Inquiry into the efficacy of past and current vegetation and land management policy, practice and legislation and their effect on the intensity and frequency of bushfires and subsequent risk to property, life and the environment.

This is my submission to the committee considering the above and put simply it is what I would describe as a common sense approach which in no way pretends to be scientific as I have no qualifications nor experience that would support these views however if they are common sense you don't need a degree to come to these conclusions.

There are three areas I wish to comment on.

1. Risk assessment
2. Protection
3. Prevention

1. Risk Assessment.

We already do this for other weather events both formally and informally and I believe the concept should be extended to bushfire risk.

In the states that are most at risk we have a cyclone building code that is applied to all domestic and commercial buildings and structures or flood maps that designate those areas of each state that are or would be most prone to flooding over 50 year cycles and 100 year cycles so the idea is not new.

So why not require each local government around Australia to identify those areas in their bailiwick that are most prone to the potential impacts of bushfire.

These areas could be identified simply according to exposure and categorised using the following as an example.

A. Fully developed urban areas whether in cities or country towns where all streets are paved and there is a public water supply and sewerage and all homes and businesses are connected to the National Power Grid.

B. Outer suburban areas that may also include small acreage that are self reliant upon any one or all the above services.

C. Rural areas where residents and businesses are self reliant upon some services but where distances between properties are both significant and separated by bushland or farmland or both.

Each designated area would have different building codes according to the hazards they are exposed to but would also have a legislated right within some parameters to take any precautions they deem appropriate to protect themselves and their property.

This idea might attract the ire of the real estate industry although it doesn't seem to have had a lasting impact in cyclone effected areas and in fact once in place should be seen as a benefit rather than a negative.

2. Protection

Following the same classifications local governments would have an absolute responsibility to ensure that even under catastrophic fire conditions there should be no need to ever evacuate an area designated as A.

That means that appropriate separation of human habitat and bush are continuously maintained and that these barriers are defendable under all circumstances.

Areas designated as B would require a co-operation between property owners and local government to achieve a definable level of protection for each, all supported by legislation that enforces both parties to hold up their end or penalties apply.

Areas designated as C are a more difficult task although I suspect that there are already accepted measures that are taken by responsible rural property owners to protect themselves and these should be incorporated into this exercise.

Local governments should be required to be subjected to a Fire Protection audit each year focussing on a different area and different aspects over a maximum 5 year cycle to ensure compliance.

3. Prevention

I don't think there is any way that some areas of the Australian bushland can or should be subjected to hazard reduction or cool burns as they are remote from human habitation and/or impenetrable and would therefore pose an unacceptable risk to wildlife and firefighters attempting such activity.

So there are two things that I think need to be addressed.

1. By mapping, where are the areas of bushland, if subjected to fire will most likely impact human habitation. (This would need constant update.)
Once established a sufficient barrier would be required by legislation to be maintained using hazard reduction techniques, land clearing, water management or any other method that will prevent impacts upon human life and property.

In Zones A where there are Parks and Gardens or other more informal tracts of bushland within the Zone, Local Governments would be responsible to ensure that these don't present in internal hazard because of poor management and/or high fuel loads.

To this extent the people who for centuries managed Australian bushland without creating catastrophe should be consulted listened to and employed.

2. When events occur that do result in vast tracts of the Australian bush getting burnt and where that results in many thousands of trees being burnt beyond recovery, Australia should have in permanent place timber getters that can harvest what is commercially recoverable, thus preventing other forest from being felled to supply our needs and make use of a valuable resource.

This process will also prevent fallen trees from adding to future fuel loads not to mention falling over roads and causing accidents and deaths as they do now.

With a little bit of science and imagination we might also find a way to use much of the other material that is currently left on the ground to add fuel to the next fire.

Mega temperature incinerators that produce very small amounts of harmful gasses (certainly a lot less than the bushfires that have created the material) could be employed to add electricity to the National Grid as an example.

Conclusion

Bushfires are always going to be a feature of Australian life and living and we have just dropped the ball as far as our response to them goes.
In all likelihood we have been listening too intently to those who really know very little about the subject and not enough to those who do over the past several years and allowed fuel loads and prevention methods to be ignored.
Now we need to take back, ignore the loud 1%ers who usually have selfish motivations anyway and put in place sensible measures that put all Australians in a safer place.

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