



**SUBMISSION FROM FOREST FIRE VICTORIA TO THE SENATE  
INQUIRY INTO NATIONAL PARKS IN AUSTRALIA**

The Chairman,  
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts  
References Committee,  
Parliament House,  
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Chairman,

**Inquiry into National Parks in Australia**

This submission is made by Forest Fire Victoria, an organization of like-minded and concerned practitioners and scientists, which formed following the disastrous fires in the eastern states of Australia in 2002/2003.

Our Statement of Purpose is:

- To provide and promote independent and expert opinion on forest fire management.
- To ensure that Victoria's forest fire management policies and practices are based on science, experience and accountability; and address social, economic and environmental values of natural ecosystems.
- To ensure that the long-term well being and safety of forest ecosystems and their surrounding rural communities are protected.

Our Method of Operation:

Forest Fire Victoria will seek opportunities to pursue its purpose through a range of strategies including:

- Making submissions to inquiries.
- Providing experts for seminars, conferences and media opportunities.
- Exposing the consequences and dangers of distorted science and misinformation.

- Bringing problems and solutions to the attention of politicians and decision makers.
- Supporting independent and objective research and education.
- Raising awareness of forest fire issues through the media and community education.
- Publishing articles and research papers.

Further information on Forest Fire Victoria Inc and it's membership can be found on our website at <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~frstfire>

### **Why we are making this submission?**

The Senate Environment, Communications, Information and Arts Committee has been requested to undertake an Inquiry into the funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's National parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Forest Fire Victoria has previously expressed great concern over the management of parks and reserves in Victoria with particular emphasis on fire management (or the lack of it) and believes that this group can assist the inquiry in it's understanding of some of the issues within it's terms of reference.

A major report ***"The Facts Behind the Fire - A Scientific and Technical Review of the Circumstances Surrounding the 2003 Victorian Bushfire Crisis"*** was prepared following the disastrous fires in the Victorian Alps which burned a significant proportion of the Alpine National Park in January 2003.

A copy of this report accompanies our submission (as a PDF file) because Forest Fire Victoria believes that it outlines a number of key issues that will be investigated as part of your inquiry. We strongly commend this report to the inquiry.

In preparing the report, Forest Fire Victoria researched and examined a large amount of historical and contemporaneous records pertaining to forest fire management in Victoria and concluded that Victoria was, in regard to effective preparedness for the Alpine Fires in 2003, less well prepared than at any time in the previous 15 years to control fires caused by lightning in the Alpine area.

The report records in some detail, facts that contributed to a number of fires becoming uncontrollable and eventually burning 1.13 million hectares of native forests (much of which is National park) and grassland and 90,000 hectares of private property. It also identifies the changes in policy the Government must make to ensure the responsible authority discharges its duty to carry out proper and sufficient work to manage fires to protect and sustain the health and biodiversity of forests, regenerate disturbed or degraded forests and to prevent and suppress all unplanned fires in forests.

Whilst many of the issues raised will have National ramifications, this group will concentrate on Victorian matters in this submission. The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry state that it will pay particular reference to:

- the values and objectives of Australia's National parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;
- any threats to the objectives and management of our National parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- the responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of National parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans; and
- the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of National parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas,

## **Our submission**

In this submission we use the expression "park" to encompass a range of reserve types, including areas designated as National parks, State parks, regional parks conservation reserves, and nature reserves, which are generally managed by Parks Victoria. This approach is mirrored in some way by virtually all other States. We are not commenting on Marine Reserves.

### **1. Park Values**

As a major statement on its website, Parks Victoria proclaims:

*"A commitment to conservation*

*Through effective environmental and visitor management, Parks Victoria is dedicated to preserving the natural and heritage values of the parks, bays, and waterways, including full protection of sensitive areas. Preservation is our highest commitment."*

Thus, the most important feature of park management is preservation – an ethic that, whilst admirable in itself, is only part of the requirement of professional land management. This has led to an approach for all National Parks of “don’t” rather than “do”, with management by omission rather than taking a positive approach to achieve particular outcomes. This is also so when it comes to use by the public with a large list of activities that are not allowed. An extension of this approach follows into fire prevention (where fuel reduction burning is minimised) and firefighting where taking a direct, pro-active approach is often not favoured lest existing systems be “disturbed”.

This approach leads to the first cardinal sin in firefighting, namely, failure to make an initial attack with sufficient force and thus, the values for which the park was created, e.g., biodiversity and landscape beauty, are so severely affected by the subsequent high intensity fire that they can take a century or more to recover.

There is also no consistency when it comes to managing park values. Parks are managed according to a range of locally produced management plans that do not provide consistency of approach or outcomes. To ensure effective practice in areas like bushfire management, it is essential that there is an overarching policy, implemented across all parks (and adjoining forest tenures) linked directly to the responsibility for fire prevention and suppression.

## **2. Are Governments providing sufficient resources?**

Using the 2003 Alpine fires in Victoria as an example, the fires were caused by nature but the resulting fire event was not natural. Those fires were fed by fuels that accumulated over decades where natural fires had been deliberately extinguished and little or nothing had been done to reduce those accumulating fuels by planned burning or any other means. In those places the fires were feral, and burnt over extensive areas with an intensity and uniformity that was alien to the natural processes that forests require for their health, diversity and sustainability.

The result was catastrophic and this can be squarely attributed to 2 key factors.

- The lack of fuel reduction burning over many years
- The lack of vigorous, timely direct attack in the early stages of the fires.

Whilst there are policy reasons for a lack of fuel reduction in some instances, the resources required to properly manage the parks have never been sufficient.

Road and track maintenance have also been consistently downgraded meaning that ground based fire fighting efforts are greatly restricted due to lack of access. The vast network of roads and tracks developed by the previous management, both for forest utilisation and fire protection, have been allowed to degrade or disappear over the years, and the removal of the forest industry from parks has meant that, unless additional funding is provided, the road and track network will continue to deteriorate.

Unless there are sufficient resources allocated to National park management, this can be viewed as Government greatly “underinsuring” Victoria’s known forest fire risk by progressively downgrading forest fire management from its former top priority in managing Victoria’s public native forest resources and values. In allowing this to happen successive Governments ignored the truism heralded by Judge Leonard B Stretton in 1939 and endorsed by Sir Esler Hamilton Barber in 1977 that fire prevention must be the paramount consideration of the forest manager.

### **3. Threats to the objectives and management of our National parks**

Poor management of the prevention and suppression of fire is arguably the greatest threat to our National parks system. A major concern is that Victorian law currently compromises best practice forest fire management. ***Fire prevention and fire suppression are inextricably linked and whoever is responsible for fire suppression must be responsible and accountable for fire prevention.***

Section 62(2) of the Forests Act 1958 lays down the responsibility of the Secretary, Department of Sustainability and Environment for protection of public land from fire, viz:

*“Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other Act or law it shall be the duty of the Secretary to carry out proper and sufficient work for the prevention and suppression of fire in every State forest and National park and on all protected public land but in any National park or protected public land proper and sufficient work for prevention of fire shall be undertaken only by agreement with the person or body having the management and control thereof and in case of failure to reach any such agreement as determined by the Governor in Council whose determination shall be final and conclusive.”*

Policies and practices for fire prevention and suppression are grounded in duties specified by Sections 20, 22 and 62 of the Forests Act 1958.

The significance of “in any National park or protected public land proper and sufficient work for prevention of fire shall be undertaken only by agreement with the person or body having the management and control” (of the land) is that it gives Parks Victoria the power of veto over everything to do with fire prevention on land it manages.

The idea that a park manager can use strategies that do not conform to best practice forest fire management or refuse to use strategies that do conform with best practice and yet not be accountable when the strategies contribute to poor forest fire management is absurd. (See pages 39, 40, 41. in the Facts behind the Fire)

This power of veto has been significantly reinforced by amendment 62B to the Forests Act 1958. This section precludes the Secretary from the application or use of fire in a National park or protected public land for any purpose, including maintenance, management, protection or enhancement of the ecology or land and vegetation, unless the person or body that has management or control of the National park or protected public land agrees to its application or use. Unlike section 62(2), under this provision there is no avenue for resolving disagreements between land managers.

The responsibility for forested land management in Victoria has dramatically changed since the legislation was first enacted in 1939.

*Approximately two thirds of the State's land area is privately owned and the remaining third, some 7.7 million hectares is public land, principally parks and forests. Heightened community awareness of conservation issues has led to an increase in the area of National Parks at the expense of State forests. The area of protected parks in Victoria (National and Other protected parks and reserves) has progressively expanded from some four per cent of the State in the early 1970s to approximately 16 per cent or 3.6 million hectares today.*

Government administrative arrangements also compromise best practice forest fire management. A significant component of the forest fire prevention and suppression force personnel and resources are not under the direct control of the Secretary of the Department of Sustainability and Environment. They are split between two Government Ministries, Environment (DSE and PV)) and Primary Industries (DPI). The Minister responsible for DPI also has responsibility for Vic Forests and private forestry activity.

When the resources of the Country Fire Authority are also required, as has been the case in recent large fires in National parks (Grampians, Moondarra, Kinglake, Brisbane Ranges – January 2006), the spread of fire control using personnel from a number of organizations greatly compromises the efficiency of the fire effort and allows conflicting objectives to lead to a “safety first” approach which tends to express itself in indirect fire attack and waiting for the fire to reach more accessible areas. Whilst this may seem to provide a greater degree of safety for fire fighters, it almost certainly allows fires to become very large and exhibit extreme fire behaviour – a situation even more dangerous than directly attacking small fires at or near their source. The ramifications for the areas surrounding the fire, both National parks and other adjoining property, are obviously severe when this approach is adopted and the threats to life and property greatly magnified. This was very evident this year with the Grampians fire in January where almost half the National park was burnt and significant losses (life and property) ensued outside the park.

Mr. Bruce Esplin, Emergency Services Commissioner, when reporting on the botched prescribed fire lit in Wilsons Promontory on March 21, 2005 noted systemic and cultural shortcomings in fire fighting practice.

He said the separation of sections of the Department of Sustainability and Environment into bodies like Parks Victoria caused a serious disruption in the management of resources for firefighting.

Unless something is done to change the current arrangements in line with this observation, there will be continued threats to the parks system in Victoria.

#### **4. The record and responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of National parks.**

The creation of a large number of National parks in Victoria over the past 30 years has been seen by many as a great leap forward in conservation and preservation of our natural resources.

From a very small land base in the early 1970's, Parks Victoria has grown to the point where it is now the custodian of a diverse estate of significant parks in Victoria which include:

- 39 National parks
- 13 marine National parks
- 11 marine sanctuaries
- 3 wilderness parks
- 30 state parks
- 37 metropolitan parks
- 63 other parks (including regional and reservoir parks)
- 2,785 natural features reserves and conservation reserves

- 8,400 Aboriginal Affairs Victoria registered Indigenous cultural heritage sites/places
- 2,500 (non-Indigenous) historic places

These assets total approximately 4.1 million hectares (17 per cent of Victoria)

Clearly from the above issues, governments have a key responsibility to ensure that the management of our National Parks is achieved to the highest standards, particularly where protection of life, property and the natural assets are concerned. Having created such a large estate under the management of Parks Victoria there must be recognition of the shortcomings in management with respect to fire alone when the sad history of recent years is viewed clinically.

The attached report "Facts behind the Fire" outline many of the issues with respect to the 2003 alpine fires, but since then there has been the Wilson's Promontory debacle in 2004 and, just recently, the serious fires in the Grampians National Park, the Moondarra State Park, Brisbane Ranges National Park and the Kinglake National Park have shown that the situation is not improving.

***Very high fuel loads, lack of well planned and executed fuel reduction burning, a decaying road and track network, sub-optimal first attack and fragmented fire responsibilities still combine to produce large, uncontrollable fires in our parks system.***

The record of the government clearly shows that standards of National park management have always compared unfavorably with the status of the management of the State forests from which they were generally created. It is very clear that while sections of the community want more and bigger National parks, and are happy to see them created at the expense of State forests, they are not prepared to see these parks properly funded or managed, or are unaware that there is a problem. Political kudos for park creation is not followed by political interest in park protection and management.

Further, as parks are created at the expense of State forests and the native forest based timber industry reduced (to zero in some instances) there is a significant loss of an experienced and well-equipped workforce that traditionally worked with the managing authority in fighting forest fires. The plantation industry is not a replacement, as it does not have suitable harvesting equipment, particularly bulldozers, to work on fires and the government fleet of machines is now quite small. Whilst there has been an increase in aerial resources available, there is no substitute for proper, mineral earth fire breaks separating fuel from fire.



Another highly significant aftermath of forest wildfire, particularly in the following 12-18 months, is the vulnerability of the exposed ground to moderate-high intensity rainfall events causing severe soil erosion and excessive run-off. Massive volumes of top soil and ash are eroded off exposed slopes, clogging streams, destroying their aquatic environment, damaging infrastructure (roads, bridges, culverts), silting dams and reservoirs, polluting downstream lake systems with excessive nutrients and rendering domestic water supplies undrinkable. Such fires also lead to severe reductions in water yield (see page 28 of Facts behind the Fire, where the Director of Australia's Co-operative Research Centre for Catchment Hydrology, Roger Grayson said run-off from the burnt-out forests could drop by 20 to 40 per cent in the next 10 to 20 years). This presents serious problems for governments and impinges directly on their responsibilities. For example, Water in the Murray Darling Basin is significantly overcommitted and such losses in the Murray system from the alpine fires cannot be made up from other sources. These losses will mean that Commonwealth and State Government commitments under the National Water Initiative, including the Living Murray Initiative, Victoria's new water initiatives and return of additional water to the Snowy River cannot be met. With the Grampians being the primary catchment for northwestern Victoria, we can expect similar problems from the recent fire, which burnt almost half the National park.

## **5. Conclusions**

Poor management of the prevention and suppression of fire is probably the greatest threat to our National parks system.

We now know that Australian forests, including those in National parks, are deteriorating in health in areas where fire is long excluded, but we also know that large, uncontrolled fires seriously undermine the values for which the parks were created, e.g., biodiversity and landscape beauty and pose an unacceptable threat to life and property both inside and outside the park system.

The responsibility for fire prevention and suppression and the required resources must be arranged in such a way that bushfire management is the most fundamental and essential aspect of park management.

Management and the law must coalesce to provide the right climate for fire management, resources must be allocated to proper access and regular strategic fuel reduction burning (in the form of regular low intensity fires lit under mild weather conditions) to maintain forest health as well as to protect forest, community and human assets from feral fires.

## 6. Recommendations

There is a range of recommendations we could make with respect to good governance of Australia's National parks, but we will focus on fire management matters, as this is the field in which we have experience and expertise.

We recommend that this Senate Inquiry find that:

- Australia must develop a National policy on the management and protection of Australia's National parks, signed off by all States and Territories and the Commonwealth government. This will have to take into consideration the various statutory links between fire fighting organizations and land managers in different States.
- For Victoria there must be a single body such as a Forest Conservancy with an unfettered charter to keep all forested public land, rivers and streams clean and running and forests healthy and diverse. This would include primary responsibility for fire prevention and suppression and would require an amendment to Section 62 of the Forests Act to provide:

*"Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other Act or law it shall be the duty of the Conservator to carry out proper and sufficient work to manage fires to protect water catchments and sustain the health and biodiversity of forests, regenerate disturbed or degraded forests and to prevent and suppress unplanned fires on all public forests"*

- The Federal government, in conjunction with the States and Territories should develop a National Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land (rather than some of the separate State Codes that currently exist) that sets standards for the management of both prescribed fire and wildfires on public land to be applied to forests in National parks. Commonwealth funding should only be provided to States demonstrating through professional audit, that they are meeting the requirements of the Code
- Each State should provide sufficient resources with appropriate organisational arrangements to effectively enable the managing authority to discharge their responsibilities with respect to fire prevention and suppression. Adequate resources for park care and protection must always accompany the transfer of forests from State forests to National parks, including maintenance of access for fire fighting.

- Strategic fuel reduction burning is an essential management practice in forested National parks to maintain forest health and protect the environment and the community from feral fires.

We would be very happy to make a verbal presentation to your Inquiry, and advise that further information is available on our website at <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~frstfire>.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. A. Incoll". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

R. A. Incoll  
Secretary