

SUBMISSION INTO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT
AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

From Hon. W.T.J.Murray A.O. former Deputy Premier of N.S.W. 17th June 2003

Introduction

I was born onto the land in 1931, in the Moree district of north western NSW. My family moved to "Brynaman" Garah in 1935 and I subsequently took over a portion of that property, "Bengerang" in 1957, selling out in 1980 to pursue a Political career. My bushfire experience was during the fires of 1951-52, following the 1950 floods which devastated the north west of NSW

Land Management

The responsibility for land management is solely in the hands of the designated owner, be it private property or crown land. The management of land is a business which must be undertaken regardless of where the land is situated, or who owns it, and it must be compatible to the area, otherwise land degradation will occur.

From the days of the earliest settlers, the daily grind of inspecting the land, caring for the stock, controlling the noxious weeds, timber regrowth and feral animals, and maintaining the fences and watering places were standard practice. All these practices not only affected the land owner, but their neighbours as well, because the failure of one individual to look after his land flowed on to his neighbour, Those who failed to look after their land soon lost the earning capacity of the land, the respect of their neighbours and subsequently their land.

Land management which exists today is no different. The technology is far advanced, but management is still the controlling factor of land productivity, be it for the growing of crops, grazing of stock or the provision of land and facilities for public use.

National Parks

National Parks are landowners on behalf of the State and the people of NSW. They have the same responsibilities as any other landowner and their failure to undertake land management practices has the same effect on those who use National Parks, their neighbours and the State.

It is regrettable that the management of National Parks has moved from land management to political dogma management, of the land designated as National Parks and Nature Reserves. The management structure has become a "return to the past" a "recreation of that which is no longer capable of being recreated." and a lock up mentality, that Parks are only for the agile, laced up booted, bearded back packer.

With the arrival of white man in Australia the whole structure of land changed. The introduction of man himself saw to that, let alone the baggage he brought with him, in the form on farming, grazing and a plethora of new animals for sport and production.

This introduction of man has changed everything so it is impossible to return to the past. This is the first decision that must be made in looking at the future management of National Parks, because without recognising this fact, then we are wasting our time trying to build new management plans.

Purpose of National Parks

National Parks are for people of all walks of life, educational standards, physical and health condition, and all the different reasons people may have for being there. The word "Park" adequately describes its use, and this definition must be firmly embodied in the management structure.

The United States of America Park Service embodies, what I believe to be the ideal standard. I have visited many Parks in the U.S and in my opinion they incorporate the ideal standards for future National Park Management in NSW. I do not suggest they are perfect, especially as my job at the time was to advise on sewerage disposal, but they are user friendly.

The Management decision to lock up Parks by restricting access, by closing roads, thus removing from park users, fire brigades, management staff and vehicles the capacity to access all areas of the parks, has led to a disastrous inability to responsibly manage the land. This action must be immediately corrected with roads and bridges being replaced. This action should not be limited to bush fire-fighting access, but access for the wider public.

Claims that public access to the parks will destroy the parks, is wrong, as has been proven in America.

Bushfires

The recent bushfire disaster was a culmination of all of the above factors being brought together at the one time. As was the case in the bushfires of 1951-52 in the North West of NSW, when the build up of fuel occurred as a result of the 1950 flood, so the bushfires of 2002-03, occurred as a result of fuel build up after a number of years, with no action being taken to reduce the problem in either case.

The difference between the North West in 1951-52, and today, is that the north west has been broken up into smaller areas of grassland, as a result of farming. There has been no widespread, fires in North West grasslands since 1951-52, while National Parks have been decimated on a number of occasions, namely the Kaputar and Pilliga areas. This is a lesson that must be learnt today in future National Park management, break up the total into smaller areas, and provide road access through each area.

Claims that such an action would lead to the destruction of the National Parks is not borne out following the resurgence of the Parks after the fires. Even after the enormous heat generated by the fires regrowth is occurring, despite the drought, animals are visible and a resurrection is taking place.

As land returns to life after a fire, drought or flood so the National Parks will grow again. If human access was to cause such devastation in the normal day to day running of the Parks there is no way such a recovery would occur after horrendous fires. The Parks must be opened up to people.

Bushfire Equipment.

It is obvious that the availability of Bushfire equipment has reached a high standard both in quality and quantity, but such is the ferocity of fires that regardless of the quality of the equipment, the best firefighting will occur before the flames appear. The cost in lives, homes, time, machinery and heartbreak can be reduced by back burning and preparation to meet the fire season. It is an adage of legal representation that the case is won before entering court.

The excuse that the fire was deliberately lit is no longer plausible; it is a fact of life. If there is no fuel there is no fire.

