

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE

We are on a cattle station near Nebo named “Mt Spencer”. This property has been in the family for 107 years, and our eldest son and his wife are about to welcome the next generation to “Mt Spencer”.

The fires which recently impacted upon us were significant and severe. We lost almost 20,000 acres of country, approximately 40 km of fencing was damaged or destroyed, untold wildlife was killed or maimed, baby calves were killed, and our own lives were put at risk. So we think we have the requisite credentials to make this submission.

There is no doubt the weather conditions were conducive to bushfire. That was quite obvious and something the Premier has adopted as part of her climate change escape clause. However, there is absolutely no doubt also that the *severity* and *extent* of this inferno was contributed to by the *Vegetation Management Act* of this state. We are not suggesting the recent amendments were the cause but instead, the whole framework of the act which has been in place is the root cause to the severity of the fires.

The Act provides that we can only have fire breaks to a maximum of 10 metres. Note that there is provision for a 20 metre break, but that only applies to infrastructure excluding fences and roads. Thus, on a cattle station such as ours, that protection is acutely limited.

The problem is that these 10 metre breaks are situated in forests where the timber is 30 to 40 metres tall. So in a fire, if the fire does not carry through the canopy of the trees, it will carry over the 10 metre break as the trees burn and fall to the ground across the break (See Image A, pg. 5).

When patrolling such lengthy breaks, as in our case recently (approximately 30km) you cannot prevent the escape of fire over these narrow breaks... it is not possible. These trees can fall days after the main fire goes through.

The problem was exacerbated in our State Forest lease country where we are limited to a 4 metre break (See attached Authority dated 4 May 2007, pg. 11-12). That particular break was not only completely useless in this recent fire, but also the site of where I nearly became a statistic of the fire. I had to retreat to a dam for an hour or so while the fire passed around me. I was also fortunate not to lose the tractor I was operating at the time. It is inconceivable that

in a fire with so much tall timber, fuel and wind in the mix that a 4 metre break would achieve anything but pose risks to those involved.

The other problem we encountered in the state forest was the fuel load. I have, on a number of occasions, requested that we be permitted to put in further cattle watering facilities and fences however, my requests keep being rejected... Dare I knock over a tree! When it gets dry, the cattle congregate around the limited water facilities and only these sections of the paddock get mown down. The rest stores the fuel for the fires which will inevitably occur. No one in authority seems to understand that concept yet to us, it is just so obvious. We are talking about a 10,000 acre paddock with one permanent watering point for cattle. Where do you think the cattle will congregate?

Most of our breaks were already in place in compliance of the 10 metre rule before the fire started. We believe that we run a fairly modern and efficient operation here and are reasonably proactive. Our BMP accreditation affirms this. But this was all a waste of time since all of those breaks built according to the law were jumped by the fire (See Images B-E, pg. 5-7).

It was only when the fire was approaching the Peak Downs Highway that we began making the breaks out to 20 metres or more and started to gain control over the fire. This was of course being done in extremely dangerous conditions. In one instance, a bulldozer was being refuelled with flames encroaching on the tracks of the machine. I was doing this refuelling and felt very unsafe. If these proper breaks were already in place, we would not have to put our lives at risk.

The rules governing clearing generally need to be reviewed. The 'experts' who have written the legislation to date seem to think that apart from being saviours of the world, trees prevent erosion. Sadly, that is not true. Ground cover is the thing that prevents erosion. Currently, we have forests becoming too thick which, in turn, promotes the growth of lantana and other woody weeds (particularly on creek banks which we can't touch). This is at the expense of native grasses that create the ground cover. These woody weeds (specifically lantana) virtually explode in a bush fire and send embers high up in trees which, then start burning 20 metres or more in the tree tops (See Image F, pg. 7). This makes controlling fires over breaks even more difficult because you cannot reach these fires with conventional fire units on the back of utilities.

Fire has historically been used as a management tool on “Mt Spencer” but in the last decade or so, we have not conducted controlled burns regularly because of all the regulation and the risk of fire escaping. Each year we get a permit to light up but we rarely do so or if we do, we only burn a small area. The risks have become too great. We generally get such a small window of opportunity to fit within the rules.

Having said that, we did burn approximately 1,000 acres last season. The photos below depict the vast difference between that country and the country on the other side of the fence. In the former, the leaves on the trees are still green but on the other side the trees have burnt to the very top. These photos speak volumes (See Images G and H, pg. 8).

It is not an exaggeration to say that these fires have been devastating to us. Apart from the huge financial burden suffered by the damage to fencing and loss of stock, we witnessed the loss of many koalas and other wildlife which we find very disturbing (See Images I-K, pg. 9-10).

Over some years, researchers from UQ and CQU have been tracking the movements of koalas in this area with the assistance of the landholders including ourselves. Whitsunday Fauna Rescue also release koalas on our property after rehabilitation from road trauma. Additionally, they collect food from “Mt Spencer” to feed to the animals they are rehabilitating. So we do have runs on the board regarding true tangible conservation. Consequently, is very upsetting knowing that we could have prevented one half of the country burnt on “Mt Spencer” if we were allowed to implement some sensible management strategies. Instead, we wasted time, fuel and money building breaks to regulation that simply did not work and in reality, had no chance of delivering the desirable outcome.

The fire situation is inextricably interwoven into the *VMA* and we believe that legislation needs to be rewritten on a bipartisan basis to achieve any benefit and to give certainty to landholders such as ourselves. Our timber is an important part of our land management strategies and we certainly do not want to clear indiscriminately. What we need is some balance. Why is everyone brought to the lowest common denominator instead of punishing those who do the wrong thing?

We can easily comprehend why many people in the bush suffer mental health problems. The sheer frustration from the sense of being politically isolated and ignored is threatening our sanity. Where were the people who write the rules when we were literally fighting for our

lives, livelihoods, the wildlife and the so called conservation for this state? Perhaps if they were in our shoes they would think a little differently and bring some common sense into the equation.

We are responsible land managers who know how to farm sustainably. The family has done so through the generations however are now being held back by the unreasonable provisions of the VMA and in particular, not being able to put ourselves in a position to protect our lives, property and the wildlife thereon due to the constraints within this legislation.

Image A – Note also damage to fence in each photo



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E – Also note damage to gate



Image F – Fire high up in tree.

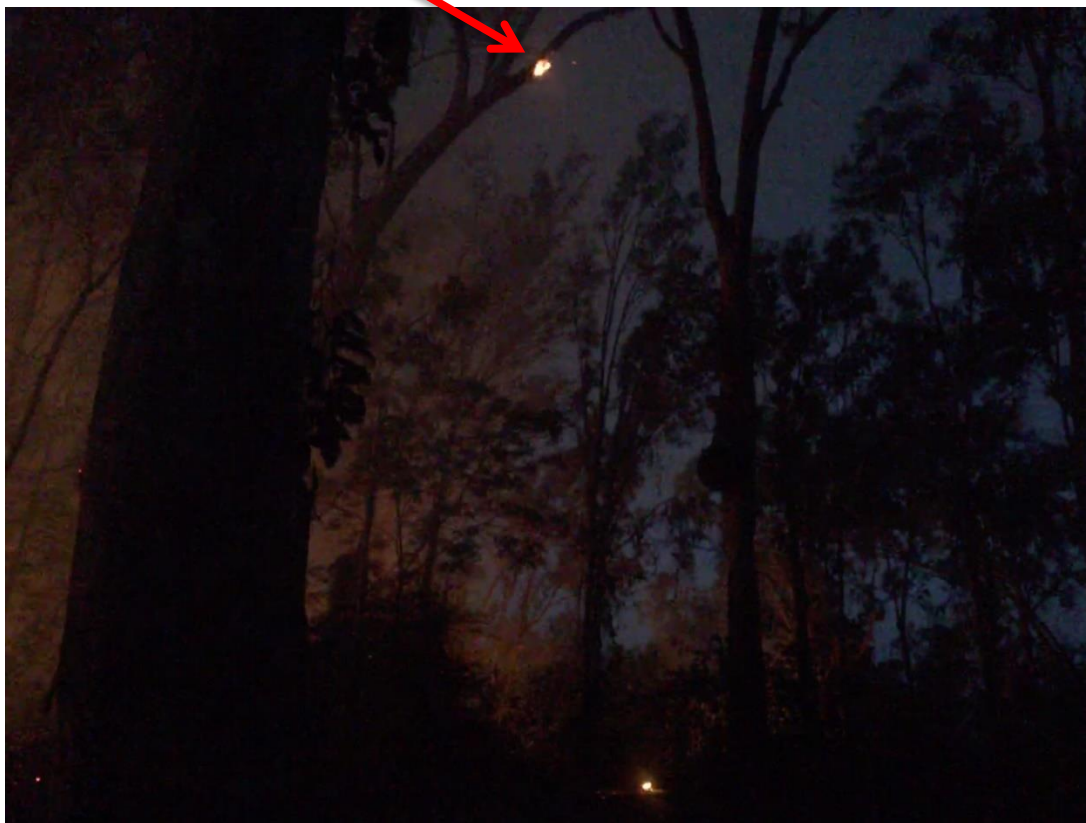


Image G – Green foliage



Image H – All foliage burnt



Image I – Incinerated Koala

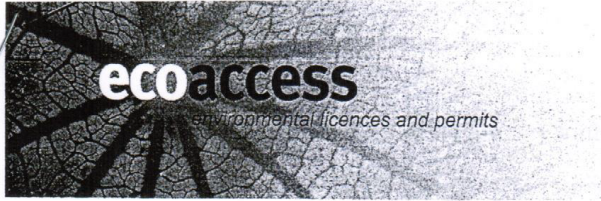


Image J - Scorched Koala



Image K – Stunned Koala





Notice

Forestry Act 1959 (Section 56)
Nature Conservation Act 1992 (Section 70G)

AUTHORITY TO CLEAR VEGETATION OR CONSTRUCT INFRASTRUCTURE UNDER A GRAZING AUTHORITY ON QPWS MANAGED LANDS

Authority Number	CF07-003
QPWS District	Mackay
Local Government	Nebo

1. Date of authority

This authority is granted on 4 May 2007

2. Details of authority holder

Name:

Residential or
business address:

Phone number:

Fax number:

Address where notices
can be left or sent:

3. Details of Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service

Address where notices
can be left or sent: QPWS PO Box 623 Mackay Qld 4740

Name of District
Manager:

Phone number:

Fax number:

4. Details of authority

Subject to the conditions outlined in Schedule B, the authority holder is authorised to clear vegetation/construct infrastructure as specified below at the location described on the map in Schedule A:

- construct track to serve as strategic fire control line. Where possible the track should be located to avoid unnecessary earthworks (NB conditions 31 & 32 below regarding drainage & sidecuts) The track clearing should not exceed 4 metres.

- make repairs to existing dam including extending the wall of the existing dam (the proposed extension will be limited to the approximate distance as discussed (~30 mts) and will require 2 or 3 trees to be removed). The fencing around the dam is to be extended to include the 'new' area for improved stock management.

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Environmental Protection Agency
www.epa.qld.gov.au ABN 87 221 158 786

 **Queensland Government**
Environmental Protection Agency
Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service



6. Description of land covered by grazing authority

Type of grazing authority: SL206827 - Term lease/special lease under Land Act 1994
Area in hectares: 3368
Head of cattle
Lot/Plan number:
NLIS-PIC Number:

Grazing authority holder's declaration

I/We, the grazing authority holder/s, have read the terms and conditions in Parts 2 and undertake to comply with them during the term of this authority.

Grazing authority holder's signature

Date: 18/9/07

Witness' signature:
(Print name)

Date: 18/9/07

This authority is issued for and on behalf of the State of Queensland by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.

Signature:
For the Chief Executive
(Print name)

District Manager

Date: 11/07/07

Schedule A

SCHEDULE A - MAP

Detailed map will be provided following field survey

SCHEDULE B - CONDITIONS

Standard conditions – Improvements (vegetation clearing and infrastructure)

Conditions for improvements (vegetation clearing and infrastructure) under the grazing authority

1. Meaning of words

Appropriate safety helmet

A safety helmet which is appropriate to the activity being undertaken.
In the case of overhead hazards such as trees or parts of trees, means an industrial safety helmet and appropriate accessories conforming to AS 1801 – Industrial Safety Helmets and AS 1800 – The Selection, Care and Use of Industrial Safety Helmets.