



Mr Maurie Killeen

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The Secretary of the Committee  
Fax (02) 6277 4424

Dear Sir/Madam

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

Please find enclosed my submission outlining my thoughts and comments on the above inquiry.

Yours sincerely

MAURIE KILLEEN

enc. *Maurie Killeen*

## **VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE INQUIRY 2003 - REQUEST FOR SUBMISSIONS**

There has been much spoken and written on the management of native forests of late. Most have been single item points of view such as green movements, cattlemen, timber industry, landholders adjoining the state and national parks etc. To come up with solutions for the future of our native forests we must consider these views as a whole. We must look back in history before and after European settlement. We must accept that our forests and landscape in Australia are always changing regardless of our intervention. The forests we know of now may only be 700 to 1000 years old; what was there before? In some areas with ignorant intervention we may have prolonged the life of a forest by 100 odd years.

We need to consider and respect the different values individuals and groups put on our forests.

### **HISTORY BEFORE AND AFTER EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT**

It is accepted that Australia had a vast area of rainforest in the last 10,000 years. The remainder left is evident around Cape York and various gorges throughout the top end of Australia, parts of Victoria and Tasmania. The disappearance of this vast area of rainforest probably would be the biggest transformation Australia has had in the last 10,000 years. This reduction may have been brought about by cyclones or more aggressive use of the fire stick by the indigenous people because of culture change from within Australia or from other culture changes from outside Australia. It may have been a series of long 10 to 30 year droughts. This brings us to the 1750 year that we use to benchmark off as before and after European settlement. The early Europeans that plied our coasts spoke of the "land of fire" because they saw numerous small fires burning as lit by the indigenous people and lightning. In our particular area of Gippsland where the recent fire was, the Aborigines moved around wood lands and plains as well as going annually into the High Plains to feast on the Bogong moth.

In their travels they used the fire stick to burn small areas when the circumstances were right. Their travel was brought about because the animals used as food supply by the indigenous people was becoming scarce through lack of grass. To get the last of the hard to get animals for food, the Aborigines used fire to drive them out of the bush whereby small patches of grasslands and woodlands were burnt. Some fire went off into the forests and burnt small patches in there as well and went out when it reached a previous burn of the year before. When the spring rain came, the burnt area became a very fresh and succulent grass and habitat area for the few animals left to breed back up again. Over the centuries this formed a mosaic of small burnt out areas in various stages of recovery, so if a fire from Indigenous people or lightning started up it would burn 50 to 100 hectares and burn out into an area burnt the previous years.

The mosaic of various stages of burning, recovery and green were right across Australia with a lot of small fires burning their 50 odd hectares then going out. This maintained the bio-diversity of the plants and animals.

Now it was sheer coincidence as the European occupation pushed the Aborigines off the coastal and later the inland regions of grasslands and woodlands maintained the same fire regime for fresh grass in the spring time to feed a different animal in sheep and cattle. This mosaic system worked well to keep fires small and manageable most of the time and maintained bio-diversity in our shrubs and trees. A lot of small low intensity fires were prevalent up until about the 1920's when the Forest Commission put pressure on land holders and cattlemen to stop the traditional autumn burning off. The traditional burning off was partially maintained by the landowners and cattlemen illegally for the next 20 odd years, until the enquiry of the 1939 fires put pressure on the Forest Commission to stop all burning.

The restriction of burning off from the 1920's was the beginning of the end of the unique mosaic fire prevention regime that had existed for quite a few thousand years.

In Victoria the 1939 fire was the culmination of the demise of the mosaic system. In some small areas of Gippsland the mosaic system was partially maintained through sheer persistence of landholders and CFA volunteers working with Forest Commission Officers who knew the merits of the mosaic system for fire suppression. This has now disappeared across Victoria and New South Wales. We have one big part of a mosaic now without all the other variants to form the series.

#### **THE PRESENT SITUATION**

Regardless our bush in Victoria will have the capacity to burn fiercely with the right conditions at the wrong time within every five years. It has burnt over one million hectares recently, and it will be ready for the same within the next five years. We need to urgently start a mosaic system in this area within the next five years to put in the other variants of the mosaic to break up the looming large fire hazard. If we can break the fuse in strategic areas it will reduce the odds of another big fire. We will need to do constant small fire prevention and suppression burns whenever the time and situations are right. Some of these burns will need to be done in summer periods to catch up. We as Victorians must all work together to make this happen. We cannot sit back now and think that it all has been burnt all will be well. This large fire has made the fire risk much much worse, but more importantly the bio-diversity cannot withstand another large area fire in a short time. We have seen change in other areas of large scale fires such as loss of species in that area and a single species dominating (mono-culture).

We cannot continue to think that locking up large areas of native forests and changing the management from the age old proven system will maintain the forest as we first saw it. The massive destructive change will happen, not if, but when if we don't act now.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment speak of not having this window of opportunity to do autumn fire suppression. There won't be a big window anymore. We have to have a lot of small windows being monitored and "opened" by many trained "stewards" who are working to a formulated plan when these small windows open. This is well beyond the DSE to carry out now or in the future. We need a co-ordinated community ownership approach to get the mosaic system started up again, Department of Sustainability, Country Fire Authority and community working together. The fire we have just had, has upset the bio-diversity. Large areas will be made into mono-cultures in the short term. It will take many years to come back to the ecosystem it was.

The green movements must now accept that the management regime of our forests over the last 40 years hasn't worked; it must be changed. Let's go back to the proven regime for the sake of saving our forests. I have driven over a large portion of the area of the recent fire and I am deeply sorrowed to see completely fire killed delicate snow gums around Hotham and Dinner Plain. The same devastation occurred on the High Plains in the 1998 Caledonian fires. These areas never burn because they have always been protected by the mosaic patterns below the snowline. There is a large area of alpine ash completely killed on both sides of the Harrierville Hotham Road. These dead trees will rattle around in the wind for the next 30 years and finally fall on the new ash that will be growing up underneath it.

The really sad part is the landowners, cattlemen, family forest industry, green movement, governments, etc all want to see the native forest maintained. None of us want to see it destroyed, but we are vigorously working against each other. Why?

## **MY BACKGROUND**

I am 60 years old. I was born and grew up at Valencia, near Maffra in Gippsland. I started work in the family sawmill at Valencia in 1959. I joined the CFA in 1960, being active in the large 1965 fires that swept through the area. (There's not much documentation on this fire as there was no death or injuries.)

I am presently the CFA Captain, Deputy Group officer Maffra Group, Region 10 CFA Planning Committee, Chairman of Region 10 VRFBA, member of Wellington Shire Fire Prevention Committee, Gippsland CMA Native Vegetation Plan Consultative Committee, Gippsland Area Consultative Committee, various economic development committees and a past local shire councillor.

I went to 2001-2002 Sydney fires as a strike leader participant. I've seen and studied many fires over the last 40 years in various parts of Australia, collecting many written pages on bush fires that have occurred over the last 140 odd years. I have been privileged with parents and grandparents who came from different areas of Australia who also cared for the environment and had much to hand down over the generations.

My father Snow Killeen was born at Maffra and worked on the land and later as a road making contractor in the Licola area and in late 1939 went into sawmilling in the Avon River and Valencia Creek area. The logging area he was allocated had to be sustainable. There was no fresh area to go to after it was logged out. He structured the operation to selective log the area and from 1939 to 1987 (when our mill was stopped from logging this area by the NRE through the Timber Industry Strategy). The mill had logged most areas three times and because of this system there is now a better bush with good trees left in it. Our family is very proud of this achievement. The sawmill is still working sourcing timber from other areas.

He was the Captain and a volunteer for more than fifty years at Valencia CFA. He was involved in the 1939 fires when it came through Licola. He had constant involvement with Forest Commission of Victoria regards to fire prevention and suppression.

My grandfather was a cattleman that worked the High Plains of Licola, Wellington, etc in the 1920's to 1950's.

### **COMMENTS ON OPERATIONS OF CFA AND DSE OF RECENT FIRES**

DSE needs to restructure from the top down to be able to respond to different situations that occur seasonally regards to fire prevention and daily regards to fire suppression.

More autonomy given by DSE to the local DSE people to work with CFA and local landholders to respond quickly when the window of opportunities are open for protective burning or fire suppression. This has to happen within twelve months.

The Multi Agency Agreement between the CFA and DSE that was formulated recently may be working at the top end but hasn't filtered down to the grass roots end.

In Region 10 CFA area we always had a very good working relationship with Forest Commission/DSE regards fire prevention and suppression for more than 40 years. Since the agreement this has disappeared at the fire front. DSE and Industry Brigades are running their own fire agenda much to the disgust of the long serving DSE personnel and CFA volunteers.

As Captain of Valencia Rural Fire Brigade and Deputy Group Officer of Maffra Group I took on the task of offering and co-ordinating our group CFA resources to help DSE personnel to catch up on their designated reduction plan on DSE native forest that interfaces with CFA area. In late April - early May 2003 when it was due to be burnt, we had seven tankers and various four wheel drive slip on units at ready with appropriate crew. We were promised our offer would be utilised but they could not bring themselves to make the move to do the fuel reduction burn. They are now coming into four years behind their fuel reduction plan. We haven't been ignored in this capacity before when help was offered. I must say we still have good rapport with grass roots DSE personnel but they are told from above what to do or not to do. Our Maffra Group of brigades who

interface with DSE from Coongulla to Stockdale are now very concerned with the lack of fuel reduction. We have the Avon Wilderness area on our back door north west of us.

It wasn't burnt in 1939 because it burnt itself out on a mosaic burn system the cattlemen (my grandfather included) used on the track from Upper Maffra to Mount Wellington. It missed out being burnt in 1965 as this fire started at Glenmaggie and went below the wilderness area. It also missed out being burnt in the 1998 Caledonian fire as we had abnormal wind direction that drove it to the north east. With the right wind in the 2003 fire it was only a day or so from being burnt. There is at least 60 years of fuel build up in the Avon wilderness with no tracks in it for quick access. A real time bomb that will go off.

We are lucky that there are still some good practical personnel who have fire prevention and suppression experience left in the DSE but under the present DSE regime they are powerless to use the expertise. These personnel would be needed to reform the DSE as they have the respect and ability to work in with landholders and CFA to get the mosaic system back on track over the next ten years.

Since Linton the CFA hierarchy went into crisis management mode. It seems someone asked are these volunteers trained? Where is the documentation? We were trained from Fiskville and regional training centres such as West Sale training centre Region 10, but the CFA didn't document the training. CFA asked how can we overcome this situation? Let's create minimum skills. So we retrained the trained to formally put it into a document. Minimum skills was a good project but was very poorly presented to volunteers by the CFA. Since Linton there has been many changes volunteers have had to react to.

We as CFA volunteers are very concerned of the career officers that are now manning the incident control centres. Since about 1990 CFA stopped sourcing these recruits from volunteer areas who have had previous experience in the rural areas and know the culture of rural communities. There is no doubt with the extra large amount of recruitment the government has implemented through the CFA we will see more of these inexperienced officers impacting on volunteers in Incident Control Centres and general fire suppressions. It would have a devastating effect on volunteerism.

It is my feeling these officers will take on a controlling role over volunteers. I strongly suggest that the local volunteers have control alongside these officers who can play very important roles of knowing the culture of the top end of the CFA and could get a much quicker and co-ordinated response for the volunteers at the fire front. It should be noted that the control of a fire is at the fire front not in the Incident Control Centre. The ICC responds to the requests of the control point at the fire ground.

The hierarchy of the DSE and CFA are paranoid of safety issues. They have this perception that the fire crews have been working unsafely in the past and they have to change the management of fire suppression to make it safer. But this not so. Our record

shows we have been safety conscious all through these five seasons.

They have pushed themselves into doing nothing or very little to lower the risk of litigation. There comes a time when it is a bigger risk of litigation when nothing or little is done. Why should litigation control the way we carry out fire prevention and suppression when we are trained and properly plan to combat the problems that we face when fire is imminent.

The CFA works very well from volunteer fireman to crew leader to strike team leader to sector commander to incident control . All have to be accountable for their actions, but from then on up into the Incident Control Centre the line of communication is very poor and they seem not to be accountable. I have raised this with Len Foster CFA Board Chairman early this year as I was fearful the poor performance of the Incident Control Centres would in time, be the cause of death and injury to our volunteers. I have seen the poor performance of ICC compromise the fire suppression efforts of personnel at the fire front many times when I have been part of a strike time. This must not continue. The system in the ICC must change.

My other concern is the Shire councils are not fulfilling their role to properly maintain and oversee the statutory role of the Municipal Fire Prevention Officer and the plan formulated they are required to work to.