

SUBMISSION

RECEIVED

18 MAY 2007

NO. 063

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce Inc.

President ; John Mulligan ,PO Box 391 Nicholson. Vic 3891 Ph 51568845

Vice President ; Graeme Connley , Tonghi Creek via Cann River . 3890

Secretary ; M.Stevens , 129 Monaro Highway , Cann River. 3890.

May 10th , 2007.

The Secretary,
Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

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

We , the East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce Inc , wish to submit the following for your consideration in your inquiry.

To begin with , our comments apply to that area of Gippsland we are familiar with ie. East of Snowy River , although our comments will most likely apply to other areas of Victoria as well.

It is now clearly evident that Judge Stretton's findings and recommendations after the 1939 fires, as with Mr Esplin's report on the 2003 fires , were flawed on many grounds and we hope your inquiry will present many more and better informed findings as to the correct approach for the future management of our forests.

It is on record that as far back as 1922 a deputation from Canberra arrived in Cann River to discuss ' Preventative Burning' . The Warragul Gazette printed articles in the 20's and 30's with differing opinions on the subject of burning so the subject is not new. It has not , however, been properly resolved in the past and the problem was exacerbated because of the 'wet years' in the 50's, 60's and 70's when Government did not have to worry much about fuel reduction as mostly it was too wet to burn other than in full summer when we did have some fires.

REF 1 & 2. With these wet seasons a mentality of **fire suppression** developed and **fire prevention** was largely ignored . In regard to fire prevention , the only thing we can control is the fuel load – we cannot control the other two ingredients of damaging summer fire and they are temperature /wind and air.

Because of the mentality in DSE and Parks in regard to fire suppression over the last 40 to 50 years our bush is in a perilous condition . It suffered a major fire in 1983 and unless immediate and practical approaches are taken to fuel reduction burning , 25 years of timber and flora and fauna regrowth will be lost. This time round it will be complete devastation. The existing Department of Sustainability and Environment

Code Of Practice does not permit adequate fuel reduction to be carried out in order to save our forests.

We believe that , after taking out 'rainforest' areas , timber harvesting stands etc of the balance of forest area the target should be 20 % fuel reduced each year. Of course the year will vary between wet and dry, hot and cold and the quality of the burns will vary ; some will need repeating in 2 to 3 years depending on topography , timber types etc. Although not rocket science , maintenance of the bush is a complex issue and can only be managed by practical people ' on the ground' who are thoroughly familiar with their area. Conditions can vary so much in fuel loads, moisture etc in a small distance that science is not much use ; rather a practical forester / bushman who has experience and a 'feel' for the task should be supported and trusted to make on the spot decisions in regard to fuel reduction.

REF 3. The lack of adequate fuel reduction burns and the result can readily be seen on the Dargo/ Licola '07 fires ; the damage, the wildlife lost , the timber lost and the effect on streams is its own proof of the poor Forest Management preceding these fires and, indeed, the handling of the fires themselves.

These forests with their timber, flora and fauna and streams will take 100 years to recover [consider the lost income from the timber resource alone].

REF 4. We have found the reporting to government of areas burnt under fuel reduction programs to have been faulty and misleading.

REF 5. The legislative and regulatory requirements are largely tied into the Code of Practice which we believe to be too restrictive and not conducive to good forest management.

REF 6. We believe fire breaks are useless in a major fire but are handy to burn back from in fuel reduction burns. If fuel reduction burning is carried out properly then they ie the burns , are the main fire breaks. We believe a network of trafficable roads and tracks are all that are necessary coupled with adequate fuel reduction burning. In addition , if lightning strikes were allowed to burn in weather other than at high risk times of the year, these too form a natural fire ' break' and haven for wildlife in times of severe fire.

REF 7. We believe that if fuel reduction burns are properly carried out and adequate then water points , other than natural , should not be necessary. We would prefer to see those funds spent on fuel reduction burning. Perhaps on the interface of private property and Crown Lands private landholders could be encouraged to construct large dams with a subsidy scheme.

REF 8. Of the land users mentioned , timber harvesters are useful in the forest as it is in their interest that hot fires don't destroy their resource , so being in the bush they should be alert to the risk of fire and they have the heavy machinery on site to assist with the fire fighting effort.

Of the other users mentioned , although not a lot of it in our area now, grazing is a very useful way of reducing ground level fuel ; it also allows those involved to know their bush area. Such graziers should then be of valuable assistance to DSE in

identifying areas needing to be 'burnt out' and to co-operate and work with DSE in fuel reduction burning.

REF 9. Service roads and access tracks have been badly neglected in our area in the past ; it is imperative that they be kept clear and accessible at all times. It should be that a permanent fire crew , with machinery, when not engaged in fuel reduction burning or firefighting , should spend their time on track maintenance.

REF 10. Undoubtedly , the recent drought years have exacerbated the wildfire situation , but they have also provided good conditions for autumn, winter and spring burning. This has not been taken advantage of by DSE or Parks Vic. They would rather fight wildfire than take opportunity to reduce the risk of wildfire. Why?

We cannot be sure whether present conditions are due to global warming or not. In the past there have been some terrible droughts. Anecdotal evidence suggests there was a very, very severe drought in East Gippsland in the mid 1800's.

REF 11 & 12. Local knowledge and skills re fuel reduction burning and fighting of wildfires have been ruthlessly ignored by DSE and Parks Vic . Incident controllers and fire managers with little local knowledge are often brought 'in' to manage fire events. Local C.F.A [all volunteers] are often sidelined by DSE with managers who prefer to use their own crews while keeping unpaid volunteers cooling their heels at various depots. The volunteers can't go home to get on with their own work but are just held in limbo for the duration of the fire. It is these local fire captains with their local knowledge who should have a much bigger say in the fighting of wildfire.

If, as we would like to see, a DSE permanent fire crew in each area then they too would gain the local knowledge , and combined with local CFA , a very good local strike force would be available to act quickly and prevent fires escalating, instead of waiting for the huge bureaucratic DSE and Parks operation to get rolling ; by which time the fires have generally escaped.

We believe that older and retired CFA members and community members should be encouraged to join their local CFA groups in an advisory role.

REF 13. One point that is very relevant and not covered by the above terms of reference is the effect that large scale wildfires are having on streams. Where disastrous fires have caused massive damage to streams these will not stabilize now for many years. At all costs we must prevent further large fires. The only way to do this now is to concentrate all our effort and resources on reducing fuel loads through fuel reduction burning. Relevant to this application also is the fact that carbon emissions are of a lesser threat to atmospheric health from a cool fire ie fuel reduction than that of a 'hot' one at the height of summer which is very damaging.

Our group , East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce Inc, comprises, in the main , concerned older people of the community ; in many cases with several generations of family with local bush experience. We, like many others over the years , have appealed to government departments to do more fuel reduction burning but in the main , have been ignored. That we have been right in our appeals has been borne out

by '83, '03 and '07 fires in Gippsland . We don't have many more chances or our bush will be ruined forever.

Our wish is to see the forests with a mosaic of differing 'age' vegetation which will sustain flora and fauna. That differing 'age' is achievable by a constant program of fuel reduction burns. Ideally , the natural occurrence of fire by lightning strike serves to maintain the health of the landscape ; natural fire occurrence is also free of any manipulation by man for any reason and it therefore removes any suspicion of self interest from the equation. Bureaucracy is in itself an impediment to really effective forest management on an ecological level.

Your terms of reference are fairly brief but to put all we know on paper would fill several books. We would look forward to an opportunity to speak personally with your committee to enlarge upon any of the points that you may find unclear in our submission. Better still we would like the opportunity to take you into our bush to show you on the ground our concerns for it.

The cause of much of the reluctance of government to carry out fuel reduction burning is the fear of a damaging ' escape' and then consequently a fear of litigation. The subject of litigation has to be addressed . If man did not interfere we would still have fires caused by lightning . Could those who would sue for fire damage sue the Almighty for lightning caused fire damage ?

This matter of risk and litigation has to be resolved if we wish to save our parks and forests.

We are also concerned that there are conflicting ideologies within DSE management . In other words those who support ' prescribed ecological ' burning and those who do not and use every means they can to thwart necessary burning . Such conflict , if it exists , should be overcome [in favour of ecological sustainable forest burned in a prescribed manner]. Similarly, we feel there is a lack of vision in management for the forest here and we have found it difficult to get anyone to enunciate a long term goal. The alternative to sensible and adequate fuel reduction burning is to experience more frequent, more dangerous and much larger wildfires.

John Mulligan
President ... East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce

 15/1/07
Per M.Stevens, Secretary.