

SUBMISSION

NO. 085

RECEIVED

23 MAY 2007

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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES
FREDA HARVEY

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

Dear Sir,

I believe that prescribed burning does NOT help the fire situation.

EFFECTIVENESS OF PRESCRIBED BURNING

In 2006/7 we experienced huge fires for 2 – 3 months, then we had to tolerate huge burn-offs over a long period. This meant that for about five months of the year the air has been polluted by smoke, adding greatly to the gas emissions that are causing worldwide global warming. It is a vicious circle. Global warming creates conditions that cause fires, and fires create chemical emissions that add to global warming. It is stupid that it is considered necessary to continue back burns when such a huge area has already been burnt.

It is a fact that fires in deep forests burn much slower than those in sparser and drier forests. So why clear the undergrowth?

We need dense forests to act as the lungs of the world – creating conditions where moisture is absorbed and filtered into and through the ground, thus preventing run-off and erosion. Moist ground, laced with roots, plants and spongy mosses, will absorb more moisture. Dry and bare ground is not absorbent and causes erosion.

Dense forests also absorb the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Authorities must look at the overall picture, what may solve one problem, could worsen another.

THE MANNER IN WHICH PRESCRIBED BURNING IS CONDUCTED

Many times in East Gippsland, we have seen burns take place, and then the workmen have gone home in the evening, leaving the fires burning. After they have gone, trees continue to fall, sometimes blocking tracks, setting other plants alight and generally creating danger to all concerned. It is quite scary to lie in bed at night hearing the trees crashing down. There appears to be no follow up to prescribed burns once the task for the day has been completed. Sometimes after a burn we will experience heavy rain, causing run off and transporting the debris to other areas (as happened in our garden three years ago).

Rainwater run-off in fire areas has contaminated the Mitchell River so that it cannot be used for drinking water, and this situation will not improve for several months. The more rain we get the more rubbish is washed into the river.

When a fire is first spotted it should be put out immediately, and not allowed to burn itself out, which seems to be the trend these days. When these fires get away, then in no time we have a vast area under siege.. It is as if the authorities are assuming fire outbreaks will burn themselves out, saving them the trouble of back burning.

Sometimes we have seen prescribed burn offs cause severe damage to beautiful trees in the forest, because the procedure has not been properly thought out. On one occasion near here this was done on a very hot day. The fire got out of control, reducing a beautiful forest to utter devastation.

IMPACT ON WILDLIFE

As a regular bird observer, it has been very noticeable over the past five years that there are declining numbers of birds to be seen, and some species have become rare. They cannot survive where their habitat has been destroyed.

PERMANENT FIRE BREAKS AND ACCESS TRACKS

Access roads in forests and parks are very important in fighting fires, but they must be regularly maintained. Many tracks are left for long periods and become completely overgrown. Then at the last minute when fires are already under way, everyone panics and there is a mad rush in to do the clearings, resulting in a total mess that has to be put right later and creating unnecessary work. If the tracks were properly maintained on a regular basis, it would save money and labour in the long term. With the knowledge that, due to climate change, the fire situation will get worse, this work should be started immediately.

Access tracks should be wide enough for two fire trucks to pass so that they move in and out easily. This will also ensure that an adequate escape route, not blocked by fire vehicles, is available for the public.

The experience we had in E.Gippsland was that a fire coming from Dargo could not be accessed due to rough terrain, and it was allowed to burn, later jumping fire breaks and spreading to Bruthen and Tambo Crossing. This could have been avoided if means of access was available to the firefighters in this difficult terrain. Once again this was an example of what happens when, in severe conditions, a fire deep in the forest is allowed to go unchecked.

Fire breaks themselves, provide only limited protection, depending on the severity of the fire and weather conditions. Hot fires create their own wind and will blow burning debris over firebreaks for several kilometers, resulting in new outbreaks. The value of these breaks is in the provision of access routes for fire fighting machinery to reach the source of the fire.

All villages and town areas should have a prescribed GREEN area around the perimeter of the locality, which is always kept clear, to be used for recreational uses and NOT available for building development of any kind. If a lake can be put there too, then that is an added asset to firefighting.

IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL LAND USES –

1. Logging

All logging in old growth forests and water-catchment areas must cease. The clearing of these forests will only create a bigger fire risk. A large fire in the vicinity of rivers and dam storages could, and does, result in the contamination of the precious water from run off during heavy rainfall after a fire. Around water storages we need DENSE forest to help create a humid atmosphere. Then if a fire should start, it will not spread so quickly and will give time for firefighters to get there and put it out, remembering that all new fires should be put out immediately. DENSE forest also prevents erosion run off and silting up of dams and streams.

When any re-planting is undertaken, a variety of trees and shrubs should be used on both upper and lower storeys. Single species forests add to the fire risk and are not supportive to the eco-system.

2 Grazing

Cattle grazing does not prevent fires.

I have seen fire prone blackberries and other weeds growing where cattle graze in the mountains. Cattle destroy the lower storey native plant life that is necessary for wildlife habitat and the humidity of the forest.. Due to this cleared undergrowth fires spread faster.

Cattle also damage natural wetlands that are vital for the eco system in supplying a basic start for the flow of water down streams and food chains.

3. Prospecting

Prospecting and mining creates erosion and dryness. Mining often contaminates streams.

CLIMATE CHANGE

There is no doubt that bush fires are becoming more severe with climate change, and will continue to do so.

Authorities and Agencies must prepare for this to ensure that minimum damage is done, and people's lives and livelihoods are not put at risk..

There is no single solution to the effects of climate change and water shortages. Everything possible has to be done, starting with community awareness of the problem and education with everybody (including City people), pulling together to fight it. We need, wind farms, de-salination plants, water re-cycling, solar panels, covered water storages, piped irrigation water, clean coal, electric cars....the list goes on and on. Certainly we do not need smoke polluting the atmosphere.

We must prevent at all costs the drainage of swamps and wetlands, which are vital to the ecosystems of rivers and streams and all wildlife. Where wetlands have been drained, they should be put back again. These natural wetlands often occur in forests and must be protected.

The only real solution to climate change is regulation of population growth as in China. It all has to stop somewhere.

SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE

Local Authorities need scientists on their staff on a permanent basis, who should be readily available to answer enquiries on best practices for their particular area and be generally responsible for educating residents

I believe that a lot can be done to prevent fires on the scale experienced in 2006/7. It is a terrifying experience and extremely disruptive to all aspects of life.

Yours sincerely


Freda Harvey