

COAG BUSHFIRE INQUIRY
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
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SUBMISSION TO COAG – INQUIRY INTO VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

“A SUMMARY OF SUMMERS”..... 1939 and 1983, to 2002-2003
AND BEYOND”

My experience of bushfires is extensive. When giving evidence at the Federal Government Committee Inquiry, I did so under considerable difficulty because of my age 86, suffering a hearing disorder, as well as poor acoustics. For me it was so difficult that it affected my evidence. I submit this in an endeavour to make amends.

The brief reference to three wildfires are included for the purpose of displaying a natural understanding of the bush, an inheritance from my father, Arthur Edward Ward, son of Edward Ridley Ward, who was a pioneer settler of the Timbarra River Settlement in the 1880's. My experience of wildfire included Black Friday 1939, and on Ash Wednesday while I was mining in the Gibbo River district, I was appalled at the news of yet another wildfire event. This motivated me to join the Bush Fire Task Force, which Mr. Jack Treasure had formed at Dargo, in 1994. At one of the meetings I accepted the office of Public Relations, and became involved in a campaign of trying to help educate, through the local paper and using a 3.1 Windows computer, the difficult task of warning Gippslanders and the public, about the inevitable threat of the wildfire of 2002-2003. We based our certainty of this on an estimated growth of fire-fuel of 80% increase over and above that before Black Friday. This could be estimated by the massive natural re-growth of sub-alpine snow gum and Alpine Ash timber. Being a skier, I often viewed from elevated slopes, the dense snow-gum forest that was once so clear, that in those times one could see the bare ground between the trees. Now there is just bush which extends to the mountains behind Omeo.

On 9 February 2003, when a friend and I drove to Mt. Hotham on the Great Alpine Road, we anticipated a sight of complete devastation, similar to that trip under the direction of the Omeo Shire Council on 16th January 1939, when instructions were given to open the road to the summit of Mt. Hotham, clearing animals from the creeks and rivers along the way. During that trip we saw 800 sheep heaped up in a paddock corner, and a poor bull with appendages burnt to ruin. We killed him with an axe. I also remember killing a ram with similar burns. On that smoky day as we drove on, we saw that every ridge-top was marked by a phalanx of gaunt trees, stripped of every leaf and branch, smaller than a man's fore-finger. It looked like a field of wheat after the reaper had gone. All the snow-gums everywhere were like that. So too were the Alpine Ash on their natural surroundings. At the Hotham Chalet site, it was a twisted mass of iron girders and warped, burnt roofing-iron. Across Swindler's Creek valley, we could still see Bill Spargo's hut. We wondered how he got on – but that's another story.

Because of my experience, I write this as part of the submission.

Continuing on 9 February 2003, when we drove up to check on fire damage, it may occur to the reader that our conclusion was one of profound shock. No crown-fire damage. No ruined domestic animals visible. No burnt ruins, except Horse Hair Plain huts. In fact, we had some trouble seeing where the fire had been! We saw at Mt. Hotham, a hawk in a dazed condition on the road. It was a brown falcon, one of those that visit burnt ground, and it seemed to have been stunned, and had attracted a passing motorist who had stopped to view it. We put it in the vehicle and it struggled against the windows, as we drove around to the back of the Lawler's Flats, where a fine view of the deep rugged valley leads down to a brief view of the road winding around Little Baldy, sometimes referred to as Baldy Hollow, which is an eastward pointing fire-hazard aiming at the Mt. Hotham saddle, where most of the business houses of the Ski Resort are exposed to any fire from the direct west. With the DSE Fire Officer, Mr. John McDonald, I called there to show him what I considered was an acute fire risk. I feel sure this valley carried the fire that destroyed the Chalet and Lawler's hut and yards, on Friday 13th January 1939. On this fire-fuel reconnaissance, we drove the full circuit of the Great Alpine Road onto the Dargo High Plains to Dargo Road and onto Bairnsdale, with the

intention of showing Mr. McDonald fire-fuel. That same fuel the Bush Fire Task Force had been trying to warn them about.

On the 19th of February, Robert Grant, President of The Wild Fire Task Force Inc. and I, motored through Omeo onto the Benambra/ Black Mountain road to Gelantipy and through Buchan back to Bairnsdale. On this reconnaissance of fire damage we saw more evidence of the extent of damage. At WAP Pendergast's Mt Lienster cattle property, at the historical sight of stone chimneys built about 1832 at the first home, we saw fire scorched paddocks and were shown where the fire came over from the Benambra-Corryong road to cross over the Deep Creek Gap north of the Brothers Mountains.

On the left soon after leaving Omeo, at Macmillan's Lookout, we saw where hot fires had burned through lightly timbered snow-gum forest. A few miles beyond this we saw burnt fences. There was little damage close to Benambra and until the Beloka Mt Lienster turn-off, where we met my cobbler Bill Hollonds, and saw Alison and Jeff Burston, and noticed a DSE sign-board warning of fire risk. A nice touch of irony there!



From there to Black Mountain before Mt Wombargo, along the road we noticed much trace of brumbies, and fire still burning to the right. (This reminded us both that we had seen fire to the left of Jim and Jack Creek, on the Alpine Road, in forest bush, but saw no fire trucks on the road). We called at a relatives place and asked him, had he seen any fuel reduction burning. "None!" was the reply. But we saw plenty further on at Seldom Seen. Here it was Black Friday again. Total destruction of forest! The trees stripped of small limbs and leaves. The fire had roared through here - just as it did along all those mountains behind Omeo, that terrible day! **The 13th of January 1939.**

RECOMMENDATION:

That the National Parks Planning for those Alpine Parks, as established in that said planning by the National Parks and Wild Life. This to be done by COAG, and to be recognized as having failed in its object. In view of lightning-ignited fires that occurred on Mt. Buffalo and Mt. Feathertop in January 2003, and were virtually unchecked and allowed to spread, to become a massive blaze across the Alps to beyond Gelantipy and into the Tingaringy National Park, consuming valuable crown land, forests, wild-life and much property, then beyond to the Snowy River.

The following is from The Department of Conservation Forests and Land's book – "**ALPINE AREA BOGONG PLANNING UNIT PROPOSED MANAGEMENT PLAN, February 1989**".

This was posted to my address, as a result of my Submission at that time, objecting to these plans on the grounds that of my belief that NP&WL could not manage the Alps as well as the present Government body did at that time. Though no notice was taken of this objection - in view of subsequent 2002-3 fire events, there is reason now to believe I was right.

Quoting now from the same document above, I now copy from page 68, what seems to explain why complaints are being made of NK&WL lack of fuel reduction within these very same Alpine Parks. Quote:-

"In general, fuel reduction burning will not take place in alpine and subalpine vegetation (Conservation A zone), Snow Gum forest or Alpine Ash forest. Where a specific asset or value needs protection, or where a logical burning boundary such as a ridge necessitates inclusion of these vegetation types, small areas may be burnt".

This, if it is indeed National Park's current policy, must explain reason for the above complaints.

To reinforce this concept, I now draw attention to similar directions on page 56 of the NRE Fire Protection Plan, June 1999. Quote:-

Vegetation types that should not be burnt:

Rainforest and the vegetation within 100m of rainforest.

Riparian Forest within 40 metres of a stream.

Snow Gum Woodlands.

Alpine Grassland and Shrublands.

N.B. This covers the dense Snow Gum forest that carried Wild Fire down to, and incinerated, the western end of Omeo.

I see no reason to believe this to be out-dated. The Fire Protection Plan is dated June 1999, therefore both should be current. I suggest the policy explains why the National Parks and Wild Life Management has this level of excess fire fuel. One has but to look at the TV for views of huge flames. You can't have such flames with normal fuel.

The 13th of January: Wildfire Time Eh! That was the time when it all came back and reminded me of the inferno of explosive fire, just like Canberra. That time though, the eucalyptus gas had collected in the turbulence on the lee side of Mt Mesley, north of Omeo. I recalled pulling up in front of the Hilltop Hotel on my Harley, in time to witness the little wink of fire to my right, on the very summit of Mesley, suddenly explode into flame across the whole face of the mountain. It came across the Livingstone Creek with a roar, like a big tongue of fire, and licked half the town into flames!

I wrote to Dr Phil Cheney, the CSIRO fire scientist, who came over to visit me, and to see that fire-site. We drove on to Mt Hotham but it was not clear up there, but clear enough for him to see the Ski Village and some of the bush on our way. Down at Sharpe's Hill we had lunch at the Commemorative Plaque we had placed there on the old road to Sharpe's Racecourse, where the Brandy Creek miners used to race their horses, long ago. Ernie Richards perished near that plaque, trying to race the fire. His wife and son came down from NSW to attend the ceremony of dedication. They remembered the names of his horse and dog that died with him.

The fire storm at Canberra was shockingly similar to the fire explosion at Omeo. Those big flames showed me the same fire front.

Now I come to a subject which I think is vital to the difficult problem of dealing with "Wildfire". It is the human concept of "Environment". We are plagued by the two different concepts of the word Environment. The urban concept and the rural. A tedious problem, one fraught by social values which neither side has been allowed to resolve. It is a matter of numbers. Also, political expedience. Put very bluntly, from a very rural view, it's the Green Movement. From a more sober view - mine, I suggest "*Respect for Mother Nature*". A review is needed of the concept of the word "Environment".

I would suggest if I may be so bold, that the Green movement, with its mass of energy, might do well to concentrate that energy on a study of nature from a bushman's or woman's point of view and experience. Or simply ask a bushman for a yarn about it. You might talk about all the trouble we had up here with the Bureaucratic Incident Control Systems. For instance, the distance some fire crews

had to travel on slow roads to reach the fire-front. The frustration fire-fighters had in waiting before actually tackling the fire. Suggest you have a look at some of the Submissions, to clarify this!

During those reconnaissances of the district fire-damage on Alpine Roads and Benambra-Black Mountain back to Bairnsdale, we noticed Incident Control points set up at Swifts Creek, Omeo and other distant centres, many miles from the fire fronts. We wondered how long some CFA and DSE crews took to get the water onto the flames.

The urban culture is controlled by politics. It's a numbers game, a green game! That's not a true environmental definition, it's an urban one. So maybe now you can see my reason for a full review of that word, "Environment". A bit like biodiversity, in bush language, it means the Natural Order, as Mother Nature runs things.

The city Bureaucrats came up to manage the fires. We only wanted to run them our way. Perhaps they thought we didn't have enough experience! That made us angry. That's a bit unfair though. So they told us to go to our Fire Plans. "It wasn't due to arrive at your place for some time, our time". But on a number of times it was just a few gullies away. At least one farmer nearly got burnt. That wasn't the only time they made mistakes like that. They said the same from Incident Control, from even closer controls! In the mountains you can't tell what the weather is like a few miles away. Certainly not a hundred miles further up the mountains.

I know if those 2002-3 fires had been in the 1939 conditions, it would have been impossible to even do what our fighters did.

Another reason I believe it necessary for a complete reassessment of what we refer to as the Environment, "*The aggregate of surrounding things*"- The Macquarie Concise Dictionary. Those surrounding features we bush people navigate through the scrub which hasn't been burnt in most National Parks for ages. Could refer to the gullies, the peaks, the individual trees and features we know, and most city fire-persons don't know. As bushies soon get lost in the city, every one has to know how to find their way about.

When I had a 4x4 Bus Service, transporting skiers on the Alpine Road from Omeo to the Ski slopes, I often had to escort them on skis for a few miles, until I met those about halfway, who were returning from Hotham - if I was lucky. They were like cattle, moving off to any clear bit of snow, thinking it was the road. I had to check every now and then, in case one was lost. But they were good people. I didn't have to prod them back onto the right track too often with my ski-stocks. But I soon found that most would get lost, when there were no ski tracks ahead.

Further to the Submission.

Events, like getting onto lightning strikes as soon as they start a fire. The people have first seen the sight of smoke - have not waited to be told to go. Not by someone who is ignorant about how soon fire can grow in the heavy fuel-loads in bush areas, where fuel has been allowed to accumulate. After all these years of no fuel reduction.

Then there are the Access Roads. In my years of active prospecting along bush tracks, I have traversed many of these fire-tracks, which some 4x4 drivers would find difficult to manoeuvre. Some of them blocked deliberately by National Parks and Wildlife personnel. Some so scoured by water running down the middle, on steep grades with no culverts in sight. *Then there are the locked gates - for the sake of emergency access!* A road is an access, and it should remain so. If crown lands have bush roads, why not use them for "Emergency".

Having recently come into possession of news of National Parks and Wild Life's decision on cattle grazing in the Alps, I again refer to the need for revision of the word Environment. Because I believe this is an example of hijacking a word to suit the Green Concept, and because it flies in the face of my objection written earlier. The objection still stands.

I, from years of experience, (before the Green concept) believe there is minimal damage from grazing the crown land. Tradition is a genuine excuse but not the most important one. **Grazing does reduce blazing.** It is the reduction of matured snow grass that carries fire across the alpine meadows to the next snow gum coppice. Also, after the 1939 big blaze, the grass was higher than ever seen by anyone. The ash had fertilised the soil. Though most stock was lost by fire, I recall in

1940, seeing cattle grazing from Dinner Plain to the summit, before the Green Hijacking, which dictated their Policy in respect of cattle grazing. There is no need for removal of grazing leases. In reality, with National Parks and Wildlife records of hot fire, due to lack of fuel reduction in all National Parks, their restrictions on grazing is a colossal cheek!

The following text was written to the National Parks and Wildlife some years ago, and I still feel that the contents are relevant today for this Submission.

*NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE
C/- NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT,
7 Service Street
Bairnsdale Vic 3875
30 June 1999*

Regional Manager National Parks & Wildlife.

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Grazing in National Parks

For many years my interest has centered on the Alpine area of Mt Hotham, the Bogong High Plains and Mt Bogong. With no pecuniary interest beyond that of a workman employed by Country Roads Board for most of my working life, I have had a long experience of the effects of grazing, fire and human pressure on the Alps.

During the period - 1935 to 1968 I had the opportunity to see the full effects of the seasons of winter, spring, summer and autumn; in the Alps. Leaving school during the 1930's and working through to retirement in 1977, I was periodically employed on road works in summer on the high country roads in those months - when the snow was either thawing or when the roads were clear. Starting in 1954, fourteen years were spent on clearing snow from the Alpine road.

When I first camped on the Alpine Road, large numbers of cattle were grazing there without restriction, and I cannot recollect any noticeable erosion or damage to alpine meadows or areas adjacent to receding snow drifts. The impression I did get was that the snow grass was being kept down to a green lawn like condition and, at the time, I considered the spaces between snow gum coppices were ideal fire breaks.

I support therefore the recent MCA requests for National Parks grazing under lease for the following reasons.

- *It is a conservation and fire mitigation measure.*
- *Ungrazed snow grass tends to become matted and unpalatable to grazing by cattle or wildlife, and then becomes a fire hazard.*
- *The presence of experienced graziers in fire prone areas is convenient for search and rescue and surveillance.*
- *Denial of grazier access to National Parks reduces the production of a significant export commodity - beef.*
- *The supposed damage to moss beds and erosion caused by cattle is heavily overshadowed by that caused by clearing timber and earthworks associated with preparation of ski runs, lifts, and access roads to commercial and private ski lodges or service buildings in Alpine Resorts.*
- *Use by graziers of forest access roads keeps them clear of encumbrances to emergency entry during fire events.*

An opinion based on wildfire experience and a history of Alpine disasters...

The often expressed blame for damage to moss beds by grazing cattle is hard to understand - for anyone familiar with the geology of the Alpine country that is. Most of our Alpine areas are in places covered by basalt (volcanic lava). This rock is without exception extremely jointed and often covered intermittently with strata of compressed ash. Winter snows when melting seep down through basalt strata and flow out in the form of small streamlets where ever this water meets the lesser permeable strata - ash. These are then occupied by moss which dies under prolonged drought conditions. Dying for lack of water rather than damage from cattle drinking there. The non-permeable strata are often the sedimentary rock beds.

Moss beds usually recover once the water flows recommence.

The risk of catastrophic wild fires, as warned by experienced Bushmen, cannot be avoided by denial of access to these Bushmen. I refer in part, to the mountain cattle men. The others can be experienced bush walkers, prospectors, and trail riders.

In view of the state of fuel loadings over all crown lands, I suggest the COAG should consider sacking Alpine National Parks and replacing them with Government control. DSE should receive censure for allowing the Alpine Parks to become the Nations most fire-prone mountain area in Australia.

I write this with the experience of –

One of the few remaining veterans of Black Friday in Omeo.

I was the Equipment Officer then for the Omeo Fire Brigade, with Captain Ken McCoy and the Regional Officer Mr. J. Pollard.

Employed by Omeo Shire Council on road and bridge work. Worked 14 years for CRB as grader operator in the Alpine area on Mt. Hotham, snow clearing the Alpine Road during 1953-1968.

Hon. Life Member of Ski Club of East Gippsland – very familiar with the Alpine area, and was an intermediate skier.

Hon. Life Member of Prospector's and Miner's Association of Vic.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred G. Ward". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fred G Ward
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Email: wildfiretaskforce_eg@hotmail.com