

To Garry Nairn
Chair
Bushfire Inquiry



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colin Sagar".

Colin Sagar on behalf of
Environment Network
Church St Bega NSW
Ph 64923073

Dear Sir,
please accept this as a formal submission to the Inquiry into Bushfires 2003.

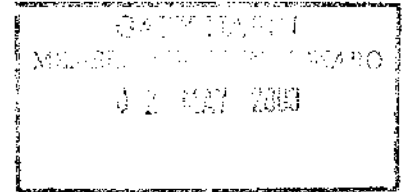
Included are a condensation of articles written for the Environment Network and published in the Bega District News in Nov and Dec 2002 and a summary of the main arguments presented to the ANU's Fire Forum held in Feb 2003.

I trust your inquiry will be relying on informed scientific and community opinion as it evaluates concerns re Bushfire in the Australian context. We will be observing with interest.

Your's

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28/4/03



FIRE

Fires are a huge cost on our communities and individuals. This includes ecological and property loss, the time and materials used to fight fires, danger to volunteers and ultimately lives.

We can't make our environment not burn. Fires are inevitable. Climate change will make this more likely for our area. Fires last Xmas have reawoken BVS to our vulnerability to wild fire. The reaction has simply been to call for a renewed attack on the bush. More clearing, more burning.

Unfortunately, the more we use fuel reduction burning as our main approach, the greater the problems will become. The recent inquiry into the 2001 fires found that although strategic fuel reduction is valuable, simply employing massive hazard reduction burns is of little value.

The over use of fire will lead to reduced soil nutrients and moisture and the success of plant species that readily and hotly burn. It will also greatly exacerbate problems such as salinity, species loss and extinction and the general degrading and loss of vegetation cover so vital to the slowing of global warming and climate change.

Increased drying out due to the excessive clearing and use of fire will lead to decreased water retention in the soil, and increased water usage for watering cleared land and "European" gardens.

The more vegetation we remove with fire or otherwise, the worse these problems including fire will become.

Siting Urban and Rural Residential development in bushland areas = high fire risk and extensive clearing = ecological fragmentation and devastation, adds to the drying out process = increased fire risk generally. It's an ever deepening spiral where we all loose.

Housing in these areas is an ecological disaster. In order to comply with fire regulations for radiation and fuel reduction zones and provide for other servicing needs, these bushy areas over a period of years, are almost totally destroyed. The very values that attracted people to these areas are invariably lost.

The answer is acceptance that our region is fire prone and that we need to adapt our lifestyles accordingly. This means good planning, particularly at the local government level. It also means effective inter-departmental co-ordination. This is the only environmentally sound and cost effective approach for community and householder alike.

It is no longer appropriate or responsible for Council to give development approvals for Urban and Rural Residential subdivisions and buildings in forested areas in our Shire. It's not fair on the ecology, the fire volunteers or the economy.

The bushfire planning guide for Councils "Planning for Bushfire protection" put out by the RFS and Planning NSW, clearly states that Councils can require the clustering

of developments and also the exclusion of development from bushfire prone areas for fire control operational reasons and in order to protect ecological values from the impacts of development and associated fire control requirements.

There are presently DAs before Council proposing subdivision of fire prone and ecologically valuable bushland, including a major "Rural Residential" project west of Bournda National Park and adjacent to the Bournda Nature reserve. The possible benefits, ecological consequences and fire control risks of siting a large scale subdivision in such an area should receive close examination by Council's planning section.

In most cases there is plenty of available, cleared class 4&5 agricultural land in the vicinity of our townships. New urban and rural residential development applications for forested land in BVS should not be approved.

Where development is approved, the bushfire planning guide and the recent review of the Coastal Policy recommends that service roads form the boundary of new subdivisions. This is not only vital for fire protection, but also the reduction of encroachments into our reserve areas.

In existing "bushy" building approved areas, Council needs to incorporate fire conscious building design and materials into it's DA process. House aspect, a fire proof room or shelter, a fire emergency plan and advice on fire retardant planting, should all be dealt with at DA level.

Clearly containing further urban and Rural Residential development will have other benefits. It will likely result in an increased consolidation and density of our townships, dramatically reduced fire risk, better economy and effectiveness of servicing generally, and better protection and quality of reserve and agricultural areas. We all win with good shire planning.

BVS population doubles every 10 to 12 years. It is crucial that changes are made now. That means Council rejecting the subdivision of fire prone bushland, backzoning areas where necessary and supporting perimeter roading for new developments. It means instituting a review of the DA process and public education re fire prevention, building and safety awareness.

We are fortunate to have in this area, community members with wide experience in planning and building for wildfire, it's prevention and control and also with knowledge of the ecological consequences of development in fire prone areas. I urge Council to adopt a/the resolution calling for a Council workshop re the various environmental and planning aspects of fire control in BVS.

The Australian National University were host to a wide ranging fire forum this February. It was a topical discussion to say the least.

Highly qualified speakers addressed issues ranging from ecology, to fire regimes, to property protection and responsibilities, to the traditional indigenous use of fire in the Australian landscape.

Forum leaders made it clear that the forum was not intended to be a post mortum on the recent Canberra and Kosiosko fires.

Ecologist Duncan Charles told the forum that given Australia's climate and vegetation, there was no simple "technological" fix to the wildfire problem. He said "It would always be a matter of managing wildfire around the edges".

In relation to managing forest lands, head of Land and Water Conservation Australia Andrew Campbell, said that although he was strongly in favour of fuel reduction burning, he held serious concerns at recent comments by Kate Carnell and Wilson Tuckey on how National Parks should be managed.

Tony Bartlett from ACT Forests drew attention to the considerable variation in optimum fuel reduction levels, saying they were dependent on landscape, forest type and the objectives of the land managers.

Ecologist David Lindenmayer told of huge variability in the intensity and destructive capacity of fire in differing vegetation types. He referred to old growth mountain ash forests in Victoria experiencing significantly reduced intrusion and fire intensity in the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires when compared to disturbed forest areas.

He reminded the forum that State Forests and National Parks both burn.

Researcher Bob Wasson urged that the discussion of appropriate fire regimes for bushland areas could not be separated from concerns for soil fertility, hydrology, soil conservation and protection of biodiversity.

Fire researcher Phil Cheney held that economic rationalism in government departments had led to resource for land management and fire prevention work being reduced and the increased reliance on emergency services and volunteers.

Insurance expert Chris Henri praised the invaluable input of volunteer fire fighters, whilst noting that the drama of wildfires tended to gain media attention out of proportion to their economic impact. From an insurance perspective thunderstorms were a larger actual cost.

In reference to the role of institutions, John Handmer suggested that there were two groups. Those that created risk such as planners and developers and those that sorted out the risk such as the Rural Fire Service and the police, He emphasised that in order

to avoid the creation of new fire risk situations improved liaison between the two groups was needed

Several eminent speakers told of the traditional use of fire by aboriginal land managers. This had been developed over thousands of years to promote game and food plants and to reduce the intensity of wildfires. The forum learnt of the dire need for research to establish the role of fire use in traditional land management in south eastern Australia.

Climatologist Janette Lindesay informed the forum that global warming and climate change meant that NSW would generally experience increased climate variability, increased temperatures and would become drier. It is expected that droughts and floods would become more extreme.

Audience participants consisting of government agency and community representatives, fire academics and students, concluded the forum by highlighting concerns and the way forward.

The forum was encouraged to move from a vocabulary and approach to fire of "fighting an enemy in an emergency of dire threat", to one of "understanding fire, using fire and adapting our lifestyles in order to successfully live with the reoccurring nature of fire in the Australian landscape".

The forum was also advised of the clear need for research into why lessons already well learned relating to fire prevention, planning, building and control were not being implemented.

Highlighted, was the need for research to establish optimum fire regimes for various vegetation types. These optimum fire and fuel load regimes would need to take account of the whole spectrum of management concerns including fire, land, water and biodiversity conservation.

Finally the forum and the Federal Government were urged to take heed of the implications of climate change on fire and the environment.

A compilation of papers presented at the fire forum will be available from the ANU shortly. Call 61258131