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**From:** Peter Edwards  
**Sent:** Wednesday, 18 June 2003 8:59 PM  
**To:** Committee, Bushfires (REPS)  
**Subject:** late submission

Committee Secretary

I would like to submit the following observations to the Select Committee Inquiry on bushfires.

My interest in the matter arises from living on the edge of Kosciusko National Park and from research in the field which I did in 1972 on fires in the Blue Mountains. (UNE Armidale thesis).

At that time I also surveyed the literature on fires. It was clear then, and seems more evident in the light of recent research, that widespread controlled burns in the bush do not serve the purpose of protecting private property. In this respect it is more relevant how much litter is in people's gutters or under their eaves than in the deep bush.

There is also concern at the loss of wildlife during severe fires. Fire management to reduce this should not be mixed up with 'controlled burns' intended to reduce hazard to human settlements. They are not necessarily compatible. Differences should be expected in their timing, location, extent, temperature, etc. Wildlife management must be based on entirely different criteria.

The vague claim is sometimes made that controlled burns make uncontrolled wildfire "less likely". Firefighters and scientists generally acknowledge that severe weather conditions are the critical factor in crowning and spotting of fires, not ground fuels.

**I propose that, in bushland, fires caused by lightning, and those started accidentally (unless they create a known ecological threat) should be left to burn. They would in general be more 'natural' than out-of-season controlled burns, and would be random and patchy. Such random burning would be likely to provide animals with temporary areas of sanctuary from subsequent fires.**

**This would be a more realistic way of reducing litter loads than going to the expense of fighting every fire that breaks out (as is now done, to general approval), only to spend more money later doing controlled burning in the very same area. Apparently, in America, the US Forest Service has realized this. It is impractical as well as pointless to deploy workers to burn large areas of national park, as some people seem to expect. I suggest that now, following large-scale severe fires, is the logical time to make that change in fire management regime, in order to observe its effect 'starting from scratch'. The money saved could be used for conservation research.**

It should be recognized that some of those who claim or imply that the NPWS is 'failing' to do certain things have an unstated agenda. They hope to force changes on management. The changes they want are based on self-interest: greater access by private vehicles, grazing in parks, harvesting, etc. These political agendas are based on the simplistic notion of the last century that all nature is there to be exploited for profit. As night follows day, whenever there is a drought, fire or other disaster, an opportunity is sought to use national parks for private advantage.

I include below a relevant letter published in the Tumut and Adelong Times on 10 June 03.

Yours faithfully,

19/06/2003

Peter H. Edwards

The Editor,

Tumut and Adelong Times,

Dear Sir,

It seems that many people are concerned at the severity of the fires which burned a large part of the KNP, and would have preferred the NPWS to have done much more 'hazard reduction'. The local MP refers to 'lack of fire prevention measures' by the NSW Government.

There is no doubt that people living near bush should be assisted to create firebreaks around their properties and around built-up areas. Lack of such preparation was the immediate cause of the Canberra disaster. Poor planning of human settlement (as on the Blue Mountains) also contributes largely to fire risk. This is a preventable hazard, wildfires are not.

Beyond that, I think a good case can be made that frequency and intensity of fires in the bush is irrelevant to human settlements.

The survival and breeding of both common and endangered species after the recent fires suggests that 'devastation' is a human perception, and that the bush is well capable of recovering from severe firestorms if they are not too frequent.

Controlled burning, on the other hand, can have harmful effects by preventing many species from completing their life cycle before the next burn. The results may be unpredictable, even creating a more flammable vegetation.

The biggest problem with controlled burns within national parks (apart from their tendency to 'get away') is that they serve no rational purpose. They have been shown to have no effect on the security of private property in severe weather. Only action in the vicinity of settlements has any value. Neither do they have a proven ecological purpose which cannot be served by naturally occurring fires.

Based on knowledge of plant successions and sub-climax vegetations, fire may be used in a park as a management or research tool. This has nothing to do with widespread 'hazard reduction'. In fact, the two would be incompatible.

There is unfortunately a political lobby which finds it convenient to denigrate the administration of parks because there are more votes in popular concerns and prejudices than in logic. If I were to say that this lobby is "a hostage to extreme red-neck ideology" it would not be informative or helpful, yet that is the terminology used by our local State MP, except that she uses "green" instead of "red-neck". This does a disservice to everyone who wants to debate the issue on a basis of deduction from facts.

Yours faithfully,

Peter Edwards