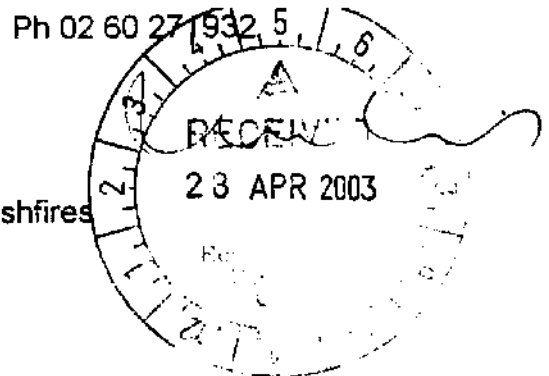


Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

Personal background and experience

My name is Maurie Smith, a retired farmer who farmed for 57 years in the Kiewa River Catchment near Yackandandah in North East Victoria until my retirement in 1999. During that time I gained an enormous amount of knowledge and insight into the natural environment that surrounded me.

In the early 1980s I became involved with the Kiewa Catchment Farm Trees Group and served as president from 1984 till 1989 when it became the Kiewa Catchment Landcare Group.

I then became the group's landcare coordinator as Tree Project Officer and in that role assisted landholders in vegetation projects. The group set up its own tree nursery that I managed for 10 years. During that time I gained vast knowledge of the catchment and the vegetation growing within, as I was collecting seed from all the species present.

From a fire perspective I joined the Country Fire Authority as a volunteer in August 1946 and remained an active fire fighter until my retirement. I was the Yackandandah Rural Brigade's captain from 1980 to 1990. I also served for six years as fire prevention judge for the Kiewa Fire Brigades Group and the Mt Pilot Group.

I also served a three-year term on the Upper North East River Management Board.

I believe my background and experience well qualifies me to comment on what occurred this summer.

Terms of reference

- (a) *the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities* – having visited several of the areas burnt in North East Victoria, and in particular that burnt by the Yackandandah/Stanley and Eldorado fires, I believe the impact will be visible for many years. Because the fires occurred during a time of extreme drought, the trees were under great moisture stress and certain eucalypt species will find it hard to recover. The understorey will, most likely, come back first. Over the last 20 years there has been insufficient control of blackberry in the public land and parks which led to a

huge build up of ground fuel load which increased the intensity of these fires. The impact on private assets such as fences, buildings, houses and livestock will take the remaining years of the older farmers and landholders to recover; public and local communities likewise because the same people are involved.

- (b) *the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown Land and private property* - possibly one has to step back 20 to 25 years to find the causes of and the risk factors contributing to these fires. Several governments have engaged in reducing the workforce needed to effectively manage the areas concerned. Many depots in local areas closed leading to a lack of local input and consultation regarding weed and fire management. While landholders have been required by law to control weeds and fire hazards, the same has not applied to public land. The increase of weeds such as blackberry on public land contributed to the intensity of the fires. This is one aspect which must be immediately corrected.
- (c) *the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control* - I personally believe there has been insufficient fuel reduction carried out over the last 10 to 15 years. Beyond that time frame I well remember CFA brigade volunteers were invited to assist with reduction burns and used the opportunity to train new members in building fire breaks for protection of fences adjoining public lands. I spent hours – day and night - doing this. But, with a rapid change in departmental philosophy, ownership, not management became the order of the day. Volunteer brigades were neither welcome or wanted. As these fires have shown, if a fire fighter has not acquired full Country Fire Authority accredited skills training, he or she should not attend a fire on public land. I question this rule? Fuel reduction undertaken wisely reduces fire ferocity – a simple fact of forest management.
- (d) *appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and potential environmental impact of such policies and practices*- There needs to be a fundamental change of attitude within government departments for any such practices to occur. As detailed in my background, I have been involved in landcare and land and river management issues for nearly 20 years. I know this was a period of change in attitudes by farmers and landholders across the whole of Australia to land management and the environment. But, yet again, departmental and government changes to the way funding and advice is given has not allowed most of these changes to fully mature. We have various Catchment Management local committees but the grassroots ideas and needs of farmers and landholders are mostly over ruled by bureaucracy. Much more local and regional consultation needs to take place.
- (e) *any alternate or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches and appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation* – My views are covered mostly in previous responses.

- (f) *the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires-* In my role as a fire prevention judge I came across many innovative ways to protect life and property from bushfires from the usual firebreaks and clearing around property and dwellings, to the installation of sprinkler systems on roofs and outbuildings, mostly powered by petrol pumps as electricity is often lost in fire situations. The water for these systems can come from swimming pools or rain water tanks installed specifically for fire fighting. Building codes possibly need to have such a clause included. On the television, I saw a street of nine houses in the Canberra fire. Seven had swimming pools yet all the houses were lost. Certainly worth thinking about.
- (g) *the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting-* The adequacy of current response arrangements for fire fighting must remain of the highest priority for any brigade at all times. Should not be a problem.
- (h) *the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions –* I have been told on good authority that there were problems with the deployment of fire trucks on several occasions due to overriding orders from remote headquarters disregarding local knowledge and involvement. I find this totally unacceptable. To be effective all firefighting resources must be used and shared against the enemy.
- (i) *liability, insurance coverage and related matters-* The rise in public liability insurance claims has led to problems with community volunteer organisations including fire brigades. During these recent fires it became apparent that fire controllers were reluctant to allow firefighters to engage in fighting fires above low to medium intensity with the result that fires quickly got out of control. Regarding asset insurance cover, the ever-increasing premiums make it nearly impossible to cover all one's farm assets. I do not have an answer to this problem.
- (j) *the roles and contributions of volunteers including current management practices and future trends taking into account changing social and economic factors-* As stated in most of my previous responses, volunteer organisations such as fire brigades, landcare groups and most other community groups must be consulted and their input taken into account in any future management decision making. In the past public submissions have not been widely used in this process I believe.

I trust the comments made in this submission will be of assistance in the outcome of this inquiry and would be willing to be involved in further discussions,

Yours faithfully



Maurie Smith