

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS

Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management

Submission by
David Packham OAM
RMB 8135 Ronalds Rd
Willung Vic 3847
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Introduction

This submission addresses some of the political and administrative issues that have emerged as Australia grapples with bushfires and fuel management.

I have provided this submission as a viewpoint based upon 45 years of involvement in bushfire research in Australia. This is not a rigorous review of the current knowledge of bushfire science but a personal and I hope expert opinion on the very important role of fire in the Australian environment.

Background

Around 1980 CSIRO closed down one of its two dedicated bushfire research groups and actively discouraged any remaining bushfire research. The grounds for this policy was that fuel reduction burning had effectively solved a serious Australian problem. It was also considered that the major factors determining fire spread were now understood.

The inescapable fact is that if fuel builds, as it does, to dangerous levels a conflagration must result at some time in the future. Frequent mild fires in the appropriate forest types as practiced by the aboriginal people removes the forest fire phenomena as a problem. Scientifically this assessment was correct.

Unfortunately CSIRO was not very successful at achieving the application of its advances and the lack of support for the application of fuel management lead to its demise as an effective environmental tool.

For almost three decades State and Commonwealth governments have been warned of the potential of a 1939 repeat fire disaster. Those warnings by fire managers and fire researchers have been ignored, discounted or discredited. Well the disaster is here, the response has been to deny, hide and deceive. There has been no acceptance of responsibility or action other than spin and deception and a policy of silence. An illustration of the extent of this deception was the on air comment from an award winning ABC journalist who has become an apologist for the Victorian CFA. He referred to the most damaging forest fire in Australia ever as 1.3 million hectares of prescribed burning. A moments thought will reveal the spin, deception and ignorance within that statement.

The motives for this disgraceful public response are entirely political and reinforces the politics of marginal preferences. Fear of litigation from its rural population is also a major motive. The state is not entitled to hide its responsibility for this environmental disaster from its own citizens.

The Risk Today

The fuels in our forest environments have been allowed to build to such a level that the inevitable wildfire has a most damaging heat release and an elevated fire spread rate. The energy releases are thermonuclear in scale. It can be safely stated that the energy release in the 2003 fires in NE Vic and SE NSW was equivalent to some 50,000 Hiroshima fission weapons. The outcome was catastrophic.

The values at risk are our environment, water supplies, infra structures, homes, life loss and injury.

Solutions are attainable but are complex, politically difficult and expensive. However the difficulties are much less than the alternative of allowing unrestrained fuel increase and hoping that suppression will be effective.

Opposition to Fuel Management.

A fuel management solution that would create a safe and healthy forest environment has been opposed by two significant groups who have an interest in maintaining our high-risk environment.

The first group is a minority of environmentalists who have a belief that “ Broad-scale hazard reduction is threatening biodiversity conservation and must therefore be avoided by land managers and resisted at a political level.” (House of Reps. Committee 2003, Minority report) There is no apparent recognition by proponents of this point of view of the threat to bio diversity by the enormous areas of high intensity fires that have extended though out the high country. This group is politically very active and has achieved a control over state governments far greater than either their numbers or their science supports.

The tragedy of this response is that the resulting infrequent high intensity fires will result in massive environmental change including stand replacement and other extreme ecological effects. The very values sought to be protected by fire exclusion are finally destroyed.

This group has been dismissive of the legacy left from aboriginal management of our environment and equally dismissive of the large number of academics that have sometimes spent a lifetime studying aboriginal use of fire.

There have been many studies that support the view that frequent mild fires is the pre European condition for much of our forest areas and our biodiversity depends upon it. Amongst the first was A.R.King's analysis of early explorers records published in 1963 right up to "Forests of Ash" (Tom Griffiths), "the future eaters" (Tim Flannery) and of course the many books by Steven J. Pyne.

The second group that resists fuel management by use of various arguments notably the "lack of weather opportunity" is the fire agencies themselves. A solution to the fire problem in Australia would threaten a large industry and erode their power built upon massive public relations activities and spin and the excitement of war.

Cheney stated this view correctly "As one former CEO put it "Why should I carry out prescribed burning? All I get is criticism about smoke and destruction of habitat and biodiversity, and my staff are vilified by people who know nothing of fire suppression and don't care a fig about managing the forests. I (personally) would be better off to let the fuels accumulate, have larger wildfires and have my people hailed as heroes" (Cheney "Economic rationalism, fear of litigation and the perpetuation of disaster fires" ANU Fire Forum, 19 – 20 Feb 2003.)

I have no evidence of any formal or informal connection between these groups. Within the groups there will be many informed people who will have a contrary view but are restrained from expressing them (even to parliamentary inquiries) either by group think or in the case of Victoria, official "guidelines".

Governments both State and Federal are played for all they are worth by these groups. The Commonwealth government must develop structures that cut through the spin and distortion, foster and support free and open study and debate.

The Technological Solution.

The ever increasing expenditure on suppression and decreasing expenditure on prevention would be acceptable if it were effective. Unfortunately 3.1 million hectares, 400 homes and Mt Stromolo observatory burnt testify that suppression alone is not effective without extensive fuel reduction.

If it is thought that the solution lies in more expenditure, more helicopters more public relations and larger five star conferences then contemplate the fate of California the wealthiest and most technology rich state in the world and even with "The Terminator" in charge is just as vulnerable as we are. Only fuel management will yield healthy and safe forests, continued water and timber yields and secures communities.

Understanding the bushfire threat.

The urbanized Australian, our administrators and many of our leaders remain ignorant of the enormity of the scale of a high intensity bushfire. Its inevitability and environmental, water resource and infrastructure destruction remain unrecognized.

The Federal Government must establish or support a rigorous and independent analytical capability to provide a balance to the fire agency domination of research, education and advice. In fact there are many views and arguments about the role of fire in the Australian community (including and especially the indigenous view) and they must all be available to the Australian people and their Governments.

The now notorious Esplin Inquiry through its appalling procedural unfairness, stacked composition and erroneous conclusions is an example of the control achieved by the fire agencies and extreme conservationists.

The interlocking domination of some fire agencies and their leaders through control of national fire policy, national fire research, national fire education and even control of the political process has delivered the Australian people and their forest environment into the current extreme risk.

Government action.

The federal government must through its support of independent and often dissenting views encourage balanced research to assist in policy formation which must be in the hands of the accountable politicians and not, as now, in the control of uncountable quasi bureaucrats. Failure to do so will continue to put us in harms way and deliver more great ecological and human disasters.

State and Territory governments have shown themselves to be incapable of dealing with the excessive fuel situation. The risk is extreme and it is defensible to suggest that the risk to the nation is greater from bushfires than from external threats. That external agencies could use the bushfire danger to achieve a crippling attack on the nation must surely be obvious and alone a reason for the Commonwealth to take a critical and objective interest in the rural fire problem.

It must be bad public policy to make use of orchestrated enquiries to justify pre-determined outcomes. The strategies are obvious and comments made to me by rural folk would suggest that the people are not fooled. This strategy is defacto government by bureaucracy as they are just about the only groups able to prepare glossy and extensive submissions on which the outcomes are inevitably based. Expert opinion and the common sense and experience of the population never get a look in.

This “Voyager 1”. Process will lead to “Voyager 1” outcomes. The Esplin inquiry has been a classic and notorious example of this process. It is sad that the great legacy of the Stretton Royal Commission into the 1939 fires has been subverted.

However the House of Representatives inquiry because of its multi party composition, privilege protection, immaculate processes for obtaining and recording evidence, openness and use of minority reports has yielded a legitimate outcome. Another example of an excellent report showing the balance and complexity that the problem commands has been the House of Reps Milton Standing Committee on the Environment (1983).

The Commonwealth Government with or with out the State Governments must fund independent bushfire studies in those universities that can demonstrate a capability to develop an objective risk assessment, fire behaviour modelling and teach and undertake fire forensic studies so that we can actually learn from our mistake.

The establishment of the Bushfire CRC, dominated and controlled by the fire authorities will not produce objective analysis for public policy formation. The CRC is dubious in its program and constrained by its strong and directive board. Monash University showed wisdom and academic responsibility by withdrawing from the CRC. The Bushfire CRC is not a formula or structure for successful research.

These are strong views and will be challenged. I am willing to justify them in person if required. May I make one point however and that is the lack of resources available to independent citizens enables the fire agencies and other well-funded pressure groups to dominate the outcomes.

David Packham