

The Member for Cowper, in a letter to The Coffs Coast Advocate, asks for submissions to be made to an inquiry into the national fire devastation. Without formally specifying the terms of reference, he indicates that the inquiry will examine:

- The role of environmental change
- The possible failure of agencies and policies to address proper land management and clearing
- The efficacy of current vegetation and land management policy, practice and legislation

This submission will focus upon those aspects.

Two things are currently indisputable:

- The world's climate is changing, possibly due to global warming, and this change may bring serious adverse effects to the natural environment and all of its inhabitants.
- Australia has a bushfire problem that is now more serious than at any time in recorded history, and which has resulted from a prolonged failure by successive governments to make scientifically-based predictions which would have enabled agencies to effectively manage environmental and commercial factors.

In general:

The Federal Government must take responsibility for the management of Australia's role in addressing these issues. These are not matters which can be left to the uncoordinated, self-interested efforts of State governments. Power plays are not appropriate.

This is patently **not** the time to take a partisan stance, to score political points or to protect, unjustifiably, those who have contributed to both problems. We need leadership which is without fear or favour, and a government which is willing and able to provide it.

Any inquiry into the causes of, and responses to, the fire devastation must attempt to identify all known and suspected contributing factors. It is irresponsible to suggest that, because there is no absolute proof that a contributing factor exists, that this possible factor should be ignored. The balance of probabilities must be considered.

The participation of expert scientists, indigenous people and non-indigenous people who have empirical or anecdotal data that may be relevant to the inquiry, must be encouraged and facilitated. The widest possible range of input from people who are knowledgeable in the processes of effective fire management is essential.

In the interests of transparency, participants should be willing and able to publicly divulge any vested interests which might lead to a public perception of bias in their contributions to the inquiry.

Specifically:

In relation to the role of environmental change the following questions are among those which need to be answered –

- To what extent, if any, is climate change a contributing factor?
- If identified as a factor, to what extent, if any, are industrial emissions contributing to climate change?
- If identified as contributors, what measures need to be taken to reduce such emissions?
- Who must accept responsibility for the introduction, management and on-going evaluation of the impacts of such measures?
- How and by whom will information about actions in relation to environment change be distributed to the interested parties, domestically and internationally?

In relation to the possible failure of agencies and policies to address proper land management and clearing the following questions are among those which need to be answered –

- Which agencies, government and non-government, bear the responsibility for Australia's land management practices?
- To what extent, and by whom, are these agencies co-ordinated across the nation?
- Do these agencies possess sufficient technical and scientific expertise to make appropriate land management judgements?
- Is there adequate funding provided as to ensure that these agencies are able to discharge their responsibilities effectively?
- Should there be a national body responsible for the oversight of all land management agencies?
- To what extent, if any, has the desiccation of the land contributed to the frequency, intensity and geographical distribution of the fires?
- To what extent, if any, has densification of forests in proximity to habitat, where such forests are predominately not consisting of fire retardant vegetation species, contributed to the frequency, intensity and geographical distribution of the fires?
- To what extent, if any, have National Parks and State Forests management practices, such as prohibiting access, affected the firefighters capacity to reach fire sites?

- To what extent, if any, have drought and overall water management policies contributed to the desiccation of the land?
- To what extent, if any, have land-clearing and other agricultural practices created an environment in which fires can thrive?
- What changes, if any, need to be made to land-clearing and other agricultural practices to create a more fire resistant environment?
- To what extent, if any, have town planning and building construction practices failed in creating urban and semi-urban environments which are more fire resistant, in terms of prevention of, and response to fire events?
- To what extent, if any, have infrastructure creation practices failed in creating environments which are more fire resistant, in terms of prevention of, and response to fire events?
- To what extent, if any, has the oversight of fire response practices failed to manage responses to fire events effectively?

In relation to the efficacy of current vegetation and land management policy, practice and legislation the following questions are among those which need to be answered –

- Are all current agricultural crops sustainable for the Australian environment?
- Have any animal species being regularly farmed damaged the environment in a way that has increased fire risks?
- Do we have sufficient water resources available to support large scale, water intensive farming ventures?
- How could changes be made to crop choices, whilst having regard to the economic impact upon all producers?
- How could changes be made to animal husbandry, whilst having regard to the economic impact upon all producers?
- What changes, if any, need to be made to legislation in order to bring a rational land management regime into play in Australia.

In relation to the matters listed above, I suggest that:

- As a matter of urgency, a national crisis management team of fire management experts be appointed to immediately implement emergency measures, which they choose, intended to limit the chance of further large scale fire events.
- Given the fact that millions of hectares of land have been already been burned, in those areas a “blank canvas” exists for the trial implementation of fire reduction measures proposed as a result of the inquiry.
- In the mid-term, suitable people, appointed to a national fire management team, draft and trial strategies which will help, in the short-to-mid-term, to reduce the potential for damaging fires.

- In the long term, a national fire management committee comprising climate and other scientists, fire managers, representatives of agricultural concerns, water managers and environmental economists, will be charged with the task of reducing fire risk across Australia.
- A national insurance scheme will be created, enabling people to insure against drought, fire, flood and similar events. This may be a government managed project or it may involve partnership with selected insurance companies, in a similar vein to the Compulsory Third Party motor vehicle insurance strategy employed in NSW.
- A committee of independent politicians be appointed to carry out three tasks. **The first** will be to accurately assess the economic impact of the current fire devastation, at local, national and international levels and to compare this to the potential future economic impact of reducing fossil fuels emissions. **The second** will be to examine and report upon the ways in which governments during the last fifty years have been influenced by single interest groups and commercial interests, into implementing policies which were not favourable towards the creation of a more manageable fire environment in Australia. **The third** will be to suggest legislation which will make it illegal for such groups to unduly influence government policies.
- All personnel having input into the creation of fire management regimes, will have demonstrable knowledge and experience in the field of fire management. People having the responsibility for the creation of policies based upon the recommendations of acknowledged fire managers, will have experience in policy design, implementation and oversight.
- All recommendations put forward by a national fire management committee will be put before parliament for assessment. No politician, or group of politicians, will have the power to veto the presentation of recommendations. The national fire management committee will be responsible for ensuring that recommendations are implemented and that this implementation is accurately reported to the public.
- All matters, pertaining to the development of effective fire management strategies for Australia, will be communicated frequently to the public, by a person or persons chosen by the national fire management committee. There will be no political interference, real or perceived, in the process of creating Australia's fire management policy.

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