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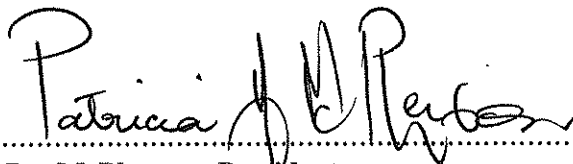
INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT  
PRACTICES ON BUSHFIRES IN VICTORIA

from

BAIRNSDALE AND DISTRICT FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INC  
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BAIRNSDALE VIC 3875

May 2007

SIGNED: .....



Pat McPherson, President

## PURPOSE AND PREFACE

The purpose of this submission is to address Reference No (3) from a field naturalist perspective:  
*The impact of prescribed burning and recent wild fires on Victoria's biodiversity, wildlife and other natural assets including water quality and quantity.*

In so doing so, we expect to be a lone voice crying in the wilderness (read environment). Ironically the destruction that we have observed was not caused by the bush fires but by pre fire prevention and post fire rehabilitation works undertaken by Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and to a lesser extent by the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

## BACKGROUND

The Bairnsdale & District Field Naturalists Club Inc (B&DFNC) has been monitoring the unique flora of East Gippsland for over 47 years.

Its purpose is:

- the study, monitoring and protection of indigenous flora and fauna, habitat, natural and geological features
- promoting the formation and preservation of national and state parks and reserves.

It achieves this end by:

- 1 Annual surveys of endangered species of:
  - Bonnet Orchid (*Cryptostylis erecta*) at Marlo Plains
  - Furred Tongue Orchid (*Cryptostylis hunteriana*) at Marlo Plains and Bemm River
  - Summer Spider Orchid (*Arachnorchis flavovirens*) at Native Dog Flat
  - Leafy Greenhood Orchid (*Pterostylis cucullata*) at Briagalong, Moormung, Hinnomunjie
  - Metallic Sun Orchid (*Thelymitra epipactoides*) at Blond Bay
  - Robust Spider Orchid (*Caladenia valida*) survey at Raymond Island
  - Thick-lip Spider Orchid (*Caladenia tessellata*) at Clifton Creek –Colquhoun Forest
  - Yellow Hyacinth Orchid (*Dipodium hamiltonianum*) at Wulgulmerang
  - Slender Hyacinth Orchid (*Dipodium variegatum*) at Colquhoun Forest
  - Purple Donkey Orchid (*Diuris punctata*) at Bairnsdale railway line and Marlo Plains
  - Leek Orchid (*Prasophyllum chasmogamum*) at Bairnsdale railway line
  - Gaping Leek Orchid (*Prasophyllum correctum*) at Bairnsdale railway line
  - Maroon Leek Orchid (*Prasophyllum frenchii*) at Gillingall
  - Enigmatic Greenhood (*Pterostylis X aenigma*) at Hinnomunjie.

In addition the Club regularly monitors 34 species of other rare orchids throughout East Gippsland.

In all cases data is forwarded to DSE for inclusion in all relevant bio-diversity data bases as required under the Flora and Fauna Act.

In recognition of its significant contribution to the East Gippsland orchid population, B&DFNC was awarded a prestigious Banksia Award in 2006.

- 2 Monthly excursions and regular camp outs to observe and monitor native vegetation and flora. Rare and restricted species are reported to DSE for inclusion in the Flora Information System. New specimens are forwarded to the Herbarium for identification and classification and entry into relevant data bases.

The above clearly establishes the credibility of the B&DFNC as a reliable contributor to the knowledge base of one of the State's valuable assets on public land and a regular monitor of these assets.

Therefore we were dismayed to see how this knowledge wasn't accessed and the asset damaged, if not totally destroyed, by fire management practices during the prevention and rehabilitation phases of the recent bushfires.

Following our observations of damage in local areas and consultation with DSE fire management personnel we have teased out the following issues of concern to bring to this Inquiry.

## **ISSUES**

### **Issue 1      Inadequate DSE protocols for bulldozer operators when undertaking fire line construction prior, during and after fires**

This is evidenced by the fact that the *Fireline Construction Standards* document for use in the East Gippsland area was drafted (according to DSE) sometime between 2003 and 2006 'for discussion with staff and plant operators and it is expected that the standards will be reinforced by use of example pictures'.

We understand that these pictures entitled (a) *Road verge with clear edge for slashing* (b) *Windrow dragged back* (c) *Mineral earth break rehabilitated* were shown to the plant operators when undertaking post fire rehabilitation.

The DSE standard per se is the issue here irrespective of whether plant operators followed the pictures or not. We observed initial bulldozer fire lines in Mitchell River National Park that had been widened to 30 metres post fire and in the process had destroyed stands of healthy live trees not effected by fire. These trees were then strewn as logs over 20 metres of the destroyed area to trap seeds and water to regenerate themselves! In addition, this so-called 'rehabilitation' process actually caused massive soil disturbance and took out an Aboriginal sacred site!

#### **Recommendation 1**

That responsible Fireline Construction Standards covering the prevention, suppression and rehabilitation phases of a bushfire are developed, legitimated and their use mandated.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That DSE is required to revise their practice of post fire rehabilitation so as not to cause further damage to and destruction of the natural environment.

### **Issue 2      Lack of resources within DSE to monitor or supervise bulldozer operations in the rehabilitation phase of a bushfire**

This was obvious when the DSE Fire Management Officer stated that 15 contractors using 100 bulldozers were involved in rehabilitation work in any one day in the East Gippsland fire areas with only he and one other person responsible for monitoring their operations. Impossible!

#### **Recommendation 3**

That DSE is adequately resourced to monitor bulldozing operations during the rehabilitation phase of a bushfire.

### **Issue 3      Failure within DSE to follow its own procedures prior to establishing a fire break**

This was evidenced by the responsible DSE Fire Management Officer at Nowa Nowa Fire District not consulting relevant DSE Forest Stewardship and Biodiversity staff (as required by

their own procedure) before establishing a fall back fire break along Dead Horse Creek Road in the Colquhoun State Forest.

Failure to do so resulted in everything within 15-20 metres along the western edge of the road being wiped out including the indigenous Colquhoun Grevillea (*Grevillea celata*), various common orchids and two small patches of the rare Cobera Greenhood Orchid (*Pterostylis grandiflora*) and Southern Spider Orchid (*Caladenia australis*).

#### **Recommendation 4**

That DSE Fire Controllers and/or Fire Management Officers follow DSE procedure and consult relevant DSE Forest Stewardship and Biodiversity personnel who are in turn, informed by Biodiversity Values Maps, before establishing a fire break.

#### **Issue 4      Lack of resources within DSE to enter endangered East Gippsland flora on Victorian Flora Information System and the Atlas of Victoria**

This was evidenced by the admission to us by DSE that there is a two year backlog in entering threatened/endangered species data on the appropriate data bases. One wonders whether all the information about endangered species (as listed in the Background) that B&DFNC gathers and reports to DSE is ever recorded.

#### **Recommendation 5**

That DSE is adequately resourced to ensure that all threatened/endangered species (not only in East Gippsland) are recorded in a timely manner on all relevant biodiversity data bases.

#### **Issue 5      CFA jurisdiction on public land**

A bulldozer hired by CFA scalped a fire break through the Lake Tyers Coastal Reserve (managed by Parks Victoria) and destroyed much of the Thick Lip Spider Orchid (*Caladenia tessalata*). This raises two issues: (a) whether CFA should be operating on public land (b) whether CFA has access to relevant biodiversity data bases before making a fire break.

#### **Recommendation 6**

That the responsibilities of DSE and CFA in a bush fire situation are clearly delineated and if CFA has jurisdiction to make fire breaks on public land, that it's activities are strictly controlled by appropriately informed DSE staff who have access to relevant biodiversity data bases and values maps.

#### **Issue 6      Allocation of post fire recovery monies**

We have been advised that \$135m has been allocated for the post fire recovery phase of which approximately \$30 is going to DSE. There is no evidence/indication that any of this will be allocated to monitoring endangered species or to establishing a post fire flora and fauna monitoring plan and a structure to undertake this work or to funding it in each affected DSE Fire Region.

#### **Recommendation 7**

That a proportion of post fire recovery monies are earmarked for and designated to:

- (a) monitoring endangered species
- (b) establishing a flora and fauna monitoring plan and structure and funding it in each affected DSE fire region

## **SUMMARY OF ISSUES**

From a field naturalist's perspective the issues are the lack of profile or concern for flora a fauna in general in fire situations. This is evidenced by:

1. Inadequate DSE protocols for bulldozer operators when undertaking fireline construction prior, during and after fires.
2. Lack of resources within DSE to monitor or supervise bulldozing operations in the rehabilitation stage of a bush fire.
3. Failure within DSE to follow their own procedures before establishing a fire break
4. Lack of resources within DSE to enter threatened/endangered East Gippsland species on the Flora Information System and all other relevant biodiversity data bases.
5. CFA jurisdiction on public land.
6. Allocation of post fire recovery monies.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. That responsible Fireline Construction Standards covering the prior, suppression and rehabilitation phases of a bush fire are developed, legitimated and their use mandated.
2. That DSE be required to revise their practice of 'rehabilitation' so as not to cause further damage and destruction to the natural environment.
3. That DSE is adequately resourced to monitor bulldozing operations in the rehabilitation phase of a bushfire.
4. That DSE Fire Controllers and/or Fire Managers follow DSE procedures and consult relevant DSE Forest Stewardship and Biodiversity personnel, who are in turn, informed by Biodiversity Values Maps, before establishing a fire break.
5. That DSE is adequately resourced so that all threatened/endangered species (not only in East Gippsland) are recorded in a timely manner on relevant data bases.
6. That the responsibilities of DSE and CFA are clearly delineated and if CFA has jurisdiction to make fire breaks on public land that it's activities are strictly controlled by appropriately informed DSE staff who have access to relevant biodiversity data bases and values maps.
7. That a proportion of post fire recovery monies are earmarked for and designated to monitoring threatened/endangered species AND to establishing a post fire flora and fauna monitoring plan and structure and funding it in each affected DSE fire region.