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Canberra ACT 2601

Mr Stuart Ellis,
Chair,
Inquiry into Bushfire Mitigation and Management
Council of Australia Governments,
coagbushfireinquiry@pmc.gov.au

Dear Mr Ellis,

Submission to the COAG Inquiry into Bushfire Mitigation and Management

The National Parks Australia Council Inc, formerly the Australian National Parks Council inaugurated in 1975, comprises non-government organisations concerned with the promotion of national park and protected areas for the conservation of nature and the benefit of present and future generations.

Introduction

Management of bushfire as an intrinsic element of the Australian landscape, while protecting life and property from risk, has been one of the many issues addressed by the various Member Groups over the years, as attested by their commentaries, submissions and other contributions to public debate. A consistent theme in this advocacy has been for better understanding of the role of fire in the environment and as a basis for long term, scientifically grounded, management appropriate for the variations in both biophysical and administrative processes, with a particular focus on retaining the integrity of national parks and protected areas.

The National Parks Australia Council (NPAC) sees this inquiry under the auspices of the Coalition of Australian Governments as providing a real opportunity to advance a cross-jurisdictional collaborative approach to bushfire management across Australia. In particular we welcome the requirement to take into account variation in relation to vegetation types, land management processes, biodiversity, terrain, long term climate conditions and other environment and heritage issues.

In keeping with the NPAC objectives, this submission briefly highlights issues of prime concern to Member Groups, drawing particularly on submissions and comment following the 2002-2003 fire season.

1 Fact not Fiction - Countering the Blame Game

Our Member Groups have deplored the scapegoating of national parks and protected areas in a blame game approach, together with calls for extensive broadscale hazard

reduction burning and extensive fire trail networks that are contrary to their purpose while vilifying “greenies” and national park agencies. The drama of bushfire events has great media appeal. There have been welcome public statements from some of the lead Fire Fighting and Conservation Agencies, as well as attempts to re-dress some of the unwarranted public statements. Nevertheless some of the reporting has facilitated airing of controversial views, deliberate misinformation, and politicking, which have thereby gained unwarranted credence. This has been detrimental to the morale of conservation agencies, who have been under unreasonable pressure to undertake inappropriate fuel reduction burning, construct fire breaks and fire trails contrary to best ecological management requirements, further exacerbated by excessive backburning during some fire events.

Section 3.2 of the Victorian National Parks Association Submission No 121 to the State Inquiry into the 2002-3 Victorian Bushfires, “Dispelling the Myths”, is specifically drawn to your attention in terms of response to ill-informed comment. Other sections of this extensively researched submission cover aspects of fire history, fuel reduction burning, land management, alternative bushfire mitigation and prevention, and appropriateness of Existing Planning and Building Codes. The National Parks of NSW issued “Burning Questions” as a leaflet in response to the blame game media at the time of the 1974 NSW bushfires.

Governments at all levels have a moral and legal responsibility to collaborate in, rather than shift blame for, protecting Australia’s unique and varied natural heritage for the long term. Australia, as a signatory to a number of International Conventions and Agreements, such as World Heritage, Ramsar, and Biodiversity, has acknowledged responsibilities to the global community. Appropriate, effective and resourced fire management regimes are a component in fulfilling these responsibilities.

Establishment of a systematic and comprehensive network of representative ecosystems across Australia is an acknowledged national intent. However implementation for the long term relies on integrated planning and management, including bushfire management, with both Federal and State/Territory governments having important and complementary roles.

The protected areas established are increasingly remnant islands of natural habitat in a sea of modified landscape. This poses many management challenges, including application of fire regimes for ecological purposes, and post fire recruitment of biota after major events. Many of our protected areas are also key components for our Tourism Industry and for recreation generally, as well as providing important ecological services such as water catchment. This reinforces the importance of minimising further degradation and loss of natural values through inappropriate bushfire management regimes.

The need for variability of regime, spacially and ‘seasonally’, is slowly becoming better understood through research. Governments have an important role in ensuring adequate financial resources for relevant research, and transmission of research findings, to managers and to the wider community. Some ecosystem types, notably rainforest, are very susceptible to fire, while some sclerophyll plant species are highly dependent of fire, with differing frequency intervals applying to different species.

This is reinforced by the listing of high fire frequency as a Key threatening Process under the NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

That the Inquiry Report provides clear articulation of the responsibilities for inter and intra governmental bushfire fire management arrangements, at all levels of government, which take account of the requirements for conservation of our natural heritage.

Elements addressed should include:

- 1.1 fostering widespread sense of pride in Australia’s intrinsic natural values and our communal responsibility for their protection;
- 1.2 improving understanding of bushfire as an intrinsic element of the Australian environment and its role in influencing the landscape across the variable climatic and landscape regimes of Australia;
- 1.3 resourcing research and the effective transmission of research findings into practical application for long term best practice management application;
- 1.4 informing and involving decision-makers, government agencies, the private sector and the general public so that these findings and their implementation is a shared responsibility.

2 Land Use Planning Legacy

The peri-urban spread of subdivision and new development into bushfire prone areas provides a huge challenge to rational fire risk management. New subdivisions are marketed in part on the appeal of open park-like space; many want to have homes – or holiday get-aways – in or adjacent to bushland. Many of these developments are occupied by people who fail to appreciate the need to address their obligations and responsibilities regarding bushfire risk that come with this lifestyle.

Initiatives such as the “Planning for Bushfire Protection” in NSW begin to address some of the problems. However even these measures are strenuously opposed by some sections of the development industry; and although planning and building regulations now to some extent require bushfire risk to be a consideration, many aspects are far from mandatory. The NPA ACT Inc in responding to proposals in “Shaping Our Territory: Options and Opportunities for Non-Urban ACT, August 2003” found it necessary to highlight the disappointingly scant coverage given to the significance of biodiversity and how to protect it, and to oppose proposals for rural village and a hospitality centre developments likely to threaten the integrity of existing protected areas.

There remains the very real problem of what to do about already approved subdivisions and established buildings in bushfire prone situations. This situation becomes more acute as urban and peri-urban development expands around city and town fringes and along the coast, pressing up against important remnant bushland areas. Unconstrained, the ‘right to build’ on lands previously subdivided and/or

zoned for deferred urban and similar development, poses a major challenge for governments at all levels. The buck has all too often rested with local government which may have neither the will nor the resources to refuse development consent – or may indeed have been over-ridden through court challenge. There should be no further delay in addressing these issues across the board.

Advocacy for land-use planning that takes into account ecological values and services ahead of time has been a constant theme of NPAC Member Groups. Difficulties in implementing the ideal are political, social and institutional. For example, following the Ash Wednesday fires in South Australia, rebuilding a burnt out home on the identical site and exactly as the one burnt was the quick, simple and cheapest expedient for home owners who otherwise faced delays and costs should they wish to improve the siting and construction in accord with best fire risk principles.

Many agricultural properties have been developed up to their boundary fences, some established prior to protected area reservation status of former Crown Lands, some since. There is a need to reconcile boundary management so that the integrity of the reserved areas can be maintained in a way that is compatible with existing adjacent land uses. Outcomes of various forest resource assessment decisions have, regrettably, left a number of small isolated pockets of important bushland amongst private and forestry lands, with mitigation of fire threat mitigation without sacrificing the high biodiversity values for which the areas were reserved a particular challenge.

The past practices of widespread prescription burning to reduce “fuel” are increasingly being challenged. Moves to instigate a more strategic minimisation of risk to life and assets (including environmental assets) with targeted hazard reduction need to be reinforced. Negotiated boundary restructure and/or buy-back may be the only solution for some of the most at risk locations. NPAC argues that it is just not acceptable that it is always the bushland that is sacrificed. In such instances the Commonwealth Government has a specific responsibility to assist State and Local Government in resolving this issue through policy leadership and resourcing.

RECOMMENDATION TWO:

That the Inquiry Report sets out clear parameters for minimising bushfire risk, in terms of the responsibilities of the various levels of government responsibility, interpreted at State/Territory and Local level according to the institutional planning and land administration arrangements currently in place, and supported at Federal level through appropriate policy and fiscal measures.

The Inquiry should specifically address:

- 2.1 gaps in current arrangements
- 2.2 the need to ensure new development is not located in areas of bushfire risk or where there will be conflict with lands that are required for biodiversity conservation purposes;
- 2.3 facilitation of best practice planning and building requirements through appropriate regulation and fiscal arrangements;

2.4 retention of important remnant and interface bushland when dealing with the legacy of previous land use planning decisions.

3 Biodiversity Conservation Across the Landscape

The importance of integrating management of the public national park system into regional and wider landscape management is increasingly recognised. The modification of the landscape by humans before and, with increasing impact, since settlement, has already led to extinction or severe contraction of many components of Australia's biota. The challenge for conservation of our remaining natural heritage is to instigate management regimes across the landscape that facilitate the natural ebb and flow of species and ecosystems rather than further restrict. Mosaic patterns of burning are increasingly recognised as offering the best hope of achieving some continuity of biodiversity in natural bush. Yet this is hard to implement, particularly in more densely modified urban and agricultural regions where only pockets of remnant bushland survive. It is even more of a challenge where life and property may be at risk, exacerbated by a combination of climate trends, seasonal weather patterns (high temperatures, drought, wind) and human behaviour (arson and human induced greenhouse effects).

One of the widely cited initiatives is that undertaken by the SE Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Project. Adaptations of this approach may well be applicable elsewhere, providing there are resources available to support interpretation and ongoing research and advice at a local level.

RECOMMENDATION THREE:

That the Inquiry Report sets out best practice models to avoid further biodiversity loss across the landscape while addressing human needs and expectations for safety and security.

4 References

NPAC would be pleased to provide further information drawing on the experience and knowledge of its Member Bodies. In addition to personal communication, this submission has been prepared drawing on the following:

- Victorian National Parks Association Inc. "Submission to the State Inquiry into the 2002-03 Victorian Bushfires, May 2003, Submission 121.
- National Parks Association of NSW Inc. "Burning Questions" 1994
- Nature Conservation Society of SA Inc. "Xanthopus" Vol 21
- National Parks Association Act Inc. "Shaping our Territory: Options and Opportunities for Non-Urban ACT" August 2003" and NPAACT Bulletin, Vol 40
- Watson, P., SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium "The role and use of fire for biodiversity conservation in S.E. Queensland: Fire management guidelines derived from ecological research" July 2001.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Reeves, B.Sc., OAM
Hon. President
December 2003