

AIRWATCH – AUSTRALIA

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COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
3-5 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600

Att: Mr. S. Ellis AM (Chair) Prof. P.Kanowski Prof. R.Whelan

Dear Sirs,

We note from a study of submissions to the Select Committee on Recent Australian Bushfires that reports concerning the effect upon or health cost to the community were limited.

We wish to support submissions to this inquiry from C.A.B.R.A., Advocates for Clean Air, and Dr D Robinson of the Armidale University Air Quality group which provide a clear indication of health effects of the "Scorched Earth" policies and unnecessary burning advocated by some.

Emissions from agricultural burning and wood burning heaters are now accepted as being twelve times more toxic than cigarette smoke.

SUBMISSION

1. Claims that aboriginal burning was somehow related to conservation are refuted by the following quote from an aboriginal elder and reprinted from submission no. 473 – A.J Pedro (A Firefighter of thirty years experience – attached) to the S.C.R.A.B. The aboriginal story is profound and pertinent.
- 2.

INTRODUCTION

Quote A.J. Pedro

"I believe that far from following the supposed aboriginal practice of burning the environment on a regular basis, in time it will be come to be known that the very opposite was the case - From what I have learned, the aboriginal peoples used fire very strategically and with a degree of control we do not begin to understand. They used fire with amazing control over less than 1% of the landscape, attracting the game to small areas for easy hunting and entrapment. I believe the vast majority of the land **was managed in a way which a scientific approach can never understand, it was left to be, in its own complexity.**

Aboriginal fire management was described to me by an elder who I met at a CALM fire seminar, and who I respect enormously. On completion I asked why he did not contradict the CALM policy of supposedly following aboriginal broad scale burning in the forests. Initially he ignored my enquiry, but then under much pain with

tears in his eyes he explained that what was suggested as following his ancestors fire management was so far from the truth that he did not bother to even try and correct the government policy. " *I will tell you how we did it*" he said.

"When we were ready to leave our summer or winter camp site and we could see a cold front coming and we knew it was going to rain soon, a group of us would be sent by the elders to the area selected for next seasons camp site, near an estuary or river, and light a fire or series of fires.

Knowing the wind direction and conditions until the cold front and rain came, we could predict the shape and size of the camp area for next season with all its new growth that would attract the game from the vast area we had chosen to leave unburned.'

3. *COMMENT: This knowledge is not available to modern science yet we vigorously pursue prescribed burning in ignorance of the effects.*

4. When we have the science to be able to predict the day, date, time, area of cover, volume of water and time of cessation of our rainfall we will have progressed towards a great understanding of our ecology and the land we occupy. We will also have a healthier population, healthier flora, fauna, rivers and streams.

5. N.A.S.A. currently provide up to date scientific information supporting the fact that smoke from burning vegetation suppresses rainfall. References to this research have been included by other concerned health groups. Internet confirmation is available at <http://trmm.gsfc.nasa.gov/> and details in depth the equipment and methods used.

6. The European Commission DG Environment recently published estimates of the health costs of PM2.5 emissions, by area. Cost per tonne of PM2.5 emissions varies from 14,000euros in rural areas to 495,000euros in a city of several million people see page 13 of <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/enveco/air/betaec02aforprinting.pdf> An Australian dollar buys about .6euro.

SOME VITAL INFORMATION FROM A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires

1. Responding to calls for more extensive prescribed burning after wildfires in NSW Rural Fire Service Chief Commissioner Phil Koperberg warned -

The previous practice of broad acre burns runs the risk of permanently changing the balance among the plants and animals which make our landscape unique and attract millions of tourists each year... The prospect of regular, comprehensive prescribed burning [o convert the entire 5.4 million hectares of national parks into a garden landscape is, however, out of the question.... Strategic fuel reduction, not widespread burning, is central to protect lives and property.

The Western Australian Forest Alliance and the Conservation Council of Western Australia made the following point in their submission to the inquiry:

Pre-emptive burning at the scale and frequency proposed by the proponents of more burning will impoverish our natural environment and leave our community just as, or even more vulnerable to fire.'

2. A.J. Pedro of West Australia, a fireman of thirty years and conservationist submitted that hazard reduction burns result in dead understory (an immediate fire hazard of higher than original risk) and a regrowth of foreign weed strewn material measuring three times the original natural undergrowth. This result is to be seen all over our country regardless of climate.

3. Michael Organ - Member for Cunningham quotes several organisations and his comments and quotes follow:

I do know...that we are in eastern Australia experiencing probably the worst drought in a hundred years and the severity of that drought has contributed enormously to the precarious tinderbox nature of the environment and you can imagine what happened at the weekend was a freakish conjunction of a very hot day, bad winds, dry undergrowth, all those things coming together in a quite uncontrollable fashion.

In their submission, CANA and Greenpeace suggested that the Committee needed to-

...recognise that further scientific research is required into the link between climate change and bushfire risk in Australia, and that such research is an important step in the development of successful bushfire prevention and mitigation strategies.

I strongly support this recommendation and call on the federal government to recognise that climate change will be a major problem globally into the future and that Australia is not, and will not be immune from these problems.

Despite this, Australia has always experienced intense fires due to extreme weather in the past, and obviously this will continue. How severe this weather becomes is yet to be seen, and recent extreme conditions cannot be ignored in the context of the impact of global warming.

As the submission from Gecko (Goid Coast & Hinterland Environment Council) pointed out:

Recent fires show the need for a multi-pronged approach to bushfire management. The challenges created by climate change are unprecedented and will require fire managers to rethink all strategies. Global warming with increased drought, evaporation and dryness will not only increase the frequency and intensity of Bushfires, but will also make hazard reduction burns more risky and will even make rainforests more susceptible. We need to rethink all our fire management techniques

I support the concept of a database being established that is federally funded and that has a federal perspective, but I am concerned by the fundamental thrust of this report and the fact that the push for this database may be politically motivated.

A sensible approach is needed, and if a database is to be established and research undertaken, these efforts must have a balanced perspective in order to be of genuine benefit.

I have concerns that the federal government, in conducting this Inquiry and in putting the recommendations that it has, is committed to the 'burn more' perspective and that the recommendations that are implemented will be pushed toward promoting this perspective.

The World Wildlife Fund, in their submission, included an ***impressive list of recommendations that I strongly support and which I regret the Committee did not take on board:***

Recommendation 1

That the Committee examine the extent to which human-induced global warming exacerbated the severity of the drought and contributed to the severity of the 2002-2003 bushfires, and recommend policies and strategies to reduce the level of Australian greenhouse emissions.

Recommendation 2

That the Committee examine and report on the historical correlation between major bushfires and national parks, forestry lands, private lands etc. and examine 'hard' evidence that studies the correlation between prescribed burning and major fires.

Recommendation 3

That the Committee examine and report on the impact of inappropriate and inadequate hazard reduction regimes on biodiversity.

Recommendation 4

That the Committee examine and report on the economic costs and benefits of prescribed burning and other fire protection works.

Recommendation 5

That the Committee examine the opportunity for the Commonwealth, through the NRM Ministerial Council, strongly encourage all States and territories to implement actions under objective 3.5 of the National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity, which aims to reduce the adverse impacts of altered fire regimes on biological diversity.

Recommendation 6

That the Committee examine and report on the lack of ecological knowledge of volunteer fire fighters and municipal staff, and ways to reverse this situation.

Recommendation 7

That the Committee highlight the opportunity for the Commonwealth, in association with its partners, to ensure that Bushfire CRC develop a major research program to investigate the role of fire in the maintenance of biodiversity, and the development of ecologically sustainable prescribed fire regimes that minimise the adverse impact of fire on biodiversity (also on human health).

Recommendation 8

That the Committee highlight the opportunity for the Commonwealth, in

association with its partners, ensure that the Bushfire CRC and CRC for Tropical Savannas Management support and co-ordinate further research into the role of fire in Australian ecosystems, to further contribute to the implementation of action 3.5.1 of the National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity.

Conclusion

I believe it is of crucial importance that all stakeholders who are potentially bushfire affected or who are involved in fighting fires or managing land that is bushfire prone work together to ensure the best outcomes for the Australian environment and the community.

I am concerned by the fact that this Inquiry was perceived as being politicised, as this issue is too important to be manipulated for political ends.

We must respond to the reality of the Australian environment with a coordinated, scientific and sensible approach. We must reach consensus on the way forward wherever possible. This will involve concessions and understanding from all quarters.

I believe this is possible, and the evidence I have read in association with the Committee indicates that, at the end of the day, the community will work for a positive outcome for the natural and the built environment. In the interim vested interests and poor management are impacting upon that aim.

At the end of the day we all want to protect people and property from the ravages of fire without unduly compromising our precious environmental assets.

On this I think all members of the Committee concur.
Michael Organ
Committee Member

ON BEHALF OF ALL MEMBERS WHO BREATHE OXYGEN DURING FIRE EVENTS, WITH NOWHERE LEFT TO GO and all those OTHER SUFFERERS WHO LOOK FORWARD TO THE CESSATION OF UNNECESSARY BURNING, AIRWATCH pleads for RECOGNITION OF THE PLIGHT OF HUMAN BEINGS in your deliberations.

This submission is based upon health of the earth, the air, flora, fauna and people - all related and interacting in a way which we must begin to understand.

There some final points for consideration which must be acknowledged:

ARSON

1. Ten N.S.W. fire fighters were charged with arson last year. Three Queensland officers went to court for similar offences - one of whom was an acting Fire Chief. Penalties are not severe enough to discourage this activity.
2. Screening of volunteers should be reviewed and regular psychiatric checks implemented.

ORGANISATION

A team of Queensland firemen went to the assistance of Sydney officers last year. According to a friend (unnamed) "We were all running around like chooks with their heads cut off ...

the Queensland team started to back burn ... we destroyed six houses.." Because court cases are reportedly imminent some states appear to be avoiding contribution to inquiries...

EQUIPMENT

In conclusion attention should be given to the fact that our fire services are probably the most poorly equipped on earth.

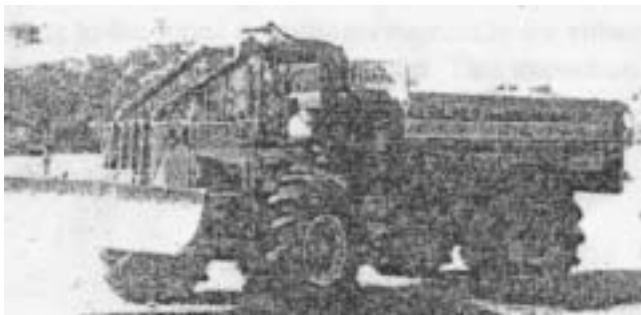
Many believe that a fast response purpose built vehicle could be used to extinguish spot fires at their inception.

To quote Mr. Pedro " **.. for bushfire suppression . . turning up to a bushfire with a truck is about as effective as arriving at a house fire with a plastic bucket.** Trucks cannot be driven through the bush to access fires that are **further away from roads than the length of the hose on board the unit.**

In most bushfires the units are useless, and a bulldozer has to be brought to the fire, sometimes taking hours by which time wildfires become uncontrollable."

"I have invented a machine to overcome this problem, and invested \$75000 to build two working examples (photographs are attached). ***This machine is capable of quickly traversing the environment in which it is to work, while carrying water, and clearing its own track or creating firebreaks.*** This is the most sophisticated ground-based bushfire suppression unit in Australia, and possibly in the world, however CALM and FESA have shown no interest in the trial or possible use of this machine.

I believe that the use of fast-response equipment such as this provides a more sustainable alternative to fuel reduction burning for the purpose of bushfire prevention .."



Airwatch support the value of this innovative equipment in any effort to reduce burning, improve efficiency, combat global warming and contribute to the health of the Nation.

We trust that this submission is of value. We are not aligned with either burning opinion but anticipate a healthy outcome for biodiversity and the population.

Leo Barraclough - Public Officer AIRWATCH - AUSTRALIA.