

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing – October 2009
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Topic: Emissions from bushfires

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Question: (Senator Macdonald)

Senator IAN MACDONALD—...I ask this question of your department—and it may have to be taken on notice—the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory prior to the last estimates in May said that 2.7 million tonnes of carbon according to the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory were emitted during the Victorian bushfires. The bushfire CRC said it was something more like 70 to 105 million tonnes of carbon emissions from the bushfires. I was asking who could be right and why was there such a large difference? It was then that they said that I should ask the Department of Climate Change. I thought they were going to get the answer but apparently they did not. Could you give me that answer? Which is right? If my figures are correct and I have no reason to doubt them—the 2.7 million tonnes according to the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory and 70 to 105 million tonnes according to the bushfire CRC—why is there such a variation?

Senator Wong—Senator, we will take that on notice...Can you clarify what you said at the very opening of your question about bushfires vis-a-vis greenhouse gas emissions? I assume you mean—

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Carbon emissions.

Senator Wong—Carbon emissions from bushfires vis-a-vis other mechanisms.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—You are the people with the knowledge—

Senator Wong—Yes, that is fine. I think we can probably provide that.

Answer:

The Government prepares national greenhouse gas accounts in accordance with Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Guidelines.

Prior to the latest National Inventory Report, the Government reported only emissions of non-carbon dioxide greenhouse gases (nitrous oxide and methane) from forest burning. This followed the international inventory reporting guidelines of the IPCC which operated at the time.

In 2003 the IPCC adopted new Good Practice Guidance for Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry which provided that countries should develop inventory estimates on the basis of carbon dioxide and non-carbon dioxide greenhouse gas emissions. These new guidelines were put into effect for the National Inventory Report applying to the year 2007. The new methods imply a substantial increase in the reported level of emissions.

In the National Inventory Report for 2007 (released in 2009) national emissions from forest burning (principally wildfires) totalled approximately 26.7 million tonnes (approximately 24 million tonnes carbon dioxide and 2.7 million tonnes non-carbon dioxide emissions).

Several groups in Australia publish figures on emissions from bushfire events at various times and for various geographical areas. The estimates of wildfire emissions prepared by other groups may employ different methods.

Emissions from bushfires vary greatly from year to year, depending on the area and the intensity of the bushfires. It is not clear from the information in the question for which year the CRC estimates apply.

The National Inventory Report emissions estimates for 2009 have not yet been produced and are due to be published in early 2011.