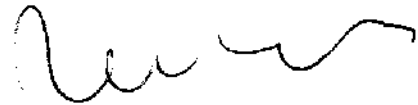


Chris Commins



16/05/03

House of Representatives Select Committee On Recent Australian Bushfires.

The Secretary Of The Committee
Department of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Chris Commins, this is a personal submission and I am 48 years of age. I make this submission having had over 30 years experience as a beef producer running cattle in the Alpine and Sub Alpine region of East Gippsland. Each fire season for 30 years I have contracted to the Department of Sustainability and Environment Victoria with Bulldozers, and since its inception by the Department, as Primary Fire Fighting Contractor.

My involvement with what became known as the Bogong Complex Fire began on Wednesday 8th of January, attending lightning strikes on Splitters Range and Eustice Track(Benambra- Corryong Road) Sunday 12th January I was on standby and Monday 13th January was at the Razorback Spur Seven weeks later I was stood down.

The scale of this fire came as no surprise to me, given the mismanagement of Crown Lands by the Parks Victoria and DSE Victoria.

What did surprise me was our incredible luck in only having four days of strong northerly winds over almost two months of fires. During the first week of January there was constant north winds. If these conditions prevailed during the fires, loss of property stock and possibly life does not bear contemplating.

The fire was going to happen. Fuel loads on crown land had been allowed to develop to dangerous levels due to totally inadequate fuel hazard reduction burns and the action of government over the past 60 years that have discouraged and prevented cattlemen from

taking cattle to the bush. As a result there is no longer a green grassy floor in much of the forest because it has become overgrown with an under story of assorted woody scrub that is inter dispersed with suspended dry litter. This situation creates a vast wild fire hazard that people need to see to believe.

There is something fundamentally wrong with management when each year more and more resources are poured into fire fighting yet each year we are under greater threat from wild fire. The fire fighting industry is a growth industry when it need not be.

There is also something fundamentally wrong when people held up as "experts" can expound complete and utter nonsense as fact. For example, people such as the Director of Parks Victoria Mr Mark Stone ,and Dr Richard Williams a self proclaimed expert on Alpine ecology and fire based in the Northern Territory , (whose "scientific" research on Bogong is based on spurious assumptions.)can say very publicly that there was no compelling evidence that hazard reduction burning and cattle grazing would have mitigated the impact of those fires. The evidence is there that both agencies (cool burns and grazing) do have a big impact on fire mitigation.

It is my hope that this Parliamentary Committee investigates the history and impact of how laws and bureaucracy have changed the ecological balance of the region.

My biggest criticism of the way the Bogong Complex fire was managed were the lost opportunities to reduce the impact of the fires. Lack of decision making was a serious impediment to action. Both DSE and CFA were complicit in this. Poor utilization of local knowledge was also an impediment.

It is my firm belief that since the Linton Fire tragedy and the subsequent outcome of the Coronial Inquest, fire managers and crew leaders have become so paranoid about safety and litigation no one wants to make a decision and initiative is stifled.

Decisions were having to follow the chain of command back to head office for consideration and debate, instead of crews on the fire line making the judgement. A number of times I was pulled out or stood down because managers from afar deemed my situation either "unsafe," or everything was "under control"! Usually this meant that one could not take the initiative. As a result back burn decisions and actions were painfully slow. Either, events overran the proposed control lines or backburns did not happen at all!

It was a disgrace that any buildings were lost around Omeo. Given the resources the CFA had on site and the weeks they had to prepare for the fire with favorable weather conditions, the CFA could have blacked out much of Omeo and other areas in a safe and controlled manner.

The Way Forward

Future management needs to see much more fuel hazard reduction burns on Crown Lands.

Regular control burns by DSE and CFA where State Forest and Parks adjoin private land, utilizing existing control lines and tracks ,and if necessary ,creation of new control lines.

Control burns should not be left until only the traditional time of Autumn. Burning should be undertaken whenever conditions are suitable and often the best time can be late Spring..

Fire managers and land holders need protection from legal action when undertaking control burns.

Alpine and Sub Alpine grazing should be encouraged. Grazing is the only agency that regularly (on an annual basis) protects spagnum moss beds in the Alpine area from destruction by wild fire and subsequent soil erosion.

Grazing of roadways should be encouraged . Many of the fences destroyed in the fires, were on roadways that had overgrown ungrazed grass.

Yours truly,

Chris Commins