



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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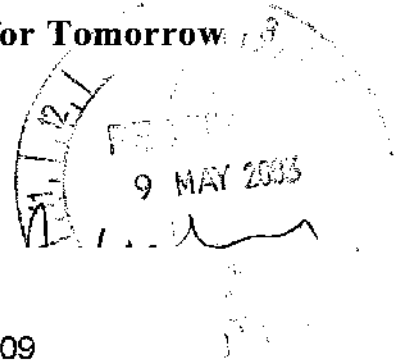
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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

9th May 2003

The Secretary
House Select Committee, Bushfires
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Email: bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au

Submission No.209



Dear Sir/Madam

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Following is a submission to the above Inquiry prepared by members of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society Bushfire Committee and circulated to and approved by the Management Committee of the Society.

The "Mission" of the Society is to help conserve the natural environment of the Blue Mountains. The Aims of the Society are to:

- Disseminate and foster an understanding of the ideals of Conservation
- Promote the idea that ecological sustainability is the key for all human activities
- Preserve the natural environment, flora, fauna, habitat, water, land and air
- Actively oppose those human activities which degrade or destroy the natural environment
- Repair the adverse effects of human activities upon the environment
- Increase the pool of expert knowledge about the natural environment.

We believe that our knowledge of the high risk of bushfire in our area, and our experience of the frequent fires over the last few years make it appropriate for us to forward this submission. Also our activities in the local environment – fighting the fires, bushcare, mitigation of fire damage, community education, and general conservation – may contribute to the findings.

I can be contacted by phone at my home or by mobile. Relevant numbers are (02) 4758 6096 (home) or 0427 163 116 (mobile). My email address is foxy@zip.com.au.

Yours sincerely

BLUE MOUNTAINS CONSERVATION SOCIETY

per

Ann Fox
*Project Officer and
Chairman of the Bushfire Committee*

Inquiry into the recent Australian Bushfires

Submission from the Blue Mountains Conservation Society

Introduction:

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society was formed to help conserve the natural environment of the Blue Mountains. After the fires of December 2001/January 2002, a subcommittee was formed to investigate how landowners and residents of the mountains can best prepare for future fires and at the same time maintain the natural environment to the greatest extent. Members of the subcommittee are volunteers with a range of interests and knowledge, and include RFS members, bush regenerators, and general conservationists.

Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

(a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities.

The impact on the environment is of major concern. The Blue Mountains Area is a proclaimed World Heritage Area and any damage to the environment is critical. Some areas (eg parts of the Grose Valley) have lost biodiversity due to frequent wildfire. The impact on private and public assets is also of major concern, and at least part of that impact is the financial cost of rebuilding and rehabilitating. Regular burning, whether wildfire or hazard reduction, can seriously affect biodiversity.

(b) The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property

There are many causes of and risk factors involved, and no doubt there will be many submission on this. Lightning and arson are the two major causes of wildfire. Fires arising from these causes can not be prevented, but watchfulness of all in areas of risk can reduce the severity. We address some points below:

1. A major risk factor contributing to the impact on people and property is that of granting development consent in high and extreme bushfire risk areas. This could be addressed immediately, preventing further building in such areas This is also covered under point (d).
2. Another contributing factor is the hotter, dryer weather we have experienced. Although this may be cyclical, climate change due to global warming is leading to more frequent 'el nino' events, and the Federal and State Governments have not moved to improve or control the changes. This must be addressed urgently, and by all Australian governments as any change will be over the long term.
3. Lack of education and preparedness of the community in general contributes to the severity of the impact – for example, in the Canberra fires. Most residents are not adequately prepared to protect their homes, gardens are not maintained to reduce fire spread, homes are not fitted with well-known and accepted measures to assist in risk management.
4. Too many residents are not insured, contributing to the financial impact.

(c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control.

A paper was prepared by Stuart James for the Rural Fire Service, Blue Mountains District¹, giving an overview of results of field studies of Prescribed Burns in the Blue Mountains from 1993 to 1997. This showed that hazard reduction burns are of limited effectiveness. The studies found that there was significant difference in the results in dry and wet climatic cycles, with greater success in dry cycles. Effectiveness also depended on the aspect, and on the degree of shading of the ground and understorey. There is also a correlation between

understorey height and burn result – generally the higher the vegetation, the poorer the result, for example, no burns were recorded achieving greater than 50% reduction of upper understorey fuels.

Hazard reduction, other than by fire, eg slashing, mowing and thinning of vegetation, near the assets being protected will provide better protection for those assets than burning in remote areas.

There is an environmental impact of any hazard reduction, and planning to restrict this impact needs to be carried out at the local level. We are concerned about the environmental impact of hazard reduction, where it has occurred on sensitive vegetation, or in areas where there are known to be endangered or threatened species. Hazard reduction, whether by fire or by other means, often severely affects the species habitat. More research is needed into the impacts of different forms of hazard reduction.

This submission has no information to address the economic impacts.

(d) Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices

With regard to damage mitigation of individual properties, retro-fitting of protective items to buildings should be encouraged, eg shutters, metal screens, water tanks, sprinkler systems, etc. Councils could give incentives in the form of a rebate on rates, for such fittings. Preparedness of the community, discussed in other parts of this submission, is a further example of effective hazard reduction on private properties.

There is an urgent need for the recent legislation regarding restrictions on building approvals in bushfire prone areas to be implemented and enforced. Continuing development in the Blue Mountains is further endangering the property built on the developments, and the environment surrounding them when fires occur. New subdivisions are currently being developed further into the bush. Although house design, materials, construction and siting can lead to some approvals, Local Government needs to carefully assess these matters and in some cases refuse consent for either subdivision or individual home development approval. Some properties cannot be protected from bushfire, no matter how carefully they follow design codes.

Where a property owner is refused development consent due to the bushfire hazard, there needs to be some means of Government buy back. Local Government is unlikely to be able to finance this initiative, which needs to be addressed by all levels of Government.

Clearing of asset protection zones as required by current legislation can have an adverse effect on the environment and biodiversity, but this needs to be balanced against the need for property protection and requires further research.

(e) Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation

Although knowledge and understanding of fires is increasing, further research is needed in a number of areas.

1. A better understanding of the behaviour of arsonists and investigation of appropriate rehabilitation of those convicted.
2. The behaviour and patterns of wildfire
3. The effectiveness of hazard reduction burning and other fire mitigation options
4. The damage to biodiversity from fires and fire mitigation, and the possible methods of effective rehabilitation.
5. Improved building design measures.

(f) The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires

CSIRO should develop a fourth level of building design in AS3959 so buildings can survive radiant heat flux beyond 31 kW per square metre. Blue Mountains City Council has produced a document which lists some features to achieve this. However, codes are effective only when they are properly implemented.

Current codes are not adequately enforced, leading to greater threats to life and property. Government at all levels needs to ensure that the codes are followed.

(g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting

Adequate in the Blue Mountains.

(h) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions

We have no contribution on this matter.

(i) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters

We believe the responsibility for being prepared prior to a bushfire lies with the land owner/manager. This would include being adequately covered by insurance. To help with the cost of insurance for those in difficult financial circumstances, a policy that covers against bushfire only could be possible, but is for Government to decide on the means. We have no further contribution on this matter.

(j) The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors

Community education should be a major part of volunteer contributions. All residents in bushfire prone areas must understand their environment, the risk of bushfire, and their responsibilities towards the safety of themselves, their family and property, and their neighbours. They also need to know how to protect their property from fire, and how to manage the reduction of fuels on their own properties, and where appropriate, along the urban interface, with other volunteers. All land owners/managers should prepare an 'Action Plan' for their safety.

It should be mandatory for new residents in a bushfire area to attend a community education presentation. This should be given by a team paid by Government or Local Council. The presentation should be a carefully prepared official one appropriate for the local area.

Volunteers and local residents also need more liaison/consultation between statutory authorities (National Parks, Sydney Catchment Authority, Councils, State Forests, etc) regarding fire mitigation information where the boundaries adjoin, and planning and arrangements for hazard reduction and fire control/suppression.

¹ James, S. (1999) Evaluation of the effectiveness of prescribed burns: a simple methodology for post-burn assessment of the achievement of fire management objectives in *Bushfire 99*: proceedings from the Australian Bushfire Conference, Albury, 7-9 July 1999. Charles Sturt University, Albury, pp. 167-173.

Cited (pages 6-7) in:

McCormick, B. (2002) *Bushfires: Is Fuel Reduction Burning the Answer?* Department of the Parliamentary Library, Information and Research Services, Current Issues Brief No. 8 2002-03, 10 December 2002.