

## Submission to the House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires, 2003

By David Barton – Matlock – Victoria

I make this submission both as an individual and as a member of the Matlock and Wood's Point district community. It is based upon my experiences within the district over the last thirty years and contains my own personal views and not necessarily the views of others.

### Background:

Fortunately, the Woods Point and Matlock district was not directly affected by the 2003 bushfires. Given the massive build-up of fuel on the forest floor over recent years, one can only be thankful that the fire didn't come through the Upper Goulburn, as the damage to homes and property scattered all the way up through the valley would have been horrendous, not to mention the potential loss of life.

However, the district was affected by the fires by way of a downturn in tourism. Many families, individuals and groups cancelled trips to the district for fear that the fire was in the area. Even though it was quite safe, people chose to either stay at home or go elsewhere. This, of course, had an impact upon local business. Many locals received phone calls asking if the fire was at 'the Point' yet, and when it was expected to get there. The reality is that there were in fact a couple of fires only a watershed or two away, but were rapidly dealt with by the expert work of CFA crews, who can only be highly praised.

Apart from the downturn in tourism, the main impact upon the region was the all pervasive and continual blanket of smoke that covered the area for some weeks, and the ongoing fear that some locals held that the fire was indeed on its way to the district.

### Fire Preparation:

The effort that many local people put in towards protecting themselves against a possible fire attack varied from both ends of the spectrum. Some locals made no effort whatsoever to take any precautions to protect either life or property. This included not bothering to clear gutters, leaving long grass right up to the edge of their homes and leaving large overhanging trees adjacent to their homes. On the other hand, some locals (and only a few) made great efforts to protect themselves and their property. This included the purchase of fire pumps, installation of new rooftop and under-eave sprinkler systems, rubbish and vegetation removal and grass cutting. Efforts of course varied according to the age and fitness of property owners, and their financial resources.

It would be fair to say that many people who owned 'weekenders' did not even visit their properties over the crisis period. Had the fires come through, many properties would have been lost due to the topography and dense undergrowth of the district.

### Weeds:

It is necessary to next speak of the spread of weeds throughout the district. They are simply out of control! They have significantly added to the fuel load now on the forest floor. Not only have blackberries now been a significant problem for over one hundred years, additional varieties of weeds have now, over the last twenty years, become so established that they are not likely to ever be brought under control.

Such varieties include English Broom, Gorse, Scotch Thistle, Bracken, and more recently, Ragwort. The Broom has reached such epidemic proportions that areas of the bush have become simply impassable. It is rapidly spreading along the roadsides (the seed being carried by mud on vehicles) and

now the seed from newly established plants is being washed over the edge of the roads, down into the steep gullies, where it is becoming established, and before long the multiple thousands of Broom seeds released will find their way down the watercourses, choking them as well. This is a state-wide environmental disaster that is being ignored!

How has this problem (that has really only become epidemic in the last ten years) occurred, and how is it being managed? There are now clearly fewer people in the bush looking after it and managing it like there were some twenty years ago. The Forestry Commission and Country Roads Board crews vanished in the early 1980's. They used to spray the weeds, clear up the trees, keep the four-wheel-drive tracks open and maintained the drains – all of that work now rarely, if ever, carried out. One of the greatest tragedies for local bush communities was the removal of these crews. Not only has the bush 'gone to rack and ruin', but many employment opportunities disappeared and local economies suffered. At the time, local communities were assured that, somehow, they would be better off under the 'new arrangements'! It never happened, and look at the state of affairs now!

Now the work that the crews used to carry out on public land is conducted mainly by the locals – if they are allowed, and if they have the right training, 'tickets', permits, equipment, OH&S approvals, Workcover, Public Liability Insurance, etc, and the list goes on! Local people receive a 50% subsidy (or if they are fortunate, a 100% grant) to purchase poison spray to do the weed spraying themselves – and they're supposed to consider themselves fortunate, whereas not so long ago it was done for them! Local people are getting sick and tired of this approach, and are becoming less and less interested in doing the Government's work for them, especially when most of the work needs to be done on public land – that is, the land that the Government is the landowner! In recent years, the sight of Government funded contractors carrying out weed spraying in the Woods Point and Matlock districts is an absolute rarity.

More recently, restrictions applied to locals being allowed to carry out their own fuel reduction burning is another reason why the weed and undergrowth problem is worse than ever. In thirty years of being associated with the district I have never seen the bush as thick as it currently is!

The upsurge in feral pests coming out of land 'managed' by the State is another area of concern to be addressed in the future, but not in this forum.

### **Fuel Reduction Burning:**

Locals have not been allowed to carry out their own fuel reduction burning any more for about the last six years. Previous to that, for the last 40 years, locals always did their own – and for the most part without incident (indeed, there have been numerous incidents where Government employees have carried out fuel reduction burns and caused considerable damage to personal property). The land around the property of locals was always clear, and as safe as could be expected. It is now often simply a jungled entangled impenetrable mess of undergrowth and weeds. It is a disgrace!

If locals want to seek official approval to have a fuel reduction burn, the conditions and limitations placed upon them to actually carry out the burn are so absurd that they don't bother any more. What is the point of only being given a permit for a specific day, and of having to arrange with the local CFA crew and/or DSE crew to be in attendance, and then, if the weather for that one-day permit is bad, the permit expires and you have to start the whole stupid process all over again! If someone is silly enough to actually, horror of horrors, 'light their own fire', (even though they are fully aware that it is perfectly safe based upon their own local knowledge from having lived in that location for over twenty or more years) well, then they can expect a very intimidating visit from the (city-based) Departmental 'fire police'. This is a disgraceful way to treat responsible rural-dwelling citizens of this state! This is made all the worse when in fact the State abrogates its own responsibility for efficient fuel reduction burning!

Most fuel reduction clearing and weed control around Matlock is now undertaken by voluntary labour using a tractor, slasher, ride-on mower, push mowers and brushcutters. This is tedious, unnecessary, time consuming, expensive work and only does a fraction of the job required. Frankly, the locals are heartily sick to death of this stupidity, and it is OUR homes that will eventually go up in smoke because of it!

A recent example of the blatant inefficiency of the Department's own 'fuel reduction program' was witnessed in Woods Point in mid-May. A fuel reduction burn was planned for the area on a certain day. Prior to the burn, staff in a DSE vehicle apparently visited Woods Point on at least two occasions to assess parameters and factors to consider for the burn. On the day appointed for the burn, a local person contacted the DSE advising that it was not a good day to carry out the burn, and not to bother.

Despite this advice, 10 DSE vehicles and 2 fire trucks arrived to carry out the burn, only to conclude for themselves that the conditions were not suitable (it was too wet!). This might not be quite so bad if it wasn't for the fact that the nearest DSE staff are resident some 60 kms away (over an hours drive). Think of the amount of time and money wasted because Government Departmental staff chose to ignore the advice of locals, and worse still, add insult to injury by not allowing them to either be involved or carry out the job themselves! Local people are not idiots and can be trusted!

Locals must not only be consulted about when, where and how to carry out fuel reduction burns, but MUST be allowed to once again carry them out themselves as they used to. It is they who know and understand the topography and the weather, far better than anyone else who lives outside of the district!

#### **An Example of the DSE's 'head-in-the-sand' approach:**

The May, 2003 edition of the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development's 'Risk & Reward' magazine (Issue 13) has an article in it called 'Science Joins The Bushfire Fight' (p 4). It opens as follows:

"Images of the Canberra firestorm and summer's huge Alpine bushfires might give the impression that there has been little progress made in coping with such emergencies. That would be wrong. Comparing the 2003 bushfires in Victoria with the Black Friday fires of 1939 and the Ash Wednesday disaster of 1983 shows a big difference. Seventy-one Victorians perished in the 1939 fires, and 47 in 1983, but just person died (sic) as a result of the 2003 fires. And although 41 houses were lost in the state this summer, that compares with 650 in 1939 and more than 2000 in 1983."

The second paragraph follows on, and opens with "It was a good outcome for such a bad summer" says Mike Leonard, head of strategic planning for fire management at the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). He attributes much of the success to a sustained effort of more than two decades of research at Victoria's Forest Science Centre ...".

There would hardly be anybody who would agree with Mr Leonard; hardly a 'good outcome' to say the least, especially for the 41 home owners that have nowhere to live! One could hardly agree that 500 homes destroyed in Canberra was a 'good outcome' for Canberrans either!

Unfortunately, the way of introducing the article appears to be essentially misleading. The article seems to imply that the lack of loss of life and low loss of property was due to recent human efforts in fire research and management and a technological advancement making the authorities 'better equipped' to deal with such emergencies. Whilst there is no doubt that we do have access to better technology and equipment, such comparisons with previous fires are misleading and tell only part of the story.

The opening paragraph neglects to mention that in 1939 very many more people lived and worked out in the bush, there were a great many more homes out in the bush, and that many people killed were isolated mill workers unable to escape the flames. This led to the change in timber milling practices whereby raw timber was taken out of the bush to a town mill, rather than being milled on location, thus reducing the need for workers and their families to live in isolated bush settings. Also, the 1939 fires came much closer to Melbourne, which leads into the 1983 fires. The simple reason for the loss of life and homes in 1983 is that the fires encroached on essentially rural/urban interface areas, again around Melbourne.

The low loss of life and homes in 2003 can be attributed to the fact that the fires were essentially in remote areas lacking in high population or housing, and that a supreme effort was mounted to protect the small urban population centres, especially by large water-carrying helicopters. The simple fact is that the 2003 bushfires essentially occurred in remote and sparsely inhabited bushland. Had the bushfires again occurred on the rural/urban interface, as they will again, then the loss of property and life would have been horrendous. If anecdotal evidence can be believed, arguments could be advanced that the 1983 bushfires were in fact more effectively fought, thus limiting their spread, than the 2003 bushfires.

The article continues on to sing the praises of research and technology in fire-fighting, but some of the research 'conclusions' are common sense observations that any experienced 'bush-dweller' or CFA volunteer could tell the researchers, if asked. It would seem that the article continues the 'head in the sand' approach to understanding what is really going on in the bush and in the management of public land, and that, somehow, science and technology will provide the answer to effectively fighting bushfires. Whilst nobody objects to research and advances in science and technology, it will not provide long-term solutions unless combined with an honest and realistic assessment of previous and recent fire events. Without such an approach, we may all one day get very badly burnt!

#### **Fire Control & Authority:**

Another observation to be made concerns who has absolute authority over what areas are managed and what services are provided during a major fire event. There is no doubt that having two 'peak' control authorities for different land status, being the CFA and DSE, does not work and is quite counter productive, if not down-right dangerous. When it comes to fire management, there ought to be one body in control, and one only, and that body ought to be the CFA. DSE and its staff and resources must be subservient to the CFA's direction and control.

If a fire is to be fought in a Government owned building in the city (which happens to have its own sprinkler system) does the owner of that building then direct the Metropolitan Fire Brigade about how to fight the fire in its building, and retain control of how the sprinkler system is to be used? Of course not – the very concept is absurd! It is the job of the MFB to fight the fire – they have complete control and so they should. Why then should the DSE have any authority or control about the way in which a fire is managed or fought on Crown land? It is the job of the CFA to fight the fire. Certainly, the DSE would have an advisory and assisting capacity, but they **MUST NOT** have the final say, or even an influential say, in how, where and when the fire is to be fought! Also, the very concept of DSE staff working to 'knock-off time' rosters is an anathema to the many volunteers who laboured tirelessly and without pay to fight the fires. If the DSE cannot pay the overtime required, then there is another good reason to get out of the game and leave it to the professional volunteers, the CFA!

#### **Track Maintenance & Closures:**

The (lack of) management of tracks is another sore point with many locals. Over recent years track maintenance has all but ceased, again with no Government crews or contractors to be seen. It would

appear that the de-facto Government policy is to let the tracks fall to ruin, become overgrown and be no longer used or accessible. If it were not for the keen four-wheel-drive groups and deer hunters, many tracks would have already disappeared. Why are tracks being closed? Why are they not being maintained? What is to be gained by shutting them down? Is it just a 'lack of resources', or is it deliberate policy? Why are four-wheel-drive clubs not being encouraged or allowed to assist with track maintenance? Answers are required to these questions.

More and more gates are going up to lock people out and more and more tracks are falling into disrepair and being overgrown with weeds. Regarding fire-fighting, locals have been advised that the 'policy' is that if there is a fire, bulldozers will be brought in to make a new track. This is absurd, wasteful and environmentally destructive. In the late 1970's the Victoria Police advised that there was no location in Victoria that was further than 5 kilometres from a four-wheel-drive track. Clearly such a track network would be adequate for fire-fighting purposes (with additional spurs created where necessary). However, it is unlikely that the 5 klm radius applies today!

Again, locals must be consulted about the status of tracks – and their wishes acknowledged and adhered to! Four-wheel-drive clubs and other community groups must also be allowed and encouraged to participate in track maintenance. If the Government is not going to allow 'members of the public' to be integrally involved in the management of the bush, be it for whatever reason ('safety', 'public liability insurance', 'potential litigation' and the raft of other excuses) the Government will have to foot the entire bill of doing it themselves – and this will be millions and millions of dollars – and they clearly cannot do it themselves! Government **MUST** change its attitude to the management of the bush. The actual physical area of 'the bush' and the actual work involved in managing it, is clearly a lot bigger and a lot more than the Melbourne bureaucrats think it is!

### **General Observations:**

It is clear that the majority of people (who live in the bush) do not either want or subscribe to the (pristine) 'wilderness' philosophy as espoused by the new 'green religion'. Indeed, such a philosophy bears absolutely no resemblance to reality – there is no (pristine) 'wilderness' left in Victoria – it is infested with weeds and feral animals, and it cannot be recreated by locking the bush away and not letting anyone into it! It must be properly and carefully managed; it cannot and must not be simply locked up and left to its own devices.

Where are the Forestry Commission and Country Roads Board crews of 20 years ago? Why are they not being replaced? Why are there so many bureaucrats in the glass towers of Melbourne feverishly writing reports and conducting investigations that bolster the ideology of the day, rather than the money being spent on staff actually out in the bush working where they are sorely needed? Why is there now 'no money' for men and women to be actively working out in the field as there was twenty years ago? The Government has got its priorities all wrong!

Indeed, if the so-called 'Greenies' care so much for the natural pristine bush, why are they not calling for a full weed and fuel reduction program? Why are they not out in the bush every weekend clearing weeds in the same manner that so many locals are? Who is it that really cares for the bush? Who is it that actually takes the time to care for, manage and work in the bush? Further, the rabid propaganda that is being produced and distributed by organisations such as the Victorian National Parks Association is a disgrace and an insult to the people who live and work in the bush. It is a further disgrace that this offensive and misleading propaganda is funded with tax-payer dollars!

When will there be a return to a 'common sense' approach to bush management. Local people despair of ever seeing a return to some of the good management practices of the past.

What the bush needs is MORE people in it, NOT fewer! The odd bushwalking group passing through is not going to do anything to fend off the encroachment of weeds and feral animals, or to make the 'wilderness' safer from firestorms. It is activity in the bush that will protect it – not neglect and abandonment!

The concept of 'National Parks' has been corrupted. The original purpose of the 'National Park' was to preserve areas of 'outstanding significance' for future generations and rightly so. However, National Parks are now being used as an excuse by ideologues in pursuit of their radical agendas to lock legitimate users out of the bush. In addition, so much land has now been locked up as so-called 'National Park' that the Government clearly does not have the resources to adequately manage it. The best we can expect is a number of new signs, a few picnic benches, and lots of locked gates telling people that they can no longer go and do the sorts of things they have done for generations!

Much of the recently declared 'National Park' certainly has no 'outstanding significance' whatsoever, and is hardly likely to be visited by anyone – and when those few visitors do arrive, there will be precious little that they are actually allowed to do. Meanwhile, we have excluded apiarists, eucalyptus distillers, post cutters, recreational four-wheel-drivers, trail bike riders, rally drivers, hunters of feral animals, etc, etc. ought to be remembered that national Parks are supposed to be for 'everyone'; but what is occurring now is that a limited and select number of fit, healthy and agile persons are the only ones allowed or able to access much of what has now become National Park declared.

Community feeling about the way in which public land is managed is reflected in the way that people refer to the Department of Sustainability and Environment, calling it the "Department of Sparks and Embers", or the "Department of Scorched Earth", and indeed, the "Department of many name changes", which simply indicates that whilst the name continues to change from one offensive name to another, out in the bush the situation continues to degenerate. The greatest insult of late is of course the use of the word 'sustainability', whereas what is happening in the bush at the moment is anything but sustainable!

### **Conclusion:**

The people of Woods Point and Matlock are very pleased that the fires did not come their way. However, they know that one day the fires will! The reality is that our district cannot withstand another wildfire, especially in its current excessive ground fuel condition. It is important to note that the fuel build-up is now so much greater than in 1939 that any wildfire would create a moonscape in our district. If a wildfire comes through the Upper Goulburn the loss of property and life would be very severe. In addition, so much unrecoverable history by way of historic buildings would be lost forever.

Things in the past may not have been ideal, but we have done little other than go backwards in terms of local land management over the last twenty years. Many warned of the dangers of withdrawing services to the bush twenty years ago, but were ignored. Now the rural community is reaping what was sown by city based bureaucrats and inexperienced academics all those years ago!

The bush is not healthy, and is being very poorly managed. As a resource it is deteriorating rapidly. More catastrophic fires are inevitable if things remain the same. Something must be done, and attitudes must change if the bush is to be redeemed.

### **Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are presented for the consideration of the Inquiry:

1. That local people be encouraged to take greater responsibility and interest in the management of both their own properties and the public lands that are adjacent to their own properties.

2. That all Government Departments, but the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and Parks Victoria in particular, immediately commence a serious weed reduction program in a concerted effort to reduce the spread of weeds throughout the bush. In the short term, such a program ought to focus upon an extensive and regular roadside spraying program. Government also ought to make available weed poison (and some equipment) at no cost to locals who are prepared to carry out the spraying of weeds on public land free of charge to the Government.
3. That local people be allowed and encouraged to carry out fuel reduction burns on Crown land surrounding their own property.
4. That all Government Departments, but the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and Parks Victoria in particular, stop trying to 'snow-job' the people of Victoria about what is actually happening in the bush and rather than attempting to repeatedly 'shoot the messenger', actually start to admit to and address the real and pressing issues.
5. That the fire-fighting control hierarchy have a single peak body, being the Country Fire Authority, that has supreme command and control of all bushfire situations, and that all other agencies be subservient to the CFA.
6. That all Government Departments, but the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and Parks Victoria in particular, pay greater heed to and make greater use of local knowledge and local input.
7. That the de-facto policy of closing bush tracks be discontinued, and that tracks be kept open and properly maintained as a resource to the wider community.
8. That all Government Departments, but the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and Parks Victoria in particular, allow for greater participation by a greater range of community groups to actively participate in the management of the bush, especially as related to track maintenance.
9. That the number of Government work crews (and accompanying equipment) deployed in the bush to undertake active management programs be substantially increased.
10. That the Bracks Government abandon its cow-towing approach to the new politically correct Green Religion, and put in place proper and sound management techniques based upon impartial validated scientific evidence and the experience and wisdom of those who live and work in the bush.
11. That the concept of National Parks and 'Parks' in general, be overhauled so that large areas of land cannot be 'locked up' purely by renaming them as something different from what they were, and that only a limited area of actual outstanding significance be declared a National Park, not whole slabs of the state. This may mean that some areas currently declared as National Park ought to be downgraded to a lesser status, thereby opening them up to greater community utilisation.
12. That organisations with a pseudo-scientific ideologically based 'barrow to push', such as the Victorian National Parks Association, NOT be granted access to Government funds – and that if such organisations are to be granted funding, that other organisations, such as the Public Land Council, Bush Users Group and the Victorian Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs, etc, be given equal access to such funding to equally present the 'other side' of the argument.

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