


  
Committee Secretary

House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires

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 Address :  
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## INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Dear Sir/Madam,

### FIRE OBSERVATION - MT BUFFALO JANUARY 2003

I feel compelled to put pen to paper and express my concerns over our recent fires in the North-East, particularly Mt Buffalo. I am a resident of Porepunkah, with 30 years' experience with the former Forest Commission, C.F.&L. in hardwood and softwood management, with a major roll in fire prevention in the Bright forest district.

When the fire first started by lightning on 7<sup>th</sup> January, I was not concerned even though we were in one of the worst droughts for some years. It reminded me of 1978 when we had 54 strikes between Mansfield and Corryong - 17 alone in the Bright district. These 17 fires were in Alpine Ash areas and mixed special forest in the lower elevation areas and were contained by the Forest Commission, C.F.A. and Sawmill crews, with little help from aircraft.

I mention the above fire to demonstrate what can be done by using tried and proven fire suppression rules, i.e. protect assets when fires are running under adverse weather conditions and strive to contain fires at night when conditions are more favourable, i.e. lower flame height and cooler working conditions for crews.

What alarms me is the way basic fire control measures seemed to be ignored in trying to control the last fires.

From my observations, when the fires first started on the western side of Mt Buffalo it was seven days before the weather turned and blew the fire onto the eastern side of Mt Buffalo. That is a long period of time in anyone's book to not have it contained, either by hand crews or fire bombers. Certainly there were other fires going at the same time but containment lines for backburning should have been done in this amount of time.

I became directly involved with the local C.F.A. when the fire spotted on to the eastern side of Mt Buffalo. Even at this stage this fire was not lost if conventional methods of suppression were used.

To my amazement, spot fires were left unchecked as crews in tankers were instructed that they were not to work on a running firefront so all strike teams became observers of a fire that kept spreading for three days and nights unchecked and was to become a juggernaut that no-one could control.

As mentioned, three perfect nights for backburning followed after the eastern side of Mt Buffalo caught fire, even with advice from former Forests and local C.F.A. that backburning would have to be done immediately in the vicinity of Goldies Spur, if control was to be achieved. No action was taken in this regard, all advice ignored. This lack of action was not due to shortage of resources as tanker crews were in attendance watching the fire grow.

Strike teams were not to work on running edges as directed by Incident Control Centre.. These instructions resulted on more than one occasion where on request by farmers and local C.F.A. battling to control spotovers were told "no, we can't go in there, it's too hot" and yet they were at the time observing local efforts to contain fires from 100 metres away in their fully-equipped tankers.

It is history now that on the Tuesday, the weather blew in and fire escaped into Devils Creek, eventually devastating the Alpine Ash on Tea Tree Spur. This Alpine Ash was 50 years' work by the former Forest Commission in regeneration after logging to maintain a sustained yield for logging that now is lost. The same devastation happened in the West Kiewa logging area.

Strike teams were not under the control of the local group officer as they should have been on the fire line, but were controlled by some person at Incident Control Centre 30 kilometres away who did not have a clue what was going on at the fire front. D.N.R.E. Incident Control Centre instruction to crews had to be seen to be believed. They too were under instruction not to work on running edges and in the frustrating position of watching spot fires escape when normally these fires could be easily mopped up. These instructions to C.F.A and D.N.R. crews all helped to create what we see today as total devastation of our environment and logging areas.

I would encourage all people to lobby their local politicians at every opportunity to pressure the Government into holding a Bush Fire Review into the handling of these fires and to investigate the D.S.E. and C.F.A as to why these fires were not attacked in the conventional way. It is hard to believe that the persons/officers of C.F.A and D.S.E. could change the fire suppression tactics. It was not the lack of resources that prompted this and should not have been the safety factor as to my knowledge there has never been a fatality when fighting fires at night as this is the only time to control large fires.

In closing I would like to say that if any accolades are handed out after the fires are out, all those men and women of the C.F.A and D.S.E who worked at the fire front are worthy recipients as are the private dozer operators and other home volunteers.

The rules imposed on fire crews by the C.F.A will have a disastrous affect on volunteer numbers as members who give their time and travel thousands of kilometres to help find themselves restricted in assisting local fire fighters and they will not be put in this embarrassing position again. Some of our local Brigade members have vowed not to become strike team members until the rules have changed so they can have a go at future fires.

### Recommendations:

1. That C.F.A. return to the proven structure at large fires, i.e. all fire personnell are under the control of captains or group officers on the fire line not controlled by I.C.C. 30 kilometres away and that local knowledge be sought and used in fire situations, not disregarded as was the case during the Buffalo fires.
2. That crew changeover be on line, not 4 or 5 hours elapsing on running edges before incoming crew arrive to find the fire has escaped.
3. That legislation be formed to release the Department and volunteers from litigation so that fire fighters can have a real go at fire suppression.
4. That National Parks have the responsibility of fuel reduction burning and the manning of I.C.C. taken from them as their effort in regard to Mt Buffalo was deplorable as I.C.C. Controllers.
5. That all Alpine Ash areas be salvaged to create employment and use the timber resource that was regenerated by the Forest Commission at great expense to maintain the sawmill industry.

I will make myself available to attend the fire enquiry and elaborate on the above recommendations.

Those personnel at Head Office of D.S.E and C.F.A who control the rules that Incident Control Centre work under should take a long hard look at these rules as there is no way large fires can be controlled in the present situation.

Steve Bracks and Bob Carr seem to think they are doing the environment and the public a great favour by creating more national parks, but unless fuel reduction burning is adopted and fire access tracks are kept open and no restrictions placed on machinery in fire situations in national parks, all national parks will remain a fire hazard and the loser will again be our environment and all the State's timber resources..

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