

Submission to Bushfire Royal Commission 2020

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Biographical Notes:

Born in 1944. Life experience (other than playing with fire since a five year old) includes farming, oil industry, pest-control industry, working with an Aboriginal Community, rail transport industry and some involvement with Agricultural extension.

Having played with fire for much of my life I feel equipped to **comment and suggest knowledge of bushfire must be taught to modern society.**

Should anyone wish to refer further for more biographical and fire views:

<https://semc.wa.gov.au/Documents/BushfireMitigationSummit/PublicSubmissions/RJFHurstBushfireMitigationSummitPublicSubmission.pdf>

This submission principally targets the Terms of Reference (a),(b),(d) and (e) only within Australia

The key point of this submission is exactly as submitted to the West Australian Waroona Fire Enquiry of 2016

- **Failure to act on reducing bush fuel loads will have an inevitable result in yet another unstoppable, cataclysmic firestorm bursting from the bush as a tsunami of flame, smoke & embers.**

- **Failure to adequately manage the fuel burden on all land outside of accepted bush or forest areas contributes greatly to the spread and damage in summer fires.**

- **There must be an acceptance that Environment change is real**
 - **Climate change may or may not be real, but the facts are Australia has had droughts & bushfire hazards from time immemorial**
 - **Aborigines maintained a mosaic burning pattern across the landscape**
 - **WE HAVE HALTED THAT**
 - **We have also introduced many annual grasses which are most invasive ephemerals that dry to tinder every summer to become linear fuses down road & rail corridors and effectively accelerants around edges of bush.**

- **Next priority is to teach fire knowledge to the whole community. Australians must adjust their mindset and accept that summer fires are a certainty not just a possibility.**
 - **It has been said that the time to prepare for drought is when it is raining; likewise the time to prepare for fire is while the grass is green.**
- **It is imperative that country communities (those with skin in the game) be given ownership of their fire problems and allowed to plan and execute their own solutions, supported when necessary by an authoritative but not authoritarian fire service.**

In accordance with the foregoing:

- There is no way it should require millions to rejuvenate rural fire mitigation & suppression. The capital cost of one water bomber put into community cooperative fire mitigation would achieve results surpassing anything a squadron of water bombers could ever achieve.
- Country communities have traditionally been considered a successful, viable expression of a group of people managing to work toward the common good in their parochial area.
- An influx of “tree-change” & lifestyle residents to rural areas whilst often adding cultural richness may also have impacted on the long established community resilience.
 - It is critical that the tendency toward learned helplessness with regard to bushfire be halted.
- Many country people epitomise the rebellious character such as displayed by the First War Diggers in dealing with British Officers.

Given the manner with which country communities work for the common good and can be disdainful of outside authority I suggest that Government would best resolve Bushfire Management issues by:

- Requiring the likes of centralised land owners and fire authorities to support & become involved with local fire management committees. Such centralised bureaucracies should be compelled to adopt an authoritative role. From such a position & working cooperatively with locals an economical meaningful resolution of fire issues is achievable if the following points are considered
 - Acceptable to those who may have been marginalised by centralised bureaucratic authoritarian cultures.
 - Appropriate to manage mitigation and suppression
 - Affordable to all.
- Summed up as Empowering, Effective & Economical, such could facilitate the creation of a hierarchical arrangement of local, regional & finally state level fire advisory groups.

- The evolution of Land Care in the 1980's is a great model for this. In Western Australia the Dept of Agriculture was very aware of the networks that are interwoven through every rural community.
 - "Micks", masons, sportsmen, service clubs, CWA, St Johns, P&C, and so on. Local Volunteer Bushfire Brigades are supported by these social networks which enhance their ability to communicate & collaborate.
 - Understanding the social dynamics and working with the accepted natural leaders in the area enabled an effective organisation to be developed working together from grass roots to Federal level
- By putting meaningful effort into the extension of fire knowledge so that everyone from schoolkids to city slickers gain a real understanding of the issues in our summer season and how to plan ahead to reduce danger.
- Institute something like the Tidy Towns competition for fire mitigation preparation also hierarchical as local, regional & state.
- Having the authoritative locals assist their community navigate through red tape to allow volunteers to be effective in fuel reduction programmes on any & all land in their district.
- Opportunities may be created for viable training businesses to develop.
 - Attendance to such training and community service with such accreditation in mitigation may be avenues for community service penalties and even work for the dole.
- Allow commonsense to prevail & allow volunteers to clean up country roads. A road should be a firebreak not a lethal fire tunnel.
- Have every community select the natural leaders in any district to be their Chief Fire Control Officer and appoint these people as the top level incident managers on any & all land.
- National Parks and the Fire authority would be required for training, supporting advice and some equipment provision.

In view of the above mentioned, hereunder are excerpts from a letter of suggestion to a leading agricultural group just before the summer firestorms.

TO MAKE EVERY FARM HOMESTEAD A "FIRE REFUGE"

- By planning & maintenance of homestead surrounds.
- By management of surrounding paddocks limiting fuel loading for a prescribed distance surrounding the homestead.
- Consideration for options of grazing hard or limiting close by crop production
- **All such that in the most severe imaginable firestorm conditions then the family in the home are safe**

MAKING ROADS FIRESAFE:

- To make rural roads safe to eliminate loss of life as has happened with many serious fires
- To achieve this community cooperation would be essential on a tenure blind basis and may involve some effort & changes for some landholders. Legislative & regulatory adjustments may be required to permit landholders with roadside boundaries to deal with road verge issues.
 - If heavily grazed laneways are created in paddocks immediately adjacent & parallel it is possible to turn a narrow road into something like a 50 metre firebreak
- Eliminate dry grass on verges
- Grazing with sheep or goats contained with portable electric fences or gates at ends of section.
 - Consider legal changes allowing notice of grazing in progress marking cones & much reduced speed limits with onus on driver for striking an animal under approved grazing for quite limited lengths of road to be practical
 - Areas of poison plants and or marked rare species or wildflower sites can be excluded with portable electric fence.
 - If grazing is impractical then spraying, scalping & mulching with ballast or bluemetal are all alternatives as the grass is both the fuse & the accelerant for road verge fires
- Adjoining landholders must be granted a legal right & obligation to burn or remove any understorey of flammable scrub, fallen branches, leaf litter etc.
- Possibilities here for kids from school to help on a weekend and get some practical knowledge of fire

Bega NSW based “Herds for Hire” run by Elisabeth Larsen who uses goats with portable electric fencing to graze for weed management and fire mitigation has been a helpful resource.

AWARDS SCHEME:

Part of the package, is the development of a system of rewards for fire preparedness across the state in a tiered format from say road to shire ward to shire to region to the state’s best.

This would have potential for sponsorship by prominent businesses & philanthropic organisations.

Such system having the potential financial benefits of reductions in insurance, rates etc along with the kudos of recognition.

To complement the foregoing, hereunder an edited version of my hearing with Euan Ferguson in 2016:

- Australians must **accept that Summer Fires are a Certainty not just a Possibility**
 - Not as regular or predictable as the tides but must be planned for with strategies in place rather than rely on suppression which often is inordinately expensive.

- **Fuel loading must be reduced, isolated, contained, partitioned and managed to limit any fire getting above ground level.**

- **Better to avoid or limit a fire than have to rely solely on suppression.**
- Those locals who see the need to act must be **Empowered**
- The remainder must be **Educated** with fire knowledge & learn to:
 - Develop fire season strategic plans.
 - Manage local fire suppression.
 - Minimise their dependence on fire services for fire suppression
- By doing so **Community Resilience Will be Developed**
 - Changing demographics combined with the growth of a quasi-military fire fighting service seem to have contributed to a “learned helplessness” which must be replaced with self reliance & pride in the community’s ability to handle their own affairs.

EDUCATION;

- Firstly the whole populace especially, Greens, Environmentalists and our politicians must be confronted and forced to acknowledge the fact that our native plants evolved in a fire environment and are adapted to indigenous fire management not the extreme dangerous firestorms which do incredible damage & have been labelled one of the most serious environmental issues of modern Australia.

Reduction of fuel loading is the only management tool which makes economic & environmental sense.

If smoke haze is an issue then closing a road is cheaper than a razed town.

No problem to cause chaos in Western Australia when main highways are closed for bicycle races.

Look at the Kimberley sunsets smoke may actually be good for tourism!!

Respiratory problem sufferers may use oxygen.

Remind the protesters that cool burning is carbon neutral with growth of rejuvenated plants and germinating ground-stories complementing epicormic growth of the eucalypts in removing CO2 from the air. Also remind them that a devastating fire can put more carbon to the air and have a much slower recovery to regrowth to re-sink the carbon.

- Secondly give the youth some interest in learning about fire
 - A computer game full of fire season preparation scenarios and fire control exercises designed to be fun & educational for kids may be possible.
 - Fire theory education in schools could be supported by community winter housekeeping burns of many small bonfires.

 - Secondary education should include books such as “Tempered by Fire”, “Fire and the story of Burning Country” & “The Biggest Estate on Earth how aborigines made Australia”. How many students value their Shakespeare nowadays?????!!!!!!! Let’s swap Will for Bill !!

- Thirdly, getting communities enthused about change.
 - To arouse interest in changing thinking may need
 - The enthusiasm & expertise of activists like Bushfire Front & Firewise WA
 - Incentives like rate & insurance reductions.
 - Sponsorship for both awards and training events Expo’s, seminars.
 - Drawcard keynote speakers, who is the next Harry Butler???A commonsense practical environmentalist.

- Let’s get on with it.
 - Perhaps a steering committee (remembering Ted Eagan’s song “A Camel is a Horse Designed by a Committee”) to draw up programmes for training exercises appropriate to the needs.
 - Homestead fireproofing.
 - Farmland fire damage limiting
 - Fuel reduction burning in forest land which must include submissions from Indigenous Elders.
 - Road verge fuel clearing

EMPOWERMENT:

- With training opportunities behind people then authorisation to access any public land to conduct agreed fuel reduction exercises should be readily available.
 - I am advised that management of weeds & disease (dieback) incursions are all feasible.
 - **So many times have I said to friends that “If I lived here I would burn in there in autumn or winter” to be told they were too scared of the relevant authority.**
 - We must change that!!! Those authorities should encourage the useful contribution such people can make.
 - **An area of concern to me is to note that in National Park areas signs exist advising people not to cut wood** as fallen timber is needed for wildlife.

- Given that the wildlife evolved in the era of “Indigenous Fire” before timber felling surely firewood removal is a boon and will help reduce the intensity of wildfires.
- Perhaps it is time that we not only permitted wood gathering but made such conditional on burning several hectares of fuel loading. In the right conditions a fire rake, shovel & a knapsack spray can contain a ground fire.
- In the event of any landscape fire in a district then the appropriately trained local bush fire officers with all of their local knowledge and strategic planning for their area plus their local community network must remain in control of the situation.
 - **Local Bush Fire Brigade FCO’s if given some financial reward** for efforts are most likely to be both more economical & more effective than a career fiery from out of the district.
 - The latter professional incomer is at great disadvantage in the smoke & confusion in an unknown landscape.

EXECUTION:

- To spread costs across all levels of government consider employing the military to assist in all fuel reduction & mitigation exercises.
 - The value of the experience of working with civilians in their local area while contributing transport logistics & command structure must be worthwhile.
- Given the serious environmental damage of large fires NRM funding should become readily available for mitigation purposes.
 - Another avenue to share the costs back to federal level.
- Putting electric power underground would be a sound move as it eliminates chance of sparking or pole failure starting a fire. It reduces unreliability of power supplies from poles burning down or from power feeds being cut for safety reasons.
- Country town water supply reticulated from tower mounted tanks to ensure supply reliability.
- Town planners must revise tree plantings, and mulch uses to avert fire risk.
- Both professional crews & enthusiastic volunteers need to start fuel load reductions this autumn & create buffer zones around towns currently exposed.
- Rural landholders should commence planning for next summer as the growing season kicks in.
 - Strategies:
 - Fence line clean up
 - Road frontages
 - Paddock trees
 - Homestead & other infrastructure buffer areas
 - Create livestock refuges cum fire buffer areas in paddocks.

- When the planning is done then start the doing & set up the fire unit to be on readiness:
 - Likely a hobby farmer does not know of the multiple uses for a Honda fire-fighter!!! From machinery wash down to sheep jetting ad infinitum.
- Having arrived to the Fire Prepared, Fire Resilient community we remove another E the Entertainment industry!! No emergency so no interest from the media!! No unnecessary persons on site with TV Cameras.
 - At last we will be spared pics showing the idiot resident protecting his home whilst wearing shorts & thongs.
 - Unfortunately they may not own heavy workpants, a woollen jumper & boots....let's get real most of us know to hold such clothing in readiness with the fire unit
- The final E which we can dispense with is in Fire & Emergency Service as we have planned the Emergency into oblivion.
 - But we still need Government Support for Equipment (just added another bloody E) to monitor, manage & suppress any paddock fire or control any fuel reduction burn.
 - Therefore a Fire Service for the bush as a support service but not an emergency service.

TO CONCLUDE:

The changed environment of the Australian landscape limits our ability to mimic indigenous practices and make fire our friend throughout the year but we can ally with this treacherous entity in the cool season if we remain aware that our winter ally will become our summer foe.

Consider the fighting of bushfire analogous with fighting a war.

In time of Peace Prepare for War

This means that decisions must be made & acted on in the cool season to determine how the summer war will be fought..

- Either assemble a huge fighting force at great cost to the taxpayer

Then allow the enemy to make the attack as and when it suits forcing engagement in a full scale battle under adverse conditions incurring horrendous operational costs and resultant great losses.

- OR utilise and support much less costly partisan forces to prepare every possible battleground to be defensible by removing excess fuel, ensuring access, and planning possible scenarios

Then the local partisans (country community) will easily defeat their enemy in minor skirmishes with little cost and minimal losses and no major costly battle to have the war won.