SUBMISSION

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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

GRAND RIDGE PLANTATIONS

Executive Officer
Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Parliament House
Spring St
East Melbourne Vic 3002

May 11th 2007

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re. Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria

Please find attached Grand Ridge Plantations' (GRP) submission to the Inquiry.

Yours Sincerely,

Phil Whiteman
Planning Manager
Grand Ridge Planatations

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GRP submission to "Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria". May 2007

Grand Ridge Plantations (GRP) owns and/or manages 130,000ha of land in Gippsland. We are, by far, the largest landowner in Gippsland, excluding the Government. Our land is mainly pine and eucalypt plantation with the balance being native forest.

Fire prevention, fire detection and fire suppression are key parts of our business with the budget for prevention and detection alone being over $400,000/year. In addition we have 9 fire tankers, 15 slip on units, 60 trained firefighters, 3 fire lookout towers and an aerial fire patrol on contract.

GRP is incorporated into the CFA as an Industry Brigade and we enjoy an excellent working relationship with the CFA, DSE and Local Government.

Over the past 4 years GRP has lost ca. 2,000 ha of plantation, worth many millions of dollars, in a number of fires mainly in 2003 and 2006. Three of the four worst losses have been from fires entering our plantations from public land. In December 2006 we were faced with losing about 8,000 ha of pine plantation at Stockdale as the Great Divide-South fire threatened to leave the state forest and sweep southwards. Fortunately this did not eventuate due to favourable weather conditions allowing the fire containment lines to hold.

The submission below suggests some significant changes that GRP believes will reduce further losses of assets and biodiversity to fire, as well as saving considerable money.

Summary

Rapid and automatic initial despatch of aerial fire-fighting resources to smoke and fire sightings will result in a reduction in; area burnt by wildfire; loss of biodiversity; loss of assets and will result in cost savings.

This would require a significant change to the approach to aerial resources and the way in which they are dispatched and used. It would also rely on many more units of a smaller (and much cheaper) nature.

In Australia, aerial resources are rarely used as first attack resources (when fires are small and controllable) and instead we wait until the occurrence of the fire is confirmed and usually until the fire is burning strongly on a large area before they are deployed. Using large fire-bombers for asset protection, when fires are out of control, looks impressive but ignores the fact that these fires were initially very small and controllable if the right resource type and number were available. Changes that address these issues combined with additional fuel reduction burning would have a major impact on reducing these losses and saving funds. Specific examples are given below.

General

Grand Ridge Plantations (GRP) manage over 130,000ha in Gippsland of which 82,000ha is eucalypt and pine plantation with the balance being largely native forest. GRP have long been concerned about the way in which aerial fire-fighting resources are used in the fire-fight and the lack of fuel reduction burning. It is our opinion that with more fuel reduction burning and a change in the aerial resources and deployment regimes, we could reduce the impact of fires considerably.

We are faced with adverse climate change, and the fire events of 2003 and 2006/07 have exemplified that what we are currently doing is not effective at avoiding catastrophic fires that cause enormous damage to the environment and assets.

Rather than having a small number of large and expensive aerial fire-fighting resources (e.g. Ericson sky cranes – Elvis) that are not deployed until fires are confirmed, burning strongly and spreading, we need a large number of smaller and cheaper aerial resources that are dispatched as first –attack resources, before the fire is significant.

In Gippsland alone there should be about 10 of these smaller helicopters and smaller fixed-wing bombers that are deployed at the first sight or suggestion of smoke irrespective of land tenure. For example, after a lightning storm where multiple strikes have occurred, these bombers could be deployed immediately to hold any fires until ground crews can put them out. Instead we wait until the fires develop, see which ones become significant and then send in the big machines when it is too late. The bigger machines are usually called at a time when several outbreaks are burning out of control, the weather conditions are adverse and all they can do is save a few assets and make people feel better. They never extinguish the fire. The fires should never get so big in the first place.

This suggestion would save money in the fire-fight alone, not to mention the assets and biodiversity saved. These small machines cost about $1,000 per hour to run compared to tens-of-thousands for Elvis.

To be successful the aerial resources initially need to be under the control of regional bodies e.g. joint DSE/CFA despatch. Dispatching the resources would not need approval from a central group in Melbourne. Dispatching the aerial resources would be the immediate initial response to any smoke or fire sighting. If it was discovered that the aerial resource was not needed then they could be sent back after undertaking reconnaissance.

Background specific to GRP

- The occurrence of fires is increasing at a concerning rate and the demographics and environment of the Gippsland region make it extremely fire prone with many ignition sources.

- Existing aerial fire-fighting resources are controlled by state-wide priorities and rules of engagement, resulting in virtually no aerial attack until fires are well developed and out of control i.e. justifying the deployment of large helicopters (the opposite of the approach GRP are advocating).
- In recent times Gippsland has lost considerable assets and plantation resource from fires which were small and controllable for some time, prior to them breaking out and causing major damage. Aerial suppression was not called upon until the fires were burning out of control. Too late in our opinion. For example:-
    - **Longford (Emu Track) fire** – January 2003. This fire was from a lightning strike that was known about for hours before it broke out from the Holey Plains Park. It went on to burn 238ha of plantation as well as other assets. Aerial bombardment as first attack would most likely have prevented this.
    - **Toms Cap/Stradbroke fire** – January 2003. This fire was from lightning strikes that were known about for hours before they broke out. The small smokes could be seen in the morning by a spotter plane but it took hours to get ground crews to identify them on the ground. It went on to burn 121ha of plantation as well as other private assets. Aerial bombardment as first attack would most likely have prevented this.
    - **McGaurans fire** - February 2002. This fire was started by a burning truck on the Princes Highway. The fire was small for about 30 minutes before it expanded quickly and went on to burn 662ha of eucalypt and pine plantation as well as threatening Traralgon. Aerial bombardment as first attack would quite likely have prevented this. This site is 1 km from Latrobe Valley Airfield.
    - **Moondarra fire** - January 2006. This fire was started by a campfire (probably deliberate) and again was small for some considerable time before breaking out. It went on to burn 140ha of plantation eucalypts and 250ha of plantation pines not to mention many private assets. Aerial bombardment as first attack would possibly have prevented this.
- All of these fires had an extreme impact on biodiversity and water quality and none had aerial resources as their first attack.

What small firebombing appliance can do:-

- Key role is to be first attack appliance, drop foam trails and foam directly on the fire/hot spot to hold it until ground crews arrive. In a dry fire-fight situation this could be phoscheck. This has been extremely effective in the past.
- Allows rapid reconnaissance and pinpointing of the fire
- Assesses the best method of attack and water availability
- Assesses safety escape routes and advises of when needed
- Advises of fire behaviour, weather conditions and positioning of ground crews
- As soon as a rural fire or smoke was detected the helicopter/plane would be dispatched to investigate and start dropping water/foam/phoscheck. This would happen before ground crews were dispatched or at the same time.
- Capacity of around 500-1,000 litres with foam or phoscheck.

All of the above suggestions would be aided greatly with a more comprehensive fuel-reduction burning program.

Grand Ridge Plantations

For specific comment or clarification on this submission contact:-
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