



Committee Secretary  
 Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires  
 Parliament House  
 CANBERRA ACT 2606

Dear Sir

Attached are my views on current bush fire practices. Unfortunately they do not fall neatly into the inquiry categories you have identified. I see the issue from a different angle. I think the majority of Australians see bush fire as something bad and they have an idealised view of the Australian bush as being old growth forests that have been unburnt for centuries. I however, see the Australian bush as a dynamic living system of which fire is an integral part. Many of my opinions are based on observation and hear-say.

I grew up in a country town; however, my family has a strong connection with part of the Blue Mountains and has lived there on the same property continuously for 100 years. One of my earliest memories is my Grandparents complaining about a New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSWNPWS) officer who was going through my grandparents' property to do a controlled burn in the Blue Mountains National Park, but got confused as to where he was and burnt a section of my Grandparent's land instead. This was in about 1976. Another of my early memories is of the 1977 bushfires and how the bush was black and empty and totally different from previously. Except the section of bush that had been burnt two years previously which was not badly burnt.

Over the next 18 years the bush regenerated, and there were no large scale fires until the bushfires encircled Sydney at Christmas in 1994. The bush is again regenerating slowly; however, some of the small animal life is gone.

While I was growing up I noticed a number of changes in the community:

- The rise of green groups and environmentalism; however, most of these people I would call "armchair environmentalists"—people who want the environment saved provided they do not have to do anything.
- With the increase in urban population there has been a decrease in the understanding about the Australian bush and how fire is an integral part. The bush has been idealised as old growth forest.
- There has been an increase in population along the urban fringe and people living in semi-rural settings. These people are passionate about living in or close to the bush; however, these people often do not understand about bushfire and do not know how or are unwilling to prepare their homes for and defend their home from bush fire. They expect somebody else to defend their home from bushfire and for insurance to pay for their home to be rebuilt and possessions replaced when they leave their home to the mercy of bushfire. They do not take any responsibility for designing their homes to cope with bushfire, preparing their homes to cope with a bushfire or defending their homes from bush fire. Homes are built to "let in the bush". They also complain when local government

does not allow subdivisions in bushfire prone areas or when controlled burns occur in their area.

- Bushfire is now promoted as a natural disaster to be controlled and prevented, rather than a normal part of the bush life cycle.
- Large areas of land have been declared National Park; however, the resources to manage it have not been provided.
- There has been a proliferation in regulation surrounding controlled burns making it virtually impossible to conduct a controlled burn. I'm told that in the Blue Mountains one must complete a development application and get Environment Protection Authority approval. Permission is granted for a limited period and usually mid-winter when the bush will not burn. Additionally, if it is wet or there is high pollution in Sydney then the burn cannot happen and one must go through the whole process again to get approval for a new time to conduct the burn.

I have also read about the aboriginal life style before white settlers. The aboriginals apparently used "fire stick gardening" to manage the bush and burnt the bush in a patch work manner. Some areas were burnt regularly, while others were hardly ever burnt. There were never large scale fires that covered hundreds or thousands of hectares. The sky in summer was apparently thick with smoke. Although fire was always present it was never large scale: the aboriginals could not afford for the fire to become wide spread as they would have nowhere to hide as we do, nor would they be able to feed themselves if their entire territory had been burnt. So aborigines had a vested interest in managing the bush to ensure there no large scale fires and so were always burning off on a small scale.

I have never noticed the NSWNPWS burn the area of the Blue Mountains where my Grandparents live. That area has only burnt as a result of the wild bush fires that sweep across every 20 or so years. Talking to my Grandfather and his family of their parents' time in the Blue Mountains at the beginning of the 1900's, they were always burning off. My great grandparents would be out cutting timber and would notice the fuel was a bit high, the weather conditions would be right and so they would light a controlled burn. It would burn a couple of hectares and go out. Since that practice stopped, my relatives have noticed a change in the bush—it is much thicker and there is a different plant community.

With the changes in land management, generally letting high fuel loads to develop, it is not surprising that the impact of bush fires has increased. I think there needs to be a dramatic change in how our bush lands are managed, but also a change in how we view bushfires and how well educated householders are to prepare and protect their homes from bushfire. Aborigines spent their entire life managing the bush; we cannot expect the bush to just manage itself and must make a similar effort to manage the bush. The bush is a big garden that requires non-european concepts to manage it, it is not a natural wilderness untrammelled by man.

I have heard a story from the Blue Mountains, regarding the need to conduct a controlled burn where a lot of new houses had been built in the bush on top of cliffs where there was a high fuel load. The houses were unprepared for a bushfire. A bushfire officer toured the area with a local and agreed with the local that a controlled burn did need to occur; however, would not authorise a controlled burn because of litigation danger if fire got out of control, even though a controlled burn was the best way of minimising danger for when the eventual wild fire passed through. The Bushfire control officer's reasoning was that if the controlled burn got out of control then the rural fire service would be liable, but if the fire started naturally then insurance would pay for the houses to be rebuilt and there would be little bad publicity for the fire service. People's litigious

nature and their building in bushfire prone areas is encouraging perverse behaviour which is increasing bushfire risk and does not encourage people to be responsible for their own actions or lack thereof.

Making bushfire something to be feared has meant a proliferation in the bushfire bureaucracy. This bureaucracy has become focused on controlling wild bush fires (which is exciting), rather than managing the bush to prevent large scale wild bush fires occurring in the first place and teaching the community how to prepare for and fight bush fire (low profile and unexciting work). These are two contradictory aims which require totally different approaches and mind sets to managing the bush and fire. Making bush fires something to be feared has also meant that people are so afraid of bush fire that they are unwilling to make reasonable attempts to protect their homes from imminent bush fire danger.

The community needs to be educated on how to prepare for and fight bushfires. Because people do not understand bushfire there are media reports of houses exploding during bushfire and other unbelievable stories. This makes people even more afraid of bushfires. As a community, we need to educate people so they feel they have control and can fight and survive a bushfire. My sister and her husband moved to Berowra Heights on the north of Sydney in the middle of last year. At the start of the bushfire season the local fire brigades ran bushfire safety and awareness courses to teach people how to prepare their houses for bushfire and defend their house against bushfire. So when the bushfire went through in November, they were prepared, stayed and successfully defended their home against the fire.

Bushfire authorities will never have enough personnel to protect every property that is potentially in danger. Every householder and land owner needs to have enough skills and confidence to prepare their property for a bush fire and then to stay and protect their property. This will free fire services to control bush fires away from these places.

From my observation, National Parks is reluctant to burn off. They appear to want all bush lands to be a climax community. However, bush is a dynamic system and needs to have all stages of regrowth to be healthy as there are different plants and animals at each stage of regrowth. After the recent bush fires in Canberra, the local national parks were closed for three months—presumably to protect people from themselves. This denied people the chance to see what bush fire did to the bush and then how the bush started to regenerate. There will be nothing for people to compare the bush to in later years.

I think that large scale fires are bad as this wide spread destruction of plants and wildlife means there is nowhere for plants and animals to recolonise the burnt bush form. I think that these large scale fires will result in extinction of animals as their habitat will be wiped out and the animals themselves will have nowhere to retreat to or recolonise from.

During the January bush fires I was listening to an Aboriginal elder being interviewed on the radio. This person said their ancestors said that when you smelt smoke you had to run to nearest patch of burnt bush. This suggests that there was always a section of burnt bush within running distance. This is not the case today. One could run for days in the modern Australian bush and still not find a burnt patch of bush. This suggests we manage our bush lands very differently to how the Aboriginals managed the bush.

To help address our current bush fire problems I think we need to several simultaneous approaches.

- I think we need a 200 year bush fire management plan for each area which identifies how each hectare within the area will be managed over that 200 years. I believe that they have been working on a bush fire management plan in the Blue Mountains for the last forty years; however, they still do not have a plan!
- The focus of bush fire services and fire authorities needs to be changed to managing the bush to prevent large scale bush fires rather than controlling wild fires. They will need to be adequately resourced to do this.
- People need to be given the skill to prepare and defend their homes from fire even in a city like Canberra (because Canberra is what I consider all urban fringe due to its design). The general public's current fear of bush fires is creating perverse behaviours with respect to the action people expect fire services to under take to defend unprotected homes and the resources people are willing to throw at them to help achieve this.
- People need to build in a bush fire aware way and when they build in high bush fire risk areas there needs to be some balancing of fire services liability for homes destroyed during routine fuel management operations. Building permission and land management need to take account of bush fire risk and the prevention of bush fire. There needs to be some way in which bush fire risk and responsibility for preventing bush fires is shared between landowners and government. We need to encourage appropriate fuel management and encourage people to build their homes appropriately and prepare their homes for fire without the threat of litigation encouraging perverse behaviour.
- The community also needs to become more aware of the bush as a dynamic system and not see bush fire as a bad thing. This will hopefully allow appropriate fuel management policies.
- Regulation needs to be reviewed so that it is possible to conduct hazard reduction burns. At this point in time the whole process is over regulated. There needs to be greater cooperation between national parks services and bush fire authorities. National parks services seem to regard fire services as a bunch of fire bugs and will not conduct hazard reduction operations. Fire services see national parks as a bunch of greenies sitting on a keg of gun powder. There needs to be some middle ground where the bush is managed as the Aborigines did so the bush contains everything from recently burnt areas to old growth forest that has remained unburnt for centuries.

Yours faithfully

Craig Allatt