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22 May, 2003

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

Dear Madam / Sir,

**Re: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Australian Bushfires**

I write on behalf of the Forest Owners Conference and commend to you the attached submission for your inquiry.

The Forest Owners Conference is an industry group of plantation owners and fire fighting agencies located in the southern border area of Victoria and South Australia. We are an integral part of the region's fire fighting resources have extensive experience in fire prevention and protection in the rural environment.

Although the 2003 fires did not directly impact the Green Triangle Region, the area was severely impacted by the 1983 fires. The lessons learnt from 1983 are still relevant today and are foremost in the prevention strategies implemented by the Forest Owners Conference members.

I trust that this submission will assist you in your deliberations. We would be pleased to present a verbal submission. The Forest Owners Conference would also like to invite members of the Select Committee on a tour of the Green Triangle Region to look at bushfire prevention and mitigation strategies.

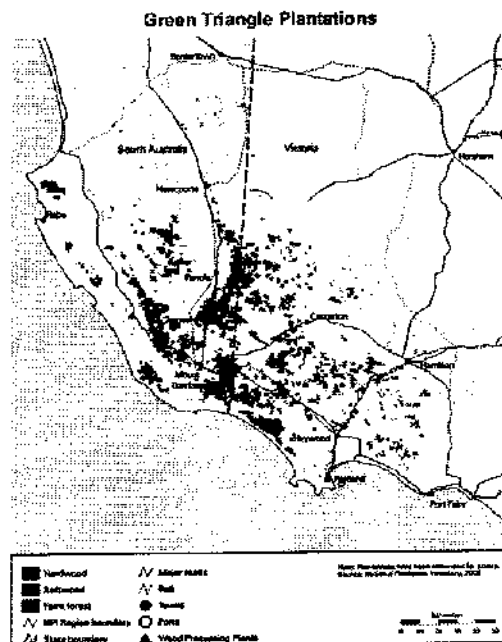
Yours faithfully

**Ruth Ryan  
Chairperson,  
Forest Owners Conference**

# Submission to The Parliamentary Inquiry on Australian bushfires From The Forest Owners Conference

## The Green Triangle Forest Owners Conference

The Green Triangle Region is Australia's largest plantation growing region in terms of both area and economic output. It encompasses the area bounded by Portland and Hamilton in South West Victoria and Naracoorte and Robe in South East South Australia. Since the first plantations were established in the late 1800's nearly 300,000 hectares of softwood and hardwood plantations have been established in the Region. These plantations now support significant processing and export industries in the area.



The Forest Owners Conference (FOC) is an industry group currently made up of 11 plantation growers and fire fighting agencies in the Green Triangle Region. The group commenced following the Caroline Fires in October 1979 and have been meeting biannually to discuss fire issues and have developed well coordinated fire prevention protocol and wildfire response procedures. FOC members manage the majority of the Region's 300,000 hectares of plantation land and form an integral part of the community fire suppression forces.

The Forest Owners Conference Charter is:

- To reinforce and encourage effective cooperation and mutual support between forest owners from both sides of the South Australian / Victorian Border, in relation to fire issues.
- To provide a forum where operational fire issues can be discussed and where appropriate agree on a standardised approach.
- To promote well coordinated fire prevention protocol and wildfire response procedures between forest owners.
- To comply with and promote FOC plantation design guidelines
- To support aerial detection and suppression arrangements for the Green Triangle Region.

## Forest Owners Conference submission to the Inquiry

FOC Members have extensive experience and can speak with authority on the management of fire in the rural environment. There are a number of principle tenants with which the FOC would like to preface their submission to this inquiry:

1. Fire is a natural part of the Australian environment and will always be a factor in the management of rural land. The severity of the annual fire season will vary from year to year, depending on the

rainfall deficit, fuel loads and weather conditions. The key is to reduce the potential of major impact on life, property, community and the environment.

2. All land managers (including Government Agencies) have a duty of care to protect the environment, neighbours and the community from unreasonable levels of fire risk.
3. Bushfire management is a holistic approach. It requires the integration of strategic prevention measures, including property design to facilitate fire control, hazard reduction and management of ignition potentials, with escalating preparedness according to risk and rapid and effective suppression capability.

Rather than try to encompass the whole bushfire scenario, FOC will generally comment on the issues of fire management that impact to the greatest extent on the plantation forest industry and areas where FOC see that our experience may assist the deliberations of the Committee.

### **Comments Specific to the Terms of Reference**

#### **Extent and Impact of bushfires – TOR (a)**

The loss of greater than 11,000 hectares of plantation in the ACT and a further 2,500 hectares in Victoria has a significant impact on the plantation owners, wood production industries and local communities. There are short term effects resulting from the significant shift in resource base with the need to salvage any timber before it deteriorates. This results in a rescheduling of harvest and re-establishment contractors and mills forced to take sub-optimal resource mix. All of which may result in significant economic impact. The longer term impact maybe the loss of industries, which may provide significant local employment.

To put the loss into some perspective, the loss of 20,000 hectares of plantation in the Green Triangle Region in the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 still has a significant effect on the local community today. It has been estimated that the current loss in volume is ~ 500,000 m<sup>3</sup>/annum, the equivalent of an additional major sawmill in the area, employing up to 500 people directly and supporting 1500 to 2000 people locally.

The plantation industry has long lag times between planting the crop and the out-turn of product, therefore plantation owners have to take any threats to their crop seriously. The community and fire services also need to recognise that it is not just a case of burning a few trees but that burnt forests may have a significant impact on the economy and long term employment.

R1 – Fire services recognise that timber plantations are significant economic and community assets.

#### **Risk factors, land management, prevention, suppression and control strategies – TOR (b, c and d)**

Coordinated fire prevention development must ensure a consistent approach between all land owners and managers with clear responsibilities for prevention and suppression and accountability for outcomes. Risk management is most effective when a single entity is responsible for the prevention, pre-suppression planning and suppression.

All land managers have responsibility to ensure appropriate planning and management of their estate will result in effective and rapid fire suppression. This may involve the provision of appropriate access track, firebreaks and water supplies and well as the management of fuel and ignition potential on their property.

It is a known fact that the majority of fires that have resulted in significant plantation losses have started outside of plantation land and the 2002/03 losses are no exception to this fact. We are thus keenly aware of the impact that our neighbours can have on us and wish to see consistent fire protection policies across all classes of land holdings.

We commend to you the approaches that FOC have taken in establishing property design guidelines (see appendix – FOC Plantation Design Guidelines) and the development of ignition management protocols such as modification of machinery exhaust temperatures, specification of minimum fire equipment / resources for all equipment working in plantations, the implementation of work bans and restriction on public access when local risk factors are high. We believe that similar guidelines and protocols should be adopted by all industries working in fire prone areas.

R2 – Rural industries and communities be encouraged to develop policies and protocols to minimise fire risk through good property design, fuel management and minimisation of ignition risks.

### **Fire Research – TOR (e)**

Fire is an Australian community problem. We cannot afford to become complacent and must continually search for knowledge and innovations, which may assist in reducing the impact of fires. To this end, it is important that Federal and State Governments continue to provide adequate funding for research and development. Topics that require continued research include:

- Fire climate and weather.
- Real time monitoring of fire danger risk
- Wildfire behaviour and development
- Fire management techniques
  - Effective work practices and machinery design to prevent ignition
  - Fuel reduction burning and fuel modification
  - Effective suppression strategies
  - Back burning as a control strategy
  - Effective control lines
  - Safe fire lighting techniques
  - Fire frequency
  - Ecological impacts of wildfires and fuel reduction burning
  - Ability to modify fuel loads and consequently reduce fire severity
  - Smoke management modeling
- Firefighter health and safety
- Development of fire fighting equipment
- Development of effective fire ground communication and information systems
- Ecological burning strategies
- Effective property design
- Community risk management and people protection
- Development of appropriate codes for building design.
- Community education programs

R3 – Federal and State Governments ensure adequate funding for fire research

### **Planning and building codes – TOR (f)**

FOC have developed Plantation design guidelines to assist in the mitigation of the bushfire risk. However we are also aware of a number of cases where Local Government has allowed inappropriate development such as residential subdivisions, next to or within existing plantations and forests, without adequate consideration of the fire risk. It is important that a consistent approach be taken and that neighbours existing rights should be considered prior to granting development approvals. Plantation companies should not be expected to create larger fire breaks just because someone has built a house too close to the plantation.

Australians who choose to live in the rural environment and on the rural urban fringe need to also take responsibility for their actions and take additional measures to protect their property. Again these include good property design, effective management of fuels and ignition sources on their properties and may even mean paying higher insurance premiums for higher risk.

There is a certain level of ignorance in the community of the risks and responsibilities of living in a fire prone environment. Government – Federal, State and Local and the insurance industry have a role in educating the community of these risks and responsibilities.

R4 – Ensure consistent approaches to planning for fire prevention and protection and that existing rights of neighbours are considered in development applications.

R5 – Federal, State and local Government, along with the insurance industry fund a communications program highlighting the risks and responsibilities of living in a fire prone environment.

### **Response arrangements and Resource Deployment - TOR (g & h)**

Large intense forest fires are capable of overwhelming even the best equipped fire fighting force. The key to minimising the impact on the community is good prevention works, good planning, early detection and rapid suppression. The first attack force must be highly mobile and have sufficient resources to be effective.

The response preparedness should be matched with the risk. Real time monitoring of the fire risk should occur and the suppression resources deployed accordingly. Contracts for special resources, such as fire fighting aircraft should be flexible enough to allow scaling up and down of resources according to risk.

There has been a tendency in recent years for the Government to support large major contracts for equipment such as the Erikson Skycranes. Whilst these are effective fire suppression equipment, under certain circumstances, (especially around the urban fringe,) the support of these should not be at the expense of smaller more flexible aircraft. The FOC are strongly of the opinion that fixed wing fire bombers and medium helicopters are vital pieces of fire fighting equipment. We cite numerous cases where the rapid deployment of fire bombers in conjunction with ground forces, in first attack has resulted in the effective suppression of the fire before it has a chance to develop into a major conflagration.

It is not uncommon to have severe fire weather across significant geographical areas. Coupled with lightning storms, this often results in numerous fire starts, which presents a challenge to all fire services. With numerous trained and competent local aerial agricultural aircraft on standby for fire bombing there is a high probability of rapid and successful first attack.

During the 2003 fires in Victoria, the majority of the fire bombing resources were deployed to the fires in the East of the State. Whilst we don't dispute that you deal with the going fires as a priority, we felt that the west of the State was left vulnerable on a number of high fire danger days. Inquiries to local agricultural aircraft contractors revealed that there were suitable planes and pilots available for standby that had not be contracted by the fire authorities. The pre-season planning needs to include provisions for the short term contracting of this equipment and ensuring that the equipment and skills of the operators are to specification.

The Federal Government's sale of commercial radio frequencies has also had an impact on fire communications. Most fire and emergency services have had to change frequencies in recent years. Unfortunately the States have also developed systems that are incompatible with each other. In this area, Victoria and South Australia both have Government Radio Network trunk systems, which do not communicate with each other. Both systems also have a conventional system for fire suppression radio traffic but one is VHF and the other UHF! This means that fire control vehicles need to carry and monitor at least two, more often three and sometimes up to five radios! The UHF frequencies also have very limited range in forested and hilly environments and may result in poor fire ground communications.

R6 -- Fire Services develop real time monitoring of fire risk and deploy resources accordingly.

R7 – Fire services explore flexible contract arrangements to ensure adequate fire bombing coverage across all regions with high fire danger.

R8 - That seamless communication systems are developed to allow fully integrated fire fighting efforts, regardless of State Borders.

#### **Liability and Insurance – TOR (i)**

The issue of fire fighter liability is perhaps the greatest threat to good incident control decision making and is a major disincentive for community members to participate in fire suppression activities. The liability issue is further clouded with increasing reliance on contract fire fighting resources and corporate volunteers. The Victorian Government response to retarding the loss of rural volunteers has been to introduce legislation that not only requires rural industries to form fire brigades, but also makes company directors liable for all incidents involving their fire crews even when working under the control of the Country Fire Authority.

FOC are concerned with the potential for incidents at fires to lead to massive rises in workers compensation premiums (or the inability to self-insure as allowed in South Australia) and the potential for industrial man-slaughter charges to be brought against company directors. We believe that fire fighters and their employers should be covered by a common insurance policy regardless of the whether that person is a volunteer or employed by a fire service or company brigade.

R9 – The Government restrict fire fighter liability and ensure adequate insurance and compensation for all fire fighters and their employers regardless of employment or volunteer status.

### **Fire Fighters and the role of Volunteers – TOR (j)**

Training and competency assessment of all fire fighters is essential. Unfortunately again, States and even fire fighting agencies within States have different expectations for training and assessment. State services tend to have very parochial attitudes to training which leads to a lot of frustration when Companies have fire fighting responsibilities on two sides of the State Border. The Australasian Fire Authorities Council has developed some National competency training modules but there is differing standards in their implementation. Bush fire training needs to be reviewed and national standards implemented across all fire services.

All fire fighters, including volunteers, must be trained and skilled appropriate to the types of risks they are likely to face. With the changing rural landscape – an increase in cropping, intensive agriculture, timber crops, hobby farms and industrial development around rural cities, the focus of the training needs to reflect the local conditions.

R10 – National bushfire training and competency standards be reviewed and standardised across all fire fighting services.

### **Acknowledgement**

The Forest Owners Conference would like to thank the Federal Government for the opportunity to comment on bushfire management in Australia and would be very pleased to make a verbal submission to the Inquiry Committee if invited to do so.

Yours faithfully,

Ruth Ryan  
Chairperson  
Forest Owners Conference

Appendix – FOC Plantation Design Guidelines