



# AUSTRALIAN FOREST GROWERS

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## Submission from Australian Forest Growers to the Council of Australian Governments National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management

### 1. About Australian Forest Growers

Australian Forest Growers (AFG) is a national association with state chapters and regional branches and about 1200 grower members and more than 10,000 investor growers participating in the afforestation managed investment schemes. It is the only national organisation representing and promoting the interests of private commercial forestry and farm tree growers. Members of the association include small-scale tree growers with only a few trees to some of the largest private growers in Australia as well as forestry service providers. Since the 1997 inception of *Plantations for Australia: the 2020 Vision* the sectors that are represented by AFG have been responsible for some 85% of the expansion in the Australian plantation estate. There are also several million hectares of private native forestry in Australia, whose owners' interests in forestry are represented by AFG. Thus, AFG represents landholders with very substantial assets, in the form of plantations and private native forest. These assets are vulnerable to fire and to decisions made by government agencies and others.

AFG provides a fire insurance scheme for its members. Through this scheme, AFG has a close relationship with major plantation insurers operating in Australia. AFG maintains a watching brief over plantation fire losses in Australia, and therefore has an excellent understanding of factors affecting fire risk and loss.

AFG publishes a quarterly magazine for its members 'Australian Forest Grower'. Each year the spring edition focuses members' attention on the coming fire season with relevant articles about fire preparedness, fire suppression techniques, fire research findings and equipment updates. An example of this is evident in the Special Liftout by Tim Vercoe titled "*Whoever owns the fuel owns the fire*" – fire management for forest growers. A copy is attached to this submission.

### 2. Bushfire management principles

AFG recognises several key bushfire management principles:

- ❑ Fire is a natural part of the Australian environment. It is also an agent for regeneration and releases nutrients locked up in litter on the forest floor.
- ❑ Each year, fire severity differs depending on weather conditions, fuel types and the amount of fuel available.
- ❑ Land managers have a duty of care to society and the environment. Because fires occur each year through natural or man made causes there is a need to put in place programs that operate continuously. It means that fuel loadings must be actively managed, access maintained and adequately trained personnel made available on an continuing basis.
- ❑ Fires do not recognize cadastral boundaries. It has been clearly demonstrated on many occasions that there is a need to develop active fire management strategies across vegetation types rather than state borders or other boundaries.

### 3. Issues for the inquiry to consider

- ❑ **Societal changes:** Recent experience suggests that there has been a change in the philosophy that underpins fire management. This may be due to a societal change from one where nature was something to be fought or controlled, a hard taskmaster, to one where the environment is perceived as fragile and benign. This latter view is supported by nature programs brought into our comfortable living rooms on a daily basis. These images are of course devoid of context. There is no heat or cold, no smell, no biting insects nor disease. Added to this is the fact that for most Australians food is delivered, pre-packaged, into air-conditioned supermarkets, further removing them from the reality of land management. In the general community, there is poor understanding and little empathy for active fuel load and bushfire management. There is a disconnect with the wider community and the practical realities of fire management and control. This needs to be scientifically and rationally addressed.

This change in broad philosophy has been accompanied in the field by a change in the land managers. In the past, most state forestry land was managed by foresters with long fire experience and training. More recently, these people have been replaced by graduates in various forms of environmental sciences with much shallower knowledge of fire behaviour. There is no better school of bushfire management than that of active fire control. AFG considers it essential that all public service fire managers be qualified by considerable practical experience before attaining a fire management position.

**The process of skilling a firefighter does not come only through the legal requirement of passing training modules, but also requires experience, judgment, prudence and sagacity. They need continual monitoring and mentoring by more experienced staff while undertaking fire suppression activities. And, above all, they need frequent exposure to a considerable range of fire behaviour that can only be obtained by deliberate lighting of prescribed fire.**

Phil Cheney, Australian Forest Grower Vol 26 no 3, Spring 2003

The nature of volunteer fire fighters has changed. In the past, fire fighters were farmers, logging contractors and forestry workers with years of fire experience and accustomed to hard work. As more native forest areas have been withdrawn from forestry management, and as farms have become bigger and more mechanised requiring less labour, the pool of physically fit, healthy and experienced fire fighters has diminished.

There are two completely incompatible forces in "the fire debate". The physics of fire and the science of the biological world can be the only logical arbiter in this complex discussion. Whilst society might demand that environmental fundamentalist principles are heeded, they cannot be allowed to shadow the sound scientific reasoning that underpins active management of fire risk. This science must be also allowed to continue to evolve, and to this end public funding must continue to be available.

**AFG recommends that the issue of experience and training be taken up by the Inquiry and make recommendations to ensure greater depth of knowledge and experience of fire behaviour in those managing fuel reduction programs, especially in National Parks and reserves, and decision makers at the fire ground.**

**AFG recommends the vigorous pursuit of philosophical agreement for the active management of fire in Australia that can be applied practically with a minimum of bureaucratic intervention.**

**AFG supports more resources being provided for research into fire behaviour and downstream technology transfer of this research in an Australian context.**

- **Fuel reduction:** Fire intensity is related to a combination of weather conditions, slope, atmospheric stability and fuel load. Of these variables, only fuel loads can be managed. Extreme fire behaviour often results when fires burn into areas of high fuel loads such as the fires that devastated the ACT in January 2003.

There has been a trend over the last ten years for more cautious approaches to prescribed burning by public authorities, partly as a result of the fear of litigation in the event of a fire escape, partly as a result of community concern about smoke, partly as a result of fire management practices that lead to loss of life and injury, and partly because many managers of public land are philosophically opposed to burning. This precautionary approach has led to fewer burns being undertaken each year resulting in a gradual build up of fuel loads in native vegetation, to a point where actively managed fuel reduction has become almost impossible in some areas.

In some States, permission for hazard reduction burning is considered in the same context as land clearing, with permits to burn being quite onerous to obtain. Often those in the bureaucracy with the authority to approve prescribed burning plans have little understanding of fire management, and may have a philosophical background that is opposed to prescribed burning as a land management tool.

**AFG recommends that more encouragement given to fuel reduction using prescribed burns on private land in all States; and that impediments to reasonable hazard reduction be removed.**

**AFG recommends that greater attention be paid to actual fuel reduction (including the use of publicly reported performance indicators) rather than developing plans that are not implemented.**

- **Equipment:** There has been a recent trend towards the use very expensive equipment, such as large water tanker helicopters. While it is recognised that aerial attack of fires has been a beneficial new tactic

over the last ten years, it is essential for cost benefit analyses to be applied to equipment purchases. Results of such analyses may reveal a need for more on-ground equipment and more less-expensive aerial bombers (fixed wing or smaller helicopters) being deployed. Benefits of early intervention in fire outbreaks are well canvassed. In many circumstances, the initial response, by whatever means, to a fire outbreak will dictate the impact it may have. Use of direct on-ground intervention supplemented by strategic aerial support are likely to provide a capacity to control fire soon after outbreaks. It is argued, for example, that direct and immediate intervention in the McIntyre Hut fire near the ACT may have extinguished the fire and reduced the ultimate damage in and around Canberra. It is also evidenced that use of aerial and ground attacks combined in highly valued plantations has been an effective mechanism to reduce fire spread and damage. Aerial intervention needs to be timely, strategic, and carried out by appropriately trained operators.

***AFG recommends that greater deployment of resources be made to on-ground attack, and that well controlled aerial water bombing capability be restricted to early intervention at source and to protection of built assets such as houses.***

***AFG recommends that further expenditure on aerial water bombing be only made based on the results of a careful review of the costs and effectiveness of that tactic when used in established bushfires remote from built up areas.***

- **National Coordination:** Pre fire season coordination of fire suppression authorities needs to occur in all regions of Australia. Coordination should include cross agency training, intra- and inter- agency communications, and development of an appropriate mix of skills and practical experience.

Independent auditing against fire preparedness benchmarks to check the fire season readiness of public land agencies may be beneficial. Audits would take into account the extent of pre-season fuel reduction, fire training, fire detection systems, fire fighting equipment and communication systems.

It was noted that during the bushfires last summer, in some instances fire authorities did not consult sufficiently with local people that had the detailed knowledge of the conditions, access and fuel types.

It is a matter of the physics of fire and long standing common sense that the more rapid and vigorous the initial attack the better the chances of extinguishing a fire. The Canberra bushfires of 2003 indicate the problems that might occur when bushfires are not confronted quickly.

***AFG recommends that a much higher level of coordination and standardisation at all levels be developed, along with management plans based upon contiguous fuel type. It may be necessary to review current processes and make them more appropriate. Such historic concerns as inter-agency coordination, communication system compatibility, and skills capacity should be targeted.***

***AFG recommends that a National Fire Audit Office (NFAO) be established to provide confidence to the community. The NFAO would report annually to the Federal Parliament against the following terms of reference:***

- ***Assessment and standardisation of essential equipment, communication and coordination between agencies (intra- and inter-state);***
- ***Report on the fire readiness of the country prior to each fire season;***
- ***Oversight of the deployment (by the States) of regional rapid response units to support fire suppression and filling of human resource gaps caused by such things as employee rostering and lack of available volunteers.***
- ***Establishment and implementation of guidelines to compel fire management authorities to recognize and act on important and credible local advice. (This should apply to all fire suppression operations especially initial attack on outbreaks.)***
- ***Creation and management of a national education program designed to provide a range of options that residents should consider when confronted by impending fire. (The major focus is to provide advice on “stay or go” options when confronted by impending fire and fire preparedness.)***

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