

SUBMISSION

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23RD May, 2007

Executive Officer,
Environment & Natural Resources Committee
Parliament House,
Spring Street,
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Victoria 3002

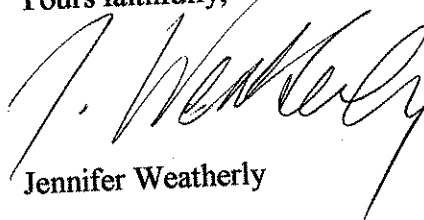
Dear Sir,

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

Attached please find my submission to the above Inquiry. If required, I would be pleased to answer questions or to provide additional material such as photographs or video footage.

Thank you for the opportunity to make representation on such an important issue.

Yours faithfully,


Jennifer Weatherly

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

25 May 07

In response to your invitation for submissions in relation to the above inquiry, I submit that there are compelling reasons for significantly reducing burning of public land in an attempt to manage bushfires in Victoria. These pre-emptive strikes are causing major collateral damage:

- Current burning practices put the emphasis on “asset protection” of farmland and infrastructure; the assumption is that forests are not assets
- Widespread burning depletes and degrades eco-systems which have evolved over thousands of years
- Widespread burning opens up forest to primary colonizing plants – quick growing, quick dieing and highly flammable plants such as bracken, acacia and wire grass
- Burning destroys leaf litter which keeps forest fertilized, cools the soil and acts as a filtering system for rainwater penetration to aquifers
- Without leaf litter, water runs off rather than into the soil profile
- Burning kills fauna and flora, dries out soil and in some cases sterilizes soil so that recovery may take hundreds of years
- Burning interferes with the natural rhythms of nature including plant seeding, animal and bird breeding
- Current management practices are turning our parks from places of beauty and natural environments into places to be feared and tamed
- On what research is the current public land management practice of widespread burning based? Where are there trial sites which show the effect of continued burning? Where are the floral/faunal surveys for all areas that are being burnt? Where is the modeling that will show the effects of climate change?

As a farmer, a director of a revegetation company and an owner of “bush” acres adjacent to the Victoria Range in the Grampians National Park, I believe that I have a broad understanding of the issues involved. I propose that the current practice of widespread burning needs to be seriously reconsidered as it promotes rather than prevents bushfires and is fast destroying a most precious inheritance, our forests.

The Victoria Range is a wilderness area of great natural beauty. It contains high peaks, sometimes dense forests and is a vital water catchment area. Despite this, the area is targeted by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, for “asset protection” burns on a large scale. Two of these have taken place recently.

One of these burns 08G13 (1839 hectares) is adjacent to our land. Together with five other neighbours who share similar views and who did not want the burn to proceed, we made representation to the Department for further information along the following lines:

- Who would benefit by burning such a large area (bearing in mind that no fire in recorded history has ever come out of this eastern side of the range and threatened assets in the Victoria Valley)?
- Was the DSE adequately prepared to control a fire which would have a front in excess of 10km with only one sandy track as a firebreak - particularly in view of the fact that the last "asset protection" burn in 1994 was not controlled and burnt out both our land and our neighbours?
- Why was the burn flagged as an ecological/fuel reduction burn when the Department could not provide any evidence of a flora or fauna survey having been done of the region?
- Where were the trial sites which would show the effects of frequent burning on the ecology of the National Park?

We appreciated that Department officers did make themselves available for discussions on site. At all times they have been professional and helpful, but they are not the decision makers. The following points were made:

- The Victoria Point area was targeted because "it was a numbers game", a certain percentage of the park was to be burnt each year (this year 5,000 hectares) and most of the rest of the Park had been burnt in the 2006 fires.
- They were aware of the problems with the previous burn that escaped and burnt our properties and took notice of our concerns.
- They said it was not an "ecological" burn but a "Zone 3". They confirmed there were no environmental surveys and that there were no trial burning sites for the Victoria Range.
- They would not reply to our letters in writing, the best we could hope for would be a "generic" letter.

Apparently, a small but vocal lobby group called GAP (Grampians Asset Protection) has been active in their aims to have the whole of the Park burnt on a regular basis. At an interesting meeting recently the "Peoples Review" into bushfire control at Willaura, which I attended, this group was heavily represented (and in fact hosted, the visiting "experts"). The chairman of the group explained how they were being listened to by the authorities and were influencing policy. It seems that this lobby group is determining policy. They presented no "science" rather they are seeking to protect their own interests by playing on the fear of those affected by the recent disastrous fires. Not one person mentioned the Park and the environmental, social and tourism benefits that it provides.

I would suggest that consultation with staff who are actively engaged in managing the Park would also be appropriate. As mentioned, they appear sincere, dedicated and informed people who are concerned that political decisions are being made to the detriment of the environment. From talking to several people one has the distinct impression that burning targets are too high and for the wrong reason. We are losing sight of what the burns are for. Now we have large, in many cases intense burns scorching the canopy over wide areas. As a retired forester, involved in many controlled burns in the 70's, told me recently "we'd have been sacked if we let a fire get into the canopy".

Three large burns were alight simultaneously in the southern Grampians area recently. The burn adjacent to our property (08G13,1839 ha) was conducted on Sunday the 13th May 2007 (Mother's Day). The fire was lit progressively along 10 km of the sandy road which was the fire break. It appeared to be burning quite adequately, however, mid-afternoon helicopters made several runs along the Range dropping incendiaries. The fires immediately became intense - not the cool burn that we were naively anticipating. In places the result was a severe burn. By 7pm all management vehicles had left the area and we were advised by DSE that it was "safe". Large trees were left burning along the side of Bullawin Road over an 8km front. Luckily the westerly wind change which was expected did not occur; even so, several trees fell over the "fire break" during the night. DSE personnel were not back on site until after 9am the next day.

It was luck not good management which avoided us and our neighbours again being burnt out. I believe those conducting the burn did so in a professional and co-operative manner, however the overwhelming impression was that the burn was "speeded up" to allow fire crews to stick to a roster. No CFA crews were involved. In fact our local Captain had not been advised that the burn was to be lit. My feeling is that the CFA would have continued to patrol that burn and not allowed it to burn so close to private property.

The current burning policy does not sit comfortably with me, particularly in view of the vast sums of Government money which are currently being thrown at schemes to "save" our environment: \$2 billion to continue the Natural Heritage Trust "to promote sustainable land management, protect unique wildlife and habitats...". The new \$50 million stewardship scheme to see farmers enter long term contracts to protect environmental assets on their land, as well as the taxpayer subsidized handouts the MIS schemes have enjoyed to plant trees over the last few years.

Whilst I believe we will never eradicate burning as it is part of our Australian psyche and has been going on since settlement, we need judicious, carefully planned use of fire.

I believe the onus should be on those who develop land adjoining forests to manage their land responsibly. Farmland can be insured and will generally recover within a short period of time; structural assets in fire prone areas should have fire protection devices installed. Should people be allowed to build in fire prone areas? We have regulations to prevent them building in flood prone areas.

I would like to think that we could all stand back from recent wildfire events and plan the future of our National Parks. We are living in a climate of fear and blame. It is not the fault of our national parks that major fires are becoming more frequent, rather it is our short-sighted and uninformed management of them.

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