

WOOLLA PASTORAL

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

9th May 2003.

Submission No.248

Dear Sir,

I thank you for this opportunity to submit my views for your consideration.

My wife and I own a cattle grazing property called Woolla, located on the upper Deua River in the Eurobodalla Shire. We have recently been affected by 3 bushfires, December/January 2002, November 2002 and January 2003.

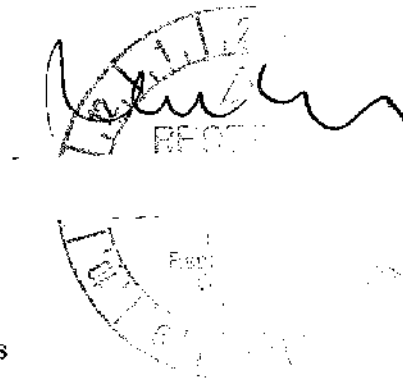
The following comments relate to my immediate experience and personal observations, but I am sure also apply to the broader picture.

All 3 fires started in the adjoining Deua National Park and spread to private property. The NPWS have more land than they can manage with their present resources and existing policies. The recent events demonstrate they need to implement more effective controls to minimise bush fire damage to both National Parks and private property.

I believe bush fires are an important and necessary function for the Australian bush to maintain its health and re-generation. The challenge is how to maintain that necessary function without allowing it to go out of control and cause massive environmental and private property damage.

I am aware that NPWS and Rural Fire Service have a limited programme for selective burning off during Autumn/Winter months. This programme needs to be stepped up and enlarged. It is also important that these burns be measured for their effectiveness. If they are not deemed to be adequate the process should be repeated so that effective barriers are in place. Regular, extensive, well planned burning of ridge tops will not prevent natural fires occurring from such as lightning strikes, but it will assist slowing and containing those fires. It will lessen the chances of fires becoming huge, out of control and too 'hot'.

Without hypothesizing further on what should be done. I will focus on my own experiences and observations. The fires along the Deua River in January and November 2002 were 'hot' fires and caused enormous environmental and some property damage.



Environmental Damage.

A hot, fast moving fire does not allow wild animals to escape its path, particularly tree dwelling species. In the aftermath of the fires I observed numerous burnt goannas, some with burnt off legs and blistered bodies, dead possums burnt on the ground that had fallen out of trees, dead kangaroos accompanied by bewildered joeys. In all a pathetic sight. Woolla is now surrounded by mountainsides burnt bare by hot fires. Some areas will recover in years to come, but others will never be the same owing to the erosion that is now taking place with the recent rains. Instead of light soil covering much of these ridges it is being reduced to bare rock.

The river which normally runs clear over clean, bare shingle beds has run almost black, depositing a mixture of charcoal and mud all the way to Moruya Heads. I am sure the river will clear in time but there is no way the soil can be replaced on the mountain sides and erosion will continue to scar and damage.

Property Damage.

On Woolla areas of small grassy clearings along some of our creeks are now covered with debris washed down from the now bare mountains. All of our boundary fences have been lost. Almost 3kms of this was lost in a mismanaged back burn. Other parts were destroyed by wild fire. Repairs and replacement is in progress and we are expecting financial assistance from Emergency Services following their recent inspection and assurances.

The subsequent erosion also caused enormous road damage. I am pleased to say, these repairs have been completed and our costs have been refunded by Rural Fire Service.

I am sure our experiences and observations are shared by many and sadly many people's losses are far worse than ours. The now ex state member for Monaro, Peter Webb, came to Woolla and viewed our damages sympathetically only to himself experience greater personal damages shortly afterwards.

I will conclude by saying I can not offer expert advice, but I am in a position to say the old policies are inadequate, the review you are undertaking is essential and your recommendations should include the following.

The introduction of a programme of rigid systematic autumn/winter burning with reporting, mapping and accountability by NPWS in association with the RFS. This programme should be extended to privately owned property along with financial and/or resource assistance for its implementation and maintenance.

Thank you for taking my views into account.

Yours faithfully,

Peter C Smith
Woolla Pastoral