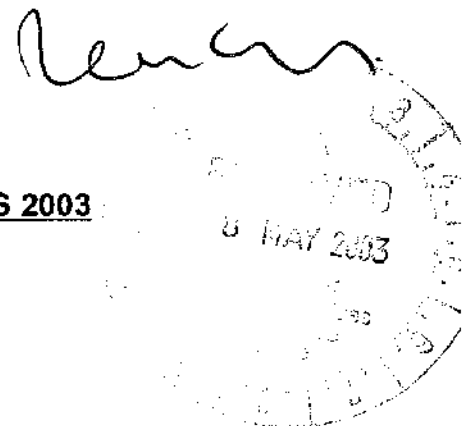


July 120

**SUBMISSION
TO THE
HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES 2003**

Submitted by: ALLAN MULL



I have travelled extensively on post-fire inspections covering over 1500 kilometres of fire-affected areas of North East Victoria, and taken 540 photographs including 235 aerial shots.

Mr Ron White, retired State Electricity Commission Hydro engineer for the Kiewa works area, has furnished me with a map of the Crown grant area managed by that authority before its hand-back approximately eight years ago by the Kennett Government (in a pristine condition and for the princely sum of \$1). The Crown Grant area covered 40 square miles and the total works were 120 square miles.

The map clearly shows 300 kilometres of fire access tracks and hand-maintained walking tracks. Little if any maintenance has been carried out on a large proportion of these tracks since being taken over by the public authority Parks Victoria. Some of these tracks do exist in State forest and two tracks are in close proximity to where the fires started on Mount Arthur (the 'Bogong Complex'), and in fact one encircled the fires.

The first few days after ignition these fires were relatively small fires, but were not aggressively fought with traditional proven methods of containment lines and back burning. The two fires that started near Bogong Village were in the Bogong National Park, were not contained within the Park, and adjoining neighbours indicate that National Parks are the worst possible neighbours, and in my opinion a public body of eight people appointed by the Governor in Council, should not control so much of our public land, as is the case with Parks Victoria now.

The authorities were extremely lucky that there were only about four days of wind during the first three weeks of the fires in 2003. In fact in this area, they had eight days without strong winds to contain the fires. Further, the eucalypt leaves had only reached the gaseous stage on the higher and drier ridges where the firestorms did occur. Largely the fires in our area were cool to medium hot burns and should have been contained in the early stages (December 6th 2002 – low snowfalls, December 31st 2002 – heavy rain).

The Mount Beauty airport is not quite long enough for full aerial fire fighting operations or Air Ambulance operations when some adverse weather conditions combine. I notified the Alpine Shire of this before the 2003 fires, and in the interests of public health and safety the Shire must acquire land and extend the runway. Government financial assistance may be required for this.

I was very angry to see aerial bombing (fixed wing and helicopter) aircraft grounded and not being utilised for several hours in the early morning and late afternoon of good and reasonably good visibility conditions during the fire period. The times mentioned are the safest times to fly in this region, and are the most effective times to fight fires outside night-time.

Why, when Minister Andre Haermeyer, Minister for Emergency Services visited Mt Beauty in January 2003 for a brief inspection of the fire situation did three fire-bombing helicopters (including Elvis) and fixed wing fire bombing aircraft fly to Mount Beauty for the duration of his short visit (approximately two hours) execute some bombing activity and then all six aircraft depart promptly after the Minister's departure? Some drops were used to a small advantage by one machine albeit three days late.

- a) Where were the six aircraft drawn from?
- b) Where were they despatched to after his visit?
- c) If any, how much fire control was achieved at Mount Beauty by this seemingly fruitless and costly exercise?
- d) How much did this exercise cost?
- e) What was the purpose of this exercise?

Occupational Health and Safety issues must be addressed, our country is in serious decay and freedom is being eroded daily. Fighting fires is like being at war, it cannot be made a safe workplace, risks must be taken, decisions must be made and taken, often immediately at the fire front. Occupational Health and Safety must not have any involvement or say once fire fighting has commenced. To do so will see country and regional Victoria at the mercy of wildfires and we will burn. Around six million hectares have not been fuel reduced. Whose turn will it be next year, and in the coming years who will be held accountable and charged with manslaughter for loss of life?

Governments must therefore legislate to totally protect the fire fighting body in control (preferably a single fire fighting authority) from any litigation and insure them adequately for compensation in the case of injury or death.

If Inquiry hearings are to be held here in North East Victoria, I would be prepared to attend and present my photographs, maps, etc. Please find enclosed several addendums in support of my submission.

My accumulated experiences from living here in this magnificent region, plus listening to dozens of verbal submissions from fire fighting captains and crews, and attending both confidential and public meetings have led to my firm opinion that this fire fighting operation would have to be one of the worst managed operations in Victoria's history.

How utterly ridiculous has the system become when I am not accredited to drive a bulldozer and use a chainsaw on Government-controlled land, when in fact I have owned chainsaws for 48 years without injury, and operated a selection of five bulldozers in this mountainous region. The accreditation chainsaw training TAFE officer who lives in Mount Beauty was not qualified outside his TAFE courses during the fires of 2003.

My great-grandfather was not accredited either, but he took the risks and settled in this valley in 1867 to begin the development of what we have here

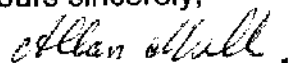
today. Six of my seven aunts and uncles were born here at Tawonga with only the presence of a bush nurse – risky business!

Bureaucrats who make mistakes with taxpayers money do not learn and keep on making mistakes. In the country, our mistakes cost us, and we learn very fast. It can be extremely dangerous to give power and control to university graduates with one or two degrees and little or NO on-ground experience. Finally, I propose that:

1. Fire access and containment lines be constructed at the adjoining boundaries of all rural and private properties at least 40 metres in width, and fuel reduction burning on a large scale be carried out regularly, at least every five years with local Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) training at these burns. Mountain cattlemen, farmers and 4WD clubs, etc. could be utilised to help start these fuel reduction burns from the ridge tops where tracks do exist. This would give the communities a feeling of ownership of the fuel reduction process and cost very little.
2. Cattle grazing must remain, as approximately 4,000 hectares where the cattle grazed DID NOT BURN during the 2003 fires. Photographs clearly show this advantageous management practice.
3. Timber harvesting in perpetuity was achievable in this region, and the regrowth from seeds sown by Mount Beauty Timbers as depicted in my photographs clearly show the benefit of that management. Research shows that erosion from logging operations is insignificant, and logged areas greatly assist soil aeration, aiding moisture retention and ground water reserves.

My concerns for our environment and our regional and rural communities dictated the huge, costly and voluntary input to this detailed submission. I trust my endeavours will assist you with your vitally important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



ALLAN MULL