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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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SUBMISSION

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CESAR MELHEM
Secretary

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find following the Australian Workers' Union's submission to the Inquiry Into The Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria.

Over the seven and a quarter years of the Bracks Government, the Australian Workers' Union has raised concerns about the level and effectiveness of management of Victoria's Crown land, particularly State and National Parks and State Forests.

In the final years of the Kennett government, that government reduced the workforce by 40%. The Bracks government has gone some way to address this issue, employing about 150 full-time firefighters under the Public Land Fire Initiative (PLFI). They have also employed about 110 fixed-term employees who are engaged for eight months per year for the duration of a three-year employment contract. This last type of employment offers little when considering the off-fire season maintenance work which must be carried out in order to keep tracks and roads accessible.

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Management of Crown Land is also deleteriously affected by the egregious encouragement of time-off-in-lieu employment arrangements which increase the availability of labour during the fire season but substantially reduce same during the off season and during the shoulders of the fire season eg. during fuel reduction burn times. In winter, it is not unusual for some work centres to be almost completely without an outside maintenance workforce. This situation could last for up to three months, while permanent staff take their accrued time. The AWU would therefore assert that whilst time-off- in-lieu has benefited the department's direct fire fighting efforts, it has done little for Best Management Practices, as employees are often away when important fire preparation work could be undertaken.

Furthermore, whilst the Australian Workers' Union accepts that Project Fire Fighters have a significant role to play in fire containment and fire suppression, their role is obviously limited because of the term of their employment and the uncertainty of employment tenure, particularly given that they really need to be engaged all year to undertake all necessary training and all necessary fire preparation work. As the recent Great Divide Complex fires demonstrate Seasonal firefighters need to be engaged earlier in the year so as to be at work when fires first break out, and also to complete necessary training.

Of further concern is the fact the number of ongoing employees in many work centres, particularly in Gippsland, are lower than they were when the Bracks Government was elected. Depots that had up to 16 or 17 employees some 7 years ago, are now reduced to 5 and in the case of Bairnsdale, 2 full-time employees. Across the Alpine area of Gippsland, the total permanent workforce numbers are around 25, compared to about 45 permanent employees when the Bracks Government was first elected.

The average age of our permanent work force is approaching 49 years, a trend that seems likely to continue. The employment of additional permanent

firefighters is essential to reverse this ageing of the workforce. After all, when you consider that a large proportion of these older employees will be approaching retirement age in the next five years (our estimate is that 80 -100 employees will be thus affected), the loss of experience will be significant. Experience cannot be purchased, local knowledge cannot be replaced, and communities across rural Victoria are already experiencing an exodus of young people in search of more secure jobs and better lifestyles in the cities and urban areas. Employment of additional permanent employees is therefore imperative immediately. Thus it is the view of the AWU that the government must invest in Victoria's future by creating a more stable and permanent work force in the Department of Sustainability and Environment and also Parks Victoria.

The retention of the existing workforce and the attraction of new employees would be greatly enhanced if the wages and conditions of all employees, particularly seasonal fire crew, were improved.

The most recent fires which swept across most of Victoria caught all departments and authorities by surprise. The fires also demonstrated that the departments and authorities have learnt little from past experiences. Forward planning and investment in appropriate fire fighting vehicles are something that does not appear on their radar.

There is a drastic need for more vehicles, especially those which are able to be used effectively in mountainous terrain. DSE will have us believe they do in fact invest in vehicles, but highway vehicles such as Commodores, Fords and Toyota Land cruisers cannot be considered appropriate, as they have at best a limited off-road capacity.

The most recent fires also saw DSE play host to overseas and interstate firefighters. This is all well and good, except they have to be resourced (and they are actually being paid more than DSE firefighters), and they need access to

vehicles in order for them to make a meaningful contribution. The AWU does not oppose the use of overseas personnel, but problems in the management of resources became evident at the recent fires in Gippsland when these personnel were released for some recreation leave and were given department vehicles to use. This made an already drastic shortage of vehicles even more drastic.

There were also times when highway vehicles were used to transport fire fighters to the frontline of the fire, returning with exhausted crews to base. Not only is this practice dangerous, because of the inadequacy of the vehicles, but it meant that at times the units which were being used to fight the fires were unable to leave the line for regular and important servicing. There was at least one instance where a Toyota land cruiser left a Base Camp, to travel some two hours to the fire front, without a spare tyre being available for that vehicle.

DSE must also re-invest in heavy machinery - dozers, excavators and graders are urgently required. Little thought has been put into the fact that as more parks that are created, there will be less logging contractors able to supply their valuable resources, in case of emergency, unlike when that Park was State Forest.

Furthermore, accessing machines from other sources, such as road construction companies, may be seen as appropriate, but unfortunately most of these operators have limited or no experience in mountain forest operations. It may also be that in some instances these machines are inappropriate in mountainous terrain.

The AWU is also concerned that some later model dozers rely on electronics to operate. We do not know what testing DSE has carried out to ascertain whether these model of dozers can in fact operate effectively in high temperatures that are experienced at a fire front. We know of one such machine that lost all of its electronics and operating power in the heat of one fire and we were extremely

fortunate not to have suffered a fatality as a result of that particular incident. DSE do not have a good history of involving, or taking seriously, advice from their own machine operators.

The Australian Workers' Union, through their members, raised many concerns about the suitability of some vehicle carriers two years ago, but our advice has been ignored by the senior management of plant purchases at DSE.

Training of firefighters is also of concern to the Australian Workers' Union. Our officials have been informed of the substandard training being offered by many providers, especially in Gippsland. Delivery of courses like Chainsaw operation is poor, to say the least. Management at the highest level have been made aware of the shortcomings of the Gippsland provider, in particular, but have continued to use them despite our concerns. AWU official Sam Beechey can provide more details about this, if required.

Employees are finding it difficult to be assessed for many fire tasks as part of their training requirements. Chainsaw assessors, in particular, seem to be in short supply with employees reporting delays of months at a time in being assessed. It is essential for the safety of the community that people are trained in the art of tree felling. Many uncertified employees are forced to undertake this task at times, not only putting themselves in danger, but also others that may be in the vicinity. The lack of skilled fallers became evident after the recent fires, when employees from far away work centres had to be deployed to the Erica and Heyfield regions to carry out the felling of dangerous trees.

The AWU was also alarmed at being informed that some 19 Project Fire Fighters were engaged at the Orbost work centre during the last fire season, none of whom had been put through the 4 wheel driving course. This situation was replicated across the state with dozens of employees being expected to drive 4wds at fires without the correct training. These employees were also required to

operate these vehicles off-road and in fire fighting situations. This practice should not be acceptable to the Department and it is disgraceful that this in-house training could not be completed before employees were deployed to fight a campaign fire.

The AWU is not opposed to the Department being able to gauge and monitor the health and fitness of their employees, but they must be consistent. One must ask the Department, why isn't the same requirement made of contractors engaged in fire fighting duties? Why isn't the C.F.A. required to undergo the same fitness and medical tests? Why aren't Parks Victoria employees required to undergo these tests? Why are Standby payments tied to and dependant on departmental employees having successfully carried out fitness tests? Why are they limited to AWU works crew?

The most recent fires tested the resolve of all persons involved, and because of the lack of resources, managing fatigue became a huge issue for DSE and the AWU. Perhaps these fires were unprecedented, but nevertheless they demonstrated a need for serious consideration of finding ways to best manage fatigue, while still being able to adequately carry out the task at hand, i.e. to suppress the fires. It is perhaps acceptable at the beginning of a campaign to expect firefighters and machine operators, to work up to and in some cases in excess of 24 hours. If a fire is still out of control after 24 hours, there is a need to begin to implement fatigue management practices. No shift should exceed 14 to 15 hours, travel time included. It is clearly unacceptable that shifts in excess of 16 hours would be worked after the first few days of a campaign fire.

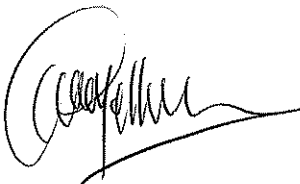
Many Incident Controllers were obviously uncaring of the time spent during the course of a shift, especially this last campaign when there was no financial penalty for employees working in excess of 16 hours. The AWU had many reports of employees working 16 hour plus shifts, weeks into the Great Divide campaign. It was also a requirement for Incident Controllers to complete risk

assessment forms for all employees required to work in excess of 16 hours. The AWU is of the belief these instructions were not complied with.

The normal length of time on an active campaign is 7 days with 2 days off, or in the case of a night shift fire fighter, 5 days with 2 days rest. There were instances where employees returned home for a rest but were required to make themselves available for Standby duty in their own immediate work centre area. This is outrageous and not conducive to good management of fatigue.

There were many employees in Victoria that undertook up to 6 to 8 trips away to fire. This not only eventually has a telling effect on their own health, it begins to impact on their families also. There have been many stories recounted about fathers being away from their wife and children for almost the entire summer school holidays. Indeed, it is extremely tragic that one of our members lost a loved one during this firefighting period, due to possibly suffering postnatal depression, leaving a young man and an 18 month old daughter. If the scientists are correct in their predictions that fires into the future are going to become more intense and perhaps last for longer periods, the need for more on ground field staff must be given priority.

The A.W.U. looks forward to discussing these matters with you personally at a time to be arranged.



Cesar Melhem,
State Secretary,
Australian Workers' Union Victorian Branch.