

SUBMISSION

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NO. 117

28 MAY 2007

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

24 May 2007

The Executive Officer
Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Level 8, 35 Spring Street
Melbourne, VIC 3000.



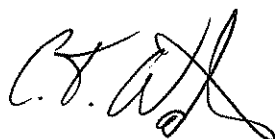
Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Inquiry into the impact of Public Land Management Practices on
Bushfires in Victoria.**

Please find enclosed an amended submission to that originally provided by East Gippsland Shire Council. The amendment focuses on a stronger emphasis on the maintenance of arterial and significant roads to ensure that these vital links remain open during bushfire events.

Please do not hesitate to contact Chris Waites, Group Manager Infrastructure on 0351539500 if you require clarification on any of the issues noted.

Yours sincerely



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East Gippsland Shire Council Submission

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

The bushfires of 2003 and 2006/07 have made a significant impact both on the land and the community sentiment in East Gippsland. From Council's perspective there are a number of points that Council would like to make in accordance with the matters identified for discussion by the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.



1, 2, 3, 4 AND 5 - PRESCRIBED BURNING

Council is very supportive of the prescribed burning actions but does not have enough knowledge of the processes utilised to comment on conformity with applicable codes and the impact it has on Victoria's biodiversity, wildlife and other natural assets. It should be noted however, that the recent wildfires have had a detrimental affect on the Mitchell River Catchment. This has resulted in a degradation of water supply quality as a result of the substantial increase in turbidity due to the loss of vegetation allowing significant soil migration into the various waterways.

Similarly, Council does not feel it is in a position to comment on legislative and regulatory arrangements and compliance for prescribed burns and bushfire management.

However, Council is of the opinion that considerably more resources should be provided to prescribed burning to increase its extent and effectiveness given the limited climatic windows of opportunity available to undertake this activity.

It is also felt that improved reporting to the general public as to proposed and completed prescribed burning programs would be a significant benefit to those living in bushfire affected areas. Prescribed burning plans, identified in advance of the 'fire season' and properly communicated to the public, would assist these communities.

6 - PERMANENT FIREBREAKS

Council supports the maintenance of permanent, strategically placed firebreaks and containment lines throughout public land areas. There is the added benefit of these firebreaks, if placed along strategic forest roads, to be able to provide viable alternative access routes. This could have alleviated a major concern during the 2006/2007 fires when the great Alpine Road was closed for an extended period. As all forestry roads were also closed at this time it was extremely difficult for towns such as Omeo, Ensay and Swifts Creek to access the major centres to the south.

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7 - WATER POINTS

Council supports the provision and maintenance of large water points on Crown land to assist with bushfire aerial taskforce operations. This is particularly relevant in times of drought or in drought affected areas where farm water is a vital commodity in the ongoing survival of farming enterprises across the municipality.

8 AND 9 - FOREST INFRASTRUCTURE

Council is of the opinion that the closure of National Parks and some State Forest roads / tracks to prevent or discourage recreational, pastoral and industrial activities such as four wheel driving, hunting, camping, prospecting, mining, grazing and timber harvesting has had a detrimental effect on the road, associated signage and bridge infrastructure. This has resulted in a reduced number of access routes of a suitable standard being available for emergency services to respond to wildfire events. This meant that considerable damage / effort was required to establish / restore access routes, firebreaks and containment lines through existing or re-grown vegetation during the recent fires.

10 - CLIMATE CHANGE

Council, like much of the community, is of the opinion that anecdotal evidence suggests that climate change is resulting in longer, hotter summer periods with correspondingly shorter winters. The obvious effect of these changing weather patterns is a longer fire period combined with drier fuel loads for a greater proportion of the year. Major fire events in East Gippsland in both 2003 and 2006/2007 would support this opinion. It is felt that the occurrence of more regular extreme weather events is very likely.

10 AND 12 - ADDITIONAL MEASURES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Council believes that a mechanism needs to be developed that integrates the skills, knowledge, expertise and interests of local communities with public and private sector scientific knowledge to assist in the improvement of the management of bushfire risk on public land. The form or structure such a mechanism would take should be the subject of detailed meetings with those communities living in bushfire-affected areas.

It should be noted that to do this effectively it is critical that there are adequate resources to achieve this level of community planning and this is contingent upon targeted government funding.

13 - OTHER MATTERS

- (a) In consultation with the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), VicForests and Parks Victoria, Council would seek to identify key roads that could become alternative access routes should any primary route to remote areas be closed due to the impact of the bushfires, such as occurred to the Great Alpine Road during the recent fires or strategic access routes for fire prevention or urgent response.



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It is suggested that the alternative routes would be identified as such with an appropriate maintenance regime put in place by the various authorities to ensure the roads and bridges making up the route are maintained to an appropriate standard at all times with the State Government funding the replacement of timber bridges on these routes.

- (b) During these bushfires the critical issue of the maintenance responsibility of community infrastructure appropriate for use as relief centres was identified.

Many buildings, being either DSE or Council responsibility, used or proposed to be used as relief centres or as venues for community meetings for bushfire updates do not fully conform to the current building regulations. It is proposed that DSE and Council in conjunction with the CFA identify key buildings and the associated minimum standards and facilities required. Once estimates to achieve the required upgrading have been prepared it is then anticipated that the State Government would support the endeavour with appropriate funding to do so.

- (c) Council would like to indicate its wholehearted support for the DSE effort through the recent fire effort and looks forward to continuing to partner in planning for the future.

However, the great reliance on volunteerism to deal with the emergency over a prolonged period did have a number of undesirable consequences. For example, there was a notable flow on effect from the bushfire event that had a significant impact on Council business in that the work required of DSE Officers was so intense that the rest of their work was affected, ergo Council's work was consequently affected in the area of progressing planning applications. This was also the case with the Gippsland Coastal Board where various approvals were also held up.

- (d) Council remains committed to the '*Integrated Fire Management Planning*' process. It is expected that this process will result in the increased level of community awareness and involvement that is pivotal in ensuring improved management of major bushfire events.

- (e) A major concern that arose during the 2006/2007 bushfire was the isolation of communities due to closure of the Great Alpine Road. Council feels that it is imperative that a management plan be put in place to ensure that these roads can be used in all but the most extreme situations. Had adequate vegetation buffers been established along the Great Alpine Road it would have been possible to allow access soon after the fire-front had passed rather than closure of the road for a number of days as occurred in the most recent bushfire



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