

Ian Dundas
 Secretary
 The Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires.
 House of Representatives
 Parliament House
 Canberra A. C. T. 2600



I wish to make a submission to the 2003 Victorian Bushfire Inquiry.

I come from a background of 48 years experience as a CFA fireman, having held the office of Captain of the 380-member Newlyn-Dean Brigade and Deputy Group Officer of the (10 brigade) Creswick Fire Brigades Group. In the period prior to 1968, I was involved in discussions with Forest Officers in the Wombat Forest near Daylesford on their research into a new innovation – Fuel Reduction Burning. Despite this previous involvement I was not personally called onto assist, this season.

I live at Benalla, approx. one and a half hours from the main fire area and have absolutely no connection with the timber industry, mountain cattlemen or Alpine tourism, so I hope my observations will be taken as completely impartial. However, in the course of my employment as a driver, I came in contact with a broad cross-section of the Alpine Area population and saw at first-hand the fire and its effects.

Could I preface my submission :-

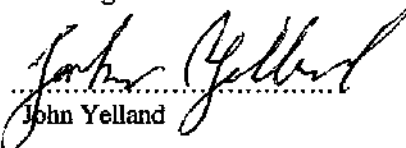
- Contrary to popular opinion, I believe that, in spite of the drought, we did not have many particularly bad fire days during the approx. two-month fire period. There were only 2-3 “Canberra-type” extreme fire days and plenty of opportunity for night-time back burning with little wind. Where possible, this must be co-ordinated and carried out under local fire brigade control.
- Strike team leaders must have local knowledge. Brigades will attempt to dis-affiliate from the Country Fire Authority if they do not. Brigade members elect their officers to protect local property and will not accept anything less. There appears to be an over-reaction to the tragic loss of untrained lives at Linton by taking decisions away from crews at the fire front. CFA volunteers have now been well-trained and, in contrast to the Linton victims, have mostly had years of experience and are much better equipped.
- Suitable large Mountain Ash milling logs could, and should, be removed from the National Parks and stored for future use, using removable “corduroy timber tracks” to minimise the environmental impact. If they are allowed to stand, they will continue to fall for 30-50 years and damage regrowth.
- A common theme running through all my discussions of fire control and prevention, was lack of consultation and involvement with the experienced local community. Decisions appear to be made far from the problems.
- The worst possible scenario for the Alpine Areas would be to lock them up as a “minimum input” National Park with no fuel reduction activity. This would condemn Victoria to a “2003-type” fire cycle every 10-30 years.

In accord with the Terms of Reference, I would make the following observations: -

- a) The affect on tourism, vineyards, timber, trout farms, adventure/trail riding was unparalleled in my lifetime. In have never before seen the streets of Ovens Valley towns deserted at the peak of the tourist season. A huge area was affected. For example, in my home town of Benalla, motel occupancy was down by 50%, one hour from the nearest fire.
- b) For years Alpine residents, particularly mountain cattlemen, have been telling me that the fuel load on the forest floor was at a dangerous level and predicted this summer’s disaster. Fuel reduction burning had been reduced, uncoordinated or non-existent. Also, cattle had been removed from some areas and this had caused a heavy build-up of fuel. Without exception, where no attempt had been made to reduce the fuel level, the fire caused a total disaster. Large mature trees were killed

and even the topsoil seemed to burn, resulting in disastrous erosion, blocked culverts and scoured tracks, after the first rain.

- c) There is currently much criticism of the management of the various Alpine Authorities. With the best of intentions I believe that the younger, academically trained forest officers must find difficulty recognising a cycle of "fuel build-up and major burn" of up to 20-30 years. I believe that the experience of the elder mountain cattlemen for instance, riding horses through the high country for over sixty years, is unique, yet no attempt appears to have been made to incorporate this experience into forest management.
- d) On the Bogong High Plain, approximately 9,000 hectares are routinely grazed by cattle for 15 weeks per year. Without exception, the fire stopped at this grazed section, which continued green and growing throughout the summer, with less than 10% of the fringe being affected. In contrast, the sections that were fenced out 12 years ago carried a heavy build-up of fuel with resultant heavy fire damage. The fire mostly burnt itself out, a few metres into the grazed area.
- e) Current grazing policies appear to be working well and need minimal changes. Research funds are urgently required in the area of fuel reduction burning. There are only limited periods when temperature and humidity are suitable for this type of burning and more research is needed on rapid aerial ignition of very large areas. Co-ordination with affected local communities needs to be undertaken to avoid disrupting important tourism events wherever possible.
- f) I feel that I am not qualified to comment.
- g) Access to the Alpine Area must always be granted to the Country Fire Authority. The initial lightning strikes on CFA controlled land were under control in a few hours. This was not the case where response was left in the hands of Government Authorities, albeit in more difficult terrain. Local CFA brigades know the area, live with the fire threat from Alpine fires and always know that they will be called on to supply the bulk of the fire-fighting force. With 60-80 lightning strikes to deal with, attempts should have been made to co-ordinate with CFA volunteers – not exclude them. They would prefer to make a rapid early response rather than work for weeks to clean up the mess. The establishment of forward radio control, catering and accommodation for an unprecedented number of firefighters appeared excellent.
- h) It would appear that no attempt was made to utilise local experience to guide visiting brigades from other areas of the state. The use of "strike team leaders" controlling tankers from offices outside the fire area was universally condemned. There appears an over-reaction to the loss of life at Linton. CFA officers are selected by brigade members for their local knowledge, experience and level-headedness. The tankers currently in use are absolutely first class and much safer than in the past. Despite this I heard a constant complaint from CFA crews, that they were "not allowed" to attend local trouble spots, in their own districts. In this state we have a unique, worlds best, volunteer fire fighting force. This co-operation needs to be nurtured. If many of these crews return home with their initial tank of water intact and never get near the fire, this must reflect on future co-operation.
- i) & j) I suggest that a register of suitably qualified local residents with fire experience be formed in each brigade to act as guides or 'local knowledge' advisers, to assist visiting brigades. They could simply ride in the leading "strike team" vehicle with access to radio. This would suit older, less active brigade or forest officers who would not be first choice as active firefighters.


John Yelland