

The Friends of Howqua Hills Inc.

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21 MAY 2007

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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SUBMISSION

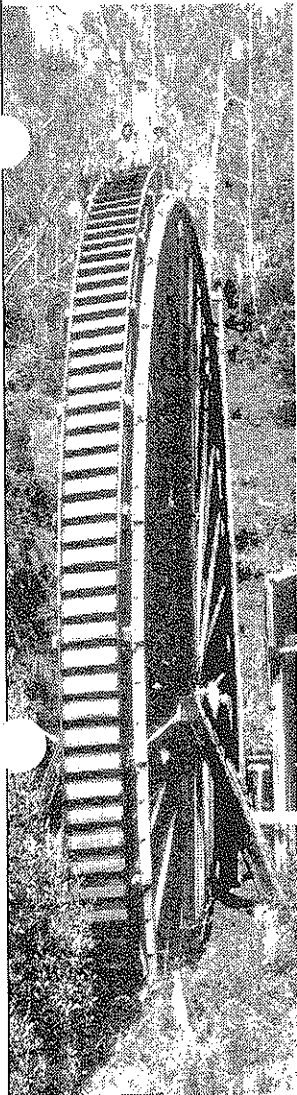
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19/05/07

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



Giant water wheel
"Hanney"
(63ft diameter)

Dear Sir,

We are small group of 50 residents of the Howqua Valley via Mansfield in Victoria.

Having suffered bushfire activity on all sides of our settlement for 6 weeks during December and January 2006/7, and being totally occupied with fighting active fires for 3 of those weeks, without any assistance from both the DSE and the CFA we feel well-qualified to comment on the matters raised by your enquiry.

1. Prescribed Burning.

We support prescribed fuel-reduction burning, but we believe that the DSE is not competent to conduct it safely or effectively.

We will not comment further on the well-documented examples of incompetence displayed by the DSE at Wilson's Promontory and Mt. Buffalo, but restrict our remarks to our own first-hand experiences.

The main fire front passed through the Howqua Valley on December 18.

The DSE had previously attempted preventative back-burns in the lower Howqua valley but these were not effective, and on 16 December, back-burning ceased after visiting fire fighters were injured.

No DSE or CFA personnel attended to back-burn until 27 December.

On the afternoon of 27 December, a two-man crew from DSE Horsham arrived to conduct some preventative burning within 300m of private property.

No contact with the local residents was initiated.

While the two DSE gents were both diligent and competent, they had not been provided with a map or been briefed re the

availability of water. I provided this vital information, and emphasized that the best source of water for their slip-on unit was from my high-pressure pump.

Subsequently, over a period of 2 weeks, many DSE crews appeared almost on a daily basis, and conducted preventative burns adjacent to the Howqua River. These crews arrived at 10 am and left at 4pm. No DSE fire-monitoring was conducted overnight. This essential function was performed by local residents.

On 11 January, while the residents were totally-occupied fighting an active fire which threatened private properties, an un-monitored DSE burn crossed the Howqua river and burnt out a camping flat and Parks infrastructure which had previously been saved by the actions of the local residents.

For the whole duration of the fire activity, the DSE incident controller never contacted the local residents to inform us of planned activities.

Therefore the DSE contravened its own Code of Practice, document 4.3.1 no. 372 and 373 . (Provision of accurate and timely information to local communities, and sourcing of local knowledge. Page 30)

While we support the concept of prescribed burning, we have no faith in the capability of the DSE to prevent our properties being destroyed by their activities.

2. Permanent Fire Breaks and Containment Lines

Our experience is that bare earth grader lines were effective in containing fires on flat land surrounded by short grass, but containment lines cleared through steep, forested areas were much less effective and were usually breached.

3. Water Points

During the period prior to the main fire front, as a result of local initiative, a temporary dam was built across an accessible section of the Howqua river. This dam provided adequate access for helicopter pick-up, either via snorkel or Bambi bucket. It was used only on one day because for most of the period helicopters were not able to operate in the valley due to thick smoke, and/or were apparently committed elsewhere. Nevertheless it was still considered to be a worthwhile initiative, without permanent damage to the (Heritage) river.

4. Access Tracks

The Howqua valley is serviced by numerous access tracks commonly used by trail-bike riders and 4-wheel drive enthusiasts. Most of these were in poor condition in spite of the prolonged drought, because virtually no maintenance had been carried out. (It is recognized that the DSE face a difficult task in this regard, because the local council and Parks Victoria actively encourage visitors to use these tracks, and they can be rendered impassible by the activities of even two or three vehicles after rain)

In any event the access tracks are of little value if, during fire activity, the DSE /CFA deem them unsafe for their crews to traverse.

The Howqua Track is the only 2-wheel drive access road to the upper Howqua valley. This is an all-weather two lane graded road, yet it was deemed unsafe by the incident controller for much of the 6 week period under review.

On 22 December, when all residents were totally occupied fighting serious outbreaks, an urgent request for DSE/CFA assistance was made by UHF CB radio via the Mt Buller firewatch tower (the phone line having been burnt out , no mobile coverage in the valley and residents not permitted access to the Emergency Services trunk radio network.) the DSE deemed it too dangerous to send a fire-fighting crew in along the Howqua Track, yet a DSE vehicle was sent in to escort two women involved in saving wildlife.

Both vehicles ended up lost, surrounded by fire and the occupants had to be rescued by local cattlemen.

The DSE "policy" (if any) appears nonsensical.

Notwithstanding ,we agree that access tracks should be maintained both for fire-fighting and search/rescue purposes.

5. Local Community Involvement

We consider local community input to the whole matter of fire prevention and suppression to be absolutely essential.

During the recent fire period, it very quickly became apparent that the local cattlemen, had far greater-knowledge of fire behaviour than any of the DSE or CFA management and staff. We encountered unacceptable hostility to our input at a meeting just 2 weeks before the first of the fires started.

Even our attempts to elicit assistance with communications to our isolated valley were treated with contempt by the local officials.

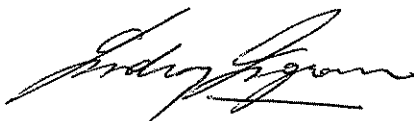
Official attempts to involve local people were simply "information sessions" at the nearest public hall, which was not safely accessible by our residents. With one notable exception, local knowledge was not sought; on the contrary, DSE officials treated local experts with arrogance and contempt.

There was excessive reliance on the internet, which clogged the local exchange ,when the telephone lines were intact, and of course there was no information after the phone lines were burnt out.

The ABC radio role as " Your Emergency Services Broadcaster" is sound in principle, but lacked effectiveness.

- . over reliance on local FM stations, which settlements such as ours can't receive
- . ABC technical section advised its Emergency Services Director (Ian Mannix) that 774 can't be received by us.... yet it is the only ABC station that we do receive well
- . far too much station promotion and "entertainment " broadcasting of fire information
- . frequent broadcasting of false information (not the ABC's fault.... false information came from DSE/CFA sources.)

Yours sincerely



Lindsay Ingram

Hon.Secretary