

State 1632



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Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Via facsimile: (02) 6277 4424

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Dear Sir

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Prior to the construction of the Dartmouth Dam some twenty-five years ago, my family ran cattle in the Razorback, Six Mile, Eight Mile, and Dartmouth areas. We of course were forced out of these areas by rising dam waters and intervention by the Victorian State Government's Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). I personally have seen the huge increase in undergrowth and fire fuel since this occurred.

My father and his generation always warned that unless our forests were managed through grazing and controlled fuel reduction burns 'a fire of holocaust proportions could wipe out Victoria,' I recall these words vividly.

On January 8 2003, the whole frightening scenario began to erupt when following a day storm, lightning strikes caused a number of fires to begin.

As Captain of Dartmouth Rural Fire Brigade I was requested to send crews to Tallangatta Valley to fight a blaze. These were duly organised and sent. This crewing exercise continued for four days; the whole time the Razorback fire burning away with only a minimum of Parks and DSE offices (I believe 4) and a logging crew (2 machines and operators) trying to contain it. These guys did a mighty job and with support the fire would have been extinguished.

Instead, when myself and four fellow farmers inquired to DSE about the Razorback fire we were told 'it's a small fire burning in remote country, it's threatening nobody and we will put it out.'

Being treated with such contempt raised our concerns no end so we decided to look for ourselves. This became the norm from then on. At the same time we were told the fire was being run by Swift Creek control - some two hours away by road and by staff who knew very little of the area. Our small group joined with the local Policeman who shared our concerns and drove to the fire front. This 'small fire' had already burnt beyond the Sheevers Point Road and we estimated that at this rate of spread, the Dartmouth Township and farmland at Granite Flat and Banimboola would be under imminent threat within a week. A rough estimation by us put that 'small fire' at 10,000 hectares. Our observations were supported by ABC radio the following day (this was the very first report of this fire).

We immediately went into action mode, and I made a satellite phone call to Swifts Creek from the Mt Wills Road asking if I could begin a fire-break-come-backburn line behind Beggs and Walsh's property. This was refused by DSE.

Our group, which was quickly growing by now, met with a local DSE representative. We went over maps and devised a plan that would minimise the risk of the fire. Swifts Creek refused this plan and another vital day was lost.

The local DSE representative then drove through the night to Swifts Creek to offer some local knowledge and advice to the badly organised and ill informed Swifts Creek Incident Control Centre.

By the time he returned we had lost another day but even more frustrating to us was the fact that the DSE approved plans we soon received, were precisely what we had recommended to the DSE two days prior. That was - a back-burn line down the one fire track and a containment line around the affected properties. The Omeo Highway and Dartmouth Dam were to be our other containment lines.

Seven days had transpired by now and as machinery and men began arriving from Swifts Creek and Gippsland, the CFA were then kindly invited to assist in fighting the fire.

The fact that the fire had grown from a 'small fire' to the vicinity of 20,000 hectares and became the largest fire now burning in Victoria, seemed to make DSE realise they were incapable of combating this disaster. DSE staff loudly said phrases such as 'we haven't got the resources,' 'we haven't got the manpower,' 'our aircraft are tied up' and **the fuel load is too large,** and 'the country is inhospitable.' Whilst they sound like pathetic excuses, unfortunately they are all true.

Regardless of these comments, we Dartmouth locals and fire volunteers were asking why the fire was still burning - it should have been out three days ago! It was clear to us the fire was still burning because of:

- **A completely under managed forest system for the past twenty years;**
- **Too much vote chasing by the State Government trying to woo the Greens;**

- **DSE and Parks Victoria failing to listen to local knowledge;**
- **DSE and Parks Victoria not recognising the skills of CFA volunteers;**
- **The whole shooting match being run by DSE miles away from the actual fire with antiquated maps by bungling bureaucrats.**

You cannot fight a fire from an office. You cannot manage a forest from an office. You cannot spray weeds from an office. You cannot trap wild dogs from an office. And none of these skills along with all that goes with bush lore can be found in a consultant's brief. It can't be learnt at University and it sure as hell can't be learnt in Parliament House Canberra or Spring Street.

To the fire

While Razorback burned, my crews and I continued to fight the Tallangatta Valley fires. We are only a relatively small brigade, our town has a total population of 45 people, and our twenty strong brigade travelled the area in teams of five, providing both day and nightshift support to other nearby brigades. So by the time we were called to our 'local' fire my crews were starting to get a little weary. Sheer guts drove these blokes on and at no stage did they stop putting up their hands.

The nightmare that unfolded from here on just seems like a constant balls-up. The only shining light being the magnificent support shown to us by the Red Cross, Ambulance, SES and other voluntary groups. They were truly magnificent.

The main back-burn line in the Six Mile ran for about six kilometres from the narrow Razorback Spur Road, down the Six Mile Saddle and then drove down the One in Five track. Most nights were devoted to back-burning and at most times things seemed to run smoothly. Just as well, as you never knew if you had DSE support or not. One minute they were there and the next you were on your own.

One particular night we had six CFA local units supported by two DSE tankers in our area and we were back-burning, even the DSE onsite boss couldn't believe what transpired next. All of a sudden at a relatively vulnerable point, there was a mass exodus of DSE pigs which saw us saw us left to patrol the complete back-burning operation with only the support of the DSE tankers which were manned by Mitta Valley local crews. DSE left us to burn.

While we watched in amazement as their brake lights flashed out of sight, the realisation that we were alone struck home to all of us. This feeling was something we grew to expect over the next few weeks as we were constantly let down by DSE staff who simply left the fire front when their hours were up, regardless of whether they were in the middle of something or not.

This sort of behaviour created all sorts of problems. The major problem was change over times. Our crews at times had to remain at the fire-front for up to eighteen hours straight before DSE crews returned. Our local crews on occasion were finally relieved by DSE crews who had been sitting on their hands waiting to go in. This frustrated everyone and created greater animosity between the two sets of crews.

On one particular occasion I had my Second Lieutenant throw his hat at my feet and resign. That hurt most especially as I was just as aggravated as he was.

On one occasion we were sent in to burn. My tanker called another CFA tanker and two DSE pigs had to face a back-burn against a hot North wind blowing into our faces at approximately 80km/h. Against the odds we held that line for six hours and extinguished three spot fires all the while we were retching and gagging in the heat and from the smoke. The fourth spot-over proved too much for us. Despite a valiant effort by our crew and the four DSE fellows, the fire swung back over us and escaped up Mt Cooper. One DSE fellow, Frank, had to be taken away by ambulance with respiratory problems and our tanker, due to inaccessible access to the fires had to go further into the blaze to turn around. We turned in the flame – I feel that once again we had been left to burn by DSE.

I held information evenings in the Fire Station every second night of the fires (when I was home) to brief the terrified townsfolk of Dartmouth. On Tuesday, 21 January 2003 I had to inform the residents that within two days the fire would be on our doorsteps. On Wednesday 22 January 2003 the fire swept over the boat ramp towards Dartmouth. I had sent one of my firemen to survey the situation one-hour prior. We were being told by DSE the fire was over a day away but it was evident that it was very close. My firemen agreed it was closer than DSE were saying, they estimated maybe two hours. The town was thrown on red alert. I called for more tankers and thankfully they arrived.

We had every available private unit and every town fire hydrant in force and I acknowledge that DSE did a mighty job that night. Working against the wind, they back-burnt against the encroaching fire and Dartmouth was spared. One farm however was lost: that was the Walsh's. It had no protection at all. This was to become commonplace as DSE did not consider farms as assets in their asset protection approach.

The fire meandered towards Mitta Mitta for the next three days. At any stage it could have been extinguished by men on foot or indeed a back-burn/fire-break off the main Dartmouth road to the Mitta River. This simple thing did not occur!

On Saturday night, 25 January 2003, I was on night patrol with to other members. We had to patrol 18 kilometres of road from Dartmouth to Mitta Mitta and three kilometres through a pine plantation on Callaghan Creek Road. The only assistance we had was three private operators and five DSE pigs.

You can imagine my surprise when at 2.30am the DSE crew leader (Phil?) came up to me and told me their 'hours' were up, they'd been ordered out. I said 'you can't leave us!' He apologised and said 'I'm sorry mate, we've just got to go. We're under instruction.' I replied 'we'll bloody well perish here tomorrow.' He was almost in tears when he said 'there might be another few here tomorrow, I don't know.' We continued into the night dumbfounded.

It's all history now. On Australia Day 2003 my family lost 700 acres of pasture, our bush leases we all burnt, we lost 30 head of stock and we lost 30 kilometres of fencing – our livelihoods have been thrown into chaos.

The future?

The township of Dartmouth was saved. This only occurred through the incredible work of our volunteer fire-fighters, local residents, some careful planning and a skeleton DSE crew who turned up in the nick of time.

If I, not DSE, I hadn't called for aerial support, the township of Dartmouth would have been cooked. Our farm was of course left to burn, once again not considered to be an asset.

The real reason the DSE was pulled out of Dartmouth surfaced a little later.

Mid-way through the fire crisis, the DSE Fire Control had been shifted to Mt Beauty. Mt Beauty, Falls Creek, Mt Buffalo, Beechworth and the ski villages were under a little threat. There were more points to be scored saving these big name areas than saving a little town like Dartmouth. As one DSE boss was heard saying '***** the Mitta Valley, let it burn.' I know the bloke who said that and I will forever remind him of this whenever I see him.

This truly was a total disaster. More so in public land and fire management than actual land lost. The most hurtful aspect of this disaster is the fact that nothing has been learnt. The DSE and Parks Victoria hierarchy are still patting themselves on the back saying the same as what the Politicians are, all of whom have no real idea of what hardship is about and couldn't begin to understand the affect these fires are still having on our families and towns here in the North-East.

My wife and I have spoken to three Victorian Cabinet Members, Candy Broad, John Pandazopoulos and Sheryl Garbutt about the future direction for Victorian public land management only to see the State Government's document produced without any of our input.

We are excellent land managers, we know the bush and how to treat it, we have the knowledge required to keep the environment safe from future disasters such as this, and we are ignored by those who have caused this, the greatest natural (or was it?) disaster in our area.

I am not a person to whinge without reason and I am not a person to whinge without offering solutions.

If DSE and Parks Victoria are to remain our State's land managers, they must listen and note the following:

- 1. Fuel Reduction burning must be increased 20-fold. The build up of fuel was the most significant additive to this fire.**
- 2. Consultation with local Brigade Captains and influential town members to ascertain where future fire fighting roads is required.**
- 3. Thirty to fifty-meter buffer zones around private property adjoining public land is required. This acts as a firebreak, a fuel reduction control line, a back-**

burning avenue and a safety zone to turn fire tankers. This will also cut down on Government costs to re-instate fencing if a fire does occur.

4. Liaise with CMA to eradicate noxious weeds along streams and throughout the bush. These areas were the greatest heat zones in the fire due to the amount of fuel they created. There is also a water quality issue here. This can be seen quite clearly as those streams that were dry before the fires are now running water; largely due to the lack of vegetation 'milking' the moisture out of the soil.
5. Water is still the key to fire fighting. Instead of restricting farm dams and their sizes: we should be encouraging farmers to increase storage facilities on their land to allow helicopter access and loading,

In summing up:

I am bitter. I am very bitter. I have been burnt out by a neighbour who has refused to listen to me and my forbearer's regarding land management. This neighbour is now washing their hands of this disaster. They refuse to recognise where they have gone wrong and they refuse to take into consideration the hardship and the heartbreak that we have and still do endure.

DSE and Parks believe that have done a good job when in actual fact they have destroyed everything they stand for. Their push North into the Bortmah Forest must be seen to be another environmental disaster. We must not allow these two parasitic groups – Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and Environment to control any more land.

Instead we should be shutting down on their commitment – after all they admitted themselves '*we haven't got the resources.*'

I would appreciate it if the Committee were to take these comments on board.

Yours sincerely

JOHN SCALES