



2003 487

Background:

Since 1984 when I left the regular Army, where I served as a military engineer, I have lived in the Victorian High Country, in the Bundarra Valley, on the edge of the Bogong High Plains some 40 km to the NNW of Omeo in the geographic NE of Victoria. My NE, N & W boundaries are the Alpine National Park, fenced, or the Bundarra River. My S boundary is adjacent to a derelict 'absentee-owner' grazing property of some 600 acres. My valley was opened up as part of the post - Great War soldier settlement scheme. I take domestic water from the river and use a creek that runs along my SE boundary as motive power for a micro hydro-electric system which has meant that I haven't paid a domestic electrical bill for almost 20 years. Up until the Australia Day fire attack the adjacent Alpine National Park was dry schlerophyll forest and proscribed noxious weeds (principally blackberry & sweet briar) that was almost impenetrable because of these weeds and forest floor litter. The area had **not** been burned during the 20th Century; a disaster waiting to happen.

Public Land Management:

The public lands (Alpine National Park & State Forest) are managed (I use the term very loosely) by Parks Victoria and the old Department of Natural Resources & Environment (DNRE), now known as the Department of Sustainability & Environment (DSE, or colloquially as the Department of Scorched Earth). The DSE also has a responsibility to ensure that noxious weed control is carried out on private land. Both organisations are very big on what the public (the owners) cannot do on Public lands, whilst doing very, very little to ensure compatibility between public and private land. In my area the public lands are breeding grounds for almost all known noxious/proscribed flora and fauna which 'invade' private land from these sanctuaries. To name a few, feral dogs, feral cats, feral goats, (no pigs - yet) blackberry, St John's Wort, sweet briar, broom, Patterson's Curse – the list goes on. It was almost impossible to gain access to the pristine High Country rivers because of weed infestation, but the annual green spotted tree frog count still goes on in the Bundarra headwaters. In almost 20 years the flow of the creek that powers my hydro-electric system has been reduced by more than 80% (average non-drought Summer minimal flow from 10 litres per second to 2 lps) by rampantly growing blackberries; prior to the fires the creek ceased flowing for 6 weeks. Since the fires destroyed all creek bed and adjacent blackberries, drought notwithstanding, the creek has once again flowed to the river at just under 1 lps -- it still is a horrific drought!!

I include fire prevention/minimisation as part of the management of public lands; what has been done in my area? The short answer is **nothing!** I have been advised that the optimum forest floor litter coverage for ecological balance is 4 tonnes per hectare; in my area in both State Forest & the Alpine National Park the litter was hundreds of tonnes. Horses could not traverse parts and movement by foot was exceedingly difficult; there had been **no** official fuel reduction burning in my memory and anecdotally, none for a century. More on this later. Since the Australia Day firestorm the 'bush' in my area is bereft of ground cover, both native and noxious flora with the exception of sweet briar which was either burned to ground level, or merely severely scorched. In the week the fires commenced the DSE were to spray

blackberries along the length of my hydro-power creek (after 10 years of requests – one wonders if the Corryong ‘wild-dog’ case concentrated minds), however the fires sorted that problem out at no \$\$\$ cost – it is an ill wind that blows no good!! As you are aware the fire has consumed in excess of 3,000,000 acres which means that not only native flora, but noxious proscribed flora has disappeared; the responsible Management departments have a clean slate upon which to commence workable management practices – should we hold our collective breath and hope, or will it be back to the previous practice of “being all too hard”.

The reasons given for the lack of noxious flora & fauna eradication/control and fuel reduction burns are always about lack of resources, which is, of course, a political problem; there are few votes within public lands and therefore there are always higher priorities, mainly in urban Victoria. If the problem is too hard, that is, too expensive, is it not better to open unmanageable/un-managed public land for commercial/private use than to systemically allow these vast public assets to be once again destroyed by neglect (benign or malevolent)?

Firefighting Management:

Some two years ago a meeting of the residents/property owners in the Anglers Rest (Blue Duck), Bundarra Valley, Glen Wills & Glen Valley area was held in the Blue Duck to discuss a local fire plan. We were all very aware that our isolation meant that we were unlikely to receive assistance when a fire threatened us (in effect, our fire fighting insurance levee is totally wasted); under the auspices of the CFA we decided to help ourselves as a community, albeit a community of individuals. We arranged for property inspections by the CFA to ascertain what the individual risks/dangers were and what would be needed to make each property as “fire safe” as possible. We set up two ‘telephone trees’ for the passage of information (we are served by a solar powered radio telephone exchange with only 4 external lines to service the 50 connections) and sent the details to the CFA down the line. Over the period precautions were set in place, individual equipment was purchased and there were some controlled burns on private property.

On my own property I have a 10,000 gallon tank for domestic water that is filled from the river. It has a dedicated 300 ft, mostly buried, 1 ½” polypipe fire fighting line that fits directly onto a fire pump that can be set up either in front of, or behind my house. Attached to the pump is a 300 ft fire hose and connections to facilitate sprays on the roof and throughout the close-by grounds. I have 12 ft firebreaks along all my boundaries and fire control lines in my hay paddock. I have fire rakes, knapsack sprays and my tank is permanently connected to another pump on the river to maintain its capacity. My home is mud-brick and therefore not overly combustible, but I also flood my gutters and keep the immediate environs clear of combustible material. My decision to defend my home has never altered. To a lesser or greater degree **all** private property was set up in a similar way, unless the decision was not to even contemplate defence – a couple of cases.

We all knew what had to be done and when the fires commenced were either fully prepared, or had minds concentrated to complete preparations ASAP.

On Tuesday 07 January 2003 there were a series of 'dry' thunderstorms that started fires throughout the High Country – they were still burning as I drafted this submission (26 March 2003). There were two lightning strikes on a small mountain, Mt Ned, at the E end of my Valley, which were hit fairly quickly by the Omeo CFA and extinguished; the telephone tree to advise residents that there was a fire was **not** activated – a foretaste of things to come.

For the first few days of the fires there was little that appeared to be happening from the Public Land Management authorities (the fire was allowed to burn and thereby gain ground and momentum); the fire was on public land, but there was no, or very little information available. The local CFA were being told nothing and therefore had nothing to pass on.

It may be of interest to know that whilst Omeo and parts of The East Gippsland Shire extend into the NE (following the old Shire of Omeo Boundaries) the NE geographic & weather forecast area does not include these areas. This means that in a situation where the NE is experiencing intense fire danger weather with a total fire ban declared, we in the N areas of The East Gippsland Shire are excluded. It can be raining in E Gippsland whilst N of the great divide it can be 40+c and gale force N winds – the situation is absurd as we then were **not** a day of total fireban as was the rest of the NE. I have been attempting to change this situation, but so far to no avail (slothful indolence, stupidity, negligence – take your pick)

By 14 January the fire was very active within the Alpine National Park and other State Forest areas (Mt Feathertop, Bogong Saddle, The Razorback) and DSE had apparently assumed responsibility for fire fighting. I had a telephone call from the Swifts Creek Incident Control Centre (ICC) advising that 'we' should set up a 'telephone tree' and begin fire precautions for our properties; when advised that 'we' had a 'telephone tree' already in place the ICC denied all knowledge. The individual at the ICC had no local knowledge and refused to provide information on the Feathertop fire (to my W and closer than the Bogong fire which was to my N) as it was in another 'fire control area'; it took some time to get the individual oriented to where various locations were, however this situation continued until 17 January when a 'dummy spit' concentrated minds somewhat.

By 20 January the situation had dramatically worsened and it was only a matter of time before we were directly threatened; embers had been falling for days. On 20 January the ICC despatched several DSE crews into the Valley to patrol Park and State Forest boundaries in an attempt to prevent fire crossing onto private land. The ICC withdrew the crews on three occasions on that day as they believed the crews were in imminent danger; no credibility was given to people on the ground. I spoke to the ICC and declared that we would rather not have anyone there than not know from one minute to the next whether they would be remaining – with more people on the ground it is possible, probably desirable to have a different strategy, but not a lot of fun to think you have back up when it has departed! On Tuesday 21 January there was a 5 kt SE wind blowing (most unusual at this time of the year) and I requested permission to start a back-burn into the National Park – permission refused as it was NP and it was their decision, not mine. Knowing the fuel problem on the ground and that the weather was due to deteriorate (intense heat and strong N winds) in the following days I made a unilateral decision and started back burning along my W, N & E boundaries.

The photographs I have show the intensity of the ground fire as it consumed the incredible fuel build up whilst creating a 1-3 mile wide firebreak into the NP – it was to prove to be exactly the right decision.

The next few days were a disaster of organisation. Information was either wrong, or non-existent; due to intense smoke the ICC could not get aircraft into the air to recede the fire front and accurately locate it. Suggestions to request defence resources were ignored (RAAF surveillance aircraft can (almost) detect a match flare on the moon and can and do fly in all conditions) and we never knew when there would be additional resources available. The CFA & DSE had different shift changing times which meant that for a period at one end of the shift there were two crews available, whilst at t'other end there was no-one for three hours – there was no system of hand over briefings in the field – madness!! Over this period there were constant warnings relating to my area broadcast over ABC local radio advising that we were about to be attacked by a major fire front and to either evacuate, or initiate our fire protection plans.

The weather forecast for the NE on Australia Day was not propitious, low humidity, high temperatures, albeit N winds were to be a mere 35 kmph; in the event the winds gusted to 70 kts and the resultant firestorm was devastating. The fire came into the valley from the WSW, W and NW in fireballs preceded by flying embers and burning blackberry canes that were transported hundreds of yards (that I observed) and ignited everywhere they touched ground. The 600 acre grazing property adjoining me to the SE and S was covered with blackberry & briar over about 60%; these thickets were up to 100m square and exploded sending flames hundreds of feet into the air with burning canes ensuring that the next property to the E, with excellent firebreaks and control lines, did not stand a chance. I had been requesting DNRE to 'force' the absentee owner to clear his property for ten years to no avail – no matter that they had a statutory responsibility!!! For those who haven't seen blackberry thickets burn intensely let me assure you that it is quite spectacular; there is nothing left but a talcum fine white powder, albeit in very strong winds the ground is totally bare as if it was swept.

My property was untouched apart from burning embers that were 'tap-danced' out, but the E end of the Valley was devastated; stock destroyed, fences burned and two dwellings destroyed – nothing apart from defended homes was left un-touched.

This is not an exaggerated description, but as I experienced it; you cannot imagine the noise or the speed the fire front moved – the wind was so strong it blew my parked motorcycle over. Omeo was yet to face its trial, but I was not there and its story has been told through the media.

Back to management of the fire; the Omeo CFA were left out of the loop until a week after 26 January. To the best of my knowledge the Incident Controller did not visit the N fire areas at any time. Crews on the ground did not receive pre-deployment briefings; local knowledge was not used to guide outside crews, in fact unless 'locals' wore a DSE uniform they were not listened to at all. There were no Standard Operating Instructions related to the operations room, information-passing telephone operators did not have sufficient (any) local geographic knowledge and as often as not did not have maps available.

Crews in the field were not fed, accurate locations of crews was chancy because of lack of local geographic knowledge, crews on the ground were not listened to in relation to fire behaviour at their locations.

Towards the end of the major danger period there was some semblance of control being attained, but the control should have been there from the beginning. Given the technology available with communications there were periods when communication ceased - there is no excuse whatsoever.

What to do for the future?

There needs to be political will to ensure proper management practices are put into place for the eradication/control of noxious weeds that add to fire risk – it is interesting that areas where cattle graze within the NP were less affected by fire than those areas where cattle are excluded. A proper programme of controlled burning needs to be introduced and abided by – as said earlier, there is now a clean slate and no excuses for doing nothing. All elements of “Risk” need to be understood (assessment and management); fire fighting is an inherently risky business and has to be accepted as such. ICCs need to be set up at the beginning of each fire season and they need to be practiced with the staff who will man them; in the forces we called them CPXs (Command Post Exercises). Alternate communication kit needs to be in place for isolated communities for when telephones fail – they will and did – Telstra provided satellite telephones at the last minute, but they worked. The ADF should be called in early rather than later and their capabilities **must** be known. SOPs within DSE & CFA must be standardised and joint regional exercises must be carried out. There must be no division of responsibility and the individuals responsible for Resource management should not be in charge of the fires; conflict of interest!! DSE fire-fighters were boasting of clearing \$2,000 per week with over-time; it is obscene that DSE land management sloth could lead to such lucrative remuneration, whilst private land holders affected by fire from public land were reduced to a state of penury.

But the most important aspect of all is that Politicians must accept responsibility for their actions; Public lands **must** be managed such that they do not put the public at an unacceptable level of risk because of lack of resources, stupidity or the abrogation of responsibility by the designated managers. Two examples of stupidity; the refusal of Parks Victoria to allow water from the Glen Wills and Benambra mines to be used for firefighting because of the fear of pollution; wait ‘til it rains and the thousands of tons of ash are carried into our pristine High Country rivers – then you will see what pollution is all about!!

We live in a fire prone area; we will never stop the natural occurrence of bush fires, but by careful and committed management of all resources we can lessen their impact!!

We survived in spite of the DSE

Why do we pay the Insurance Fire Levy when the CFA will NOT assist at our location??

Why does firefighting appear to be all about \$\$\$\$ and not being sued???

Why is the 'wheel' re-invented every time we have a major fire??

Why is there a reluctance to use specialised ADF assistance??

Why do senior fire managers appear to be more concerned with their egos than actually fight/controlling fires?

Why did State Government politicians not visit the fire areas until after Australia Day and then say that they did not have permission to come up – having 'permission' has never stopped the buggers interfering in anything before!!!!????