


Sub 454



Timber Communities Australia
Tasmanian State Office
PO Box 172 Campania
Tas 7026
Phone: 03 6260 4442
Fax: 03 6260 4420
Mobile: 0417 013 336
Email: barry.tca@tassie.net.au
Http://www.tca.org.au
A.B.N. 33 008 665 736

30 May 2003-07-23

Committee Secretary
Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
E-mail: bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au

Submission on National Bushfires in the Summer of 2002/2003

Members of Timber Communities Australia seek to assist the Select Committee to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment. Bushfires have been a part of the Australian environment for thousands of years yet we seem to continually fail to learn from the lessons of the past.

Families of forest workers and communities that depend upon the continued access to our natural resources know first hand the need to manage the fire risk. They know the devastating impact of wild fire and know practical ways of dealing with such risk.

Timber communities in Tasmania watched with horror the media reports of this summer's bushfires in NSW, ACT and Victoria. They are alarmed that many of these fires started in National parks and escaped to damage property and forest outside of these reserves. They were shocked along with the rest of the Nation to see a massive fire front descending on the National Capital causing the loss of life, the destruction of hundreds of homes and causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.

Tasmania did not escape the bushfire season with hundreds of fires being fought including 23 major fires that burnt over 50,000 hectares of bush, grasslands and forests. In what is believed to be the longest sustained fire fighting period since the 1967 bushfires Forestry Tasmania was involved in 105 fires this summer.

Since those bushfires in 1967, Tasmania like the rest of Australia has seen a massive change in land use. Much of the State Forest has been redesignated from State Forest to National Parks and Reserves. 40% of Tasmania's land mass is now allocated for National Parks and conservation reserves amounting to 2,756,000 hectares. This is a dramatic increase 475% on levels of reserves existing in 1981 when only 580,000 hectares was designated as conservation reserves.

With such extensive reserves, members of Timber Communities Australia believe that a duty of care exists for land managers of these reserves to ensure that the bush fire risk is minimised and the property adjacent to these reserves is protected from wild fire escapes. Our members are very concerned at reports from NSW that there has been a deliberate and substantial decline in fuel reduction burning in land now allocated for the conservation of biodiversity.

Members of Timber Communities of Australia are also frustrated by the lack of application of the practice of fuel reduction burning and active management of our forests in reserves and the constant misinformation campaign waged by opponents of the timber industry when fuel reduction burning does take place.

The lack of adequate fire minimisation strategies in these National parks and reserves threaten the very conservation values that they have been created to protect. The habitats and perhaps even entire populations of some threatened species were engulfed in the huge fires that spread through the parks of north-eastern Victoria.

Fire is a natural part of the forest ecosystem in Australia and this extensively documented.

The genus eucalyptus has evolved over thousands of years with fire as an integral part of its existence. The aboriginal occupation of this continent played a pivotal role in maintaining eucalypts through their use of fire for cooking and hunting. They regularly burned areas to produce green pick that attracted game. They also carried fire with them rather than trying to restart a fire at each camping place. This inevitably led to fire escapes, the majority of which were not extinguished. Radiated heat from even relatively small fires would be unbearable for near naked people.

Journals of early navigators contain reference to smoke along the Australian coastline. Tasman recorded the earliest reference when in 1642, a party landed to find many fire damaged tree butts and smoke was seen.

The Tasmanian Government's 1994 Fire Review Committee found:

"in the past, total fire exclusion has been pursued as a policy and practice in some National parks on the mainland and overseas. It has never been successful and has always contributed to the occurrence of large intense wildfires which decreased bio-diversity."

Not only are fires a natural part of the Australian forest environment, they are inevitable. Fine fuels (leaves, twigs, bark and small branches) accumulate in forests at the rate of between one to ten tonnes per hectare per annum, depending on the density of the forest. Wildfires occurring with forest floor levels of 30 to 40 tonnes per hectare are often too hot for fire fighters to handle. This threshold has been widely accepted since the CSIRO report on Bushfires in Australia made in 1978.

According to media reports on this summer's fire the NSW Environment Minister was advised in December of fuel levels up to 140 tonnes per hectare in the Brindabella National Park, the media also reported that no hazard reduction burning had been carried out in the last two years. These type of reports alarm members of Timber Communities Australia and we believe an audit of fuel levels should be undertaken in all National Parks.

In 1967, the Tasmanian people witnessed the terrible destruction of a wildfire. Under the influence of very strong north-westerly winds, above century temperatures and low humidity, many small fires which had been burning prior to the 7th February flared in violent activity shortly after 11 a.m. on the 7th. In a period of a little over 5 hours burned an area of some 264,270 ha and caused the death of 62 people. This was the largest loss of life and property on any single day in the history of the Australian continent.

In addition to the appalling loss of life, over 1300 houses and cottages were destroyed within the 14 municipalities affected by the fire, together with 128 other major buildings including factories, churches, halls, post offices, hotels, service stations and schools.

Fighting a fire on this scale requires massive resources well beyond the scope of Tasmanian fire-fighters, even resources such as the large helicopters used in NSW would have little impact. The value of these resources would be limited if they remain based in NSW or Victoria, the response time would be much greater than five hours. The 1967 bush fires show that reducing the fuel loads and thus the intensity of wildfire is a much better proposition than waiting for such an event due to build up of fuel loads.

Volunteers are a vital part of the effort to fight fires, together with equipment that can be sourced from the local community. The forest industry is a ready resource from which this equipment and personnel can be drawn. The majority of forest workers are trained in fire management and have a good knowledge of the local forest. They are also trained in emergency procedures including First Aid.

Equipment used in forestry operations can also be used in the fighting of fires, establishing fire breaks and retarding the spread of fires. Forest industry workers have a vested interest in protecting the forest from bushfires and normally live within communities that are near to the bush.

However, this work force has faced severe pressure in the last twenty years when Governments have decided to close native forests to the industry and create the extensive reserve system of National Parks. These workers have faced the prospect of unemployment and relocating their families. Bush contractors have been forced to sell vital equipment and to either scale back or close operations. Sawmills have been forced to shut down in regional areas, again seeing the demise of a workforce capable of combating fires.

The forest industry is supportive of allowing its workforce to volunteer to fight fires and continually seeks to liaise with the Fire Service and the Parks and Wildlife service to develop effective strategies and procedures to combat fires.

In contrast activists from lobby groups seeking the creation of National Parks and the removal of the forest industry from Native forest, seldom volunteer to combat bushfires. During this summer, a fire commenced in the Southern State Forest that looked likely to threaten the Hartz National Park. Forestry Tasmania publicly called for members of the Wilderness Society to assist in fighting this fire. The Wilderness Society spokesmen declined to assist, and instead chose to criticise the Forestry Tasmania staff that were fighting the fire.

A major asset in fighting fires is access. Access to the forest has been affected by the change in land use as more native forest has been reserved in National Parks. Multiple-use forests, unlike national parks, have roads for logging and management with logging bulldozers available to assist in fire suppression. These roads are expensive to both construct and maintain, it is only from income from forest product sales that they have been funded in the past. Future roads in National Parks will need subsidy by the taxpayer or from increasing fees to visitors and tourists.

Unfortunately, there has been a deliberate management strategy to remove roads from National Parks and reserved areas. In Tasmania, the road bridge at Farmhouse Creek has been replaced with a pedestrian one. The Mt McCall road to the Western Wilderness was only saved after Ministerial intervention at the highest level.

Whilst there is some risk of arsonist using the road system to start wildfire, there is a greater risks of wildfires getting out of control due to a lack of access roads and fire trails. We urge the committee to compare the road system available to fire fighters against the locations of the ignition points of the fires this summer.

Conclusion

Members of Timber Communities Australia in Tasmania are convinced that the severity of the bushfires this summer can be substantially attributed to the fuel loads on the forest floor that have been allowed to build up in National Parks, reserves and other forest. These build up of fuels whilst a natural occurrence needs to be managed with fuel reduction burns and other mechanisms such as thinning of the forest.

TCA believes that preventive burning is the most effective tool for containing major bush fires in Australia. Properly conducted it is also environmentally beneficial, because it replicates the conditions under which Australia's forests evolved.

There needs to be a high level of cooperation and interaction between agencies responsible for land management and fire fighting. In Tasmania these agencies were well prepared to tackle the bush fire risk after a series of combined inter-agency workshops held over winter by Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service and Tasmanian Fire Service. This inter agency cooperation is seen as a major contributor to the success of managing bushfires.

We believe that management plans for our National Parks and reserves must include fire management as a priority to ensure that fire does not destroy the conservation values the parks are created to protect, and to ensure that fire does not escape from these parks to damage property and to threaten lives.

We believe that the House of Representatives inquiry has an exceptional opportunity to set the standard for fire management for the National for the new Century. In doing so, it must build upon the experiences of land managers and fire fighters over the first century of Federation. It must acknowledge the role of the first Australian in their management of the bush, and the evolution of our unique forests.

Kind regards,

Barry Chipman
State Coordinator