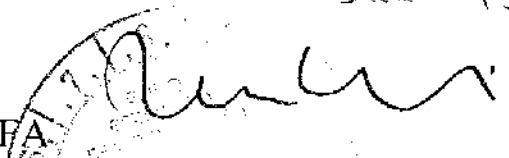


Date 15/9



Don Spriggins BSc (For) FIFA, MACFA
Forestry Consultant

The Chairman,
Select Committee on recent Australian Bushfires,
Parliament House,
Canberra. ACT.

Dear Sir,

Inquiry into the recent Australian Bushfires.

I would like to make a submission to the above inquiry. I would be pleased to meet with the Committee when you visit Western Australia.

I have had lengthy hands on experience in fire management and bushfire control in Australian forest conditions. i.e,
1953-55: Attended School of Forestry, Creswick, Victoria.
1956-1959: Served as an assistant forester with the Victorian Forests Commission at several Victorian forest Districts during which time I was closely involved in bush fire suppression.
1960-61. Attended Melbourne University graduating with a BSc in Forestry.
1962-1984: Worked with Forests Department of Western Australia being in charge of several forest Districts in the South West of WA and being closely involved with fuel reduction burning and bushfire suppression.
1984-1995: Worked with Dept of Conservation and Land Management based at Bunbury, WA as Regional Manager for the Central forest region being responsible for management of a large area of national parks, state forest, wildlife reserves and tree plantations.
1996-present: Work as an independent forest consultant. Have prepared several fire management plans for private clients.

After coming to Western Australia just after the Dwellingup fire, the last major bushfire in Western Australia, I saw the development of one of the best fire prevention programs in the world where fuel reduction burning up until the 1970's of about 250,000 hectares per year in S/W forests prevented time and time again, the development of potentially serious bushfires.

Since the 1970's I have seen this excellent program decline due to community opposition to fuel reduction burning. As a result what was once a shining example is now one where fuel levels have built up to extraordinary levels in much of the South West with potential for a serious wildfire(s). The eventual outcomes unless fuel levels are reduced quickly and on a large scale are:

- Large (10000 +) hectare fires in old and new growth forest are likely to occur. Such fires will devastate the regrowth particularly requiring the need for some emergency salvage operations, clearing, replanting and waiting 20 to 30 years for the areas to reach the same size/age as previously attained. The loss of this

hugely important resource will have a huge impact on the states timber industry and may require importation of material from overseas or interstate to replace it.

- Valuable conservation reserves will be severely damaged and take decades to recover. There have been examples in recent years where long unburnt "wilderness areas" have burnt due to lightning caused fires. The landscape has been devastated and deaths of native animals have been colossal.
- Numerous properties will be destroyed and lives lost due to wildfire's burning on private lands in semi rural areas. Fuel build up on many private areas has reached very high levels and the requirement by some local authorities to forbid the clearing of trees from bush blocks (other than the housing envelope) has placed many households at great risk. It is also likely that substantial areas of our state's hardwood and softwood plantations are likely to be damaged by wild fire, with similar consequences.

Areas of concern are:

- Ministers and Heads of State Conservation Departments are not accountable for lack of action to achieve fuel reduction targets.
- Many local authorities (who are responsible for fire control within their shire) have abdicated that responsibility. In some cases they are openly antagonistic to fuel reduction burning and have introduced restrictions on clearing that could provide some degree of safety to householders.
- A shift from a fuel reduction policy to one of relying more and more on costly suppression fire suppression equipment, particularly waterbombers.
- A decline in the amount of timberworkers in the SouthWest due to creation of extensive National Parks. With disappearance of these workers and heavy bulldozers a valuable fire suppression force is fast disappearing.
- A decline in the number of well trained and experienced fire controllers in the Department of Conservation and Land management and Fire and Emergency services. It takes about 15 years experience to produce a competent fire controller.
- A greater reliance and expectation that volunteer fire fighters will be available to fight fires in heavy fuel conditions in forest areas. This is putting lives at risk, as forest fire fighting is very dangerous and highly specialised.
- Strong opposition to fuel reduction burning by many environmental groups who have had an excessive influence on government policies so as to disfavour fuel reduction burning.
- Opposition to burning by urban residents whenever smoke levels from fuel reduction burning drifts over Perth.
- Some government departments, Dept of Environment etc have been active in opposing fuel reduction burning for a variety of perceived reasons.

What needs to be done:

- An immediate increase in the level of fuel reduction burning throughout the South West. In forest areas this probably means an annual target of about 450,000 ha per year to overcome the massive backlog.
- Ministers and Departments to be made more responsible and accountable to achieve their burning targets.
- A separate Commission is formed to audit and report direct to the Premier on actual areas achieved compared to targets.

- An investigation be carried out to determine what needs to be done to make local authorities more accountable for fire control in their areas. Planning restrictions on clearing and fuel reduction imposed by local authorities need to be reviewed and amended.
- More funding is made available to the Dept of Conservation & Land Management to maintain access roads and tracks in forest areas to allow access by fire crews.
- A halt is made to plans for establishment of the Walpole Wilderness area unless adequate fuel reduction and access needs are met.
- More fire fighting equipment is provided to allow on ground attack of bushfires including heavy bulldozers now that the timber industry equipment is departing.
- A public education/information programme should be established to inform the public the benefits of fuel reduction burning and counter environmental propaganda, which sets out to demonise fuel reduction burning for no scientifically valid reason.

Mr Chris Muller, a fire specialist with substantial field and administrative experience in WA and Victoria, carried out a comprehensive review of the Dept of CALM's fire management operations in 2001. The Committee should read his report and I suggest his expertise be called upon by the committee during your visit to WA.

I remain available to meet with committee and discuss any of the above items.

Sincerely,

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DON SPRIGGINS BSc (For). MACFA. FIFA

May 8th 2003.