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19<sup>th</sup> October 2006

Committee Secretary  
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology  
and the Arts Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

**RE: Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

On behalf of Australasian Fire Authority Council I wish to provide you with a submission for the Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

The Australasian Fire Authorities Council is the representative body for the fire and emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasian region. AFAC was established in 1993 and has 27 Full Members and 9 Associate Members. The Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) is committed to improved collaboration between the fire, emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasian region, particularly in the exchange of strategic information and the sharing of expertise.

As the national peak body, it is also committed to:

- Developing national standards for the fire industry;
- Advocating State and Federal government on behalf of its member agencies;
- Creating national positions on key issues;
- Continuously scanning the ever changing political environment;
- Acting as an industry voice on national issues.

**AFAC' VISION**

The vision of AFAC is for a community protected from the adverse effects of fire and other emergencies.

## **AFAC'S MISSION**

AFAC's mission is to:

- Promote community fire prevention and education;
- Enhance the operational performance and accountability of fire and emergency service agencies;
- Promote change within the fire industry in a planned and controlled manner;
- Co-ordinate education and training policies and strategies;
- Influence national fire policy, product and performance standards
- Obtain and share knowledge on issues affecting members and facilitate discussion and debate on those issues;
- Facilitate research and development in areas of common interest to members, and
- Effectively represent AFAC members in Australasian and international forums.

## **COMMENTS FOR THE INQUIRY.**

- Fire is a critical natural process in the management of National Parks and Conservation reserves. The vast majority of natural environments in Australia have developed with fire and adapted to the prevailing fire regimes.
- Ecologically sustainable management of National Parks must consider the provision of appropriate fire regimes to conserve the biodiversity and other values of the land.
- In Australia, responsibility and accountability for the health and vitality of natural environments on public lands is primarily assigned to land management agencies.
- Land Managers need to take the lead role for fire management in areas for which they have responsibility. They should ensure that the use of fire on their land is designed to meet the management objectives of the land and that their duty of care to the adjoining communities and to the public good also are met.
- To do this it is clear that land managers must have the capacity to manage fire on the lands for which they are responsible and accountable. The responsibility for fire 'response' capability should not be separated from land management responsibility
- If these National Park Agencies are to be successful in meeting the obligations with which Governments charge their staff they must have the appropriate skills and capacity to analyse and understand the role of fire in the ecosystems they manage
- There has been a reduction in most land management agencies of the skills available to manage fire in recent decades. This change is continuing with many of today's land managers having a lower level of understanding of the role of fire in the landscape, compared with land managers of the 1980's...
- Park Management Agencies must enhance their practical knowledge of fire in the landscape through their use of prescribed fire. This knowledge leads to a greater ability to understand fire behaviour and therefore to manage the suppression of unplanned fires.

- In recent years there has been an over reliance on volunteer fire fighting agencies to undertake fire response and fire management programs on National Parks, Governments need to address the resourcing of Park management agencies to enable them to adequately undertake their core land management responsibilities with respect of fire management in National Parks
- Governments should commit appropriate levels of resources to the responsible land management agency when new Parks are acquired to ensure responsible fire management works can be undertaken. To provide such resources, an audit of the responsible agency's capability and capacity to meet the increased level of responsibility should be undertaken and shortfalls addressed.
- National Parks and conservation reserves should be managed under an adaptive management approach; in recent years the inappropriate use of the precautionary principle has led to inappropriate fire management in some parks and reserves.
- Park Management agencies should undertake research in fire management through partnerships with the Bushfire CRC and other research organisations.
- Park Management agencies should formally adopt the zoning principles as outlined in the CoAG inquiry into bushfire management.
- Park management planning should incorporate a consideration of the role of fire in the landscape. Planning should aim to:
  - Reduce the threat of severe destructive fires
  - Conserve biodiversity and water catchment values
  - Ensure consideration of the safety of communities and individuals potentially at risk.
- Park Management agencies should ensure that they have and maintain a workforce with sufficient skills mix and capacity to undertake fire management programs. This must include sufficient trained and experienced staff in the use of prescribed fire to achieve land management objectives. In addition, adequate trained and accredited staff with the appropriate infrastructure for fire suppression is necessary for the Agency to meet the fire responsibilities for the lands they manage.
- Park management agencies should retain sufficient staff to meaningfully engage with the communities surrounding the land that they manage, and the related fire management agencies, to ensure obligations with respect to community protection are met and objectives of management are understood.
- Park Management Agencies should adopt scientific principles for the management of fires in National Parks as set out below


### **Scientific Principles of Fire Management**

- Fire should be regarded as an environmental factor that has and will continue to influence the nature of vegetated landscape and biodiversity throughout Australia, and is integral to conservation and land management.
- Species and biological communities vary in their adaptations to and, reliance on fire. These communities therefore vary in their fire responses.

- Knowledge of the temporal and spatial scale of fire in relation to life- histories of organisms or biological communities should underpin the use of fire and fire regimes in natural resource management.
- The biological impact of a single fire event and the rate of recovery are directly proportional to the intensity and size of the fire. Park agencies should avoid leaving large areas of fire prone vegetation unburnt for long periods in order to minimize long-term deleterious impacts on biota and environmental values.
- Fire diversity benefits biodiversity at both the landscape and local scale. Within fire prone landscapes, a mosaic representing a range of fire intensities, frequencies, season and scales of burning is likely to optimize conservation of biodiversity. At the local scale, fire regimes should be based on the biological attributes of the organisms present.
- All available knowledge, including life-histories, vital attributes and dispersal distances of the flora and fauna, should be used to develop ecologically-based fire regimes for a landscape unit or vegetation complex.
- Fire management should be based on a systematic approach to risk management that identifies the assets and potential consequences of wildfires, and possible impacts of mitigation and management options. Fire regimes should be managed for two primary reasons, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive:
  - To reduce the occurrence and impact of large, damaging wildfires,
  - To protect and conserve the biota and.
  - To protect life and property from the uncontrolled wildfire through the development and implementation of strategies for fire protection and suppression.
- Fire management should adapt to new knowledge gained through research, monitoring and experience, and adapt to changing community expectations.

I trust that these comments are helpful to assist the Senate inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Yours faithfully,



**LEN FOSTER AO**  
**Chief Executive Officer**