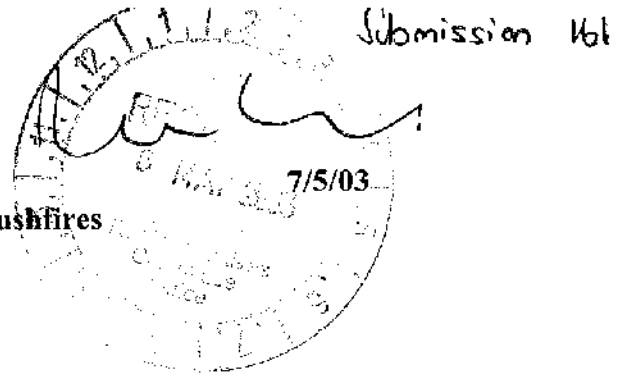


**Committee Secretary
House Select Committee On Recent Australian Bushfires
Department of the House Of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Dear Sir/ Madam,**



Thankyou for the opportunity tom express our knowledge of what occurred in the North East Victoria fires –specifically the Razorback Complex. Our family had first hand expericnce and knowledge of this fire, John being fire captain at Dartmouth and being actively involved in the situation for 5 weeks. We were also victims of the fire, our entire farm burnt out on Australia day 2003 our comments are based on first – hand, on the ground, eye witness experience of what went on. We hope you will adopt some of our suggestions, as we don't want other Australian families to go through what we are currently suffering.

1. Management of National Parks and State Forest in N.E. Victoria

1. Hazard reduction in the Mitta – Dartmouth – Lightning Creek areas in the State Forest and National Parks has been extremely limited and unsuccessful in the past twenty-five years. There has been no fuel reduction in the state forest around our farm over the last twenty-five year period. (Within a 10 km zone)
2. Fuel reduction has been incomplete in nearby areas because the areas designated for bums have not in fact been burnt thoroughly and are not followed up by an inspection.
3. The build up of weeds including blackberry, broom, and St Johns Wart and other highly flammable undergrowth, in State Forests and National Park, added significantly to the intensity and heat of the fire coming out of the forest onto our property.
4. There has been no effective attempt to control weeds in the forest and national parks. You could not walk through these areas prior to the fire due to weed infestation and undergrowth.
5. Good Neighbourhood program works have been very limited around our properties. We have only a one-year project carried out.

2. Bush Fire Management and Response

1. The recourses of the D.S.E. were totally inadequate to control the Razorback fire. There was no Aricl response to Razorback in the first 6-7 days. The fire should have been suppressed within the first three days.
2. Only very limited D.S.E. and Parks Victoria resources were mobilised into the Razorback in the first 6 days. Four to five D.S.E. / Parks Victoria personnel were sent into the fire within the first 3 days along with Brookes Earthmoving, who ringed the fire. Brookes Earthmoving was logging in the Razorback at the time. When the local Parks Victoria Officer requested additional recourses, he was refused assistance. The fire expanded from Day 4 onwards with no resources

allocated to suppress it. By Day 6 the fire had reached Sheever's Point and local farmers and CFA captains became concerned, and drove in to assess the problem. The group included John Scales, Mike Walsh, John Cardwell, and Tom Walsh. (all local farmers) and John Kissane (Mitta Policeman). Contact was made with Parks Victoria representatives David Foster and David Sace at Mt Wills, offering the services of a dozer and C.F.A. crews to help suppress the Fire. East Gippsland D.S.E. Officer in Charge, Ben Rankin, was contacted by satellite phone by John Scales, Captain of Dartmouth CFA, on the 13th January to propose a plan involving a huge containment line on the 6 Mile Track utilising C.F.A. and D.S.E. Resources. Ben Rankin stated he didn't need help, he had dozers and resources to deploy. There was a failure to recognise the problem early and deploy adequate resources. It was two days later that the proposed local plan was activated.

3. Resources did not start to arrive till Day 8 on the Razorback Fire. The slow response and delay of 2 days cost the Mitta Valley community valuable farming land. "The 2 day delay" meant the containment line and back burning plan eventually adopted in the Razorback, was not completed on time. The fire jumped the line near Begg's property, at the uncompleted section of the plan, and crossed into the Bogong National Park. Time delays in decision-making exacerbated the spread of fire and meant fire plans put into action were doomed to failure.
4. Local area C.F.A. crews (5 tankers, 24 hrs a day) worked tirelessly on the 6 Mile Containment Line for 6 days, along side D.S.E. crews and pigs. D.S.E. pigs are totally inadequate to fight wildfire – they are good for back burning but useless for spot overs. D.S.E. fire fighting equipment and skills are inadequate and inappropriate to fight wild fire.
5. D.S.E. fire fighting procedures left C.F.A. crews unsupported and in danger on many occasions in the Six Mile. It took 3 hours to change – over D.S.E. shifts, leaving C.F.A. crews on the line an additional 3 hours. D.S.E. crews would leave the line after 12 hour shifts regardless of the "state of fire". C.F.A. crews were left unsupported.
6. Outside C.F.A. assistance was too little, too late. Local area C.F.A. crews were exhausted and put at great danger. Army resources were utilised too late, the damage had been done in the Mitta Valley. C.F.A. strike teams deployed to the area were unprepared and unskilled to suppress fire in mountainous terrain. They stood back on the asphalt and watched local crews fight the fire.
7. Controllers outside the region controlled C.F.A. Strike Teams. There was no liaison between local or area C.F.A. captains and D.S.E.

controllers and Strike Teams. They were controlled outside the fire area – they weren't part of a "Total Fire Suppression Plan". The CFA Strike Team resource was a total waste of funds because they didn't contribute to putting out fires.

8. C.F.A. Strike Teams were an inappropriate response to controlling the fire. They let fires burn down into farmer's properties before spraying them with water. Strike Teams are not allowed to fight a running fire- too dangerous! If no official body will fight a running fire how do farmers protect their properties?
9. There was poor communication and liaison between D.S.E. controllers and local / area CFA Captains and District Group Officers. In many cases, there was no liaison.
10. There appeared to be 4 separate responses to the fire. Local C.F.A., D.S.E., C.F.A. Strike Teams and Private fire fighters. They rarely worked as a team. No one agency was in control. They rarely involved the local CFA Captains in planning.
11. D.S.E. carried out back burns within a kilometre of towns without informing local C.F.A. captains or the community. This often led to panic and stress.
12. D.S.E. did not provide up to date bulletins on the fire. Local fire captain would have to drive to fire fronts to assess the situation and then brief the community. Not knowing where the fire front is creates community unrest.
13. Having a number of agencies involved in the catering caused numerous problems. D.S.E crews received far superior cooked meals and had everything provided "free of charge". Paid workers were treated far better than our volunteers who often sacrificed their income and their livelihoods to fight the fires.
14. The definition of "asset protection" disadvantages farmers. Asset protection as practised by the D.S.E and the C.F.A. hierarchy is "towns and family homes, public buildings and structures". There is no regard to farming land, our fences or our stock. A house is more important than our farming land. This definition needs to be altered. Farmers value their farming land more than their homes – their land is their livelihood. Most C.F.A. Captains are farmers. The C.F.A. really needs to re-examine its philosophies if it is to retain members in the future. Your commitment to the C.F.A. is considerably reduced when you fight a State Fire for 3 weeks, only to find out that your own farm is not on the priority list.
15. When State Forest/ National Park fires burn onto private property, the Government should fully compensate the injured party. This is the only way there can be some accountability for their management of forests and forest fires.
16. Parks Vic/ DSE has failed to carry out preventative measures that would assist them to control forest fires. A total review of forest fire prevention and management is required.

17. Existing Parks Vic/ DSE staff need to be investigated to determine whether they carried out the tasks in their Park management Plans in regard to Fire Prevention.

3. State Government Recovery Strategies

1. Recovery strategies have been too slow to get off the ground. The V.F.F. is an exception, as they had fodder to farmers within 2 days of the fire damage. The \$500,00- they received has been delivered on the ground. The assistance with fodder is too little. Ten weeks down the track, all the fodder is used, our herds decimated, no rain to revitalise the burnt acres.
2. The fencing package is a deceptive ploy to make the Victorian Public believe the Brack's Government is helping farmers. They are only sympathetic to farmers who were insured, the farmers who don't need assistance. Very few farmers want dog fences, in fact not one farmer in the Mitta valley is taking up on this expensive venture, a subsidy of \$2.10 being about 1/6th of the true cost of erecting dog fences. Moreover, Wild Dog fencing is not a specific bush fire package; it has been around for 5 years, with few people being able to afford it.
3. The Brack Government's coordination of volunteers, \$200,000-, wasted because he only managed to get 100 volunteers on his list. Why? Because volunteers respond to local calls from volunteers, not centralised, bureaucratic phone numbers. Volunteers need to be accommodated and fed when travelling miles to assist families; there is no sign of funds to assist with this.
4. The clearing of 3 metre fence lines is unrealistic. Thirty- fifty-metre fence clearing lines that can double as fire breaks and access tracks would be more practical.
5. Farmers affected by the 2003 Fires should be eligible for full E.C. status. The drought assistance should have been immediately granted, we should not have to beg for assistance or apply for the dole. We are all forgetting that these were Government fires, which destroyed our lives. The repercussions of these fires will be suffered for the next 5 years.
6. There has been no assistance for pasture renovation. Farmers who have had to reseed their paddocks have done so at their own expense. A cash grant for reseeding would have solved many of the farmers' problems.
7. There has been no assistance with cost of agistment or freight of cattle to and home again from agistment.
8. Containment fencing was only approved after cattle stood on burnt paddocks for 8 weeks. What a joke! Farmers need to be funded for 3-4 containment areas, as the cattle have different requirements at different ages, requiring

segregation. All our boundary fences were destroyed, so our cattle had to be herded into several burnt out paddocks for weeks before anyone came near us to assist with containment fencing. Thank god for volunteers, Rotary and Apex Clubs, because the Brack's Government sure doesn't care. Containment fencing is also supposed to protect environmentally sensitive burnt areas. A lot of damage is done in 8 weeks if you can't keep your cattle away from an area.

9. The Department of Primary Industry response has been sympathetic and timely. Staff helped us out and rang to see how we were coping. They have provided us with advice on cattle health, feeding and fodder. However, their support has dropped away. No one has been near us for 3 weeks. Maybe they think the problems have all gone away? Our farming problems have only just begun as winter approaches and we have no rain and no pasture growth.

4. Recommendations

Fire Management

1. We need a single, responsive, fully resourced bushfire-fighting agency. The aim of the agency should be to suppress fire quickly and prevent damage to private property. Ariel support is the key to fires in inaccessible areas.
2. If CFA Strike Teams are used again, they must be lead by local CFA Captains. The way they operated in the recent fires was a complete waste of resources- they were ineffective and provided a false sense of security to farmers.
3. Personnel need to be highly trained in fighting an active fire.
4. Fire fighting agencies should not be allowed to leave a fire unattended or under resourced.

Park Management

1. There needs to be a review of forest management. The taxpayers demand responsible forest management, with accountability back to the public. We all love our forests, however, Parks Vic have destroyed them and they should all be replaced by a new responsive agency. Parks Vic/ DSE has failed as land managers.
2. Forests should be accessible to all- I support the Bush Users Group and its philosophy. Cattle should be able to graze the high country, simply fence off the sphagnum moss areas. Reduce the undergrowth. The minimal damage carried out by the mountain cattlemen is nothing compared to what Parks Vic has let happen.
3. Farmers should be given the land management role for 1 kilometre around their properties. This way we can ensure that weeds and

undergrowth are minimal. Firebreaks around properties should also be allowed so we can protect ourselves from forest fires.

4. Fuel reduction must be carried out in all areas surrounding private property, community structures and towns. This disaster can not be allowed to happen again.
5. Research needs to be carried out to advise and assist farmers on the types of fire protection strategies they can put in place to minimise fire damage i.e. types of trees planted, clearance around boundaries.
6. Farmers need to be fully compensated for bushfires.

4. Recovery Responses

1. Emergency assistance such as cash payments should be paid to farmers following the fire- currently you have to have your house burnt down to receive a grant from Human Services. We needed additional financial support with phone calls, fuel, and transport of cattle away from the fires, groceries and house cleaning. We received no personal assistance.
2. Casual labour to help in the first 2-3 weeks following a fire is essential. Following a fire, the family is distressed and can't make decisions. There are cattle to muster and sort, hungry cattle to feed, agistment to organise, fences to mend, bookwork, and the organisation of fodder. There was no one to help with all this!
3. Farmers should be provided with adequate fodder to feed their cattle following a State Fire. Other farmers should not have had to donate their precious hay; as most of Victoria is in drought. The State Government should face up to its responsibilities and provide aid.
4. Containment fencing should be made available the day after the fires, along with the labour to construct it. If you destroy other people's property, you should recompense it.
5. Tourism and small business suffered financial losses in some areas for a limited time (2-3 weeks). But look past a couple of weeks income to the long-term affect on the farmers- we will be losing income for the next 5 years. Funds need to go to those most in need, not to those who get the most airplay.
6. Most small towns have bounced back very quickly after the fires, with sightseers and tourists flooding to the burnt areas. Tourism recovery strategies have been timely. Mr Pandanopolos has been sympathetic and responsive to the needs of tourism.

7. Volunteer coordination needs to be localised. Lions, Rotary and Apex don't need Mr Bracks to coordinate them, but they probably would like some petrol money, food and accommodation.
8. Local Government has largely failed in the Towong Shire to follow up on the needs of farmers affected by the fires. Money is being channelled into halls, streetscapes and parties, usually held nowhere near the bushfires. A town such as Dartmouth, which was nearly destroyed, has received no assistance at all. Our community, the only one in the whole shire, which came close to the flames, has largely been ignored.

Thankyou for the opportunity to share our experiences and recommendations.

**Robyn and John Scales
Farmers, Dartmouth**