

1 Summary

The following are the main points to be drawn from the experience of mountain cattlemen in the 2003 Alpine fires:

- It is abundantly clear that there has been inadequate fuel reduction burning.
- There have been sufficient days when this could have been undertaken.
- The valiant efforts of local fire crews were inhibited by poor management.
- This poor management resulted in fires that could have been put out in the first few days, burning in a destructive manner for weeks.
- Generally, licensed grazing areas that were grassed and grazed did not burn.

It needs to be noted at the outset that during January 2003, the cattlemen were in fact fire fighters and held various positions of command in their local brigades.

Some cattlemen were devastated emotionally and financially by the fires. This is especially distressing because cattlemen believe some of the fires could have been extinguished on in the first few days. For those cattlemen in particular, it is now particularly galling to read government material referring to the “benefits of wildfire”. There is a temptation to move on from the damage and look to the future. However, those who suffered extreme circumstance need to be acknowledged and assisted in their own personal recovery.

During the fires, and to a lesser extent since, in the rash of criticism about inadequate fuel reduction burning, some thought more focus should be on acknowledging the valiant efforts of firemen. That is true. It is also true that it was the local firemen (who are also local farmers and cattlemen) were the ones being critical about the inadequate fuel reduction.

Also, it is not so much a matter of applauding the efforts of firemen but asking the question, why did they have to be fighting a fire that should have been controlled earlier? Sure it was their finest hour but why did they have to be there in the first place.

There are several attitudes towards fire that need to be resolved within the community. The question has to be asked, What should be our attitude to fire?

- Should we seek to return to nature and let all fires burn? This would involve letting every fire burn and would involve small burns that would, in effect, reduce the amount of fuel.
- Should we seek to replicate the regime of the indigenous populations that involved continual patch burning, probably for thousands of years? Those attracted to this notion should note that this was the regime was replicated by cattlemen in the first 50 or so years of their cattle grazing.
- Should we continue the current regime of fuel reduction burns and extinguishing fires that threaten assets? This regime might be acceptable, but would it continue to be so, in the absence of sufficient fuel reduction burning?

These sorts of questions need to be re-examined within the community and some sense of agreement reached on fire management.

Fuel reduction burning

- There has been very little or no fuel reduction burning in the past twenty or so years.
- Where there had been some fuel reduction burning, this was generally unsuccessful with only small areas being burnt.

- Over the past few years there have been a sufficient number of days, particularly in the autumn, when it would have been appropriate to undertake fuel reduction burning.
- There are some who say, “*You could never have stopped a fire like that*” - referring to the worst blasts of fire on the “*blow-up*” days. Cattlemen think that if fuel reduction burning had been adequate, the fire attacked in the manner that locals, including the predecessors of DSE and PV, have operated before, including the use of firebreaks, backburns and times of fire fighting, they would not have had to *face* such furious fire. Also, the fire would not have spotted so far and frequently in front of itself.
- Prior to the alpine 2003 fires, some local cattlemen have made their views, about the need for fuel reduction burning, known to local authorities including the NRE, PV and CFA, but were generally ignored. Other cattlemen have felt that it was pointless raising this issue with the relevant agencies.

The impact of cattle grazing on fires

- Cattlemen generally observed that grassed and grazed areas of their licences did not burn.
- When the fire came up onto high plains areas, it trickled around and went out.
- The fire did burn on former licence areas that have been excluded from grazing and especially in areas where heath (kerosine bush) has flourished since the removal of grazing.
- The cattlemen do not claim that grazing *prevents* fire, only that it *reduces* fire. This has also been the view of predecessors of the Victorian Environment Assessment Council.

Comments on fire suppression

- Not enough was done to put out fires in the very early stages. Some of the fires could have been extinguished in the first few days.
- The local fire crews fought the fires in the usual brave and valiant manner. It is important to note that the cattlemen *were* the firemen. For the cattlemen to be critical of local fire fighters would be criticism of themselves
- Management of fire crews was totally inadequate. There is no implication that the management was maliciously inadequate. It is generally acknowledged that the managers did their best. It was just manifestly obvious to cattlemen/fire fighters and other local experienced volunteer firemen that this was inadequate.
- Major mistakes were made by ignoring local knowledge.

Expectations about returning to licensed grazing areas

- There is a general expectation that cattle should be returned to the licensed grazing areas in the summer 2004.

Fire impacts on land adjacent to licensed grazing areas

- Land adjacent to licensed grazing areas was generally extremely vulnerable to fire and was burnt in a very destructive manner.

Fire impacts on private property

- Where the home property of mountain cattlemen was burnt there was generally little or no fuel reduction burning in the adjacent public land.

2 The local mountain cattlemen and “local knowledge”

The Association represents cattlemen who have grazed cattle in high country Victoria for decades. In many cases the current cattlemen are third and fourth generations of families who have grazed their cattle in high country for more than 150 years. These cattlemen have lifelong experience of this public land and the manner in which it has been managed. History has been handed down within these families and the current cattlemen’s experience is the sum total of the preceding generations of experience.

This submission relies on the cattlemen’s own first-hand reports of what actually happened in the years leading up to the fires and what actually happened in summer of 2002/03.

There is a plethora of papers on bushfire preparation and suppression by scientists and bushfire experts. There seems to be a widespread conclusion that, for whatever reason, fuel reduction burning has been inadequate and this is certainly supported by the cattlemen’s own observations.

These representations are based on anecdotal information. Anecdotal information is just as important accurate and useful as the most learned scientific paper.

The Association provided individual cattleman/members with a format in which to provide the responses so that it will be a relatively easy task to cross correlate the responses and develop some recommendations. This submission contains comments by 11 cattlemen.

3 Full reports and recommendations by members of the Mountain Cattlemen Association of Victoria on the 2003 Alpine Bushfires

Name	What is the total area of your licence area?	What percentage of your licence area was burnt	What percentage of your licence area is open, grassed and regularly grazed	What percentage of your grazed area was burnt. (just the percentage of your licence area that is open, grassed and regularly grazed)?
Buff Rogers	55282 Ha	99%	20%	5%
Roper and Maddison	Maddison Brothers and Ian Roper licence number 1107625 of 430 hectares and number 1107624 of 430 hectares	Approximately 65 percent of the area was burnt	30% of the area is grassland and is regularly grazed	Only 5% of our grazed area was burnt
Rusty Connley	14973 Hectares	95%	55%	75%
Simon Turner	1) 1601323, 2) 1601324, 2) 1601428.- 10679 Ha	The percentages given for each licence represent the amount of licence area within the fire boundary, not the actual area burnt. No. 1601323, 100%. No. 1601324, 75%. No. 1601428, 33.52%	15%	0.5%
Harry Ryder	2990 HA	47% (PV figures-probably right)	55%	2%
Stuart Hicks	3088 Ha	80%	12%	1%*
Barry Fitzgerald	450 Ha	4%	85%	4%
John Cook	Approx. 24,000 acre grazing lease	98% burnt, plus hut	30%	25%
Laurie Reed	930 Ha approx	100%	80%	100%
Richard Faithfull	9500 ha approx	60% burnt	15 - 20%	2%
Barry Hicks	480 Ha	30%	70%	nil

*even though a firestorm went through there, remarkably the cattle stayed on the grassed areas and survived. The fire came out of the heath a short distance and then went out, and spot fires in the grassed areas only singed patches of around 10-15 feet diameter then went out. Geoff Pike, DSE helicopter pilot observed this and reported to us.

BR: Buff Rogers
IR: Ian Roper and John Maddison
RC: Rusty Connley
ST: Simon Turner (President MCAV)
HR: Harry Ryder
SH: Stuart Hicks
BF: Barry Fitzgerald
JC: John Cook
LR: Laurie Reed, Delegate River, Tubbut area
RF: Richard Faithfull
BH: Barry Hicks

1.5 Please comment on the level of fuel hazard reduction around your licence area land over the past five years, what was done in 2002 and how vulnerable your licensed area was to fire in 2002. What is your comment on the level of the fire fuel reduction?

- BR *Fuel hazard reduction has been totally inadequate over the last 5 years. No fuel reduction of consequence was done in 2002, except an illegal burn which was extinguished by D.S.E. There has been no effective burning done for 20 years consequently the licence area was in a very dangerous state*
- IR *These licences are all in National Parks and had never been fuel reduced by controlled burning*
- RC *For the past five years fuel reduction has been negligible. In 2002 an attempt was made with approximately two hectares being successfully burnt. Weather conditions were unsuitable on the day. No follow-up attempts were made. In 2002 the fuel was extreme in the area is not grazed.*
- ST *Fuel hazard reduction has not been done on any areas on or adjacent to our grazing licences for the past 10 years. Nothing was done in 2002. Prior to 1992, only the occasional area has been fuel reduced by burning. For the past 40 years the level of fuel reduction burning has been steadily decreasing, leaving our licences extremely vulnerable to excessively hot fire activity. This level of management is totally unacceptable from both a safety, and environmental point of view.*
- HR *There has been no fuel reduction burning since the 1939 bushfire. The open grassland is managed by grazing. The closed heathland/timbered valley of Bundarra headwaters that cannot be accessed by stock is what burnt*
- SH *There has been nil fuel hazard reduction burning in the past 5 years. Nothing in 2002, and the area was extremely vulnerable in 2002, as it has been for as long as I can recall. There was a big build-up of heath, the previous generation i.e.: Wally Ryder, Ross Blair, Eric Weston and Bill Hicks called heath "Kerosene Bush" because of its highly explosive nature when burnt. Next to 100% of heath on our run was burnt. Photographic evidence from the early 1960's shows large areas were then grassed, these same areas have now been taken over by heath, due to the severely controlled grazing regime, this heath subsequently burnt in January 2003. Parks Victoria regarded burning as completely unacceptable in alpine areas, at any time.*
- BF *None. Very vulnerable. My only comment is that grazing held the fire fuel*
- JC *Some fuel reduction was conducted four years ago, but due to heavy snow last few years, the ground fuel was very heavy. This caused a very hot fires and crowning of the fire front, reducing the trees etc. to sticks, and foliage and grass to total destruction.*
- LR *Nil in 2002. Very vulnerable to fire. Adjacent areas burnt by wildfire in January 1988. No*

fuel reduction burning since then.

RF *To my knowledge no fuel reduction has been done during the past 10 years. Any fuel reduction burns done prior to this was not done by government departments but cattlemen. As evidenced by the amount of grazed area burnt there was obviously little risk of fire on the open grazed grasslands.*

BH *The last time there was a fuel reduction burn around my run was 1939 to my knowledge. This fire was a disaster waiting to happen*

1.6 If the fire fuel reduction was inadequate, were there sufficient days when burning could be undertaken safely in the lead up to the fire season?

BR *In the period September- October 2002 there were many days in which burning could have been safely undertaken.*

RC *Many suitable days came and went that would have been adequate to recommence controlled burning but were not taken advantage of by the relevant authorities*

ST *Most definitely. The number of dry seasons experienced in recent years have created burning opportunities well into Autumn and even early winter on the lower northern slopes. However, the resources of DSE have not been sufficient. The summer fire crews have been terminated at the end of the fire danger period, leaving only a skeleton crew of permanent staff who are trying to complete logging regeneration burns and don't have the opportunity to complete any general fuel reduction*

HR *It is not the policy of the land managers to have any fuel reduction burns at the higher altitudes on the Bogong High Plains. There is always weather suitable for conducting fuel reduction burns. The season can be cut short by rain but in general there are always going to be opportunities to achieve something.*

SH *We could have done fuel reduction burns every autumn for 20 years, and with that fuel reduction completed, stocking rates could have doubled thus preventing a takeover of the highly inflammable heath. With this fuel reduction burning and grazing we could have preserved more of the highly sought after alpine meadow*

BF *Over the last 10 to 20 years, many.*

JC *Yes*

LR *Yes*

RF *There has been opportunity for fuel reduction burns in the treed areas most autumns following removal of cattle in the past 10 years.*

BH *Yes, last year there was a week of excellent weather to burn the bush.*

1.7 If you had any concerns about vulnerability to fire, did you express your concern to any government agency? If so, please tell us who you told.

BR *Yes, we have been asking the NRE and PV every year for the last 20 years to fuel reduce and telling them that the whole district was a time bomb. If they did not fuel reduce we would be incinerated. Exactly that happened on the 30th of January.*

RC *For many years I have been concerned about the level of fuel that was accumulating and strongly advised Parks Victoria at a meeting in Omeo in October 2001. I stated that if they didn't reduce the fuel level we would have a disaster that would be far greater than the 1939 fires.*

ST *Some comments have been made through the local CFA brigade, however I am well aware of resource availability within the DSE, and realise that they didn't have the ability to address my concerns.*

HR *I did not express any concerns about vulnerability to fire. It would have been futile*

- SH *Felt this was pointless, Parks Victoria and DSE clearly have their own anti-everything agenda.*
- BF *What was the value when Government agencies take very little notice of what you say.*
- JC *I expressed my concern to many government departments, members of the NRE, CFA and local government.*
- LR *Yes, NRE*
- RF *I did not have concerns about the vulnerability of fire because cattle grazing reduces the fire fuel load.*
- BH *I must admit I have got sick of trying to get action from the departments as far as burning the bush as they always have played around until it gets too wet to burn and say it's okay to go ahead.*

1.8 What effect did grazing have on your licence area in relation to the fires? For example, did it reduce the impact of the fire, not have much impact or have no impact.

- BR *Only in a few heavily grazed areas.*
- IR *In the 65% of the area burnt on these runs was all heath country, inaccessible to cattle and horses. The 5% of the grazed land burnt was only singed and, by the end of the season, cattle were grazing this area. Almost all our cattle grazed on the unburnt area, some going into Pretty Valley but they stayed on our side of the river. We did have 10 head of cattle go into the Falls Creek management area. We electrified our fence immediately after the fires and removed these cattle. The gate west of Rocky Valley Dam was left open on a couple of occasions and these cattle returned and we removed when we saw them. Altogether we removed these cattle three times. We were speaking to the Falls Creek Management Committee employees and they seemed to have had no objection to the cattle being there, so we eventually left them there. We did have four head of cattle grazing the periphery of the northern end of Rocky Valley Dam which we put back on numerous occasions. The reason they escaped was that Parks Victoria did not fix their fence correctly.*
- RC *The 2003 fires gained momentum in the ungrazed areas surrounding our licence. Once upon the grazed areas of fire decreased in intensity and slowed at it passed through the grazed areas.*
- ST *The grazed areas of our licences generally didn't burn*
- HR *Grazing dramatically steadied the fire to the point where it went out.*
- SH *In the grazed grasslands, the fire went out, thus creating areas in which entire ecosystems, of plants, animals, birds and insects have survived. In areas where cattle have been excluded, e.g.: Mt Nelse, the whole area was burnt leaving no refuge for anything. I would like to take this opportunity to point out, from my observations sphagnum moss beds, which were grazed around and sometimes through are the only ones to have survived. Moss beds in ungrazed areas, had thick heath build up around them, and were completely burnt.*
- BF *The area is grazed fairly heavily so had some impact on the fire not burning*
- JC *Grazing reduces the ground fuel, keeping the grass low and lush, like cutting a lawn and keeping it trimmed. Where there was no grazing it was totally burnt and will take a long time to recover.*
- LR *Grazed areas did not burn as hot. Most grazed areas had no crown fire.*
- RF *Grazing has significantly reduced the effect on my licence area in relation to the fires. Please refer to the attached photographs 1 & 2 taken on Friday 31st January 2003 which shows the trial plots, where no grazing is allowed, burnt by fire which stopped at the fence where the grass had been grazed. My observations on Friday, 31st January 2003 and those of Tim Faithfull prior to that were that Parks personnel were not interested in extinguishing the fires which were burning slowly across the licence areas. Tim was there for a week trying to extinguish the fires without assistance from Parks personnel whose only contribution was to*

- erect signs saying "Track closed".*
- BH *Grazing had a huge effect in saving the country from not burning.*
- 1.9 If you would like to, please provide any comment on any observations about the activities of fire crews. Your comments might be critical, complimentary or both. Please state whether you are referring to the CFA, Parks Victoria or DSE etc.**
- BR *Management of the CFA. crews was incompetent and the consequences appalling. CFA. information regarding the position and progress of the Fires was totally inaccurate! We were told the fires would not be here until Sunday the 2nd of Feb. Four Days earlier on Thursday the 30th of Jan I drove 30kms to Native Dog. The Fire front was then in the Buchan River Valley just below Native Dog. We then knew that the fire would be in Wulgulmerang that afternoon. We were told we would have CFA Tankers to assist us and 24 Tankers and Crews were located at "Karoonda Park" 30 minutes away. The only help we got as the fire was roaring down on us was a message from our local CF A Captain: "I am sorry, you are on your own. There will be no Tankers. Good Luck. I am very sorry" Parks Victoria was never sighted until about 3 or 4 weeks after the disaster! DSE did send a Dozer to put a bit of a break around the House and sheds one Day before the Fire.*
- RC *During the height of the fire we never heard from or saw any PV or DSE personnel until the fires were out in our area and then it was to request we consider removing the cattle from our leases.*
- ST *It took too long for the fire agencies to get serious about attacking this fire event. Too much valuable time was lost in the early stages of this fire campaign. Not enough aggressive approaches at fire suppression were implemented in the early stages allowing the situation to dramatically escalate.*
 - *Aircraft were not deployed early in the day, by the time they were allowed to fly the smoke levels were reducing visibility*
 - *Back burning was not used to its greatest potential allowing the fire to spread*
 - *Fall back positions were all too often utilised rather than a more committed approach in the first instance*
 - *Insufficient local on ground knowledge was utilised*
 - *The concerns of possible litigation implications overshadowed practical, effective management decisions.*
- HR *It was obvious that the Alpine grazing leases and the associated plant communities were an extremely low priority for the DSE firefighting operation. Resources were everywhere but on the Bogong High Plains. Environmental constraints on the use of bulldozers seemed more important than stopping the fire. Fire crews from DSE put most of their effort into the work being done during the hottest part of the day. Clearly backburns need to be conducted through the middle of the night then stopped by 4-00am to allow to subside before the day begins to heat up. This was not practised much and virtually every fireline was breached using the DSE preferred option of afternoon backburns and skeleton crews overnight. Instructions to CFA strike teams to NOT initiate backburns needs to be revised.*
- SH *As a lieutenant in the Dederang CFA brigade, on day one of the fires, I attended 1 of the 2 fires in crown land, which the Dederang brigade attended, and subsequently extinguished. At that fire there was a D4 Dept. bulldozer but the topography was too steep for it to work. From our position we could see 3 other smoke columns in the National Park. A call was received for the dozer to attend one of those fires. The reply was that the dozer was first to go back to the depot to be decontaminated, a task taking some 6 hours. It could have been at the next fire within 2 hours.*

It was my concern along with most other locals, in the first 3 days of the fires, with

unseasonably mild weather, i.e.: wind being mostly southerly, nothing was being done to extinguish the fires. On day 2 I attended a fire directly below our alpine grazing run on Mt Fainter. At this time this fire encompassed around 20 hectares. This fire was later called the Bald Hill fire. On arrival at the fire, we were confronted with a hostile Park ranger demanding to know what we were doing there. When told this was a cattle track and our grazing run was directly above, he said that this is a National Park and that wasn't possible. He had a crew of about 12 park workers from Mallacoota. There was a road on 2 sides and they had raked a trail linking the 2 roads together, the fire had burnt about 1/10 of the land enclosed. I indicated to him, the rest of the area had to be burnt out, he told me that was completely out of the question, as too many trees would be destroyed. I told him the fire would get away. I offered the Dederang CFA brigade to help, he said they had put in too much work and it wouldn't get away, he wouldn't even consider my offer. The next day the fire jumped the break and continued, eventually linking up with other fires, resulting in vast areas of alpine ash being burnt.

During the fires, whilst we were trying to protect our assets, e.g.: huts, yards, on our grazing run, we had no communications with Parks Victoria, nor did we see any Parks Victoria workers patrolling the high plains. They showed no interest what so ever in our assets or us.

- BF *This comment is made by cattlemen who were on the spot, "The fire crews from Parks Victoria and DSE made no attempt to put the fire out in the early stages"*
- JC *I was divisional commander of the Benambra sector, working closely away from CFA, DSE and Parks Victoria ground crews and hierarchy. The ground crews were very good to work with, but their superiors were not very helpful. The main problem being that they would not take notice of local knowledge.*
- LR *All fire crews appeared to work well.*
- RF *Like Tim, I tried extinguishing fires with my slip-on firefighting unit without success. In my opinion, had there been large tankers of water sprayed on these fires earlier they would have been extinguished without further devastation. Photo 5 shows yards burnt at the edge of the bush area.*
- BH *CFA fire crews were very good but it seemed to be directed to save towns and important buildings and not much thought put in to stopping the forward thrust of the fire.*

1.10 Given normal seasonal conditions between now and next summer, do you think it is reasonable to expect to be able to return cattle to your licence area.

- BR *Very reasonable.*
- IR *We anticipate that, with good rains, this country will rejuvenate very quickly and we look forward to a good grazing season next year*
- RC *In my experience it is important to get cattle back onto the leases with their first grazing season after bushfire. This practice aids in keeping down future potential fire fuel such as grasses and shrubs. The lowest stocking rate does not impact on the environment*
- HR *I would expect the country to be suitable for grazing next year however I fear repeat of the Caledonia scenario. The area that has burnt on my run is now additional land for grazing however Parks Vic argue that burning of the scrub will give cattle access to areas that have been protected from grazing in the past.*
- SH *Directly after the '39 fires, e.g.: the same season and subsequent seasons, vast numbers of sheep and cattle were grazed on the Bogong High Plains. This post fire grazing helped to control an explosion of woody species thus preserving these highly sought after alpine meadows. If we are to retain these alpine meadows, it is imperative that we restock the alpine runs next season at current stocking rates or greater where applicable. Not to return stock*

there will see vast changes to the ecology system. Massive buildup of woody species, i.e.: heath and none or very little of herbaceous meadow flora. The flow on from this will be very little water harvested off this area, impacting on Hydroelectricity, reduced inflows to river tributaries e.g.: Murray Darling system, loss of water quality, as woody species can't hold back soil as effectively as grass, during the torrential downpours commonly experienced in the high country. Considering this area is highly prone to summer lightning strikes, allowing a massive buildup of flammable woody species will guarantee devastating wildfires every 20-50 years, as is the case with Mt Buffalo. Where grazing was banned 75 years ago and since then has suffered 3 major blazes. Allowing management by theory to continue will create a very different and undesirable environment re the safety and welfare of citizens residing and working near the National Park.

BF *There is no reason why I can't take our cattle onto our licence area.*

JC *Yes. The area when the cattle graze cannot be allowed to get overgrown and out of control and cause another devastating fire.*

LR *Yes.*

RF *Given normal seasonal conditions between now and next summer, I think it would definitely be reasonable to expect to return cattle to the area.*

BH *Cattle should next year be grazed as usual on the Bogong high plains as a lot of the country was not burnt and where it was burnt the cattle will graze the excess herbage that was created by the fire, making it less of a fire risk in future seasons.*

2 Areas near your licence area

2.1 Please comment on the vulnerability to fire of any land near your licence area that may have been grazed in years gone by. If you provide comment here, please clearly identify the land that you are referring to and when it was last grazed by cattle. Also, who is the current land manager, PV, DSE etc.

ST *There are large areas of public land adjacent to our grazing licences and our freehold property in the parishes of Nunniong and Bindi, that have been grazed in the past 160 years, but due to changes in the structure and type of vegetation, these areas are now so densely vegetated that grazing is no longer feasible. This clearly shows how the vegetation has changed over time, affecting not only introduced herbivores but also the native fauna. These changes in Flora structure have been the key element in the intensity of this recent fire event.*

HR *North end of Bogong High Plains, Mt. Nelse, Spion Cope etc.. Grazed Prior to 1991. Fire burnt through this ungrazed area of the park totally and comprehensively. Very noticeable that fire burnt right to edge of stream beds in most instance in this ungrazed country*

BF *Considering nearly 100% of the area around Mt Nelse and Watchbed was burnt, speaks for itself. The area has not been grazed since 1990.*

LR *Licensed area is the Crown land buffer zone portion of original grazing block 1 Parish of Wyangil, which lies east of the Snowy River, between Snowy River, NSW border, and private land at Tubbut.*

The main area of original lease was taken over by PV when declared park around 1980 and grazing was disallowed.

This area was very vulnerable to fire and much devastation has occurred, especially in the lower grey (white) box areas adjacent to the Snowy River. It is my opinion that had been grazing been allowed, not only would fuel had been reduced, but the continued presence of a licensee would have been able to indicate problem areas and exert more pressure for fuel reduction burning.

I believe that by excluding grazing, DSE and PV are denying themselves and the people of Victoria valuable “Honorary Managers” if you like.

By interacting with the cattleman, they would be able to get information onto critical management issues, e.g. pest plants and animals, areas that require fuel reduction burning etc. as they do not have the manpower or, it seems, the inclination to properly manage our public land.

Cost to licensee would be negligible and the benefits to the State that flowed would be immense.

RF *Please refer to attached photos 3 and 4 which show the almost complete devastation by fire of the area formerly leased by Fitzgeralds and controlled by Parks Victoria.*

BH *It was evident to me that the open grass country that was not stocked heavily was burnt and burnt hot.*

3 Your private property

3.1 If the fires affected your private property and you are adjacent to public land please comment on the level of fuel reduction on the public land over the past five years, what was done in 2002 and how vulnerable this public land was to fire in 2002. What is your comment on the level of the fire fuel reduction?

BR *My Private Property joins the Grazing License area and my response is the same as for question 1.5*

IR *We had no private property burnt nor was there any public land burnt adjacent to us. There has been no fuel reduction burning adjacent to us within the past 15 years*

RC *Over the past five years there has been no fuel reduction programs at all. Fuel has continued to accumulate over many years in the State Forest that joins my private property.*

ST *Same as 1.5*

HR *Fires burnt 400+ acres, being 200+ acres of improved pasture plus 200+ acres of retained bushland and about 4 km of fence. No stock losses. Fuel reduction was carried out adjacent to about 1/4 of my boundary about 6 years ago and regularly prior to that. This strip had more grassland through the forest. The whole length of my boundary (7km) with the public land was burnt including the bit that had been fuel reduced 6 years ago however that section appears to be showing improved characteristics of regeneration. The grassy forest areas seem to have more plant life at ground level post fire than the areas that were heavily forested with mid story plants as well as big timber and deep litter on the forest floor. This type still has a very sterilised appearance 4 months after the fire. (THIS ASPECT WARRANTS FURTHER EXPLORATION). The level of fuel reduction was inadequate to stop the fire.*

BF *Comment on the level of fuel reduction on the public land over the past five years - None. How vulnerable was this public land was to fire in 2002 - Very high. What is your comment on the level of the fire fuel reduction? Pathetic, since there hasn't been any fuel reduction burning for many years.*

LR *Nil fuel reduction burning last five years. Some burnt by wildfire January 1988. Rest burnt by wildfire January 1939. This land adjacent to my property is very vulnerable to fire. Fuel reduction burning grossly inadequate to non-existent.*

RF *All my pasture, hut, 10 cows and most fences on my Beloka property were lost to fire on 26 January 2003. Had fuel reduction burning being adequate this would not have happened – none has been done during the past five years.*

3.2 If you would like to, please provide any comment on any observations

about the activities of fire crews in relation to your experience regarding your private property. Your comments might be critical, complimentary or both. Please state whether you are referring to the CFA, Parks Victoria or DSE etc.

BR *The same answer as for 1.9*

IR *The fire spotted onto our run at 10:50 AM on Tuesday 21st January and the power company had men there by noon. They requested a plane from DSE that was based at Dinner Plain - one plane of Foscheck would most probably have put this fire out. This was refused resulting in the southern catchment adjacent to Rocky Valley Dam being destroyed. When the fire was out in this area we were pleased to note that mossbeds had also been extinguished.*

RC *During the lead up to the front of the fire reaching us we were in regular telephone contact with the Benambra CFA base station where we provided regular updates from our end of the valley after traversing the nearby bush tracks. At the height of the fire we telephoned the Benambra CFA station and were informed that no assistance could be sent our way and we would have to fend for and defend our own property. We did this to the best of our resources.*

ST *The same answer as for 1.9.*

HR *The rank and file fire fighters from all organisations gave their best. They were regularly frustrated by instructions from above that were issued with a different set of priorities in place (avoiding overtime payments and avoiding litigation) Managers both CFA and DSE that came to the area from outside were regularly in conflict with local people. After the fires were over and DSE began to spend further millions of dollars on rehabilitating fire control lines farmers were told that rehabilitation of firelines through private property was the landholders responsibility. The fire that came out of the National Park and for a month had the potential to burn whole communities off the map because of poor park management was finally halted by dozer lines through the improved pastures of the adjoining landholders. The government and its agencies then tried to step away from doing the appropriate reparations to farmland. Total arrogance!!!!*

BF *I wasn't at our property Shannonvale at the time of the fire, so I can't comment, but what I observed all three were found wanting at times.*

LR *All fire crews appeared to work well.*

RF *Unfortunately all fire crews including my family were trying to save the people around the township of Benambra, so there were no resources to fight the fire at Beloka.*

4 General

4.1 Please comment on any issues that you think should be considered by the 2003 Alpine Bushfire inquiry. This could include your opinion about the manner in which the land has been managed, whether fuel reduction burning has been sufficient, the manner in which the fires were fought and any issues that arose after the fires.

BR *The management of the Alpine Park has left much to be desired. The enormous fuel build up over the last 20 Years made the control of this fire impossible. The locals of this district have been living in fear of this very disaster for years. Up to the late 60's and early 70's we cattlemen did a considerable amount of burning in Spring and Autumn. Fuel loads were never allowed to build up to the state they have been in recent years. Any fires that did threaten us were controlled and at least kept out of our Private Property. I hold PV and DSE fully responsible for the 30th January inferno and the losses of Stock and property we have*

- suffered in this District.
- IR *We also had destroyed in the fire the old Roper Hut on the Duane Spur and the huts and fencing in Bogong Creek. The old Roper's hut is probably the most important hut for walkers travelling between Mount Bogong and Falls Creek and this should be rebuilt for tourist safety. As requested, we removed all our cattle by truck on 27th March*
- RC *In summary it is more than obvious for the need of regular control fire reduction programs. This should be done in consultation with the local landholders and several tentative dates suggested, so climatic conditions can be taken into consideration - not just the date on the calendar which is currently the format with PV and DSE.*
It is the cattleman who ride and survey the bush in an attempt to utilise the best grazing areas for this stock, so it only makes perfect sense to utilise our knowledge in an endeavour to ensure that nothing like the 2003 bushfires happens again. Regrettably the threat of bushfires impacts on us every year. The most important thing is to keep the fuel load at a low level to prevent damaging intense heat fires that cannot be controlled, that means of regular cool burning assisted with seasonal cattle grazing.
- ST *The management of fire on Crown land in Victoria, in the Alpine, sub Alpine and forest regions has left much to be desired. The enormous amount of fuel build up over the last 2-3 decades made the control of this fire very difficult. DSE's own figures for actual fuel reduction achievements for the past 10 years in Gippsland indicate that they have fail to reach any more than 50% of annual targets. Even if the annual targets were achieved, I believe they would still be well below the level of fuel reduction that is required for a balanced environmental out come.*
- HR *It is unlikely that broad scale fuel reduction burning will ever be introduced however there needs to be a historical disclosure that recognises that the Australian bushland developed in the presence of fire, both from aboriginal burning and from lightning strikes and that the land managers have consciously decided to exclude regular fire from the landscape. The public needs to be made aware of the magnitude of the change to the environment that will come from these policies, fully debate it, accept responsibility for it, and sit back and watch the bush evolve into something else again.*
Fuel reduction zones around rural communities are a necessity to avoid loss of life from fire in the future.
Rehabilitation of fire control lines through farmland.- To be done by the people that make the fire control lines.
- SH *If the National Park is to once again become the national treasure it should be essential that the green ideology driven, policy forming bureaucrats based in offices, be replaced with broadminded, practical people who are not afraid to embrace common sense.*
- BF *The land is very poorly managed. When fuel reduction burning is done it is hit and miss rather than burning the whole area. The fire should have been attacked early and an attempt made to put it out rather than just control it.*
- JC *These lightning strikes could have been contained and controlled in the first four days if Parks Victoria and DSE in the Northeast had listened to locals.*
Fuel reduction burning was practically non-existent.
The DSE and Parks Victoria must remember that public land belongs to the public, not just them.
Controlling and containing fires of this or any size cannot be done from offices. It has to come from the fire front to the local control centre, then to the Incident Control Centre, who then keep the equipment and appliances up to the men on the fire front.
All firefighters and control personnel from other areas, must have a local with them all times to prevent errors of judgment due to lack of local knowledge.
- LR *The trouble is the land has not been managed, except for some license areas. The fact that many license areas were not severely burnt and few cattle lost is in itself evidence enough!*
Fuel reduction burning is grossly inadequate.

Have no problem with the general manner in which fires were fought by crews on the ground. There were, however, some stuff-ups in co-ordination and general administration at the higher levels.

In the aftermath of the fire, assistance in rebuilding defence and infrastructure damaged by fire is inadequate. The subsidy available for fencing is discriminatory in that it is only available to those who happen to be adjacent to Crown land and wish to construct a dog proof fence.

- RF
- *Fuel reduction must be increased to reduce the risk of losses by fire.*
 - *Grazing does reduce fire fuel load and should be used more widely.*
 - *Government departments need to heed local knowledge and form partnerships in planning and exercising control over public land.*
 - *Fire control needs to be closer to the front line.*
 - *Government personnel need training and mentoring from people with past experience fighting fires.*
 - *Are there too many chiefs? 29 people in the Incident Control Team – how can decisions be made in a timely and efficient manner.*

BH

The biggest problem I saw in the early stages of the fires were the NRE and PV tried to handle it on their own and didn't seem to understand the potential of the fire if we got bad days. Quicker response by all parties I think could have made a difference. Also I think one organisation should head all fires in Victoria. If a farmer owns country the CFA is in charge as well so we have the same people in charge of all fires. As for fuel reduction banning, we need a lot more autumn burning in the low country and in some cases roads built between private country and bush to use as an anchor point. You can't burn it all at once. You do it in patchwork style like the old cattleman did 40 years ago and in some cases more recently. Also, in Region 24 the fire restrictions need to be lifted earlier.

4 Comments and Recommendations by Jack Hicks

I am a farmer living at Dederang a Mountain Cattlemen running cattle on the Bogong High Plains and the captain of the Dederang Fire Brigade.

I was actively involved in the fire fighting campaign from start to finish.

I have made a list of the more serious problems we had during the fires.

They are as follows.

1. Initial attack on the lightning strikes on the 8th of January was too slow.
2. Access tracks: Largely had not been kept open.
3. Equipment: Bulldozers with lights & fuel trailers suitable for fire fighting were not available. Aircraft sat on the ground too much in the early parts of the fires.
4. Water supplies: were not adequate because of the lack of maintenance.
5. Containment lines & back burns: were not carried out correctly. These incorrect techniques were putting lives & property at risk
6. CFA Strike teams: were not utilised properly in a lot of cases.
7. Incident control centres: were too big & lacked local experience in the initial stage of the fires. Radio communication was not good. Parks Vic Staff should not be incident controllers.
8. Local knowledge: was not used enough early on.
9. Fuel Reduction: had not been done properly prior to the fires.
10. Litigation: Some Fire Crews were not performing their duties properly in fear of litigation.

The following is my response to these problems.

1. **Initial Attack:**

- All Wild Fires must be attacked immediately by the best and safest means available on the day.
- A control centre must be set up for each fire.
- Local people should be consulted at all times.
- Each fire must be managed on its own merits.

2. **Access Tracks:**

- All fire access tracks must be open before the start of the declared fire restriction season.
- Summer fire crews using chainsaws bulldozers & graders must carry out this work for training and familiarisation of the area they will be working in for the fire season.

3. **Equipment:**

- Each District or area must have adequate equipment to safely protect the community along with its assets & public land.
- This equipment must include Bulldozers with Lights, Fuel Trailers & Transport to carry them to the fire.
- Crews need hand tools & quick attack units to go straight to the fire.
- Aerial attack is needed on standby 24hrs a day in each area to spot fires, water bomb & back up ground crews when needed.

4. Water Sources:

- Must be maintained at all times. Wherever possible build new storages eg dams, tanks or quick fill access points along streams.

5. Containment Lines& Back Burning:

- Containment lines must be used wherever possible to stop fire. They can be existing roads or be constructed by bulldozers etc.
- Back burning must be done as soon as possible it should be lit along the containment line first and let suck or run back into the fire front. By using this method the safety of the fire crews is guaranteed.

6. CFA Strike Teams:

- Strike teams must be got onto the fire lines as soon as possible.
- Local CFA tankers & crews should not be part of a strike team.
- Strike team leaders should not be part of the fire management team.
- Strike team leaders must be responsible for the safety and welfare of the team.
- Strike teams should change shifts on the fire line at all times if possible

7. Incident Control Centres:

- An incident control centre must not get too big.
- It should cover no more than one fire or a district or a valley.
- It must be headed by staff from the agency in charge of wild fire suppression in that area. Parks Vic staff should never be in charge of a fire.
- It must have local knowledge in it.
- One Radio Channel for each fire.
- It should be set up at a suitable pre planned site.

8. Local Knowledge:

- Should always be used in control centres to help with planning , With strike teams as guides, To assist bulldozer operators and many other jobs.

9. Fuel Reduction:

- Fuel Reduction must be carried out on all land to prevent wild fire.
- Also around towns and public places to save lives and assets.
- Municipal Fire Prevention Committees are already formed in Victoria to deal with fire prevention planning. This public committees role should include, Inspection of all fire prone areas. Assist with the drawing up and implementing fuel Reduction Plans. Conduct Inspections after the fuel reduction burns to make sure they have been successful. If not put them back on top of the list for next season.

Methods of fuel reduction to include:

Autumn Burning.

- This work should be carried out before the fuel load reaches an unsafe level and at least on average once every 5 to 6 years for each area .
- Clearly depending on the timing of autumn breaks, safe autumn burning can take place from

late February through to early June.

- Fuel Reduction Burning should be a joint operation between the relevant fire suppression agencies eg in Victoria CFA & DSE.
- Fuel reduction burning is a good means of training and must be encouraged.

Grazing

- Grazing is a very successful means of fuel reduction. This is very evident in the Victorian high Country where the cattle have been grazing for more than 150 years. Large areas (thousands of hectares) of the Bogong High Plains did not burn when the fire came up out of the scrub. Where fuel reduction had been carried out by grazing the fire literally, went out. If the wind or whether conditions did carry the fire across open grasslands the fire was only a cool burn just singeing the tops of the plants The Snow Gums & Bog Communities, have been saved by the cattle grazing around them. The birds and wild life are still there and alive.
- The Mt Nelse areas of the Bogong High Plains that have had cattle excluded from 12 yrs ago against the wishes of the cattlemen & sensible people, have burnt very hot and will never completely recover. The fire has burnt the plants right down into the roots. The heat of the fire has scorched the earth leaving it very prone to wind and water erosion. The cattle should never have been removed.
- Mt Buffalo is a very good example of a national park without a fuel reduction plan. Cattle were excluded some 75 yrs ago. 3 big wild fires in the last 30 years. This must not be allowed to happen any more.
- Cattle Grazing is the only means of fuel reduction for alpine grasslands.
- It will be very important to maintain grazing in the alpine high country that has been burnt. The regrowth of the plants in the grazed areas that have cool burnt will be prolific in the coming year. If this area is not kept fuel reduced it will burn again just like Mt Buffalo has.
- Grazing should be reintroduced back into all alpine areas to prevent future wild fire. Grazing should also be used as a means of fuel reduction in forests, along roads, on reserves and on other public land.

10. Litigation:

- Once a fire is going Occupational Health & Safety has no place on the fire ground. Common sense and good training must prevail at all times. The crews & equipment must be covered by a good insurance policy.

Signed: Jack Hicks

5 Submission by Mr. Harry Ryder,

Re: Inquiry Into 2002/2003 Victorian Bushfires

I make this submission to the inquiry as a person who has experienced the recent bushfires from a number of different perspective's.

As a landowner in the Kiewa Valley I experienced first hand the effects of the fires entering my land from both Crown Land and National Park. Approximately 400acres on my property was burnt including 4km of fencing.

As a Mountain Cattlemen I continue my family's tradition of grazing cattle on the Bogong High Plains. In this role I have witnessed over the years the unnatural levels of litter building up throughout the alpine and sub-alpine regions. The excessive growth of shrubs (middle story plants) has continued unabated for years and many of the tracks to the high plains have become so overgrown as to be a hazard, not only to the cattlemen and cattle, but to the general public using these tracks.

In my role as CFA volunteer, including six years as Captain of the Tawonga Fire Brigade (1993-1999), I not only fought the fires that threatened my property but went on duty as a volunteer to fight fires in the Mitta Valley.

When I was a child I remember hearing stories of cattlemen burning patches of bush as they moved cattle to and from their licences. This was an activity that history records as happening even before white settlement. Captain Cook called Australia 'this continent of smoke'; Tasman in 1642 recorded seeing smoke, Giles in his explorations of Central Australia recorded that the aborigines were forever burning the landscape and even Hume and Hovell on their way to Port Phillip made repeated references to the aborigines burning. Their diaries even record having to stop in the north east of Victoria for three days due to excessive smoke. And that was in December!

History also shows that most of the country seen by the early explorers was an open woodland. Cook described the Illawarra region of New South Wales as '...trees, quite free from underwood, appeared like plantations in a gentlemen's park.' Hovell in his diary entry of the 18th November, 1824 (in the vicinity of north east Victoria) records that 'The Country all around us has a very fine appearance, in some places there is not more then [than] half a Dozen trees in a hundred acres.' Comments similar to these appear throughout his (and Hume's) diary.

This then begs the question of whether the locking up of land in National Parks is actually 'saving' that very aspect that the park was established to supposedly protect. Certainly the change in the composition of the plant communities means that the Australian bush is radically different to that of yesteryear and pre-white settlement. In fact many high profile environmentalists and scientists repeatedly point to the changes in fuel loads and its effect on the bush. Most recently David Packham OAM has broached the subject of fuel loads in his submission to the inquiry. His comments on fuel loads and current fire management practices, I wholeheartedly endorse.

I have listed below a number of points that I was directly involved in, and affected by. I make the comments in good faith and are not to be taken as criticism of any one individual. I hope my submission goes some way to rectifying many of the problem's that arose during the fires and that the community as a whole will learn from its mistakes.

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO 2002/2003 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

ISSUES/PROBLEMS THAT AROSE DURING THE COMBATting OF THE FIRES

Fire lines repeatedly being breached.

Fires should have been stopped inside the boundary's of the bush, whether crown land or national parks. Active fire lines must not be left unattended or fires will continue to jump containment lines.

Restrictions on backburning.

Restrictions placed on strike teams initiating backburns meant that opportunities to enhance control lines were missed. In the right circumstances (at night or early morning) trained firefighters can use backburning to great effectiveness. Treating volunteer fire fighters like idiots with these restrictions leads to an extreme sense of disillusionment and will lead to a reluctance to provide free labour to help fight fires on government land.

Work Times

Paid fire crews working bankers hours, arriving on the fireground at 11-00am with the intention of starting backburns etc through the hottest part of the day. Backburning etc. should be done at night and be blacked out and completed before the heat of the day, both for control and safety of firefighters. No firefighters have lost their lives fighting fires at night.

Crew changeovers being done away from the fireground.

There should be greater use of buses & 4WD's to transport crews from the staging area to the fireground so that all equipment remains in the area of the fire.

Excessive time being wasted at staging areas waiting for briefings etc.

With modern technology weather briefings and instructions could be done when crews change over on the fire ground.

Lack of communication

Communication between volunteers and Parks Victoria/DSE staff needs clarification. There were examples of end of shift debriefings not taking place as well as confusion over radio channels etc.

Local knowledge

Local knowledge was not sought in many instances and examples of when help was offered, it was often rejected to the detriment of the result. Persons from outside the area brought into ICC's cannot possibly know the little nuances of the district under their control.

I would suggest that every shift at an ICC have either a local DGO or fire brigade Captain of the CFA present to provide that local knowledge.

Existing fire trails not being maintained to allow safe access

Fire lines in timbered country should, where time permits, have more effort put into removing

potentially troublesome trees with excavators, dozers or chainsaws before the fire arrives. This would minimise danger of working with half burnt trees during the fire. Many existing fire trails were not used during the bushfires because of the perceived view that putting staff into the bush placed the fire fighters lives at risk.

I would suggest that where the fire pattern is known, many of the fire trails could be used to good effect by commencing backburns (at night) from the trails. (This would also [in many cases] alleviate the need for fire containment lines being constructed on private land).

Lack of accountability throughout the command structure.

The name of the officer in charge at the ICC and at the fireground and the whole chain of command should be printed in the local newspaper or listed on the Internet every day so the general public knows who is responsible for what section, on what day, in order to foster a culture of accountability.

RECOVERY SUPPORT.

Agencies failing to accept responsibility

The 'passing the buck' attitude between government agencies made it difficult for any person affected by the fire to obtain information. At the time of the fire there was very little information available but by the end of the fire, landowner's were inundated by the various government and local government agencies with information. And all of it the same. Surely one information source is sufficient.

Immediate post fire assistance not made available.

Re-tensioning of all fences cut to allow machinery onto private land to construct fire control lines should be done as a matter of course or the landholders compensated.

FUEL REDUCTION PROGRAMS

Detailed fire reduction plans should be released each Spring and detailed actual post fire reduction results released in Winter.

The total inadequacy of fuel reduction throughout the forests and parks led to the inferno that we just had. A history lesson for the land managers would indicate that the land before white man arrived received regular burns of low intensity by aboriginals and not always in Autumn.

Burning a few dozen hectares here and there accompanied by numerous press releases is virtually useless and may as well not be done.

If a fuel reduction burn is commenced but not completed for any reason, then either a further attempt should be made, or that area becomes first priority in the following season. The public has the right to know what targets have been set by the government agencies and whether they have been met.

I would suggest that these details be published in the local newspaper each year.

Towns in areas adjoining parks and forests must be protected by regular fuel reduction programs

The local CFA volunteers should be allowed to carry out protective fuel reduction burns in zones in the forests around their towns.

Alienation of locals in the fuel reduction process leads to lingering bitterness.

There is a distinct feeling amongst rural people that they are excluded from the process of planning fuel reduction programs and that priorities of those making the decisions are very different from those of people who have to live in the affected areas.

Education of the general public and tourists to places adjoining National Parks and State Forests.

Effort needs to be directed at educating the general population to raise their awareness of the importance of the fuel reduction program being completed each year and the significance of its role in environmental management.

FIRE CONTROL LINES

Fire Line Construction

As I mentioned earlier, in many areas adjacent to private property fire trails exist although many are not well maintained. Fire control lines were put in on private land when the fire pattern was known and in many cases, well ahead of when the fire front was expected. This is inexcusable by DSE or Parks Victoria when they have pre-existing fire trails especially constructed for the purpose of fire fighting.

If it is deemed necessary to construct fire control lines on private property then may I suggest that the agencies concerned liaise directly with the landowner BEFORE they commence any works. Consideration must be given to the placement of the lines, the type of machinery used to construct the lines and any possible damage to structures (fences/watercourses etc).

Fire Line Rehabilitation

The fiasco that occurred in Northeast Victoria over the failure of Parks Victoria, DSE etc to do any rehabilitation of fire lines on private land was incomprehensible. Landholders who watched for weeks while fires burnt inside the National Park, were left wondering if they would still have a house left standing at the end of each day. Then at the end of the fires, these people were given the final kick in the guts by being told that the fire control lines that had been put through their private property to stop the fire coming out of the national park, were not going to be rehabilitated by the government agencies. 'They are the responsibility of the landholder' was the repeated response to repeated requests to have the control lines rehabilitated.

The constant 'passing the buck' attitude between the agencies did nothing to engender goodwill between the bureaucrats and landowners. The issue of the government having the ability to desecrate freehold land without being responsible for its actions and offering any recompense, needs urgent attention. Malicious damage is a criminal offence - is cutting up freehold land to 'save' a national park malicious damage? Many landowners would say so.

I would suggest that before any further fires occur, guidelines on the construction and rehabilitation of fire lines on private property be developed so that all parties involved, are aware of their responsibility. This could be developed by the VFF in consultation with Parks Victoria, DSE and the CFA.

ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE TO FARMERS AFFECTED

Fencing

The offer of half cost materials for dog proof fencing which had burnt in the fire was laughable if it wasn't so sad. Fencing between neighbours is on half cost basis, not 3/4 - 1/4. And dog proof fencing is great if you can fence all your boundary's. But what about the landholders who lost kilometres of fencing but do not need dog proof fencing or have neighbours that do not need dog proof fencing?

The Government must accept the status quo and realise that they are responsible for half cost fencing wherever their boundary adjoins freehold land.

As a landholder that has had 400 acres burnt, 4 km of fences burnt and about 5 km of fire control lines put through my property, I have not been eligible for any compensation that is practical to accept. Dog proof fencing was offered but has no value when most of my neighbours are either involved in horticulture or are rural residential allotments. Fence line clearing was also offered but not accepted - unless realistic clearing distances could be offered, then there is little value in doing the work.

CATTLE GRAZING

As a holder of a licence to graze cattle on the Bogong High Plains in the Alpine National Park it is fascinating to observe how the alpine meadows that are grazed by cattle were the only areas of the Alpine National Park that did not burn. Over 4000 ha of alpine grassland were saved from fire because of the fuel reduction done by the grazing of cattle. Ungrazed areas were comprehensively decimated

The potential for increased cattle grazing to reduce fuel loads throughout the mountainous public lands needs to be considered given the present constraints on smoke caused by fuel reduction burning.

Harry Ryder

H & S Ryder

6 The need for more fuel reduction burning

The reports of cattlemen again highlight the need for proper fire fuel reduction.

The MCAV considers that fuel reduction burning has been inadequate. Fire is essential to the Australian landscape, and is necessary for the maintenance of biodiversity.

MCAV also believes the areas claimed in fuel reduction burning programmes are an over estimation of area actually burnt. These calculations seem to be based on a block target area rather than the area actually burnt.

Clearly the fuel loads have been enormous. If fires spot long distances over rivers, lakes and over fuel reduced areas then there must be too much fuel burning in the fire zone.

Claims that the weather conditions are the limiting factor in fuel reduction burning indicate a lack of understanding of fire management. The current process of Autumn burning is hampered by the increasing build up of fuels leading to later and later ignition options before the winter rains. Cool burns are best achieved in the Spring as the snow and winter moisture levels retreat.

We know the bush is going to burn. It is just a matter of when and how it burns. We can cool burn to reduce fuel in the same manner that the aborigines did for 30,000 years.

The local people and organisations such as the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria have consistently called for increased fuel reduction burning

6.1 Recommendation

- Fuel reduction burning programmes need to be expanded and properly funded.
- Education programmes should be developed in conjunction with management plans to educate the community of the need for fuel reduction burning, and how to cope with smoke.

7 Utilising cattle grazing to lessen fire risk

Fuel reduction burning in conjunction with well-managed grazing should be used as a primary management tool in reducing the possibility of wild fire. More than twenty years ago the former Government agency, the Land Conservation Council's report on the Alpine area acknowledged that: *"In some areas, grazing can assist in management by reducing the build up of dry plant residues particularly when exotic pastures have been introduced, thus lessening fuel available for fires"*. In this context grazing referred to public land generally and not the Alpine National Park specifically. In its 1988 report *"Statewide Assessment of Public Land Use"*, the Land Conservation Council stated that *"well managed forest grazing can also provide community benefits through weed control and fire-fuel reduction"*.

7.1 Recommendation

It needs to be acknowledged that well managed grazing can assist in fire management by controlling regrowth, and that grazing is a viable method of reducing fuel loads. Wherever appropriate grazing should be used as a management tool and incorporated into fire management plans. Grazing provides the State government with revenue as opposed to burning, which is a direct cost to the taxpayer .

8 Getting the record right

People reviewing submissions about the Alpine fires will quickly become aware of a wide gulf between the attitudes of bureaucrats in charge of fire suppression and local individuals. The MCAV is aware of submissions that present almost unbelievable examples of administrative bungling and mismanagement. There is some discussion in the cattlemen's own presentations that are highly critical of some government agencies and actions and the Association vouches for these statements. By the same token the Association is also aware of comments by bureaucrats that only about 5% of the stories have any substance. Similarly, the fact is that many individuals fought tirelessly to save human life and private property.

Sorting through the anecdotes, stories, rumours and explanations will be an interesting challenge for people reviewing the submissions. In order to help get this right, the MCAV suggests that the inquiry produce a draft report for circulation and response within the community. In Victoria, the Land Conservation Council and its successors up to the Victorian Environment Assessment Council have relied on the process which includes the distribution of a draft report. The community has had the opportunity to make recommendations on the draft report. The MCAV strongly supports this process and recommends it be adopted in relation to the 2003 Alpine fires. In this way, the community would see the direction in which the inquiry is heading and make further submissions on any points that seem to have been dealt with in an inappropriate manner. The process generally ensures that the final report will be accepted by the community and that the recommendations will be supported.

8.1 Recommendation

The MCAV recommends that the inquiry produce a draft report upon which the community can make additional submissions.

9 The history of cattlemen and fire

Josephine Flood states in her book *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*: “One of the aborigines' most important artefacts is one that is largely invisible to the archaeologist: fire. Much of the vegetation encountered by early white settlers in Australia was not natural but artificial: an Aboriginal artefact created by thousands of years of burning the countryside Aborigines never put out their fire.”

In the early 1900's cattlemen holding Crown Land leases burned parts of their leaseholdings each year as they believed appropriate. The cattlemen were following the practice of the aboriginal people by using fire to keep the forests open. Reports from early settlers and explorers described the Australian bush as being similar to the open parkland of the English countryside. Until 1919 when the Forest Commission was formed, cattlemen had “patch burnt” wherever and whenever they thought appropriate. This practice was disapproved of by the Government of the day, and by the early 1920's was banned by the Forest Commission altogether. The effect was to force some of the cattlemen to abandon their grazing leases due to excessive vegetation. Cattlemen considered these areas worthless unless they were periodically subjected to patchwork style burning.

The ‘no burn’ policy was also adopted by the Crown Lands Department which administered areas not under the control of the Forest Commission. The policy was not rigorously enforced by this Department and cattlemen holding Crown Land leases continued their fuel reduction burning programme. Ultimately the ‘no fires’ directives were effectively policed, and the practice came to an end.

It is interesting that during the terrible fires of 1939 cattlemen were able to shelter in areas which had been previously burned and grazed in defiance of government policy, and these sanctuaries were also shared by native birds and animals. These areas also provided the timber industry with valuable

resources.

A Royal Commission to investigate the 1939 fires delivered its report in 1944. The report placed the blame for the fires on cattlemen, miners, timber workers and indeed all those who lived and/or worked in the bush. The report did not address the question of fuel reduction burning, although witnesses who lived in the bush reported to the Royal Commission that a policy of banning fuel reduction burning had led to a build up of litter on the forest floor which in turn had made the fire worse. This information was ignored. In the report, lightning as a cause of fire was only briefly mentioned as a 'rare occurrence'. We now know that this is not the case and that lightning is a major agent for starting bushfires.

An appendix, written by a former President of the Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria, the late Jim Commins, forlornly predicted a new round of holocaust wildfires because of inadequate fuel reduction, the removal of patchwork burning and the reduced numbers of cattle grazing the bush runs at lower altitudes and the high country. Many of Jim's dire predictions have come true.

Appendix - Mild Fire Conservation or Wild Fire Catastrophe, written in 1997

the late James A. Commins
Special Projects Officer, and President, MCAV

The heading 'Hellfire' beside a photograph of John Longstaff's 1898 painting depicting bushfire horror, and the question 'Can we ever stop the bush from burning?' in the Saturday Age News Extra on 6 December 1997 encapsulates a dilemma born from many decades of environmental mismanagement.

A greater risk than ever now exists for the most calamitous bushfires in recorded history if this summer happens to become one with frequent hot dry winds interspersed with thunderstorms that produce little or no rain.

Until there is less reliance on costly modern machinery, that is quite ineffective for suppressing the front of a wild fire in adverse conditions, and there are directional changes towards more safely and diligently applying the practice of using mild fire to prevent very extensive wild fire, the damage to natural assets and valuable property will increase. There is now a huge accumulation of flammable litter over a vast area where forest workers fear it will burn too fiercely, even in the cooler months of the year.

About thirty years after the first white colonists occupied the Port Phillip Settlement, the Western district and the Omeo plains, the Victorian Government enacted legislation to make most of the land which was suitable for closer settlement available for selection. Early maps of the state showed these selected areas and all the remaining land was marked as 'Pastoral land'.

The Eastern section of that pastoral land amounted to about four million hectares and extended to the Northern and Southern aspects of the Great Dividing Range, bounded by the Eastern seaboard and the New South Wales boundary.

During the first 100 years of the European occupation of this large area only two roads were put through it - to connect settlements in the North East and South East of the state, and one to the Monaro district of New South Wales.

Until the post World War II period, almost the only human presence in this most extensive area were cattle graziers, although during the latter years of the 19th century itinerant gold prospectors would

have searched most of the area.

The Crown land allotments of pastoral land were let by grazing licence, and over the years some hundreds of runholders did occupy and manage them for cattle grazing.

In the early 1900s, graziers holding Crown land leases burned parts of their lease holdings each year as they believed appropriate. The graziers were following the practice of the Aboriginal people by using fire to keep the forests open. Reports from early settlers and explorers described the Australian bush as being similar to the open parkland of the English countryside. There is no evidence of regular Aboriginal habitation, except along the eastern coast, although it is recorded that native tribes hunted through the mountains in the summer months. Most of their frequent campsites would have been near lakes and rivers where farms and towns now are. Their propensity to light and maintain fires in all seasons soon found them being discouraged from camping anywhere near the homesteads and farm improvements of pioneer white settlers.

In the years prior to 1959, smoke was often seen rising from the forests in any season of the year except winter. Naturally ignited fires burnt unattended except when farmland was imminently threatened. Cattlemen burnt many patches when their experience indicated that it was appropriate to do so. Where cattle grazed the regrowth annually following a burn, the fire retardant effect of fuel reduction was prolonged for some years more than it would have been without the cattle. Practical graziers knew that very hot fires from a heavy fuel base were counter-productive because they promoted the regeneration of thickets of tree seedlings and woody shrubs which overwhelmed the pasture species for many years.

In the first quarter of this twentieth century expressions of concern about forest fires were raised when many people were then more familiar with the environment of Europe, while the harsh Australian climate was foreign to them and not well understood.

Unfortunately decision-makers must have relied more on dubious theory than practical facts to devise management plans which eventually produced disastrous results in Victorian forests. Many runholders felt overwhelmed by management regulations and abandoned their runs.

Areas suitable for timber production were delineated as reserved forests and in 1919 the Forest Commission of Victoria was established to supervise timber harvesting and to police a new policy that outlawed all the firefighting on Crown lands. This was seen as a complete folly by the relatively few people with 'hands on' experience, but their warnings went unheeded.

The ban did cause some graziers, particularly in the west of the region, to abandon their grazing leases as they considered that these areas were not worth persevering with unless they were periodically subjected to patchwork style burning.

During the two decades prior to World War II, the only major timber harvesting and sawmilling industry was to the east of Melbourne and extending to the Erica and Noojee districts. It was over this region that the Forest Commission exercised its responsibility. Further to the east, before the days of aerial surveillance and watch tower management remained the same and cattlemen continued their fuel reduction burning as they always had. They were doing as the Aborigines had done for untold centuries before them.

Following the dry season in 1938 (very similar to the 1997 experience) and the continuing drought conditions in January 1939, disaster struck as wildfire swept through most of the forests at Eastern Victoria. The forest resource where major timber-harvesting was in progress was destroyed, as were sawmills, and more than seventy lives were lost. Continuous fire burnt through to Mount Kosciusko

in New South Wales and beyond, and it swept over drought-parched bare paddocks into the town of Omeo, where the hospital, a three story hotel, the power station and many houses were burnt. It was a more extensive and devastating conflagration than the well-remembered Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. The sun was blanketed with smoke and in much of East Gippsland it became completely dark about 3 p.m. on 13 January 1939, and lamps had to be lit to see anything for about an hour in many places.

The most appalling losses were where control of the forests and timber harvesting had been exercised by the Forest Commission for twenty years and it was practically all a total loss. It is a very significant fact that further to the east, where cattlemen had effectively reduced much of the fuel, the destruction of commercially valuable forest was very much less. It is also interesting that during the terrible fires of 1939, graziers (including the writer of this article) were able to shelter in grazed areas which had previously been burnt in defiance of government policy, and these sanctuaries were also shared by native animals and birds.

In the eastern forests, where extreme drought prevailed some large patches of snowgums with thin bark were killed, but only relatively small amounts of alpine ash with the more protective bark were destroyed.

It is especially notable that sawmillers were able to relocate to the Mansfield, Heyfield, Omeo and Orbost areas fifty years ago, where they have operated ever since, and continue to do so on sustainable yield basis.

Widespread public concern led to the establishment of two Royal Commission enquiries - one to establish the cause of the fires and the other to examine forest grazing. These were presided over by Judge Leonard Stretton and he delivered reports in 1944, in verbose language that did not mention important aspects. The report placed the blame for the fires on cattlemen, miners, timber workers and indeed all those who lived and/or worked in the bush; although the cattlemen became the main focus.

The report did not address the question of fuel reduction burning. It is possible that the issue was not understood at that time outside country areas.

Lightning was only mentioned once, and in the context that it was a 'rare occurrence' and unlikely to cause fire. It was assumed that the cattlemen were the principal initiators of wildfire. Lightning did and always will cause forest fires and ignorance of its role contributed to a policy that banned fuel reduction burning and failed to protect the forests.

The enquiry was held in a past era when communications through the mountains were virtually non-existent, the frequency of lightning strikes was virtually unknown, and a common presumption prevailed, as Judge Stretton boldly proclaimed, 'The fires were lit by the hand of man!'

Individual cattlemen presented evidence to the enquiry, but were not organised as a group in order to mount a defence of the situation in which they found themselves. The presiding Judge conferred little credibility on them. In dealing with soil erosion and response to cattlemen's explanations that uncontrollable rabbits were responsible, he trivialised this concept as he 'supposed Brer Rabbit would have blamed Brer Fox'.

The findings of the Royal Commission enquiries brought much pressure to bear upon cattlemen who practised forest grazing. They provided impetus to continue misguided policy and also made an effective launching pad for the emerging environmental movement to attack grazing and forest enterprises. It is now widely known that lightning ignites a great many fires and in a drought year when little or no rain may fall with a thunder storm, there is every likelihood of many fires being

started and not being extinguished by rain. There can be no doubt that just such a chain of dry thunderstorms led to such a widespread inferno as Black Friday on 13 January 1939. Common sense should have indicated that no grazier is likely to try and burn his pasture and chance losing livestock when drought and dangerous fire risk conditions prevail.

Over the last fifty years, cattlemen have observed profound changes in Crown lands management, and in the condition of the mountain environment. Very large areas of forested land have not been touched by fire for over fifty years. These could suffer enormous damage if subjected to the not unlikely sequence of drought, north wind, fire, then flood. There has been some fuel reduction burning in places, but this has been very inadequate, with very long periods between attempts to burn.

If a widespread outbreak of fire should occur, the only reliable safe havens for wildlife, humans and livestock in much of the mountain areas, are in new growth areas where significant numbers of cattle are returned to graze for a few months each year, or in recent logging coups.

Even in times of severe drought, when these grazed areas in the mountains might support a fire through them, it is extremely unlikely that there would be sufficient fuel at ground level to maintain a dangerous fire. Certainly not enough for a deadly 'treetops' inferno where fire rages from the floor of the forest up to the tops of the trees, where the pre-heated eucalyptus leaves have become highly inflammable.

There have been occasions when students of nature have questioned entrenched policy, but their work has usually been submerged in academic controversy. An American author, Stephen Pyne, investigated Australian environmental research and wrote a very informative book entitled *The Burning Bush*, in which he very comprehensively reported on the conflict of ideas about fire that had been like a tug of war between researchers on the subject. In another book, entitled *The Future Eaters*, archaeologist and author Dr Tim Flannery explained how the Australian natural biota became thoroughly attuned to fire since the demise of large prehistoric animals, and how the severity of wildfire was reduced only after Aborigines came and adopted their well-known habit of lighting and keeping fires alight at all possible times. Dr Flannery has pointed out that, unlike other continents of the world, Australia has for aeons of time not had the mega fauna to complement the effects of fire and effect a more balanced ecological development. He did not say that cattle might fill that role, but it is quite logical that they can. The Victorian practice of part-time or seasonal grazing with cattle ensures that no vegetation is eaten to extinction, while the annual trimming of dominant grass and many shrubs helps to maintain a wide diversity of vegetation. Unless in a stockyard situation, cattle do not cause bare ground, in Victorian bushland grazing conditions, as several academic researchers have set out to try and prove.

Most of our rapidly concluding twentieth century has been clouded by misguided fire policy. However, more recently, half-hearted fire prevention management has been a move in the right direction.

This year of 1997 has been one of, perhaps, record low rainfall and the threat of forest fires becomes increasingly more dangerous as the dry seasonal conditions remain.

I suggest that the highest priority effort should be applied along the following lines as soon as possible to reduce the fire hazard and environmental imbalance that has been increasing with very little impediment for many years.

- Establish burnt fire breaks then set alight areas of limited size that will burn with low or moderate intensity to that which has already been burnt.

- As more fuel reduction burning is achieved lightning fires should be recognised for their peril and value and should be allowed to make a natural contribution to fuel reduction.

- The grazing of animals perfectly complement fire by keeping regrowth in check. Domestic cattle can be managed to make many areas safe havens for man and beast.

- Public relation exercises should aim to inform people of the urgent need to address the dangerous condition of forest and educate them to understand and accept that accumulated forest litter and senescent pasture species must be reduced. This will protect native plants and animals as they have an intrinsic capacity to survive low or moderate fire but are devastated by holocaust wildfire.

Let us hope that common sense will demand effective programming of mild-fire conservation before another major catastrophe by wild fire occurs.

Appendix - Support for cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park

Legislative support

Cattle grazing is enshrined in legislation. The National Parks Act states, **32AD. Licences (1)** *The Minister may grant licences in respect of the alpine and bush grazing licence areas in accordance with the agreement on provisions for alpine and bush grazing licences endorsed by the Minister on 25 May 1989.*

Cattle graze just 2.4% of the park

There are 56 licences to graze cattle in areas that total just 2.4% of the Alpine National Park. About 10,000 head of cattle graze in the park for just 16 weeks in Summer and early Autumn.

Labor Governments have successively supported alpine grazing

The former Cain and Kirner Labor governments supported grazing in the Alpine National Park so long as it was properly controlled and managed. Legislation brought in to Parliament by that Labor government created 7 year grazing licences within the Park, and deliberately made these licences renewable. In order to give protection to the conservation values of the Alpine National Park licence conditions took into account the need for strong management practices. When the licence document was reviewed and renewed for a second 7 year term in 1998 it was found that the document was strong enough to continue to protect conservation values, and no changes were required to the original licences.

Alpine grazing is a heritage icon

Alpine grazing has existed for 166 years and has worked under all political parties and all governments. One small group of lobbyists should not be able to dictate the removal of part of the history and heritage of Australia. Indeed the challenge for the green lobbyists is to recognise this history and heritage and support well managed and properly controlled grazing, as a means retaining this important part of our past.

Scientific research quantifies community support for alpine grazing

A University research survey¹ conducted in 1996 found strong support within the community for retaining managed grazing within the Alpine National Park. The abstract stated, *"These results provide support for the Victorian Government's current management policies for grazing on the Bogong High Plains."*

This survey showed that over 90% of respondents had heard of the mountain cattlemen, and 71% were willing to contribute financially in order to retain the presence of mountain cattlemen on the Bogong High Plains.

Demonstrations of community support for alpine grazing

¹ A research project titled "*Analysing conflict between cultural heritage and nature conservation in the Australian Alps: a CVM approach*" by M. Lockwood, P. Tracey and N. Klomp of the Johnstone Centre of Parks, Recreation and Heritage, Charles Sturt University Albury

The strength for retaining the mountain cattlemen's pioneering heritage has increased. Heritage values are recognised and appreciated within the Victorian and Australian community.

- The Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony featured the music from the film "*The Man from Snowy River*", and featured horsemen, and whip-cracking. Most of the whip-crackers were either mountain cattlemen or family members of mountain cattlemen.
- "*The Man from Snowy River*" was one of the most widely seen and most popular films of all time.
- The Centenary of Federation Parade through the streets of Melbourne in May 2001 was a great success for MCAV. The Association was asked to provide 205 mounted stockmen in a re-enactment of the original parade in 1901. The Parade in 2001 was lengthy and featured floats and entries from all sections of the community. The loudest cheers and the most enthusiastic support from the 300,000 crowd was for the mountain cattlemen.
- The recent "*arena spectacular*", "*The Man from Snowy River*" attests to the continued popularity of High Country magic.

The mountain cattlemen's appeal to the urban community has lost none of its strength over the past decades. In fact, interest and support for the mountain cattlemen is growing. Each year thousands of people attend the MCAV *Get Together* to support the mountain cattlemen.

Minister Sherryl Garbutt's support for alpine grazing

Over recent years, the Hon. Sherryl Garbutt MP, former Minister for Environment and Conservation consistently stated that the Government would not be taking any precipitous action to remove the mountain cattlemen. The Minister said,

"This government consults as part of its decision making. The government has said time and again, and I have explained it many times, that it will not be changing leases without consultation, without agreement and without the alpine cattlemen volunteering." 18.9.2001 Page 306

"We have a very clear policy on this issue. We want the environment protected. I said in this house just a few week ago ... that there would be no changes to those licences and that we would not be taking them back or changing them without the agreement of the alpine cattle graziers." 31.10.2001 Page 1261

"The amendment guarantees the existing rights of licensees who hold grazing licences under the Forests Act and under the Land Act in the area that is about to be included in the Alpine National Park. The amendment allows existing licences to continue in force without change to the number of cattle, the area, the nature of the licence, its renewal process or anything else. These provisions save the rights and entitlements and terms and conditions of licensees and will be inserted in the acts to give licensees that guaranteed protection." Second Reading Speech, National Parks (Amendment) Bill, 1.6.2000 Page 2120

ALP Policy on alpine grazing

In the lead up to the 1996 State Election, the ALP had a policy which stated,

"Labor will improve and extend the Alpine National Park by ... Enforcing environmental conditions on grazing licences, and examining ways to remove all grazing from the Park."

However, for the 2002 policy the ALP policy on alpine grazing was silent. Therefore it must be that

the Government supports the status quo as outlined in the National Parks Act.

Conclusion

If the cattle were removed from the Alpine National Park it would be the end of the mountain cattlemen, Victoria would lose an icon and the country would lose a living link with its pioneering past.

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Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria

PO Box 5083, Burnley, 3121
www.mcav.com.au
barker@vicnet.net.au
Reg. No. A2117

Phone 03 9429 8455
Fax 03 9427 9324
ABN 2534 2519 237

*Submission by the
Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria
on the
2003 Alpine Fires*

*“Let us hope that common sense will demand effective
programming of mild-fire conservation before another
major catastrophe by wild fire occurs.”*

Written in 1997 by the late Jim Commins former President
of the Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria

May 2003