


Robert W Allen

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Mr Ian Dundas
Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600


2/06/03

**SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO BUSHFIRES - JANUARY AND
FEBRUARY 2003**

I submit the following thoughts and criticism on the basis of my training and experiences of 40 years as a field based professional forester employed between 1953 and 1993 by the Forests Commission of Victoria and the subsequent departments managing the State Forests of Victoria.

I obtained a copy of the Terms of Reference through the office of the MHR for Ballarat, Catherine King, and received information that the deadline for submissions was extended to the end of May.

A. The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities:

1. History demonstrates that in Victoria and southern New South Wales almost every summer provides potential for the development of damaging bushfires. The severity of this fire risk depends very significantly on the previous year's rainfall, the actual seasonal weather conditions and most importantly upon the amount of available fuel both inside and outside forest areas.
2. In 2003 the months of January and February were preceded by long term severe drought conditions in most areas of Victoria and N S W. The actual weather conditions at the time of the fires were in general above average temperatures, significantly very low relative humidities and on some days extremely high wind speeds, often unpredicted.
3. Because on some days these fires burnt with an intensity much more severe than usual, the impact on the environment in Forests and National Parks is such that natural recovery will take much longer than normal and assets such as productive forests and recreational facilities have been lost for all time.
4. I have not visited the local communities affected by these fires since the event, but having seen similar impacts to other small communities during my career, point out that the mental trauma as well as the physical losses of assets will require very long term rehabilitation periods.

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 and other land and private property.

1. Fires in State Forests and National Parks can only be controlled in initial stages by using well trained fire crews with adequate equipment and rapid means of access to fire locations.
2. It is all very well having available helicopters and other aircraft for emergency situations but they are rarely in the right place at the right time when a fire is initially reported.
3. Management practices and policies in State Forests and National Parks are now such that the situation in (1.) above can rarely take place.
4. Compared with the "good old days" of 1950 - 1985 under the well trained permanently employed people who generally lived close to their work areas in Forests and Parks, their replacements are now seasonal workers employed short term, who live remote from the work areas and who rely on a short burst of fire suppression training at the start of their employment period.
5. Fire fighting equipment such as bulldozers, graders and trucks able to be converted into additional fire tankers were owned by the Forests Commission and available for immediate use. Now, this equipment generally needs to be hired from private operators and thus inevitable delays occur in it being effective.
6. As an example the following table compares manpower and equipment, based at the town of Beaufort, controlled by the Forests Commission in 1983 with resources controlled by Department of Primary Industries in 2003.

	1983	2003
Professional foresters	2	Nil
Technical forest officers	3	1
Rangers	1	1
Permanent works crew	16	4
Office staff	2	1
Sawlog production crew	4	Nil
Bulldozers	2	Nil
Graders	1	Nil
Tractors	1	Nil
Tankers	1	1
Trucks with slip on tanks	2	Nil

7. Many of what were once Victoria's well managed forests have been taken over as National Parks. National Parks policy appears to be to spend very little in the field, lock them up to stop people using them and allow access tracks to revegetate to prevent their use, even by fire suppression vehicles.

I believe that during the bushfires this summer many delays were caused waiting on tracks to be re-opened before crews and equipment could proceed.

8. On the day after many of the lightning strikes were reported in the mountain country of Victoria, radio reports contained news that the fire control authorities were "monitoring" those fires. In the past years (1950's -- 1980's) Forests Commission crews would have been attempting to put those fires out, even without access to modern aircraft now available.

9. It would seem that the Victorian Government needs to re-define its policy regarding fire in Parks - are they going to just let them burn or are National Parks to be considered an asset worth protecting and saving from fire. Surely the purpose of creating National Parks is for them to be available for use at all times by the public for recreation and education. Why create them if they cannot be managed?

10. With regard to the economics of fire protection versus wildfire suppression, surely Governments must be aware that the true costs of disasters such as those caused by bushfires are borne for many years after the event. Thus the public should insist on Governments being proactive in their fire protection policies instead of their current reactive stance in trying to extinguish large fires when and where they may occur.

Unfortunately, present day politicians realise that the trees of the Forests and the aesthetics of the Parks do not vote at elections!

11. A return to the methods of the past of intensive field management of Forests and Parks would provide a great boost for employment in rural areas. It would allow much more emphasis to be placed on stable, cost effective and sensible fire protection management and as a spin off return to well planned management of the other values associated with Forests and National Parks.

C. The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control.

1. For any bush fire to start there needs to be a source of ignition, suitable weather conditions and fuel available for burning.
2. We, as humans, can do nothing to prevent lightning strikes or to control the weather, but we can do things to minimise the amount of available fuel.
3. Fuel reduction can be achieved by mowing or slashing of grass, ground cover or shrubs, by raking and clearing leaves, bark and small branches to provide fire breaks, but within forests the most practical method available is fuel reduction burning.
4. Many people are of the opinion that large trees themselves are a fire hazard that need complete removal to ensure the safety of nearby assets, but it is less well understood that the crowns of trees will not support a fire by themselves. Without a ground fire, there cannot be a crown fire thus the reduction of the fuel on the ground is the key factor in fuel reduction burning.
5. It is quite obvious from observation and published statistics that fuel reduction burning within Victorian State Forests and National Parks has been inadequate for a number of years. In 2002 the area subject to fuel reduction burning was at extremely low levels and Victorians were extremely lucky that fire incidence in the Dandenong Ranges and around Ballarat was relatively low.
6. Since 1985 in Victoria there has gradually been a decline in the overall standard of forest management due in no small way to the amalgamation of Government Departments. This has resulted in State Forests no longer being managed by specialist foresters and by a severe reduction in employment of professional foresters and technically trained forest officers.
7. Combined with the above, the slashing of permanent field based forest work crews has resulted in a much reduced capacity to carry out adequate fuel reduction burning. Suitable days for fuel reduction burning in forests are limited by daily weather conditions, and thus when conditions are suitable only small areas can be safely burnt by the small crews now employed.
8. Although not very familiar with the surrounds of Canberra or the condition of the pine plantation around Mount Stromlo which received some adverse publicity, I wonder if the current management of that area employed the use of "Crown Fire Free Areas."

These special fire protection zones were created in the 1960's around the "timber towns" of South East South Australia and in my experience certainly prevented plantation fires causing severe damage at Tarpeena, Kalangadoo and Penola.

D. Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.

1. Fuel reduction, be it by burning or other methods, is labour intensive and expensive, but it is the one means available to the Government, and thus to the Community, which can reduce damage by severe wildfires.
2. By adopting a policy of significantly increasing the amount of fuel reduction burning in Forests and Parks much needed increased employment would be generated in rural areas which have suffered so much in recent years.
3. This emphasis on fuel reduction would gradually reduce the amount of money spent on extreme fire control situations and emergency relief and rehabilitation projects.
4. Widespread fuel reduction burning can be proven to reduce the loss of community facilities and infrastructure and thus its cost must be weighed against the cost and losses caused by the recent fires.
5. People who choose to build their houses in fire hazardous areas need to understand that they are responsible to adhere to rules, regulations and common sense in regard to fire protection measures. They should not be allowed to rely on Insurance Companies, taxpayers or Public Appeals to bail them out if their assets are burnt due to their own neglect.
6. The State Governments concerned must of course be prepared to stand up to the criticisms of the vocal minority of radical green environmentalists who seem to be against any interference to nature. Where were these people when Omeo was threatened, Canberra in dire danger and the Alpine Forests of Victoria being incinerated?
Surely those who have a real interest in the environment can see that the devastation caused by the fires of this summer is not beneficial to the natural environment nor its surrounding communities.



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