

26th May, 2003.

Angel John Gallard

House of Representatives Select Committee on the
Recent Australian Bush Fires
Parliament House
Canberra A.C.T. 2600

Dear Committee Members,

I am seeking to have this submission accepted as a late submission. Due to an urgent domestic situation, I have been unable to get it to you before this date:-

RE: Letter of Submission - Bush Fires 2003 & for the past 215 years

215 years of European occupation of this country have seen big changes in the Australian bush. The 50,000+ years of land management principles of our indigenous brothers and sisters have been disregarded in favor of bigger and more dangerous wildfires than ever. Salinity, siltation and pollution of our rivers, lakes, fish breeding grounds and the destruction of important wetlands continue.

Note well this extract from the late Fred McCarthy's 'Artists of the Sydney Sandstone', Vol 4, Chapter 15, Pages 701 - 702:-

Quote:

"We cannot of course, accept the modern condition of the bush land in the Sydney-Hawkesbury region as being equivalent to that of pre-European times. Drastic changes have taken place. The forests have been logged, innumerable fires, more than in Aboriginal times have swept through the bush in hot summers, rivers, creeks, and waterholes have been silted up, swamps drained, the wild fowl in many areas have been deprived of their wetland habitats and gone away as have most of the flying foxes and bats, repeated intrusion through the bush on foot, trail bikes and four wheel drive vehicles have forced out most of the animals, dense sclerophyll scrub and areas of spiky hakeas have taken the place of open forest and patches of grass. The bushland fortunately is being preserved in National Parks"

End of quote.

There is no doubt that big changes have taken place, particularly in reference to wildfire. We are now experiencing some of the most devastating wild fires this country has ever seen in recorded history and it is no good for anyone to blame it on the drought. The drought is only one small part of the equation. The real core problem of wildfire management and prevention is to be found in the procrastination and deliberate dithering with regards to hazard reduction, prescribed burning, fuel reduction and urban and rural planning. As a former public servant Field Officer, I have witnessed this action.

I have fought bush fires and carried out large scale hazard reduction, made recommendations with regard to urban and rural planning over a period of years, so have many other experienced land managers, yet in the intermediate years between fire seasons, these recommendations and planning are either forgotten or overridden by profit seeking developers.

There are many ways to mitigate wildfire, but they cost and that cost must be maintained indefinitely, irrespective of Departmental budgets over the lifetime of future generations. The cost and the planning and the protective measures are forever, not next year's allocation of funds to this department or that department. This applies to all forms of land management not just wildfire.

Wildfire is of accidental or pre-meditated ignition and this can happen at any time. With all due respect to the late Fred McCarthy's faith that 'the bushland is fortunately being preserved in National Parks', we, as a responsible caring community must ask the question of our egocentric, strutting machiavellian bureaucracy as to why they have constantly frustrated the efforts of hands on, highly experience field officers of voluntary and government departments. These people are dedicated to the wise use of the resources under their care being good value in any crisis. Yet all their experiences, sometimes a life time and some, if they have been taken on board, follow the wisdom of countless thousands of years of Aboriginal Land Management practice. Even when too old to fight fires physically, these people can contribute to future generations of land management. Their field craft and experience must be considered and passed on to future generations as it was by our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Field Officers in the days of the Park Trust Management System were people who knew their country, they walked, talked, ate and slept in their country. They knew of all the access and grass routes, vagaries of the weather, and implementation of help to save lives and property in emergencies. Most of these Field Officers/Rangers etc. were trade-based men, and sustainable resource based conservationists. When the National Parks and Wildlife Act came into being in 1967, the Act required that these Field Officers would become Rangers under the Act, so these independent highly motivated & experienced Land Managers were absorbed into the N.P.W.S of N.S.W.

The bureaucracy described the former patrolling of one's country as 'aimless wandering.' The time of being intimate with and knowing your country as Aboriginal people had, learning the land's behaviour under all conditions, living with it – not against it, died, and with it, the true 'Ranger', a term almost phased out by countless re-structures of the N.P.W.S and other departments disappeared. Career Public Servants in the form of graduates in various sciences have taken over. These people only spend a relatively short time in any one area before moving up the career path, a person who wants to stay put, and be as our Aboriginal brother and sister land managers were, respecting the land and being part of it, is seen as having no ambition.

Field Officers have always been a minority in the public service. If they dare to make waves, the department sees to it that they get their knuckles wrapped. If you look at the numbers of experienced Field Officers available in the N.P.W.S on a per hectare basis, you can easily see why so little is achieved in actual on-ground land management for example, 2 field officers per 21,000 hectares of park. To add to this the paper trail, they

have to follow with the plant and equipment availability and then you have the question everyone wants answered - "WHY is it so"? as Professor Julius Summner Miller used to ask.

This is only one government department with which I have been personally associated with, before retirement for twenty three years. There are many other departments associated with land management that have the same problem. The bureaucrats see that few 'on the foot' field officers experienced decision makers get into the upper management role. This can even be seen happening within the Rural Fire Service.

Field officers responsible for a particular tract of their country should not have to go cap in hand each year for every budget to fight for the justification of their request for adequate funds and field resources to pursue ongoing programs of wildfire protection measures or any other land management criteria and public safety.

There is more than sufficient data available for governments and bureaucrats, if they are 'fair dinkum' to see that such matters are beyond the yearly 'begging bowl parade'.

These essential ongoing commitments must be funded on a continuing long term financial commitment irrespective of which government, minister or departmental head is in power at the time.

Nature, land and myself as an Aboriginal person do not recognise the nonsense being bandied around at the present. This current disastrous situation must be a turning point in land management across the board. The repercussions to the community, personal loss, loss of human life, loss of sustainable resources are immeasurable in real terms.

The answer lies in the wisdom of the ancients, based on countless generations of land management, and traditional land managers. If we look to this, we see a true spiritual unity with the land of which we are a part of.

Aboriginal people respect fire and its use, the damage done by uncontrolled wildfire is a major threat to people who rely on the wise use of a sustainable resource. The elders of each clan were responsible for the custodianship of their country and as such used fire in various ways to minimise damage that might be done by wildfire. There is plenty of evidence for this and other land management authorities have already taken this onboard in the northern parts of Australia. Dialogue with experienced senior Aboriginal people should be an important part of this enquiry across all boundaries.

Planning for the future must include detailed maps and photographic records of these most recent fires, so that ongoing monitoring can provide future guides for full level management.

Continuity of intimate knowledge must be encouraged and maintained in all sectors of land management, seek information from elders both black and white who have local knowledge of fire behaviour, development of a set of readily retrievable histories of every rural and urban fire protection zone and provide planning guidelines to suit the various degrees of potential threat from wildfire, then we might be getting somewhere.

I would like to see Federal, State and Local Government recognise on behalf of all Australians the enormity of the land management problems facing this country on a joint National basis. Nature and natural environmental cycles do not recognise political boundaries. Think seriously about what Jeff Farley had to say in his Australia Day address to the Nation and to all Australians. Think about the coroner enquiry results when they are handed down. This long and hard about all of the data you gather and for Australians and our incredible heritage both black and white. Unify and provide a set of guidelines and direction for wildfire management based on practices as old as the oldest continuing spiritual relationship with the land, of any nation in the world!

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Respectfully Yours,

Angel John Gallard
(Gura-dyarralang)

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Dear Committee Members,

Re: Letter of Submission – Wildfire Management and Control

The oldest practicing spiritual land managers in the world hold the key to Wildfire Management in this country. Wildfire knows and recognises no Federal State or Local artificial boundaries. Wherever there is fuel a wildfire will burn.

Wildfire is a big a threat to Aboriginal sustainable resource based management, as it is to any rural or urban modern developments. Aboriginal people have successfully used fire to protect their resources from wildfire for countless thousands of years.

Aboriginal use of fire in land management, for cleaning up the country was, and is, a spiritually based process designed to benefit both humankind and the environment. Aboriginal burning practices were and are in the control and directional hands of Elders stepped in generations of knowledge and wisdom about their country.

In terms of their country, the language area was broken up into what approximate sub-catchments which supported a clan or mob (a family unit) up to approximately 100 people, these tract of country vary in size but have been equated by scientists to be approximately 60 square kilometers in area.

Their country was known intimately to all members of the community as was some of their adjoining countrymen's land. The use of fire was, and is a prescribed burning program that maintains a wide variety of habitat at various stages of growth and productivity. The mosaic of fuel reduction interlocks with surrounding clan lands which extend across the language group area. These areas can cover hundreds of square kilometers which in turn, about other language group areas.

The practices used in this mosaic, varied fuel level habitat and resource level ensured that when natural, wildfire was ignited it was allowed to burn in the knowledge of the land managers that it was burning in a location where they knew the condition of the bush and how and where that fire would burn with their prescribed burnt country.

This is the lesson we have to learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters.

Re: Letter of Submission – Wildfire Management and Control

When we eventually realize that local knowledge in local community bush fire districts can be drawn on and used in the same way as the traditional custodians and owners of the land do it, then we will be on the way to preventing destructive holocaust wildfire.

To achieve this will require a complete change of mindset in the established bureaucracy, which currently is creating bigger and better technology to fight bigger wildfires, irrespective of experienced practical Elder volunteers, professionals and firefighters, who are voices in the wilderness.

Decentralised, local community based land management provided local communities with sustenance and resources for living for at least 50,000 years. In two hundred and fifteen years this tried and tested system has almost been destroyed. Note well that this not only applied to wildfire management but management of all systems. The answer to all of our land management problems are to be found in knowing your country respecting it and the creator of it and learning to live with it not against it.

Respectfully Yours,

Angel John Gallard
(Gura-dyarralang)