



*"The lightning strikes in the Alps in Victoria in early January 2003 heralded the beginning of a wild fire eclipsing the fires of 1939, following much the same path except this time the fire extended over the Wulgulmerang Plateau and beyond, incinerating most everything in its path. The designated wilderness area in the upper Buchan Valley, completely mismanaged by Parks Victoria, had such a build up of under storey fuel to feed this fire that it became a raging inferno, not only crowning out but becoming an unstoppable fire ball hitting Black Mountain, Wulgulmerang, and Seldom Seen with devastating speed and destruction.*

*Wildlife suffered huge losses. Birds were sucked into the fire and perished. Endangered species such as the rock wallaby are probably extinct in the Buchan Creek area which was*

*severely burnt. Many animals perished here and those that did not die in the fire died of starvation or were easy prey to wild dogs. Cattle died not only from the flames. The radiant heat, generated by those gaseous fire balls, exploded their stomachs their cloven feet gone and walking on bleeding stumps.*

*Even with this unbelievable disaster forecast by locals with knowledge and experience, small areas had relatively cool burns that can easily be identified by the trees retaining their upper storey green leaves and low levels of damage at ground level.*

*Why did these areas escape the full severity of the fire? The answer is there for all to see. Some of those areas had been fuel reduced the previous year and others had been grazed by cattle, brumbies and fauna and retained a short green cover of native grasses."*

**John Margetts, submission no. 50 to the House of Representatives  
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires**



# Fire Storm

More than 400 submissions have been received by the House of Representatives committee investigating the 2003 summer bushfires. The submissions come from all states, and a range of perspectives. *About the House* reviews some of the evidence received so far.

**L**ast summer's bushfires have ignited a debate which has been a long time coming.

Among dozens of issues, at its heart are competing views over fuel reduction burning and grazing in national parks, maintenance of access roads, and making best use of local knowledge.

Submission after submission from individuals and units involved in fighting the fires are strongly critical of government authorities on each of these points.

The submission from the Bushfire Management Committee and Group Captains of the Snowy River Rural Fire District in south-western NSW is typical of many received from on-the-ground fire fighters.

It blames the severity of the fires on "fuel build up, lack of hazard reduction on a regular basis, and fire trails that had not been maintained to a condition that was acceptable for use".

It says the only places where the fires were contained were where access and fuel loads were manageable—that is, where the fire came out of the national park onto private land that was still being used for grazing, and in areas where burning regimes had been carried out by individual landholders.

"The impact of hazard reduction is obvious; areas that had previously been burnt enabled us to control the fires," the Snowy River Rural Fire District submission says.

"Fire trails that had been maintained and were fully constructed prior to the fire certainly assisted with fire fighting

operations (brushed up to mineral earth, double width and canopy removed). Other strategies that would assist with bushfire prevention include strip grazing, block burning trials for hazard reduction purposes, and not closing trails that were constructed during the recent fires and maintaining them instead. Some trails have already been closed off after the recent fires."

In previous years funding was made available to maintain fire trails on private property, the submission says, but in the past five years there has been no money allocated to private landholders to maintain these trails.

Overall, the submission says, land management policies are "non-existent". "The fact that two thirds of KNP [Kosciuszko National Park] was burnt out is testimony to the fact that whatever land management policies are in place are not working."

On operational matters, the submission says resource sharing between agencies worked efficiently and effectively due to good communications between senior officers of agencies on the local Bushfire Management Committee. However, "communications between agencies on a Div. Comm level were non-existent".

"Some of the problems volunteers faced included task forces arriving late, and change-over times. The window of opportunity for conducting backburns in the Snowy Mountains Region is very limited, and late crew arrivals jeopardised critical backburns on numerous occasions."

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There was also a considerable problem with radio communications. “Resources were stretched at district level, but our most serious concern was the fact that our radio communications system was totally inadequate for this terrain and could well have endangered lives.”

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The submission is critical of NPWS (National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW) ground personnel, saying they had no understanding of fire behaviour in their own area as they had no previous practical experience with hazard reduction burns.

All these criticisms are echoed in the submission of the Rocky Plains Brigade, which operates in NSW in a 600 square kilometre area to the east of the KNP, and by the Mudgegonga Rural Fire Brigade, which operates over the border in north-eastern Victoria.

The Mudgegonga Brigade fought the fires at Mt Buffalo, Stanley and in the Ovens Valley. Its submission is “not intended as a negative criticism of how the whole episode was managed but as a positive tool to go on with and implement changes that will help improve any future situations”.

The brigade is very critical of the Victorian ICC (Incident Control Centre), saying the ICC had control of too many fires with the result that a good job was not done on any of them.

“Strike Teams and local DSE [Department of Sustainability and Environment] and CFA personnel were all frustrated by the lack of common sense displayed by the ICC,” the submission says. “There were a lot of unnecessary delays in putting decisions into action, and quite a few occasions when nothing happened at all, causing immense frustration.”

The submission suggests that geographically separate fires have continuity of personnel in charge. This also includes keeping, where possible, Strike Teams in the same areas instead of constantly shifting their area of combat.

“It appeared there were not enough ‘locals’ in ICC as geographic blunders were the norm rather than the exception. For example the Strike Teams working in Porepunkah were shifted to Buffalo River the following day and vice versa for the Buffalo River based Strike Team.

“It was apparent that basic safety issues were often ignored and Strike Teams from other regions were arriving on site in the dark in unfamiliar territory after the interminable briefings.”

Maps supplied for fire crews were mostly unreadable photocopies.

“There were also too many radio channel frequencies—teams were confused as to which one they should be using. It also became messy when fires broke out in the Beechworth, Kiewa and Tallangatta areas and everyone in the communications headquarters were using the same channel (102)—some sort of GO TO channel is needed. Poor radio reception was a huge problem—more mobile communication facilities are needed.”

then start to rebuild their lives once they knew what confronted them. No community should be subjected to such stress.”

Mr Ingram sees the issues as dividing into three areas—public land management, fire response and incident management, and post-fire response and community recovery.

Detailing data supplied by the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment (now DSE) at a forum in Bairnsdale, Mr Ingram’s submission outlines the Gippsland Fire Management Plan, which



Meeting at the community hall in Beechworth (Vic) at the height of the bushfires. Photo: Ian Currie/Newspix

The Independent MP for Gippsland East in the Victorian state parliament, Craig Ingram, shares the view that government agencies have much to answer for.

“In this region, large sections of the community are extremely angry at the government agencies responsible for public land management. They have failed in their duty of care,” Mr Ingram says.

He says although the destruction caused to private property was significant, it “was also minimal compared to the potential of the disaster”.

“We were fortunate that the weather conditions were relatively mild through most of the period except for the three days of the extreme damage. If they had been driven by hot northerly winds such as have been experienced in past fires, the devastation would have been much more widespread.

“Almost everyone outside the larger towns was under the threat of their homes and properties coming under attack by an enemy that showed no mercy. The fact that community meetings were held in every centre as far as Mallacoota was evidence that the authorities were not confident that the fires could be stopped until they reached the sea if the worst conditions eventuated.

“For some, the arrival of the fire was almost a relief from the weeks of worry. They could

divides the region into zones rated from one to five. Different zones have different management targets in terms of how and how often they are treated for fire prevention.

“The Department presented this information along with data on the ecological use of fire with both flora and fauna experts from the Department and Parks Victoria,” Mr Ingram says.

“All speakers were absolute in their belief that the targets need to be met to adequately protect both human life and property and the ecological values and species diversity within our public land areas. The flora and fauna representatives believed that the targets set for Zone 4 were well below what was required for ecological burns.”

However, far from meeting or exceeding targets, “the data shows that the Department has not been able to meet any of its targets in any year over the past decade and is 50 per cent below the expected target”. The worst areas of performance are the Zone 1 areas adjacent to private land.

“These charts show quite clearly that the government departments responsible for the management of fire prevention have failed to meet the goals that they have established to protect human life and assets and manage the forests for ecological purposes,” he says.

“The public land managers in Gippsland have, through lack of fuel reduction burning and fire prevention work, allowed our forests to become a tinder box.”

Mr Ingram says this prolonged failure is due to the over restrictive nature of the guidelines for allowing fuel reduction burns; the lack of resources to allow the department to fulfil its obligations; and the loss of the traditional foresters' knowledge of fire and fire behaviour.

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) disputes many of these views. It says many of the criticisms of national parks and

how we live. The Victorian National Parks Association believes significant strides in this direction have been made in Victoria and that in general, both fire planning and suppression is intelligent, balanced and worthy of commendation. Improvements can be made, but we believe that the basic structures, processes and principles are correct and need to be respected and preserved.”

The VNPA says that “unquestionably, the major cause for the 2002-3 fires was drought”.

It suggests the exceptionally severe drought —“the worst since reliable records began in

prioritise its fire fighting efforts towards those fires closer to townships and other important assets rather than being able to follow its normal policy of tackling all fires with an aim of controlling them as quickly as possible. To its great credit the number of uncontrolled fires was reduced to 14 within three days. However it was these 14 that subsequently went on to combine into the massive fires that led to this and other inquires. Perhaps this inquiry might be able to determine whether additional resources and other improvements might help this first strike capacity.”

A submission from Western Australia from a high-powered group of experienced fire fighters calling itself the ‘Bushfire Front’ warns that “a catastrophic bushfire crisis is imminent in Western Australia”. The group’s chair, Roger Underwood, is a former general manager of WA’s Department of Conservation and Land Management. He says a “Canberra-style” disaster on the fringes of Perth or extensive damage to a major southwest town such as Bridgetown, Denmark or Margaret River is possible.

“Alternatively, the disaster could be a major forest fire with large-scale loss of old growth karri forest, associated birds and animals, pollution of drinking water and deaths of fish,” the group’s submission says.

“Such a disaster is not just possible but highly probable. All the factors leading to the terrible bushfires in the eastern states in recent years are present in WA. At the same time, the government’s bushfire damage reduction program has been allowed to slip to danger level.

“There are two critical problems. The first is a massive build-up of bushfire fuel in public and private forests. The second is that the resources available to fight fires are in decline. Waterbombing aircraft and helicopters can assist at a fire, but are not a substitute for on-ground firefighters who can only succeed in suppressing intense summer wildfires where the fuels have been previously reduced.” ■

#### Links & Contacts

The House Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires has been conducting site visits and meetings, and has begun a program of public hearings. Further information is available at the committee website or by phoning or emailing the secretariat.

Visit: [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/bushfires/inquiry/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/bushfires/inquiry/index.htm)

Phone: (02) 6277 4813

Email: [bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au)

*About the House* will continue to cover the proceedings of this inquiry.



Fire trucks from a NSW Strike Team. Photo: Newspix

park management are based on “five myths”. These are that: fire is more severe because we do not follow the practices of Aboriginals or of graziers in the past; prescribed burning will prevent fires or help in all circumstances; grazing reduces blazing; logging reduces blazing; and more tracks are needed.

“A common source of fire and its spread is often said to be ‘national parks’,” the VNPA submission says. “The 1939 Black Friday fires burnt a larger area than those in 2003. There was extensive logging and grazing in 1939, but only a handful of national parks. ‘Greenies’ had not been invented. How frustrating it must have been to not have parks and environmentalists as ready scapegoats for the Black Friday inferno. These days we have no such troubles. The opportunistic seize on fires to run campaigns against the bush and the people who cherish it, and the attacks have begun.”

It goes on: “The unsophisticated, interested and blame-apportioning comments that followed the 2002-3 fires will not yield a successful and sustainable relationship with our natural environment. Such a relationship will balance the needs of safety, biodiversity, tourism, agriculture and cost efficiency with the realities of where and

1910”—was probably exacerbated by global warming. Temperatures through 2002 were significantly higher than in other drought years and rainfall even lower. These factors combined to create extremely dry, highly combustible vegetation.

**“The opportunistic seize on fires to run campaigns against the bush and the people who cherish it, and the attacks have begun.”**

“Once started, the drought conditions meant the undergrowth, ground cover and leaf litter was exceptionally dry, even in vegetation types which normally remain damp, such as wetter forest types and alpine areas. This meant much more fuel was available enabling hotter and harder to control fires which entered areas that tend to remain unburnt by fires in milder years.”

The VNPA says this problem was made worse by multiple, simultaneous lightning strikes, with more than 80 fires started in eastern Victoria and 40 in NSW over January 7 and 8.

“This unfortunate event over-stretched the fire-fighting resources forcing DSE to