

12 November 2003

Mr Stuart Ellis, AM
Chair
COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire
Mitigation and Management
PMC
BARTON ACT 2600

Dear Mr Ellis,

Re: COAG Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management

Thank you for your encouraging letter of 6 November 2003 in response to our submission centred on fires in the KNP region. Indeed, it is a heartening that a national approach is now being taken to consider both mitigation and management of fires in the future, with clear flow-on effects for disaster and emergency management generally. Of course, we would love the opportunity to complete anecdotal evidence gathering / survey of the local community if the panel feels that to be appropriate.

I wonder if I may submit a few additional thoughts in relation to fire management, particularly in relation to National Park management. It appears at face value, that whilst there is a division in the community over the 'fuel reduction' issue, the level of evidence-based inquiry is limited. For instance, the impact of increased periodicity of fires may indeed, increase the volume of shrubby flora, further intensifying the fire risk and incidence. The 'green pick' theory may have some merit, but increasing the volume of soil nutrients post-fire may also be a factor in weed infestation, particularly in poorly managed lands, the perimeter of grazing lands and national parks, further increasing the fire risk through reduced access and other factors. Perhaps there is a need to better identify the source of fires over the past 10, 20, 25, 50, 75 and 100 years. Indeed, this would better describe whether it is simply the fuel load in the national parks that is the problem, or whether it is a complex mix of human activity including arson, land management practices, accidents and natural events such as lightning that are responsible for fires.

Stuart, you may wish to talk to Dr John Banks at the ANU (formerly Forestry School) about his perspective on fire in the post-pastoral era. Dr Banks has definitive fire-scar data for some areas within KNP including Thredbo Village. The accepted viewpoint is that the co-evolution of firestick farming and the Australian flora necessitates repetition of the fire regimes of the Aboriginal people. However, the transporting of the supposed fire regimes of the Aboriginal peoples into contemporary pastoral and now, land management practices including maintenance of national parks, is most likely to be inaccurate. In the first instance, the settlement patterns of the original inhabitants of this continent are clearly different to the more sedentary Europeans. This is particularly so in the Snowy Mountains where the local tribes primarily frequented the high country during the warmer summer months and for their annual spiritual festival during the Bogong moth migrations.

Secondly, whilst pastoralism and forestry are significant assets for Australia, one must perhaps, keep a sense of balance in assessing the risks and benefits of any industry. I was particularly disturbed to hear the former Chief Minister for the Act, Kate Carnell talk about the ACT fires. Ms

Carnell patently supports the ACT Forests, a position that fails to recognise the very real threat, damage, loss of property and life arising from the Canberra bushfires in particular and the impact of the 'pencil pines' and their high flammability. That a key public figure has high level access to the media and thus the potential to distort public opinion in the face of such a disaster is unthinkable and unfortunate. The Inquiry is an opportunity perhaps, to take a more sober approach to properly assess causative factors and community response to fire and other disasters and better address future preparedness without prejudice or favour towards any particular individual, organisation or industry.

Similarly, I was alarmed, that there was a long time delay before the fire managers finally came in to water bomb the Byadbo fires (December 2002). Last year, at the time of the meeting of concerned agencies on the South Coast, my intuition told me that it was 'game over' and that a major problem would arise from the essentially locked culture of men managing nature. I do not mean to sound sexist, but it is precisely this 'culture' that the Coroner identified to be a key factor in the Glenbrook Train disaster, and again, a factor in the Waterfall Train disaster. The strong territorialism of some men in terms of land access, ownership and management is pretty scary for on-lookers. One cannot simply ring up for instance, the NPWS and say 'what's going on guys, why aren't you going in there with the helicopters to water bomb?' You can imagine the response.

The cultural 'shift' is considerable.

One can understand that there was a question mark over the decision to make a NPWS administrator the Section 44 appointee. My immediate response was that it was inappropriate, that the NPWS are 'too close' to the problem. I could not understand why indeed, a properly trained incident controller was not appointed. Someone with specific skills is arguably better placed and more effective in that position of extreme stress, requiring a level of detachment and authority to call in resources and with the assistance of expert advice, manage the disaster.

We wish you and your co-panel members well with the Inquiry Stuart. Of course, if there is an opportunity to collate evidence from the local community, we are pleased to do so to support your endeavours.

With regards and best wishes,

Acacia Rose
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