

The Committee Secretary,
House Select Committee,
Inquiry into Australian Bushfires,
Department for the House of Representatives,
Parliament House,
Canberra. ACT. 2600.



17th. May, 2003.

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES**

As a young Councillor representing my community I rely on the values of my lifetime experiences and lessons learned by previous generations to guide me when making important decisions.

My family has lived in the Diamond Valley for four generations. My grandfather was an orchardist and farmer. He, and those before and after him, grew up living with the greatest threat to all forms of life - bushfire. There was nowhere near the amount of vegetation that exists today, but when the fires came, as they always do, the locals voluntarily answered the call, their efforts were always hampered by poor CFA equipment and resources.

Australia is the driest continent in the world. It is a well documented fact that Nillumbik (a Melbourne metropolitan municipality on the urban fringe where I am an elected councillor) is one of the highest bushfire prone areas in the world, second only to California.

Nillumbik's topography is characterised by very rough and steep terrain. The vegetation is predominantly dry sclerophyll bush. There are many narrow dirt roads, very windy, and overgrown with roadside vegetation. A number of roads are dead end roads. CFA trucks will not enter some roads in the shire in the event of a bushfire. Running rampant in the shire is a particular variety of native vegetation, Burgan (*Kunzea ericoides*). Extremely flammable, it is known to local CFA members as 'petrol bush.'

Unlike other States, in Victoria I understand it is illegal to force residents to leave their properties in a bushfire crisis. Here on the urban fringe, many newer residents have no comprehension of the volatility of a bushfire. I believe that when (not if) the fires again come to Nillumbik, a large number of lives will be lost. I have been publicly criticised for 'scaremongering,' although no documented proof to support such claims has ever been presented by critics.

Residents on 'fire-safe' properties are being forced to plant native vegetation dangerously close to their homes. These Council requirements have also been supported by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Already a heavily vegetated shire, in 2002 -2003 Nillumbik Shire Council supported the planting of more than 22,000 native trees each year, in the drought conditions we have been enduring. Is this an example of responsible planning? Not in my view.

In Victoria, the State Government allocated funding far in excess of the allocated bushfire relief funding, to those organisations who I believe have failed to properly manage our environment. We must learn from these mistakes, not repeat them.

I have no confidence in the Victorian State Government's ability to conduct an independent inquiry into the Victorian bushfires. In my view, it will be a 'whitewash.' The extreme 'green' views supported by the government for the sake of political expedience places lives in danger.

Bushfires pay no heed to municipal or State boundaries. There is a desperate need for strong leadership and direction from the Federal Government to ensure safe planning across Australia.

My greatest fear is that when the fires come, those responsible for poor planning will not be held accountable. If my concerns are viewed as 'scaremongering' then so be it. I will continue to stand up and be accountable for the safety of the community I represent.

When history repeats itself, as it will, governments and responsible authorities will be unable to plead ignorance. **They are culpable.** Many recommendations of Coroners Reports into previous fires have gone unheeded.

Perhaps it needs litigation in the form of a class action by those who, despite earlier warnings and pleas for remedial action from the State Government, have lost everything.



Cr. Belinda Clarkson.