



9th May 2003

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission No.244

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Dear Secretary,

Gecko – Gold Coast & Hinterland Environment Council is a conservation group whose mission is to actively promote, conserve and restore the natural environment of the Gold Coast region in partnership with our member groups and the wider community.

Our area, which extends out to the Scenic Rim of the Tweed Mt Warning Volcano, consists of a very constrained landscape of steep slopes and multiple waterways, and we have one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the country.

Our interest in bushfire management consists of protecting the biodiversity and the wildlife habitats from both fire itself and the management tools used to control fire to protect housing, ie., fire trails and hazard reduction burns.

Bushfire hazard reduction, including making of fire trails and burn-offs, may have a devastating effect on both flora and fauna, as well as the landscape. Gecko is concerned that regulations and training should be in place for the management of these processes in sensitive areas.

The effectiveness of prescribed burning as a method of bushfire hazard reduction is questionable, and there are concerns over the impact of human imposed fire regimes on the environment. There is also evidence that frequent burning has many detrimental impacts on natural ecosystems. There needs to be an evaluation of the costs, in terms of economic and human resources, balanced against the gains, of current bushfire hazard reduction practices and more effective means of bushfire prevention and management must be found.

Recent fires show the need for a multi-pronged approach to bushfire management. The challenges created by climate change are unprecedented and will require fire managers to rethink all strategies. Global warming with increased drought, evaporation and dryness will not only increase the frequency and intensity of bushfires, but will also make hazard reduction burns more risky, and will make even rainforests more susceptible. We need to rethink all our fire management techniques.

With regard to the Terms of Reference, please find our comments below:

- a. the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;

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While we recognise that bushfire can be a threat to biodiversity and can destroy forests and wildlife habitat, we are concerned when hazard reduction burns are too frequent to maintain biodiversity. Tracks can also become too extensive, creating edge effects and bringing in threatening processes such as weeds, feral animals and even fire vandals, as well as providing access for the stealth or destruction of valuable rare and threatened plants. We are insistent that if fire breaks are necessary, they must be planned, not only strategically for the prevention of the spread of fire and protection of firefighters, but also for the protection of our rare and threatened plant and animal habitats, as well as the stability of the landscape and protection of our waterways.

Fires must be timed at least as far apart as the propagation cycles of the trees and shrubs. In some wet forests, the natural fire frequency is hundreds of years apart. It's no coincidence that these are the most biodiverse, species-rich forests. Frequent fires (and logging) can generate a dense, even-aged eucalypt stand that is more flammable than the biodiverse old-growth it replaces. The Canberra fire got out of control when it ripped through an even-aged pine plantation. To reduce fire risk and maintain habitat it is necessary to break up the vegetation density by having an uneven aged forest and stop clear-fell logging.

We are concerned about the position taken by some that the more frequent hazard reduction burning, and the greater number of fire trails, the better. We do not want to see our forests managed to such an extent that they lose their natural values. This is why we believe it is essential to keep houses and major infrastructure away from forests so that we don't have to constantly be burning them off and putting more and more trails through them.

- b. the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;

National parks in our region largely consist of rainforest and wet sclerophyll and should not be subjected to regular mosaic burn-offs. Our state forests are also largely old-growth wet sclerophyll forests and should not be subject to frequent burn-offs. All lands, no matter what the tenure, should be assessed for the appropriate fire management for their ecosystem type prior to any fire management strategy being adopted.

Recent comments from our local government representative calling for burning off of our national parks every three years show the misinformation that exists about this subject. Gold Coast's national parks are only a tiny proportion of the forested areas, and mostly consist of rainforests, which would suffer greatly from any burning regime, never mind every three years.

Fire Management Plans need to be developed for all conservation areas, including flora and fauna (including invertebrate) studies, fire exclusion zones, narrow tracks, perimeter burning, wetting down of trees, protection of old growth trees and guarding against increasing fire propensity.

- c. the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;

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Hazard reduction burns are often conducted by local bushfire brigades, which are not trained to recognise areas of high nature conservation value. These brigades are required to raise most of their own funds, thus they are encouraged to conduct burn-offs without regard to the ecological needs of the forests.

According to Dr Phil Cheney, Senior Principal Research Scientist at CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products Bushfire Behaviour and Management Group, we have to do hazard reduction in a systematic, planned and scientific manner. While hazard reduction delivers significant advantage in fire suppression under mild and moderate conditions, when conditions turn to extreme, its value diminishes at an extraordinary rate.

- d. appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;

Griffith University Gold Coast has formed the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium, which is developing policies and educational materials to inform governments and fire authorities on the appropriateness of different strategies to assist in determining ecologically sustainable fire regimes for the Southeast Queensland Region, including the "Individual Fire Management Planning Kit: Balancing fire safety with conservation of bushland plants and animals", February 2002.

While we haven't examined these products in detail, we support the approach of having partnerships with local government, scientists, and fire authorities working together to determine the most appropriate management strategies for fire management.

- e. any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;

See answer to d. above

The results of an analysis proposed by The Queensland Rural Fire Council: "Costs/ Benefits Study of Prescribed Burning" using case studies and available research data would provide information on the effectiveness of our current fire management practices.

It is not clear whether biodiversity conservation is being effectively addressed by State fire management planning. Further research is required into the effects of fire in different land tenures and ecosystems.

- f. the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;

Gold Coast City Council has developed a Bushfire Management Strategy, which consists of mapping of the hazard levels throughout the City and a policy for hazard reduction including width of clearing from buildings of 10m of an inner zone, and another 10m outer zone of clearing of understorey, plus an additional clearing of 1m of understorey for every degree of slope greater than 20 downhill, and 1/2m of understorey clearing for every degree of slope greater than 20 uphill.

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While we believe it is necessary to provide this guidance for clearing required near dwellings, we prefer to have housing avoid areas of high and medium bushfire hazard, and to have those houses that are built required to use materials and design in keeping with regulations for building in bushfire prone areas.

What is needed is a policy of avoidance of building in bushfire prone areas, particularly on steep slopes and ridges, as well as an acknowledgement of the increase in bushfire hazard due to global warming and increasing levels of drought.

Gecko has already begun planning to host a seminar on “Families, Forests and Fire” to bring together all stakeholders to discuss the latest knowledge and issues involved. We are gathering research and inviting speakers to enlighten all of us on the need to guard our communities with proper building standards and distances from forests. Gecko is seeking a multi-pronged approach to fire management, including avoiding building near forests.

Conservationists continue to point out the folly of further development in the Gold Coast Hinterland, particularly in highly fire-prone areas and where property is unsuitably steep. The result of the continuing land clearing and development is the demand for yet more clearing permits and requests to burn-off. All of this compounds the difficulties faced by the rural fire brigade called upon to protect an increasing number of properties, often remote and with difficult access. What is needed is a policy of avoidance of building in bushfire prone areas, particularly on steep slopes and ridges.

g. the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;

Volunteer bushfire brigades are underfunded and are essentially there to protect their own homes and those of their neighbours. They should not be expected to manage large areas of public land to ensure public safety without professional assistance.

Volunteer brigades are not trained or equipped to deal with house fires and can only guard the homes from the outside. Building on steep slopes in remote areas means that urban brigades can often not access the site due to the steep terrain and fully loaded trucks.

The Government needs to ensure that fire management techniques being practiced by bushfire brigades are informed with the latest scientific research by the CSIRO on the implications of climate change for bushfire behaviour and prevention.

h. the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;

no response

i. liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

no response

j. the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

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See answer to g. above.

Recent fires show the need for a multi-pronged approach to bushfire management.

Overall, in examination of bushfire management Gecko's main concerns are maintaining biodiversity in the community, the timing, conditions and frequency of burn-offs, the avoidance of building in bushfire prone areas, particularly on steep slopes and ridges and the appropriate resources and training provided for fire brigades.

We apologise for the submission not being delivered on time and hope our concerns are considered in the fire management analysis.

Yours faithfully,

Sheila Davis
President