



SUBMISSION



TO COMMITTEE SECRETARY

HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE on the
recent Australian bushfires

Dept. of the House of
Representatives

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

FROM Ronald J. Evans

Submission 2003

January 8th 2003 in Victoria's North East and East Gippsland, was the beginning of, what turned out to be 59 days of very questionable fire management operations in recent history. The long-term impact on the bush and its inhabitants, the environment, water quality, tourism and in particular the local community in general, will be felt by the Nation for many years to come. Similar numbers of lightning strikes across Eastern Victoria on previous years have been extinguished by departmental foresters and firefighters, loggers and contractors, all assisted by volunteers and career staff of the CFA. (eg. 1978, 1980, 1983, 1985 & 1986).

10 to 12 years ago, we in the North East of Victoria had 3 to 5 wet summers in a row when very little, if any, fuel reduction burning was able to be carried out, and after about 6 years the fuel reduction program was about, or in excess of 130,000, acres behind the planned program. This meant that the Dept. responsible for the management of the Crown Land in the North East has been in 'catch up' ever since. It would appear that the same applies to East Gippsland. (refer attached sheet) It has been speculated that in recent years, because of the fuel build up on the forest floor, that a cool burn was either going to be very difficult or no longer possible. Too much fuel to do a cool burn at the end of summer, must wait for rain, then when it rains it is too wet to burn.

Areas that are declared Wilderness Areas, and are supposed to be left in their natural state, are disasters waiting to happen. Because fire is part of the Australian ecology, there is nothing natural about locking up areas of our bush and saying this is the way it used to happen before white man came along. During the Caledonian Fire 5 years ago, it was documented by the Dept. responsible at the time, that the fuel loading levels in the Avon Wilderness Area, under threat from this fire, were 32 to 33 tonnes to the Hectare, so that loading will be much higher today. Further to that, the tracks had not been maintained since the Wilderness had been proclaimed.

Some suggestions that we as a society may need to consider, and accept, for future management of our bushlands, because just using 'expert advice' has certainly proved to be disastrous this time around:-

1. In addition to scientific and expert advice, which is always invaluable, we need to listen to, and heed, before it is all lost, generations of bush users and experience (eg. logging operators, mountain cattlemen, aboriginals etc.) and tap into this valuable resource with regard to management of the high country and the bush, rather than just pushing political agendas. For too long now, politics, votes and money have driven the bush management program. Sadly, large portions of the areas that have been burnt out this time will be lucky to recover for the next generation (our children or grandchildren).
2. Review the cattle grazing policies and areas that are now available to lease with the view of increasing these areas, where possible, and so get some of the fuel reduction at no cost.

. When reading about the history of the high country, it appeared that common sense and self-regulation was a reasonable way of determining stocking rates. No doubt this could be achieved with balanced discussion between the users and the Dept.. Further, in consultation with the appropriate Dept., the mountain cattleman could do some of the fuel reduction burning when bringing their stock off the high country at the end of



the season, as was done in the past, but now could be done on a more cooperative and planned basis. Fires lit along ridge lines will burn further down the sides into the valleys, depending on the season, and this could be done virtually for very little cost, therefore saving the Dept. concerned.

To achieve either, acceptance that there was or is a problem in the current management philosophies and aims, there will need to be a change in departmental and political attitudes and thinking when dealing with sensitive issues such as management of bush which then reflects into fire prevention.

FIRE FIGHT

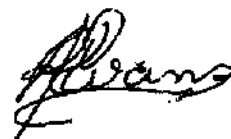
The effectiveness of the fire fighting process now seems to be overshadowed and hamstrung by directives coming from middle management upwards in the, what used to be called a chain of command, ICC structure of the AIMS / ICS management system. The firefighters (both career and volunteer) at the fire front were eager to do the job at hand, but were to often redirected to other duties by a distant management. Little to no advice was sought, for overall planning, from local knowledge or from the fire front. Aggressive firefighting appears to be a thing of the past. Safety is the new buzzword. It would appear that in the minds of some people that safety is a new thing just recognized after the tragic events of the Linton fire, and that before that time firefighters just went out and confronted the fires with little or no concern for their own or fellow volunteers safety and wellbeing. Firefighting is a dangerous occupation in any environment, particularly its unpredictability, and unfortunately, sometimes lives may be lost. Defensive firefighting will mean larger fires and huge losses of assets, (and that is in no way denigrating the value of human life) and when farmers were told, during the recent fires, that they were on their own, when it came to property protection, it went down like a lead balloon. A better balance of safety and recognition of a fightable fire as against a fire that is beyond human intervention, an issue that could be dealt with in future training programs. The 'fire ground' should be exempt from the influences of OH&S law, as it is not a controllable work place, as part of the intent of the Act.

'The Organization' (DSE or the CFA) has the ability to amass large amount of resources and equipment in a fairly short period of time, but the effective and efficient use of those resources. (eg. tankers parked and not crewed) has to be brought into question.

In summing up:-

1. More consultation with the public with regard to the management of the Crown Land, after all it is our (the public) land also.
2. Management, planning and decision making of the firefight to be made in consultation with those in command at the fire front.
3. More notice should be taken of local input into the decision making process.
4. More efficient and effective use of the resources that were available.

With the modern technology, communications, equipment, (both aerial and on the ground) and all the other resources available, and the minuscule number of extreme fire danger days out of the 59 days, one begs to ask how we managed to burn as much or more than in 1939.



Thursday, 27 March 2003

ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

185

Summary of annually proposed fuel management program in Gippsland

Burning Zone	Total area in Ha	% of region in Zone	Likely Burning cycle (years)	% of region treated annually	Average annual target (Ha)
1	89 344	5.47	5	0.69	17 679
2	408 437	15.85	10	1.58	40 783
3	115 830	43.30	20	2.58	55 713
4	468 593	18.19	As required	0.2	5 132
5	494 630	19.19	never	—	—
Total	2 576 835	100.00	—	4.63	119 527

Source: DNRE Gippsland Fire Protection Plan, Gerard O'Neill, June 1999

Gippsland Fuel reduction burning achievements 1992 to 2002

	Average last 10 years
Zone 1	6,576
Zone 2	23,712
Zone 3	22,213
Zone 4	1,589
Total	54,244

Source: DNRE Gippsland Region Fire Management Profile Geoff Kennedy Oct 2002

