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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Hon. John Pandazopoulos, MP
Chair - Inquiry into the Impact of
Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria
Level 8, 35 Spring Street,
Melbourne. VIC 3000

21st May 2007

Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria

Dear Sir

Melbourne-based HVP Plantations (HVP) is Australia's largest private timber plantation company, owned jointly by Australian and US superannuation and investment funds.

HVP manages around 245,000 hectares of land across Victoria, including 165,000 hectares of sustainably-managed plantation which annually supplies some three million tonnes of softwood (pine) and over 300,000 tonnes of plantation hardwood (eucalypt) to sawmillers, panel producers, and pulp and paper mills in Australia and overseas. The remaining 30 per cent of HVP's holdings are managed for plantation protection, conservation and other community values.

HVP plantations are located in the North-East, South-West, Ballarat, Colac-Otway and Gippsland Regions of Victoria, with a large proportion of our estate adjacent to public land managed by Victorian State Government departments or agencies.

HVP directly employs some 130 full-time staff across the state in Melbourne, Ballarat, Benalla, Buxton, Myrtleford, Churchill, Rennick (near Mount Gambier) and Shelley (near Corryong). HVP also engages specialised contractors who employ some 650 employees to undertake harvesting, haulage, silvicultural, fire management, road construction & maintenance and nursery activities on our estate in rural and regional Victoria.

In addition to this, downstream employers such as sawmillers, panel producers, pulp and paper manufacturers who rely on HVP's timber resource are significant employers in rural and regional Victoria.

As a company that manages seven Forest Industry Brigades (FIB), which were formed and operate under the Country Fire Authority (CFA) Act 1958, and as an organisation that was actively involved in the 2002/03 fires, the 2006/07 Great Divide Complex and 2007 Tatong-Tolmie fires, and as an organisation that has a substantial investment in rural and regional Victoria, HVP feels it is well placed to make the following observations with respect to the impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria:

The Issue

Fire is critical to the maintenance of biodiversity and ecological processes and contributes to the distinctive nature of Victoria's forests and woodlands. However uncontrolled fire, as we have seen this fire season can pose a serious threat to human life, property, community assets and investments, such as plantations, and other significant forest values including water, wood and biodiversity.

The management of public native forests and conservation reserves and in particular the management of fire is a State Government responsibility.

Common law provisions also impose a duty of care on forest owners and managers with regard to fire.

HVP considers that in relation to managing fire on public land, planning, preparedness and suppression capabilities are critical. This requires:

- An analysis and evaluation of the risks associated with fire management on public land;
- Collaboration between forest or public land managers and other agencies (eg Parks Victoria, DSE, Vic Forest and CFA) to ensure that resources are used efficiently and that the response to fire emergencies is effective and well coordinated;
- The management of fuels, detection of fires, provision of firefighters, equipment and communication systems, access and infrastructure and development of response plans to be activated in the event of unplanned fires;
- Public land management agencies maintain an effective workforce available to meet fire management related tasks;
- The provision and maintenance of suitable access tracks, fire breaks and signage on public land to provide safe access for both management and emergency situations;
- Maintenance of appropriate land management skills, knowledge and experience; and
- That sufficient resources are allocated to the task by Government agencies in order to meet their duty of care to the wider community, volunteer fire fighters, their own employees and immediate neighbours.

With respect to fire suppression activities HVP notes that:

- This is a difficult and dangerous task that requires a well trained and experienced firefighting workforce with appropriate equipment and effective management systems (eg AIIMS ICS);
- This requires the ability to conduct back-burning during wildfire suppression operations, which in turn requires specialist skills and considerable experience. These skills are most effectively gained by involvement in prescribed burning programs or silvicultural burning operations (eg for forest regeneration, site preparation and habitat management);
- Strategically placed prescribed burning on public land is an important and practical tool, particularly in forest and woodland management, as it facilitates a reduction in the amount of accumulated fuels. This reduces the intensity and difficulty of suppression of unplanned fires, and reduces the likelihood of severe damage to forest values and adjoining stakeholders assets; and
- That there must be very strong support from all levels of Government for the land manager with the operational responsibility of commencing and managing fuel reduction burns. When dealing with weather and natural systems it is not realistic to assume that these operations will always go according to plan. This strong support must be for successful and unsuccessful operations. This will provide encouragement and incentive for managers to meet burning targets.

Maintenance of skill levels

Over the past two decades the proportion of actively managed public forested land, which was once managed on a multi-purpose basis and included commercial and non-commercial harvesting operations, has diminished and been progressively transferred to a growing system of passively managed national parks and forest reserves.

HVP believes that this outcome has the potential to result in a reduction and loss of practical fire management skills by land managers and the loss of associated resource management infrastructure and skill levels. For example:

- bulldozers and plant operators with experience in steep forested land which were once strongly associated with the management of forested public land are now much reduced in availability.
- the experience and practical skills of HVP staff and HVP contractors was in high demand in the recent fires due their association and experience with active, practical forest and fire management.

Irrespective of public land management status, be it Parks Victoria or State Forest, public land managers and the agencies they represent have a responsibility to minimise adverse impacts on society caused by uncontrolled forest fires. This includes:

- The need to manage the accumulation of flammable litter and understorey fuels in strategic areas of forests in order to limit the intensity and difficulty of fire suppression and the potential risk it places on adjoining neighbours, community assets and rural stakeholder and investors; and
- Maintain adequate access tracks and firebreaks for fire management purposes.

Acknowledgment

HVP would like to acknowledge that DSE forest & fire managers have

- actively engage and consulted with our Company on the development of regional fire management plans that recognise the value of our plantation assets and their value to employment in rural and regional Victoria; and
- actively sought to involved HVP staff in fuel reduction programs where they are located within our area of interest.

Importantly HVP is aware that DSE forest & fire managers are actively involved in managing the critical aspects of bushfire management, including planning, preparedness and suppression capabilities on public land and are pleased to co-operate with them.

Should you wish to discuss this matter any further to gain an appreciation of associated issues I can be contacted on (03) 53390000.

Yours sincerely



Malcolm Tonkin
Manager – Stewardship & Asset Programs