

SUBMISSION TO COAG INQUIRY INTO BUSHFIRES

Fuel reduction and damage from bushfires

My experience with bushfires goes back to 1959 when I joined the Forests Department in Western Australia. I was one of the fire fighters in Dwellingup when it was burnt out by the bushfire of Tuesday 24 January 1961. Air photos of the area burnt (about 150 000 hectares) were taken soon after and I was in charge of the team that interpreted the fire damage. We found, after field checking the air photo interpretation, that much less damage was done in areas that had been previously prescribed burned.

This same observation, that areas that have had their fuel reduced by prescribed burning under mild conditions are easier to control and suffer much less damage in a bushfire under intense conditions than areas with no fuel reduction, has been made many times over many subsequent years by field staff and scientists working in fire management.

Therefore I would ask the committee to take on board the clear message that an adequate program of prescribed burning must be reinstated in the forest areas of Australia.

Independent monitoring of quality and quantity

As part of a reinvigorated program of prescribed burning in forest areas Australia wide there must be adequate and independent monitoring and auditing and public reporting of the actual program against the agreed program in both quality and extent, each year.

Best practice and the very severe fire season

The aim must be to develop best practice bushfire management in all states and territories and this must encompass coping with the irregular, very, very bad fire seasons as these account for most of the deaths and damage to the environment and to property. Eg Ash Wednesday, Dwellingup 1961, ACT, NSW, Victoria last summer. It is not enough to plan to cope only with the many run of the mill fire seasons important as this is. In any case if the severe fire seasons are taken care of the run of the mill fire seasons will also be taken care of.

Bushfire risk for country towns

I recommend the committee consider the need for each country town to produce each year in the non-fire season a plan showing the fuel loads and bushfire risk for a 10 kilometre radius round the town. This could also be considered for those suburbs at the urban – forest interface of larger towns. I am sure the committee could develop this idea into a useful recommendation, excluding those places with low or non-existent bushfire risk.

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