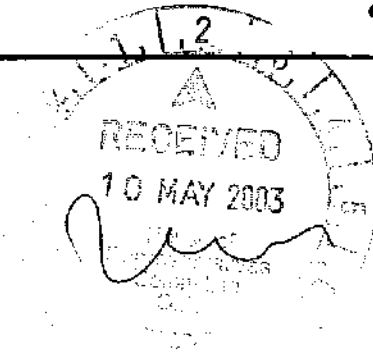


May 7, 2003

The Chairman
Select Committee Inquiring into Bushfire Damage
Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT



Dear Sir,

Submission to your Inquiry

I wish to draw the attention of the Select Committee to two facts

- (i) that I am appalled and shocked at the devastation by bushfires in the eastern States last year and the way in which State governments and national park managers are trying to slip out from taking responsibility; and
- (ii) that a similar disaster is looming in WA, and if it doesn't occur next year it will the year after, unless something remarkable happens.

Bushfire management is not rocket science. Firstly you need to reduce the risk and the hazard, and the means of doing this are well known. Secondly you have to have an efficient and effective fire suppression organisation. The way of setting this up has been known since the 1930s.

In WA both these aspects have been let slip to dangerous levels, especially in the forests and in bushland surrounding the urban fringes of Perth. The State government is simply not doing its job when it comes to funding an adequate hazard reduction program, and it has overseen the almost total dismantling of the system of district fire management which had been in place since the War.

The Commonwealth government is exacerbating this situation. You guys are continuing to pay good money to the States to help them fight fires, while they are laughing behind their hands. "There's no need to spend our precious dollars on fire prevention! The Feds will bail us out when the fires start!" is the usual attitude.

I understand and appreciate that the Commonwealth should assist with disaster relief - i.e. helping people and businesses hurt by bushfires. This is compassionate, and a good way to spend taxpayer dollars.

On the other hand it should not be necessary! The Commonwealth should withdraw all funding for bushfire management in States unless they can demonstrate that they are doing it responsibly. This means having a nominated Minister accountable for results, and a decent fire management system, including independent audit and public reporting on outcomes..

Stop rewarding the States and incompetent agencies for failing to do a good job!

Yours sincerely,

J. Underwood