

Submission to the Federal Government's Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires



Submission No. 223

**By:
the Prospectors and Miners Association of
Victoria Inc.
GPO Box 1706P, Melbourne Vic. 3001**



ABN: 47 352 796 896
Reg No: A 0000 422H

**Submission prepared by:
Rita Bentley, President.
Phone: (03) 95721578
Fax: (03) 95721579
Mobile: 0408 328 640
Email: ritabentley@ihug.com.au**

9th May, 2003

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

Dear Sir,

Submission to the Inquiry

Attached is the Association's submission to the Inquiry.

We would be pleased to provide clarification or further information if required.

Yours sincerely

**Rita Bentley
PMAV President
Phone: (03) 9572 1578 or mobile 0408 328 640
Fax: (03) 95721579
Email: ritabentley@ihug.com.au**

**Submission by
the Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria Inc.
to the Federal Government's Inquiry
into the recent Australian bushfires**

Background of Association

The PMAV was established in 1980 to represent the interests of prospectors and small-scale miners in Victoria. The formation of the Association was due to the growing negative influence of green politics on the prospecting and mining industries.

The activities of our membership stretches from recreational prospectors using metal detectors or gold pans to those operating mines on areas no bigger than 5 hectares. We operate under strict Government environmental and safety regulations.

Most prospectors and miners operate on public land. We have a personal interest in ensuring public land is well managed. We also have a special affinity with the heritage and traditions associated with these important activities.

Many of our members reside and/or operate in areas that were either affected by the recent fires or in areas that remain at risk. We continue to be concerned for their future safety.

Gold and heritage issues

Victorians have enjoyed the benefits of gold mining and prospecting for over 150 years. Much of the land in Victoria's goldfields was not available for selection as private land, and therefore clearance, because of the wealth that lay below. It is thanks to the gold mining industry that much of the central and north-east Victorian forests still exist.

As far as we are aware the recent Victorian fires damaged only two operating mines. The Red Robin Mine near Harrierville and the Maude and Yellow Girl at Swifts Creek. Both mines lost present day infrastructure as well as heritage mining equipment.

The fires burnt through many of Victoria's remote goldfields across the high country and an untold amount of heritage has been lost as these fires destroyed all in their wake.

The PMAV's North-East Branch is assisting in the recovery of mining equipment actually uncovered by the fires. The Branch, with the approval of the land managers, is restoring an historic quartz crushing battery whose location was unknown until the fires – it had been hidden under a mountain of blackberries.

Prospecting and mining activities have been restricted over recent years with the claim that these restrictions would improve the environment. Yet the scale of our activities is so small and always temporary that these claims do not make sense. A survey conducted by the Victorian Government ⁽¹⁾ showed that over a 20 year period a total of only 209 hectares

(ic 10 hectares per year) of the central Victorian goldfields was disturbed by small-scale miners. This has all now been rehabilitated and is supporting biodiversity.

We have continually asked for proof regarding claims of environmental damage arising from our activities – no proof has been forthcoming. The environmental damage arising from the recent fires, however, has been intense and yet the State Government has not indicated it will change the land management practices that were so obviously to blame.

We are not causing any environmental degradation but green, ideologically based land management decisions certainly are.

Removing the mining industry

Much has been heard of the importance of retaining access to the timber industry's earth moving machinery for fire fighting purposes. The mining industry's equipment and manpower is also important. Obviously, when decisions are made to exclude mining from areas and the miners move on, so does their machinery.

Health & Safety Issues

Stories abound of the risks that firefighters take to protect life and property. The risks have been dramatically increased over recent years by the policy of 'management by neglect' of our public land – particularly those areas within national and state parks. The build up of fuel on the forest floor and the proliferation of weeds to add to the fuel are all controllable and Government surely must have a duty of care to ensure a safe workplace both for Government firefighters and volunteers.

Industry is forced to comply with tight occupational health and safety regulations – is Government to be held any less responsible for its duty of care to volunteers and its own fire crews?

Public land management – the crux of the problem

We have been part of the increasing criticism of the management of public land and the continuing lock-out of traditional activities in response to political pressure from well funded, ideologically driven green groups. In Victoria many activities are automatically prohibited within national and state parks. These include mining and prospecting (with a few exceptions).

The current Victorian State Government boasts that it has created more national parks than any previous Government but fails to ensure that these parks are properly managed or are safe. The State Government is proposing to burden Victoria with even more parks whilst refusing to investigate the growing community concerns regarding park management.

The PMAV is an active member of the Bush Users Group and fully supports the efforts of BUG to achieve a more realistic administrative and management regime for our public land. We were a contributor to the *Flamin' Parks – The Neighbours From Hell* document (2) that BUG published last year.

We were signatory to the attached letter expressing joint concerns regarding public land management recently sent to senior Victorian politicians (3). We were active participants in

the 'Access for All' rally in Bendigo in March 2002. A list of the demands arising from that 3000 plus strong rally are attached, together with supporting documentation (4).

We have tried every avenue to make those in power listen to our concerns regarding the misdirection of land management. To date all of our concerns have been ignored.

It is time that public land management was refocused towards actively conserving the environment rather than nit-picking about which activities can or can't occur – especially when there is no evidence to support their exclusion.

It is vital for the wellbeing of Australia that the current 'lock it up' mentality of public land management stops. State Governments must be held accountable for land use decisions which exclude traditional activities and put people, flora, fauna and property at risk. State Governments must be forced to show that their current system of land management is actually working – we are of the strong belief that, at least in Victoria, it is not!

Brief case study on how public land management decisions are made in Victoria.

The Victorian Government recently declared 105,000 hectares of new or expanded national and state parks in central and north east Victoria following an expensive, six year 'Investigation' by the Environment Conservation Council.

The ECC Investigation was fundamentally flawed and substantially biased. Decisions on land use were made without evidence to support them and by rejecting evidence which didn't suit their ideology.

Major mistakes were published as fact, when we pointed this out to the ECC they acknowledged them but failed to withdraw the faulty document. The public was seriously misled regarding the impacts of the parks.

All attempts to bring our concerns to the attention of the Government were ignored and the Government appointed spin-doctors worked against us constantly. The Government protected the ECC. It was as if the ECC were doing its bidding and were not to be touched. The Government refused to even listen to our legitimate concerns about the ECC's activities.

The 'Investigation' was a sham. It was simply window dressing to cover the green agenda of State Government policies. The public was supposed to be consulted – but no-one truly listened.

The new parks have devastated the central Victorian timber industry, closed down the 150 year old sustainable eucalyptus oil production industry, prohibited access to major goldfields for the mining industry and even the apiarists are concerned for their future. These effects on industry, and much needed jobs, in rural Victoria have all taken place without any proper consideration of what will happen to country people.

The State Government has already been forced to backpedal on its firewood policies when the public realised that there simply wasn't enough firewood available from the area to

keep those reliant on it warm over winter. These policies were formed on the basis of the ECC's reports and are an indication of their accuracy and reliability. The problem of firewood supplies for north-east Victoria is still being ignored.

It is obvious to those who know the region that it is only a matter of time before the box ironbark forests suffer the same fate as the alpine country. Yet no-one listens!

Politically difficult

Public land management decisions are too politically difficult for most politicians to make. The immense pressure from well-funded green groups to close down public land to 'save the environment' is rarely questioned. They put up a few clever figures and many politicians just accept what they say and legislate accordingly. The true story is much more complex and therefore difficult to understand for city politicians. It is often glossed over and the easier, warm and fuzzy, green argument is accepted.

Early last year I was given the attached document 'Living beside a National Park' (5) by a resident of Licola, Victoria. I was so concerned by its contents that I wrote to the Premier, Steve Bracks, (6) expressing my concerns regarding the contents of the document and asking what steps were being taken to ensure the same couldn't happen again. A year later, I am yet to receive a reply; no doubt the question was too difficult to answer – even for the State Premier - and look what happened.

Fire management and public land management are complex issues. Green political pressure makes them even more difficult. It is time that public land management decisions were taken out of the political arena – such as was attempted in the RFA process, but this time with guarantees. It was too easy for the State Government to renege on its agreement. Someone in power must stand up to the greens and enforce the rights of those conducting legitimate activities. This issue in itself is worthy of a full Parliamentary Investigation or perhaps even a Royal Commission of Inquiry – we simply must find a better way.

Summary

The most important obligation of any Government is the welfare of its people. Unless significant changes are made to the way in which public land use and management decisions are made then more Australians will be put at unnecessary risk of death by fire.

Governments must be compelled to improve public land management and must be held accountable when standards are not met. We have seen how dangerous public land mismanagement can be so Governments must be forced to act and not make the people of Australia face such a situation again. This issue must not be swept under the political carpet – it is simply too dangerous.

Submission prepared by:

**Rita Bentley, President, Prospectors & Miners Association of Victoria Inc.
Phone: (03) 9572 1578, Fax: 03 95721579 mobile: 0408 328 640
email: ritabentley@ihug.com.au
9th May, 2003**

References:

1. Gold Mining Disturbance on Public Land in the Box-Ironbark Ecosystem (1998). Report by Minerals and Petroleum Victoria and Flora and Fauna Program, Department of Natural Resources & Environment, Melbourne. (copy available if required)
 2. Flamin' Parks – the Neighbours From Hell, published by the Bush Users Group (Vic) 2002. (attached)
 3. Open letter sent to Victorian Politicians – Bush Users Group and supporters. (attached)
 4. 'Access For All' Rally media kit, March 2002 (attached)
 5. Living Beside a National Park, by the Licola community, March 2002 (attached)
 6. PMAV letter to Premier Bracks regarding public safety and fires, May 2002 (attached)
- Note the references marked as attached will be sent via Australia Post, as they are not available electronically.*