

# SUBMISSION

RECEIVED

NO. 071

22 MAY 2007

Our Ref: 230/01/03  
Your Ref:

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL  
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Ask For: Ian Walk



21 May 2007

Baw Baw Shire Council  
PO Box 304  
Warragul Victoria 3820  
Telephone +61 3 5624 2411  
Facsimile +61 3 5622 3654  
bawbaw@bawbawshire.vic.gov.au

**Hon. John Pandazopoulos**  
**Environment and Natural Resources Committee**  
**Level 8, 35 Spring Street**  
**MELBOURNE 3000**

Dear Sir,

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

I refer to your letter dated 28 March 2007 regarding submissions for the above mentioned Environment and Natural Resources Committee Inquiry.

The Baw Baw Shire Municipal Fire Prevention Committee has provided the following submission for consideration by the Environment and Natural Resources Committee:

### **(6) The effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed firebreaks and containment lines throughout public land areas.**

Experiences from the Great Alpine Complex fires has further reinforced the known fact that firebreaks do not stop fires, but do assist in reducing fire intensity allowing fire crews to manage fire in these fuel reduced zones. Maintaining permanent strategic firebreaks/containment lines on the public/private interface will assist in forming a valuable strategy to reduce the likelihood of wildfire spreading to or from public land.

Firebreaks/containment lines can also be used as a starting point for fuel reduction burning buffer zones, directional burning back into public land thus forming a deeper fuel reduced area. This combined with well managed fuel reduction practices on private land will complement these strategies.

The permanency of these control measures can be placed in future Fire Management Plans and mapping aids to assist fire agencies in preplanning and fire management strategies.

### **(9) The provision and maintenance of serviceable access tracks and signage to assist with recreational and emergency requirements.**

During the 1960-70s there were hundreds of bridges, from log fills to extensive structures, constructed throughout the public forest areas of Northeast Victoria and

Gippsland. The bridges were constructed to provide access during the forest harvesting boom period. The anticipated lifespan of the bridges was 25-30 years and designed for single axis vehicles. The bridges now provide all year round access to public land for emergency services, forest workers and recreational activities. Within the fire area of the Great Alpine Complex fires 2006/07 there were 300 bridges of which 70 were burnt or damaged and 60 will need to be replaced.

The Great Alpine Complex fires had a significant impact on the Baw Baw Shire and a number of forest bridges were damaged or destroyed. The Willow Grove Fire Brigade has expressed concern with the condition of a number of bridges to the North of the town and that access to the forest area that surrounds the district has been significantly restricted.

In April 2004 the Blue Rock fire (an escaped fuel reduction burn), burnt a bridge over Bull Beef Creek, and it took approximately three years to replace, which in turn made fighting the Moondara fire in January 2006 more difficult.

There are also two other bridges of concern, which have been closed, as they are unsafe. Rowleys Ridge Rd Bridge over the Tanjil River is also used as an alternative route to Tanjil Bren or Mount Baw Alpine Resort. Hawthorne Bridge, which crosses the Latrobe river has also been closed, which is of great importance and makes a quick response to any new fires a lot slower, and let these have a greater chance to turn into much longer fires, which also means our fire suppression strategies have to change.

In the short term funding should be made available to replace these strategic timber bridges with less flammable materials such as concrete and steel. A 5-10 year replacement and maintenance program should be funded to ensure adequate access throughout Gippsland's public land. To protect the bridges from wildfire, a fire preparation and maintenance program where regular works are carried out throughout the year should also be funded.

Priority should be given to the completion of the South Face Road from Moe Rawson Road to the Mount Baw Baw Alpine Resort. This road would not only provide an alternative access to the Alpine Resort and public land but also act as a strategic firebreak where fuel reduction burning buffer zones could be established.

**(13) Any other matter that impacts on the scale and intensity of bushfires in Victoria.**

On the 2 May 2007 the Baw Baw Shire Municipal Fire Prevention Committee considered a summary of the proposed submission from Grand Ridge Plantations and have given their support to the following submission from Grand Ridge Plantations:

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. Specific examples are given below.

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 eg 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 half a day 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 500litres with foam or phoscheck.

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

If you have any queries regarding this submission please contact me on 56242447.

Yours faithfully



**Ian Walk**  
**Municipal Fire Prevention Officer**