

Tom Groggin Station

23 May 2003



Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

**Tom Groggin Station – Submission re January 2003 Bushfire Experience
(Appendix attached)**

My name is Trevor Davis I am the manager of Tom Groggin Station and outlined below is our submission to the Enquiry. The attached **Appendix** is a narrative of the events over the 33 days we fought the fires at Tom Groggin, this narrative is supported by a diary maintained over the period.

Introduction

Tom Groggin Station is a 2000 acre cattle breeding property running 700 breeding cows and located 33kms from Thredbo on the south side of the Murray River. It was completely surrounded by the January 2003 fires and thanks mainly to the efforts of the farm's management and family, who fought the fires for 33 days, the farm property was saved, despite the devastation of thousands of hectares of surrounding Alpine National Park.

The cattle operation depends for its economic viability on 75000 acres of grazing leases in the Victorian Alpine Park which are grazed annually from December to the following May. The fire destroyed virtually all the grass in these leased areas and some 85 head of cattle died as a result of the fires. The cattle that survived the fires were brought back to the property. With winter approaching and the leased areas destroyed, the property is desperately short of feed, which is now having to be bought in.

Tom Groggin Station is bounded by National Park; Kosciuszko National Park to the north and the Victorian Alpine park to the east, south and west. The fires in these Parks surrounded the property. During the course of the fires, with the approval of the relevant authorities, I operated the farm's bulldozer to clear containment lines around the perimeter of the property. Over the 7 years I have managed Tom Groggin I have been concerned to conserve and manage the fragile high country leases and have liaised closely with Victorian Parks officers regarding periodic fuel reduction burns within the

grazing lease areas and on behalf of the Parks have carried out road works and weed eradication programs. With this experience and our direct fire fighting experiences we are uniquely qualified to assist the enquiry with first hand observations, comments and views, which follow below.

Losses caused to Tom Groggin by the Fires

Substantial losses have been sustained directly caused by the fires and are losses both direct and indirect are continuing. The major costs and losses are as follows:

- 1.2 kms of lost fencing costing \$12,000 to replace
- 85 head of cattle lost costing \$45,000 to replace
- 445,000 of feed will need to be bought in to keep cattle going; otherwise we will be forced to sell cattle in extremely poor condition at 1/3 of normal price
- 33 days of lost farm productivity as the manager and his wife focused entirely on fire fighting

Benefits of Fuel Reduction

Fuel reduction burns have been carried out by the Victorian Parks adjacent to the property's borders periodically and these have been effective in not only providing protection to the Tom Groggin property but also in protecting these fuel reduced areas from the devastating affects of the January hot fires.

During the course of the January fires it was obvious that the fire's impact, where fuel reduction burns had taken place in past years, was significantly less severe and in some instances there was no burning at all. It was also noticeable in all areas that cattle had previously grazed the fires were not as severe. The evidence still remains in these areas. On the other hand where the fuel levels were highest the fire has burned hottest

In addition to the fires not burning as severely in areas where fuel reduction burns and grazing have taken place these areas show evidence of better recovery with less soil erosion. Protection of Property Being surrounded by National Parks Tom Groggin Station is extremely vulnerable to the risk of fire emanating from the Parks. Fuel reduction by way of controlled regular hazard reduction burns should be an essential feature of the Parks management procedures. As mentioned above Victorian Parks have conducted a number of fuel reduction burns over the years and these are welcomed although we believe they should be more frequent.

HOWEVER IN THE KOSCIUSZKO PARK AREA WHICH ABUTS OUR NORTH BOUNDARY WE ARE NOT AWARE OF ANY FUEL REDUCTION BURNS EVER BEING UNDERTAKEN. This is despite the fact that the property is most vulnerable from fire from this direction in the prevailing hot summer north westerly winds. This also despite our repeated requests to the NSW Parks for fuel reduction to be undertaken.

As a matter of urgency those charged with the responsibility for managing our Parks must be required to develop plans for fire suppression including programs for regular fuel reduction burning.

Effectiveness of Fire Fighting Efforts

With some notable exceptions the fire fighting efforts of the RFS and the NSW NPWS were remarkable in their ineffectiveness. The appended narrative relates specific observations.

Being located on the border of Victoria and NSW we suffered from the lack of a coordinated approach. Depending on where the flames were at any time we fluctuated between being the responsibility of one control center or another with the inevitable consequence of confusion and chaos. Effective progress in protecting our property was only made when we took control of our destiny.

Some conclusions reached based on our experiences:

Insufficient attention or importance given to the views of experienced locals and property owners and managers

Chains of command among the RFS and NPWS confused and unclear

Creation of emergency hierarchy with outsiders brought in over those with local knowledge responsible for delays and inefficiencies

Also see conclusions in appended narrative

Conclusion

It is imperative that those charged with the responsibility of managing our public lands are required to develop and implement effective policies and procedures for the suppression of hot bushfires. Although bushfire risk can never be eliminated, we believe ample evidence exists (including that submitted here) that fuel reduction programs can effectively mitigate the devastating affect of hot summer fires

I would welcome the opportunity to attend any enquiry and provide oral evidence

Yours faithfully,



Trevor Davis
Manager, Tom Groggin Station

(see Appendix next page)