

**From:** [Yinnar Fuel & Farm](#)  
**To:** [Committee, Environment \(REPS\)](#)  
**Subject:** Inquiry into the efficacy of past and current vegetation and land management policy  
**Date:** Tuesday, 7 January 2020 8:13:57 AM

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Please find attached my submission for the above.

## Terms of Reference

The Committee will inquire into and report on 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. The inquiry will have particular regard to:

### **Past and current practices of land and vegetation management;**

We all know in the early years, the aboriginals burnt out bush areas to protect themselves and improve feed availability for the native wildlife to ensure their own food source.

Many have written that the bush areas resembled that of a well maintained park that you would now find in the city.

The aboriginals managed the bush, learning over thousands of years that if they burnt too hot, they destroyed the structure of the soil which resulted in unwanted weeds and plant species that were of no benefit. Burning cool they learnt that the good species of grasses and trees germinated with less unwanted weeds and plant species invading.

My dad, now deceased and his dad worked the bush in their early years and it was all manual labour in those days. I remember my dad saying that they used to throw down a match wherever they were working and let the small fire trickle around them. They would do the same at every work site. Working with timber and in the bush was their livelihoods, so they had to try and prevent large fires otherwise there was no work.

Cattlemen that ran cattle in the High Country helped keep our bush open, accessible and the buildup of fuel minimal in the areas they grazed. Our Cattlemen cared for our bush. Grazing large amounts of cattle in the bush helped to minimise the severity of fires.

Cattle grazed our roadways, reducing unnecessary fuel loads.

The Forest Commission, now obsolete, managed our bush. There were rangers that lived within National Parks. The Forest Commission undertook controlled fuel reduction burns, maintained fire access tracks, built new ones when necessary. The Forest Commission were hands on and understood the bush and how easy fire can destroy the bush and everything in its path.

The Forest Commission maintained Fire access tracks better than some of our country gravel roads are today. These Fire Access Tracks acted as a fire break in the event of a fire, there were no dead end tracks. Basically they were built in cells and each cell contained a water hole. Beneficial to fight fires if necessary and to provide much needed water for our native animals.

### **Current Practices ...**

There are none.

Our bush is locked up and not managed. There is no burning of undergrowth, there is no maintaining of fire access tracks, there are no fire breaks maintained and I doubt there would be a dam in sight for our wildlife, let alone to help with fire fighting efforts.

In fact after a fire event as with the 2009 Yinnar South Fires, any tracks that are bulldozed in for access at the time of the fire, are quickly made inaccessible with DELWP pulling logs back over the tracks.

DELWP Victoria say they can't make their tracks any wider because they cannot disturb the vegetation. When questioned as to what happens in a fire, they could not answer.

DELWP use these fires to milk the system as was seen in the 2019 Yinnar South Fires.

They will be doing exactly the same with the 2019/2020 fires. The longer the fires goes

the more money in their pockets. This is not acceptable.

DELWP need to go to make room for a Forest Commission that actually cares about our fauna and flora.

Our local councils choose to cut one width of a slasher/mulcher of road way and leave the rest as long grass, that's when they choose to cut at all.

If a tree falls along our roadways, part of the tree is cut up and removed while the rubbish is just left on the roadway creating more fuel.

Cattle have been removed from the bush, supposedly because of them causing too much damage. I would much prefer to see cow hoof prints in the soil than see the soil, wildlife and everything else in the fires path destroyed.

Cattle are no longer grazed along our roadways to reduce fuel loads.

I had a debate with one of our customers who was convinced that cattle destroy our bush.

I happened to say to her. "When you are driving home I want you to pull over and stop on the side of the road and observe the cattle and the paddocks those cattle are grazing in".

This was the middle of winter after quite a bit of rain. She turned to me and said, "so they don't destroy our bush", I said, "just have a look on your way home". After stopping and taking the opportunity to observe how cattle graze and that they are not in the one spot very long and that the paddock, wet as it was, still had great coverage of grass and wasn't destroyed, this lady changed her mind.

Severe, fuel loaded fires do more damage than any cattle grazing in the high country.

They destroy our good species of native plants, our wildlife, our homes, our livelihoods and at times our lives.

My husband David (formerly a member of the Boolarra CFA for 10 years) and I have now lived through the Boolarra/Delburn Fires back in 2009, the devastating Jeeralang Fires in 2009 and the most recent 2019 Yinnar South Fires.

The most recent 2019 fires in Yinnar South proved to be a very testing time for my husband and I who run the Shell Service Station in Yinnar. As part of a small community in an emergency situation, we make ourselves available to be open for any emergency vehicles requiring fuel around the clock.

Standing at the back of the Service Station in Yinnar we could see a small plume of smoke around 9.00 am. This appeared not to grow much over a 2 hour period, then it took off.

We had local CFA Fire Trucks come into the Service Station around 10.30 pm saying they hadn't put an ounce of water out all day. You could see and hear the frustration, they should have been able to get that fire out a lot quicker, but given the terrain, lack of access and the authorities running the fire from air conditioned offices, they could do very little but to sit and wait.

The panic from residents was so real and was felt more than ever during these fires. Being a small country town, many of the residents and customers relied on us for updated information. We in turn only relied on local CFA crews who knew the area well and that were out on the ground and in the know, for up to date information as they come through the Service Station to top up with fuel. Numerous times we had to shut down, politely, some of the information that was being talked about on facebook and causing undue stress to residents who had evacuated and thinking they had lost everything.

We could relate to this well, as the same thing happened to us during the

Boolarra/Delburn Fires of 2009. We were at the Service Station in Yinnar providing a service to all the CFA and emergency vehicles and received phone calls from people saying our house was just about to go up in smoke. Your heart just drops. I remember clearly, David looked down at himself and said, "this is all I have left". Thankfully when we were allowed to return to our property in Boolarra, all was good.

From these fires came our Petition to open fire access tracks and maintain them year round.

*To the Legislative Assembly of Victoria:*

*The petition of the residents of the Latrobe Valley and wider Gippsland region draws to the attention of the House the fact that during events such as the recent Yinnar South fires many bushfire access tracks can often be inaccessible to fire-fighters and first responders which in turn inhibits fire-fighting capacities and increases fire risk to local communities.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria call upon the State Government to ensure all bushfire tracks are adequately maintained all year round and ensure there is appropriate access during an emergency event.*

This Petition was signed by over 3000 local and city visitors to the area. Russell Northe received letters back from Lily Ambrosio and Lisa Neville insisting that DELWP would work with communities to ensure fuel loads were reduced.

To this date I have seen nothing come of this petition. Nothing has been done.

Our current position as at 23rd December 2019. We are currently in a situation where we had a great season with large rainfall totals. Fantastic for the farming industry, not so great for our bush and roadside areas that have growth that it out of control. Some of these roadways were cut Friday 27th December 2019. The Morwell National Park areas that were burnt in March 2019 already has green growth tipping the tops of the fence posts. Our own roadside has grass tipping the tops of the fence posts. Cut Friday 27th December 2019. Safe at the moment while still green, a major fire hazard when dries out. HVP plantation land, burnt in March 2019 has grass lapping the top of the fence posts. DELWP have not been seen since the fires in March 2019 and there has been no controlled burns to reduce fuel loads anywhere else in the area.

Local Councils, DELWP and privately owned plantations namely HVP have to be accountable and do their preparation as do community members.

The Local Council is quick to send out letters to land owners to clean up their properties but they neglect to clear up their roadways.

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### **Whether current legislation and regulation is in conflict or causes confusion for landholders;**

There are various rules and regulations that cause great concern for landholders.

Landholder in Latrobe City Council for example are not allowed to clear vegetation and trees that the Landholder feels are dangerous or detrimental to saving his/her property in the event of a fire without a costly Permit.

It is cheaper for a landholder to remove the tree without a permit and get fined, than actually obtain a permit to remove the tree.

After the 2009 Delburn Fires, some residents at Boolarra wished to cut down trees that they thought were dangerous and could fall on their house or sheds. Latrobe City Council had their arborist attend and inspect the trees. Trees were deemed not to be a danger of falling. A week later, one of those trees fell on the landowners shed creating more anxiety and loss.

It has been shown that those who choose to clear large dangerous trees and have received fines from local Councils for doing so, have actually been able to save their property during a fire event.

Local Councils need to be aware, community members who choose to live in bush areas

are very respectful of what is around them, they don't want to clear every tree off their property, they just want to feel safe that a tree is not going to fall on their house or shed. There should not be one rule for landholders and one for local Council.

City dwellers relocating to our bush areas need to be educated as to what is safe and what is not. Some City dwellers that relocate to our bush areas have no idea of fire and what damage fires can do to an area. During the 2009 Yinnar South Fires, there was an elderly City dweller who returned to her holiday property in Yinnar South in the middle of the night while people were being evacuated. No one would have known that she was there. She apparently showed up in her pyjamas. It took her neighbour quite some time to get her to leave the property.

### **The science and research behind activities such as hazard reduction burning, clearing and rehabilitation;**

This all depends on what science you are using.

If you are using the hands on, common sense approach as per the aboriginal burns, the bush workers, forestry commission, and cattlemen that has proven over and over to prevent large fires or you are using models as seems to be the case with everything today.

Most country residents don't need science to know that the more fuel on the ground the larger and more intense the fire will be.

If you are using a model all practical, common sense approaches to fires are lost.

Sometimes you have to go back in history before you can move forward.

### **Legislative capability at local, state and federal levels requiring landholders to reduce fire risk on their properties;**

Local councils vary so much in what they allow to happen on private properties, therefore I believe local councils should not have a say or legislation in this area.

Local councils don't manage their own areas of responsibility.

State Governments, ditto, they all vary in what they allow and therefore should not have their own legislation as what can and can't be undertaken to protect private property.

DELWP agencies all have different outlooks on fire and fire prevention.

Federal Government legislation should be the only legislation, as fires have no boundaries and if we are all working to make Australia safer, we need to have one set of legislation which provides that safety.

### **The impact of severe fires on the economy in urban, regional, rural and remote areas;**

Fires cause many mixed feelings and emotions. Evacuations cause anxiety and stress, loss of property exacerbates those feelings as with the loss of pets, animals and lives.

The last thing residents want to do is go out shopping, they are in shock, they have lost everything. Those that are evacuated shop elsewhere and local businesses lose trade.

Our coastal towns rely on tourists and holiday makers during the summer months and city dwellers tend to flock to these areas. 2019/2020 fires in East Gippsland is going to see these towns feel the pinch. Some may not even be able to keep the doors open.

Our fire fighters go into these towns, however, eventually fuel and supplies are bought in from elsewhere, therefore even your small Petrol Station does not gain a lot out of fires. I know this first hand, because my husband and I have felt the disappointment of when you put yourself out to help the fire fighters, it usually takes a turn when it is removed from the CFA and DELWP takeover. As a business owner you become DELWPS slave, but only when they want to use you.

### **The progress and implementation of mitigation strategies recommended in state reviews over the last decade; and**

Reviews are a waste of time and money unless the recommendations can be forcefully

implemented.

The 2009 Royal Commission into the Fires made common sense recommendations for Government bodies to reduce fuel loads in bush areas and also on the sides of the roads. Nothing has been done.

If the 2009 Royal Commission recommendations were adhered to by State and Local Governments, the fires we are seeing in 2019/2020 would not have been so severe in nature.

### **The role that emergency services have working with land management officials in managing fire risk.**

The sooner we return the CFA (Vic) volunteers back to CFA the better. These services are becoming too top heavy and are causing more trouble than they are worth.

Yinnar South Fire started approximately 9.00 am. We actually saw a small plume of smoke at the back of our service station. It was called in by the Yinnar South Fire Brigade and a helicopter and back up crew requested. The helicopter was refused, back up crews apparently were notified around 10.00am.

The only way to stop a fire is when it is small and quick action is required.

The present set up, especially in Victoria we have CFA volunteers, CFA Paid, MFB Paid, HVP Paid, DELWP Paid.

All these departments fight with one another for control. I was disgusted, but not surprised to hear that during the 2009 Yinnar South Fires there were nearly fifty cuffs down at the staging area as to who was in charge.

Our local CFA Brigades (volunteers) know their areas like the back of their hand and should have control of fires in their areas and request assistance when and if required.

We were just talking the other day about an incident at Boolarra during the 2009 Delburn Fires at a Community Meeting. The Fire Chiefs were instructing the community on what to expect etc. and the CFA Captain at the time, stood up and told the community to not take any notice of what was said, if they weren't prepared with the appropriate fire fighting equipment and the confidence to defend their property they need to get out now. The CFA Captain saved many residents because they did evacuate. However this CFA Captain was pulled over the coals for his actions. All residents praised his efforts in telling them exactly how it was. This Fire Captain knew the area extremely well and the ever changing wind directions.

Just recently Saturday 04th January 2020, declared a severe fire danger day. Our local Yinnar CFA was on standby to go to Bairnsdale. When questioned as to who we would have left here, the answer was "Melbourne will come up to man Yinnar CFA Station.

Where is the common sense here? Melbourne Fire Fighters would not know any of the local roads, let alone alternative access via private properties etc.

There are just too many chiefs and not enough indians.

### **In Summary:**

- Federal Government needs to stand up and over ride all current legislation at State Levels including local Councils.

Federal Government should be the only entity in charge of our bush as fire has no boundaries.

Federal Government should determine and enforce clear legislation for local councils and Vic Roads as to work required to be undertaken on roadways and parks under their jurisdiction.

Federal Government should also determine and enforce that private landholders be entitled to clear what trees or plants they deem dangerous in the event of a fire.

Federal Government should determine and enforce clear legislation for Private Companies eg HVP that grow plantations. Strict guidelines as to how close to boundary fences can be planted. Many plantations are planted right to the boundary fence of private landholders. HVP plantations need to have an open boundary around their plantations in which two trucks can pass comfortably. HVP Plantations should also be required to clear any long grasses and weeds around their plantations for the safety of other landholders.

This should also apply to privately owned bush blocks.

- Remove DELWP from the equation and introduce a new Forestry Commission to manage our bush areas and track access. Employing people that understand and respect the importance of our bush and wildlife.

Employ more Aboriginal people within this new Forestry Commission that know how to burn our bush areas cool. The Aboriginals are the only ones that have the knowledge to save our bush into the future.

When the fires are over and the land is still clear, have this new Forestry Commission plan and start building roads into the bushland areas making accessing the bush easier and also these tracks will act as fire breaks. Tracks must be wide enough to enable large trucks to pass going both ways and must not contain any dead ends. At the same time, the Forestry Commission could install water holes at intervals for our wildlife and for fire fighting purposes.

With the tracks open, families can go camping, hiking, bike riding and enjoy the great outdoors. Doing so will enable our younger generations to understand the bush, native animals and the Australian landscape better than any text book. Remember that the young of today are our future.

- Immediately after the fire risk period of 2020, re introduce cattle grazing in our bush areas and the high country as a natural way of reducing vegetation.
- Ensure our logging industry continues. Areas logged were the areas with the least damage during the 2019/2020 fires.
- No more locking up of our bush land.
- Override Victorian State Government plan to install a windfarm on HVP land in a well known fire danger zone within the Yinnar/Delburn/Boolarra area. If this windfarm goes ahead within this plantation area, HVP and the wind farm developers plan to go to phase 2 which is within HVP plantation along the Jeeralangs and with a third phase being planned for Traralgon South. All of these areas are high risk bushfire areas and residents feel it is putting them at further risk of being burnt.
- Override State Government, especially in Victoria (I cannot speak for other States and Territories) and return the CFA (volunteers) back to CFA. If they require assistance then they request assistance. Local volunteer CFA have better knowledge of their own backyard than someone new to the area.
- Arson Laws need upgrading to that of a Terrorist with Life in Prison, including anyone that lights a fire or throws a cigarette out of a car window on a total fire ban day. No loop holes and no sentences that say up to .....

- As for all the journalists and media playing the Climate Change Card for the reason behind these fires, maybe it's time the police looked into some of these Climate Change Activists leading up to and during the fires. It's sad to think along these lines, but if they are willing to disrupt Cities by gluing themselves to roads to fulfil notoriety they are capable of anything. Sadly I am not the only one in our community that feel there is more to these fires than meets the eye.

We need change urgently and the only way we can reduce the intensity of fire is reduce fuel loads and ensure adequate fire breaks around built up areas. These fires aren't caused by climate change, they are caused by State and Territory Governments choosing to shut up our bush and neglecting their responsibilities.

Can we please forget this Climate Change rubbish and go back to the past to learn for the future.

My car is already packed and this season I feel more vulnerable than ever. We have done everything we can around our property, however when you look at our bushland areas that are out of control and nothing has been done you know it is only a matter of time before the inevitable happens.

We should not have to live our lives like this through the summer months.

Thank you for your time and keep up the good work.

Jan Holt

