



**NORTH EAST  
CATCHMENT  
MANAGEMENT  
AUTHORITY**

*Your Reference:*  
*Our Reference:*

8 May 2003

Committee Secretary  
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires  
Department of the House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir / Madam,

**Re : Federal Inquiry: 2003 Bushfires**

The North East Catchment Management Authority (CMA) is a Victorian Statutory Authority, which has the statutory responsibility for waterway and floodplain management. It also has the co-ordination role to ensure the implementation of the Regional Catchment Strategy to improve and protect the region's natural resources through community programs. In this context the CMA is making the following submission.

The bushfires in North East Victoria burnt 708, 000 ha (35%) of the North East Catchment area. This had a very significant impact on property, stock, flora and fauna values, water quality and water resources.

The CMA is making the following submission based on the following terms of reference.

- Impact of bushfires on catchment condition;
- Impact of bushfires on catchment processes;
- Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate damage caused by bushfires on social, economic and environmental values;
- Research needs to determine impact of bushfires on catchment processes.

The CMA has also encouraged community members to make submissions directly to the enquiry and inform the CMA for its submission in relation to the above terms of reference.

It should be also noted that the CMA is very active in the Bushfire Recovery Program as it relates to catchment values, waterway management, water quality programs and stock containment grants.

### **Catchment Values:**

It is recognized that fire is part of the ecological system across Australian forest types. In the short term there has been substantial loss of flora and fauna in the catchment. It is likely it will recover with the possible exception of some of the alpine ecological vegetation classes. Along with this recovery will be a change in the soil hydrology. In the short term we can expect greater groundwater recharge and run-off. But the run-off will be of a lower quality and transporting significant nutrient and sediment loads into the river and stream system. The effect of this is likely to be increased turbidity, algal blooms, and sediment loads in the Murray River. Given that the North East has been producing 38% of the Murray Darling water (and arguably the highest quality) it is likely the entire downstream water quality will be affected for sometime. After 5 years the water yield from the catchment is likely to be reduced as the new vegetation has the ability to utilize a greater percentage of the rainfall. Consideration needs to be given what this means to management of the rivers and streams systems and quantity of water available for extraction.

The enquiry is asked to recommend research or make recommendations into the following aspects:

- Research into effectiveness and impact of fuel reduction burning (FRB) in different forest types.
- Research into fire behaviours under extreme conditions as was experienced recently.
- Research into the impact of fires on water quality and water yield over the long term.
- Post research into the effectiveness of FRB's and grazing in Alpine areas.
- Comparison of '39, 82 and 2003 bushfires, and of previous fires
- Ensuring the lessons learnt from the recovery process and longer term changes to the catchment are documented to assist future generations who may face similar circumstances
- Establishment of the necessary longer term monitoring sites, and indicators established
- Opportunity to implement pest plant (eg: blackberry and broom) and animal management programs.
- Ensuring an integrated approach by all the appropriate organisations to planning for and recovery of all assets
- Ensuring that monitoring and evaluation systems are put in place so that the full impacts of the fire can be understood.

### **Fire Suppression Preparedness**

The CMA has no statutory role in fire suppression and defers such matters to the fire fighting agencies-the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

However, one of the important roles of the CMA is to listen to community concerns and engage community with catchment improvement programs and knowledge exchange. In this context the CMA supports a thorough enquiry into the fire fighting response methodology. There is widespread dissatisfaction in the catchment community about the final outcome of the fires being far worse than they should have been. The DNRE/CFA Strike Team/Local CFA communication and general liaison can be improved.

Potential peer assessments of preparedness should be made to assess people's capability to stay to defend their properties and lead to better preparedness. Access to accurate information about where the fire front is could be improved so that people can make informed decisions – including the use of consistent maps for fire information. A major improvement in these fires was the access to information via ABC radio broadcasts and community meetings.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the enquiry.

If you require further information please contact me on (02) 6043 7600

Yours sincerely



**Sarah Nicholas**  
**Chairperson**