

13 June 2003

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT
AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the 2003 Bushfire Inquiry.

As Victoria's largest electricity distributor, covering around 64% of the State, Powercor Australia spends millions of dollars each year on programs to reduce the risk of bushfires in Victoria. Powercor Australia has a comprehensive Bushfire Mitigation Program, comprising of a number of activities to ensure our network is safe and the risk of bushfires is minimised.

These bushfire mitigation activities include:

- Pre-summer inspection of all Powercor overhead powerlines in fire hazard areas to identify any vegetation clearance issues.
- Completion by our vegetation management contractor, Vemco, of any works identified by this inspection program in accordance with the Code of Practice for Electric Line Clearance (Vegetation)- 1999.
- Aerial audits of designated powerlines to gauge the effectiveness of our vegetation clearance program.
- Regular audits and inspection of poles, overhead powerlines and pole top structures, with any problems prioritised and rectified.
- A comprehensive communication campaign, which includes reminding the public about the fire risks from private overhead powerlines and their responsibilities in regard to these lines.

As well as the activities listed above, Powercor Australia also works closely with the Country Fire Authority to help the community understand how to prevent bushfires and encourages any residents in bushfire prone areas to have a practical bushfire survival plan.

Powercor has a Bushfire Mitigation Management Framework (BMMF), that it uses to manage its Bushfire Mitigation obligations. The (BMMF) has been based on guidelines

developed by the Victorian Electrical Supply Industry Bushfire Mitigation Working Group and describes the activities, procedures and processes that make up the Powercor Bushfire Mitigation Management system. The Powercor (BMMF) has been developed in accordance with industry guidelines and prepared with the cooperation of the Office of the Chief Electrical Inspector (OCEI).

The Office of the Chief Electrical Inspector (OCEI) is the regulator for electrical safety and has the responsibility for the formulation and enforcement of regulations relating to the prevention of fire ignition caused by electricity network assets and the resultant risk to the public and property damage.

Powercor would like to identify an opportunity to the select committee, which we believe could add value to the regulatory process currently being used for the bushfire mitigation activities of the Victorian electrical distribution industry. Our experience is that the consultation and communication process currently utilised by the government through the OCEI in the drafting of regulation could be improved.

We believe that there needs to be a formal ongoing committee of key stakeholders established in Victoria to develop, consult and communicate any regulations relating to bushfire mitigation. It is suggested that such a committee could be affectively convened under Section 10 of the Victorian Electricity Safety Act 1998 ie.(under the auspices of the OCEI, the safety regulator for Victoria). The Section 10 Committee process appears to work well and could easily be adopted for Bushfire Mitigation regulations.

It is also suggested that the Section 10 BFM Committee consist of representatives from Electricity Transmission companies, Distribution companies, Emergency Services, and local governments as well as representatives from the OCEI.

We suggest that if the above process is used there would be a greater understanding and acceptance of new legislation, which would greatly assist us in keeping our networks bushfire safe.

There are also national electrical industry forums both within the Electricity Supply Association of Australia (ESAA) and associated with the Electrical Regulators of Australia Committee (ERAC). These forums could provide a platform for development of national guidelines taking into account the different demographical and environmental contexts across Australia.

There are also ad hoc Bushfire Mitigation discussion sessions amongst distribution and transmission members of the ESAA Environmental committee. Powercor propose that these are made a regular agenda item to formalise the activity and further the transfer of BFM information across state boundaries.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission and Powercor would like to wish the committee every success in identifying what needs to be done across Australia to minimise future risks.

Yours sincerely

{ SIGNED }

Bryan Quinn

| **GENERAL MANAGER NETWORK**