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SUBMISSION

21 MAY 2007

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL  
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

NO. 068

Robert Dark

20 May 2007

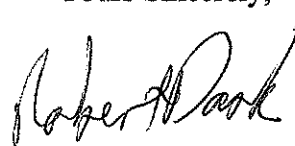
Executive Officer  
Environment and Natural Resources Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
East Melbourne, 3002

re; Inquiry onto the Impact of Public Land Management  
Practices on Bushfires in Victoria

Dear Sir,

I wish to make a submission as a concerned recreational user of our forest areas. I make the submission on the basis of observations made personally over the last thirty years. I have made comments on a point by point basis as per the terms of reference.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Dark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'R' and 'D'.

1. I would make the point that recent fires have originated mainly on crown land not freehold land and it would be unfair to place any burden of control measures on freehold land until the management of crown land is sorted out. The effectiveness of prescribed burning has not been proven as a fire prevention/reduction tool. Irrespective of the drought conditions the burnt area has within a few weeks a new layer of readily combustible material which has been dropped by flora scorched in the prescribed burn. Incidental evidence would indicate that the increase in prescribed burning in recent years coincides with an increase in the number and severity of wildfires probably due to an increase in the undergrowth density triggered by the prescribed burning. The current practice of burning in Autumn means that the area burnt will largely have regrown during the following Spring which seems to defeat the purpose of burning. The intensity of a prescribed burn needs to be more carefully controlled than what is currently occurring as flora and fauna are being destroyed. Most flora species within the alpine/sub-alpine areas affected by the recent fires and targeted for prescribed burns do not need fire to regenerate and in fact are killed or severely damaged by fire. The effective extent required for any prescribed burning will never provide sufficient benefits to justify the cost, resources, impact on the forests or the resultant environmental pollution.
2. The manner in which prescribed burning is carried out is unstructured despite any intent to the contrary with burns being incomplete, broken or just plain wrong with the use of aerial incendiaries. I have actually watched an aerial incendiary drop on the wrong side of the burn line. The tracks within a prescribed burn area are not monitored for fallen trees for sufficient time after the burning with frequent obstructions persisting into the fire danger period. This tends to indicate that either the codes of practice are not being followed or that they are manifestly inadequate.
3. The impact on biodiversity is obvious in the reduced numbers of smaller, slow moving fauna and the increase in the extent and variety of weeds. The impact of fires on water quantity and quality was well documented by the MMBW at its Healesville experimental catchments. The recent fires will reduce both water quality and quantity over the time period required for the forests to regenerate. The regeneration process gives an avenue of opportunity for faster growing weeds to take hold which in turn provides fuel for fires in succeeding years.
4. Reporting of prescribed burns needs to be made readily available to the public so that they may be better informed as to what is happening to their forests. This should include full statistics on the timing and size of the burn with comparisons between planned and actual burns plus a historical map of prescribed burns with an overlay of wildfires for the same period. The reliance on the Internet for the dissemination of information on the location and timing of prescribed burns is unrealistic and should be published in the relevant daily newspapers as per historical practice. The relevant Departments have not been given a mandate by the people of Victoria to manage the forests in the way that they are being managed.
5. The regulations need to be tightened to make the bureaucrats more accountable for their actions in conducting prescribed burns and any other fire prevention strategies.

6. Permanent fire-breaks and containment lines would only be effective if they were regularly maintained, were so placed to be effective rather than convenient and were in sufficient numbers to limit the size of a fire. Another use may be as a rapid access/escape route and as a refuge for wildlife. The viability of a fire-breaks would also have to be viewed in light of the claims that recent fires have been spotting up to 10 kilometres ahead of the fire front. There is also evidence that the 2007 fires readily jumped over the fire breaks cleared for the 2003 fires which further questions the effectiveness of such a strategy.
7. The provision of large water points can only be effective if there is water in them. The ongoing period of below average rainfall would tend to suggest evaporation would make this impractical plus current practice seems to be to back burn rather than put the fires out with water by either aerial or terrestrial means and I find this a contradiction. The only practical location for such storages would be by way of dams on significant water courses but maintenance and siltation would be an issue. The existing small fire dams do not seem to be maintained in any way.
8. An impact of traditional uses is that current timber harvesting practices see access to areas adjacent to the active coup being physically blocked to facilitate harvesting with minimal signage to indicate this. This means that access and escape routes are blocked. Coup sizes should be reduced so that no through access route is ever blocked. In addition temporary unnamed coup access tracks should be clearly signed as being no through tracks to prevent confusion in an emergency. The significant amount of logging presently occurring means that there are many areas available for colonisation by weeds and faster growing short life natives which provide high density fuel for years until a substantial canopy can regrow to smother them out. The availability of tracks for recreational four wheel drive use means that fallen trees and other obstructions will mostly likely be cleared or at least made known prior to the fire season. This is a zero cost method of patrolling and clearing many thousands of tracks which in terms of the forest has minimal negatives. Mining and prospecting activities also have a problem of leaving dead-end, unsigned tracks scattered through the forests. Many abandoned mines have permanent large water reserves which should be investigated.
9. The term serviceable in terms of tracks needs to be defined. There should be a maintenance schedule for all tracks that sees every track maintained within a five year period. Far too much resource is put into logging access and very little into general access. Also every timber bridge should have a maintained by-pass around it in the event of fire damage and it should also be on an inspection schedule. The maintenance of helipads in terms of emergency access should also be addressed as they provide a potential extraction point for any persons, members of the public or fire fighters, trapped in a wildfire. It is common sense to have a reasonable level of signage on tracks to facilitate any emergency access or evacuation but it is ridiculous that this signage is always made from combustible material. Emergency evacuation points should be sign posted and marked on maps.
10. Climate change with the subsequent drying of our forest areas means that fires must be halted more quickly than what has been achieved to date. If we keep allowing our forests to burn as they have been then we will trigger a mini climate change because of the loss of mature vegetation which will be to our further detriment. The below average rainfall also equates to below average growth rates when a forest has to re-generate. The reduced amount of available water during the fire season means that the use of that water must be more efficient.

11. Communities in rural areas should be encouraged to share information on fire fighting methods applicable to the local area and should be encouraged to have all residents undertake a community based fire fighting course even if not directly involved in a fire fighting organisation. The involvement of further scientific input needs to be weighed against the gap between conflicting opinions of experts and the real life situation.
12. Local communities seem to be largely ignored. They need to have direct access to fire information and a set of rules to govern notification practices needs to be developed. Something along the lines of a dedicated fire information officer with access to ALL real time information should be appointed within any community that is potentially under the threat of fire. This person should also be able to call in emergency assistance to cover infrastructure and services outages as the result of a fire. The wider community needs better information than what was provided during the January 2007 fires. The websites were confusing, contradictory and slow to update in real time with a strong tendency to have a website linked to another website and so on until the circle was closed back to the original site with still little useful information. There should be a single website/ phone enquiry point which is updated in real time. Not CFA, Vicroads, Parks, DSE, etc. as individual contacts.
13. The January 2007 fires were largely attributed to lightning strikes. Would it not make sense to investigate the installation of small lightning conducting towers to prevent uncontrolled strikes. The number of towers would be significant but if such an idea were to work then the effort would be justified. There is also the point of the pollution/greenhouse gas problems being magnified by large scale wildfires or even prescribed burning as well as the aesthetic problem of having large areas of the State blanketed under dense clouds of smoke. The Victorian Government seems to have a marketing strategy for tourists to come and see our world class national parks. Who wants to see ash and charred trees or smoke so thick from a prescribed burn that you can't see the next hill. Also the current practice of back burning rather than attempting to put fires out has, on incidental evidence, added to the fires far more often than it has reduced or contained them. I always thought that due to the very limited control over it, back burning was the absolute last resort in fire fighting, only to be used when absolutely everything else had failed and the situation could not be made worse if the back burn escaped. Not the main fire fighting tool.

As I recall a number of the fire outbreaks were attributed to fire bugs. With this in mind it would seem that a much higher official presence seven days a week may be a deterrent.

Prescribed burning is being touted as THE fire prevention tool of today. The January 2007 fires burned much of the area burnt by the 2003 fires which demonstrates that the effectiveness of prescribed burning is at best short. The lesson we should be learning is that prescribed burning is not THE solution and in the longer term is probably not even part of the solution. More effort should be put into researching alternatives. The local and international concerns of global warming due to emissions is being totally ignored when assessing the impacts of prescribed burning and wild fires. The direct pollution from smoke emissions and the follow-on problem of carbon dioxide emissions needs to be viewed as a serious detraction from the practice of prescribed burning.

The focus of DSE and Parks Victoria needs to be directed more heavily towards the maintenance of the forests to best prevent and control fires. There is at present a very heavy bias towards logging operations and prescribed burning. Things such as the maintenance of camping areas to reduce the risk of fire escaping are being largely ignored. Few camping areas either have the grass cut around them or have a maintained fire break. Existing fire dams are rarely maintained and water points on streams are few with little maintenance on those that do exist. I believe the overall management practices for our forests needs to be reviewed in light of the recent fires and a more applicable set of guidelines established. This needs to be done with much more consultation from the community at large.