

# **Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management**

## **SUBMISSION**

**To**

**Council of Australian Governments**

**Prepared by:-**

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(Inc)

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## **Background**

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents West Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers. WAFarmers has recently expanded its membership base to incorporate rural small business owners.

It is estimated that collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production (ABS March 2003) that agriculture in its various forms contributes to Western Australia's economy.

Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

## **Introduction**

WAFarmers is please to provide comment to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management.

During 2003, WAFarmers participated in the House of Representatives Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires inquiry into the incidence and impact of bushfires.

A submission was lodged in May 2003 and a copy is attached for COAG's information. Subsequently, evidence was presented at the Committee's public hearing in Perth in August 2003.

WAFarmers notes that COAG's inquiry is to take account of the work and findings of other bushfire inquiries. To this end, WAFarmers recommends that COAG take into account the Hansard transcript of evidence provided by WAFarmers representatives at the August hearing.

## **Objectives of the inquiry**

WAFarmers notes COAG's acknowledgement *"that bushfire management and mitigation is constitutionally an area of State and Territory responsibility"* and cautions against moving away from this situation in the efforts to achieve the adoption of national best practice.

Western Australia's isolation, vast land mass and sparse rural and regional population present unique challenges and does not predispose the State to a national "one hat fits all" approach on any issue.

### **Scope of the inquiry**

WAFarmers earlier submission (attached) and Hansard transcript of evidence address the issues raised under this heading.

### **Conclusion**

It will become evident to COAG as WAFarmers input into the earlier House of Representatives inquiry is studied that our members do not hold the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in the same high regard as the House of Representatives Committee appears to have done in its findings.

It is disappointing that Eastern State's agencies chose not to participate in the House of Representatives inquiry as a benchmark for comparison of CALM's fire mitigation and management practices would have been useful.

The relationship between the WA farming community and CALM has since deteriorated further due to reasons not applicable to this inquiry and as a result there are major implications for the forthcoming bushfire season.

The following extract from the House of Representatives Select Committee's findings, *A Nation Charred*, is an accurate reflection of WAFarmers member's views on this vital issue.

*The Committee heard a consistent message right around Australia:-*

- *There has been grossly inadequate hazard reduction burning on public lands for far to long*
- *Local knowledge and experience is being ignored by an increasingly top heavy bureaucracy*
- *When accessing the source of fires, volunteers are fed up with having their lives put at risk by fire trails that are blocked and left without maintenance*
- *There is a reluctance by state agencies to aggressively attack bushfires when they first start, thus enabling the fires to build in intensity and making them harder to control and*
- *Better communications between and within relevant agencies is long overdue*

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