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10th. January, 2020

Dears Sirs, Re Bush Fires call for Submissions

I am by no means an expert on this subject but I have had some experience with forest management during 18 years spent in the local timber industry.

It is my firm belief that a major change in forest management in Qld. was ramped up approx. 30 years ago. This was a result of downgrading of the Forestry Department to be part of the Department of Natural Resources. Whether this move was for financial reasons or a direct move away from logging in our Native Forests can only be answered by the people in government who made this decision. While not all fires were in native forests the ones that were are the ones which the fire services failed to control and caused the most anxiety for Australians.

The Foresters who were employed by the Department at that time were mostly long time forestry workers who understood and knew how to manage the bush. Their roll was to move from forestry block to block selecting trees to be logged on a sustained yield basis. This resulted in the forest being disturbed and partially cleared (thinning out). Fire breaks and access roads were maintained. The fire hazard was greatly reduced plus low heat burning of the fuel on the forest floor was undertaken in a controlled manner where and when required and conditions allowed. It was a rare event for a controlled burn to break containment and get out of control.

As areas of our native forests were closed to logging and eventually move under the control of the National Parks most of these foresters were redeployed or given redundancies. I had several long conversations with these foresters when they visited the sawmill on a weekly basis. I was alarmed at their concern as to what was happening to the management of the bush. I was told numerous times that some time in the future when the conditions were right the forests will go up in smoke. The Governments policy had shifted away from promoting workers within the Department to employing University Graduates as Foresters unfortunately the graduates had little practical experience. Most had a different mind set on the future use of our native forests. I wrote to the Premier of Queensland several times about concerns within the industry but never received a reply. Fire danger was always present and the Forestry Dept. kept a constant vigil as is evident with the towers, lookouts and access roads (fire breaks) which were constructed throughout the forests.

I remember as a child living at Sunshine Beach my father showed us kids smoke from a fire burning down near Coolumb. Dad thought it started from embers from a cane fire. It took a week to reach Sunshine Beach burning nearly all the heath country between Lake Weyba and the coast. This was before the David Low Way was constructed. The old military tracks acted as fire breaks in certain places. It burnt all the way to Noosa Junction although there was nothing there at that time only a sanitary depot and an old mineral sands office. After the bush recovered from this blaze, in the spring the heath country was a mass of different wild flowers and the swamp at Noosa Junction was covered in yellow "Christmas Bells". The black cockatoos and rainbow lorikeets came in huge numbers and fed on the new food source. The black cockatoos would just snap off the bottle brush and throw the flowers in the air. It was amazing to watch, sadly their food source has mostly now disappeared.

Harry Woodley was the local forester at that time in charge of Noosa National Park. Harry and his small very small team back burnt from Sunshine Beach Road and the fire burnt itself out and never jumped into the National Park. Sunshine Beach Road was not much more than a dirt track at that time. The point I am trying to make is that experienced people who know what they are doing is vitally important in fire and bush management.

As urban development has spread to the forest edges people do not appreciate the fury of a forest fire until it happens and then its too late. It is lovely to be close to nature with the presence of animals and birds etc.

No forest has every disappeared as a result of logging, it was disturbed but it was still a forest as opposed to forest cleared for urban sprawl which is lost.

I believe the Rural Fire Brigades do an excellent job, although they received some training they have a normal civilian life and usually by the time they are called out the forest fires are beyond their control. As fires create their own atmosphere conditions become extreme and beyond the Rural Fire Brigades power to control. The city Fire and Rescue are even more disadvantaged in their ability to fight forest fires.

There will be many and varied reasons to why the recent fires have been so devastating and to why they have not been able to be managed. Prevention is key to any problem. I can't honestly comment on the fires in NSW and Victoria but those states are blessed with a larger native forest reserve than Qld. and I know they have had the same policy on forest management as Qld. The answer lies solely at the feet of the various State Government Departments and the management policies they have forced to implement in the desire to maintain government with the support of urban Australia at the expense of rural Australia. This trend will only continue as urban areas increase.

Core samples from the earth and reef taken by scientists over recent times has determined that Aboriginals arrived in Australia approx. 60000 years ago. It is believed at that time Australia was covered with mainly coniferous forests. The Scientists involved in this study determined that through the Aboriginals method of "Green Stick Farming" (burning) and the Eucalyptus Forests began to evolve. With some species of Eucalypt needing a fire to regenerate and the forests in general need disturbance in order to remain healthy and regenerate. The management of our native hardwood forests was to try and emulate this process. I will add that a healthy growing forest is an excellent store of CO₂ and if used correctly will stay stored for lifetimes as opposed to forests that are preserved (old growth) actually give off CO₂ as the old growth decays.

The loss of life both human and wildlife from the recent fires is very tragic and a supreme effort must be made to ensure it is prevented in the future even if the outcome is unpopular with many Australians.

Regards,
Brian Roper