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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE



Tuesday 15 May 2007

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

Dear Sirs/Madams,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the recent fires.

Living in the area affected by the 2003 and 2006 fires we now know that forest fires belong to and affect everyone. Their impact is felt widely, even though in the main those of us directly threatened are usually left to our own devices to defend ourselves against them. Because fires begin in a carelessly or negligently managed forest doesn't help us rationalise their effect, especially when we are prohibited from making our property boundaries more separate from the very forest which nurtures and hands the fire over our fence lines.

The culture of the people who are responsible for forest management and fire control, are not serious about the forest. These who boast of being in charge of and enjoy exercising control of the forest resource, appear to have a priority to protect the parts of the forest containing harvestable timber. They are less, if at all concerned about what they call "shit country" which often has people living amongst it and which in many instances contains the greatest diversity in flora and fauna. But the anomaly in this is their tardy response to fire when it is still small enough to control and extinguish. This is part of the "shit country" mentality. The inability to realise a fire can grow too large to fight by feeding on the shit country and using it as an avenue to the logging coupes, present and future.

By referring to the forest as forest, rather than the derogatory "bush" we might make those who are charged with its care to realise it is a valuable resource in all its forms.

1. Prescribed burning on crown and freehold land.

- (a) Prescribed burning on crown land must be undertaken in consultation with the freehold landholders bordering of the forest, and communities that are close too and who use and frequent the forest. Under the guidance from local knowledge, more areas of the forest can be cleaned up before the next summer season. In this way the fuel reduction will be greater and the fire area more extensive.
- (b) If permitted to do so; most private landholders will burn what they consider the dangerous areas of their land without need of encouragement. By making the most of this local, usually willing resource will allow the government department responsible to get the timing right, and be in attendance, resulting in the most effective outcome. Too long has the state government overlooked this asset.

2. The manner of prescribed burns.

- (a) It is difficult to estimate just how to burn an area and closer to private land the decision should mostly be left to the people who live there. Permitting, even demanding they take a hand in this endeavour. This for two reasons:-
 - i. Because they have local knowledge, and some idea of the way a fire might react from previous experience. Which will grow with each year's burn.
 - ii. By being part of the process from consultation through to action, local people will also take responsibility for any outcome of the action taken, or deferred.
 - (b) Code of practice for prescribed burns. The state government has locked up forest as national parks, which their personnel are unable to manage and maintain, other than to make certain people can't enter: and to leave it just evolve. The people that work in this department use incorrect terminology in their reference to their area of responsibility. "Bush" appears inappropriate having a connotation which suggests rubbish or has been seen in the recent fires as "shit country". Forest is a value term that should be encouraged.
 - i. Safety for the people carrying out any task is a major issue, but if carried to extremes, which in the case of fires; prescribed or otherwise. It would be prudent to allow the forest to burn and guard manage and protect only the areas which are close to habitation. At least the expense would be spared, and the firefighters would be presented to less risk.
 - ii. There would be opportunity to educate personnel in fire fighting techniques during fuel reduction burns. This added to all the other benefits.
3. Impacts of prescribed burning and wildfires on biodiversity and water elements.
- (a) These can hardly be monitored accurately. But there is no doubt that prescribed, fuel reduction burns will change the flora and fauna element in volume and type within the forest over time. It will be really noticeable if this is a recurring action each year or biennially. How this will affect an area and others which border it cannot really be known, though science will have several theories. But occasional very hot wildfires also effect the flora and fauna of the forest, but I imagine more severely.
 - (b) From our experience, we have seen less of an impact with certain bird species. They appear to have the ability to shift. The yellow tufted honey eater is one such, and it uses our bird baths because the dams it prefers to drink from and congregate round, have dried up, due to pumping water for fire fighting or just the effect of the drought. Kangaroos also tend to be in greater numbers round areas where there is still water and some graze available. The Australian wood ducks move to areas where there is a greater amount of water, no fires or fire damage. This tends to make their numbers appear larger to those who live at the the destination of this migration. The anecdotal observations are hardly noticed, or in the case of some, like the duck shooting lobby, ignored to further their own aims.
 - (c) There is no accurate way to predict what the impact fire of any kind will have on the flora and fauna without monitoring. It is important however, to accept that whatever is done, there will be an affect that we may not be able to control. The decision to try to save the forest further from habitation, or allow nature to take its course will impact on everything within it the country and to some extent the world climate.
4. The reporting process applicable to prescribed burning programs;
- (a) Should be very public.
 - i. To allow scrutiny of the outcome and discover effects and in the fire season, how it impacted on the burning of the area, should the fire move through it.
 - ii. To disclose problems, hindrances and/or opportunities which contributed to a better/lesser result. Locals should be included in this process.
5. The legislative and regulatory arrangements for prescribed burns and bushfire management.

- (a) It may be undesirable to make legislative a regulatory boundaries for prescribed burning due to the dynamic nature of the weather, terrain and other conditions which affect where the burning is to take place. Regulation and legislation will remove much of the flexibility of a fuel reduction burning program. Hampering, if not completely hamstringing those who need to get the job done.
 - (b) Competent and capable people with an ability to interact and not react with the local community should be in charge of any burning and fire fighting operation. Training should be supplied to ensure this is not only possible but probable.
 - (c) Legislating for volunteers to be paid a similar re-numeration to the DSE personnel at a fire scene. Would be wise and would take some of the friction out of any fire situation where paid personnel and volunteers are thrown together.
6. The effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed fire breaks and containment lines throughout public land areas.
- (a) Keeping firebreaks and containment lines open and maintained is extremely advantageous. Even more so if they encourage recreational use of the forest. Open and maintained firebreaks, allows access to forest areas for fire crews to quickly address fires when located, and could be used for training drivers of appliances/equipment to negotiate difficult terrain. It is also a boon for recreational exploration of the forest areas, in vehicles and on horseback. These are watchers of the forest much like beekeepers were until excluded from some forested areas.
 - (b) In many instances it would also allow fast access to place and fill water bladders for fire fighting purposes deeper into the forest. This access would allow the fire fighting water bladders to be serviced by wheeled vehicles so they could be a water source for wheeled and airborne firefighting appliances.
7. The provision and maintenance of large water points on crown land to assist with bushfire aerial task-force operations.
- This would, as well as create a different environment for native wildlife and recreation purposes if properly thought out and positioned, need not be the only system of water containers to fight fires. [See above re: transportable water bladders] They would have implications beyond fire fighting.
8. The impact of traditional land uses such as :- timber harvesting, grazing, four wheel driving, hunting, camping, mining and prospecting on the scale and intensity of bushfires and the ability of relevant agencies to respond.
- (a) The way timber harvesting is carried out is not making the best use of the forest, and certainly destroys the natural forest diversity, which may create an environment for fire escalation. The impact could be undesirable and assist with fire spread and intensity.
 - (b) Four wheel driving in the forest will allow tracks that can be used for fire fighting to remain open. Educate people about the forest and responsible fire use. The impact though borderline, tends to be desirable against fire spread.
 - (c) Mining is a destructive industry and would create clearings which remain only while the industry continues and would very slowly regrow forest. The impact could be desirable against fire spread, but not good for the forest.
 - (d) Recreation in the form of camping and hunting are other activities that will demand the tracks and containment lines used in previous years of fire be maintained. This would be a desirable outcome for firefighting and against fire spread by allowing access for wheeled fire appliances quickly.
9. The provision and maintenance of serviceable access tracks and signage to assist with recreational and emergency requirements.

- As above, access tracks and signage will be invaluable in a fire situation, and will assist with making the community own the forest and want to preserve it.
10. The impact of climate change on bushfires and public land management practices;
 - Climate change if by natural or human instigated causes will make the forest an endangered area. There is no doubt that the risk of fire is greater than ever before and will increase, if the rainfall continues to remain minimal. The agencies charged with fire prevention and forest maintenance must factor in a greater risk of fire due to climate degradation.
 11. Whether additional measures are required to provide a mechanism to the skills, knowledge and interests of local communities, and appropriate scientific expertise, to be better represented in the management of bushfire risk on public land;
 - More people trained to work in a fire situation is imperative. Especially in rural communities and forest neighbourhoods.
 12. The involvement of local communities in the management of fire, and
 - It is communities local to the forest that know best how fires will run in their area, and because they are the people on the front line, their assistance is invaluable and must be encouraged. These communities tend also to fight the fire more intensely due to their vested interest. It is not only fire crews, even local fire crews who should be utilised in fuel reduction burning or fighting the fires that occur during the summer period. It's in the interest of the local people that they be permitted to fight that which threatens them, not only for the purpose of protection, but for the mental/psychological relief this offers.
 13. Other elements that impact on the scale and intensity of of bushfires in Victoria are:-
 - (a) That the forest service be responsible and attend to fires rapidly, when they are discovered. That the forest service hire the summer crews earlier, train them better and seconder residents from the local area to assist in quelling a fire while it's still small, immediately it has been discovered and mapped.

The situation we find ourselves in is dynamic, and we who live in or near, or work in or near, or are in charge of, or just enjoy these forested areas, must decide what we want to achieve to prevent fire and in a fire situation. Do we save the forest or do we save the communities that live near and amongst this, which people in the city see mainly as a resource. If we are to save the forest and the communities, then there must be more planning, and as I suggested in the 2003 fires submission, the forest made more accessible. But mostly, the forest must be seen as something of value on the whole, not sectored as useful and useless.

If we encourage people to visit the forest areas and allow them to discover its appeal, they will own it, and they will want to protect it and encourage the relevant authorities for this to happen.

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Sincerely,

Charlie Schroeder.

