to support this submission.**

*While I have no objections to any use of this submission, I wish to retain ownership on this material to be used as the basis of a forthcoming book.*

**L.Ralph Barraclough**

**Captain  
Licola Fire Brigade**