

HFNC Submission Parliamentary Vegetation Management enquiry

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Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

The Committee will inquire into, and report on, the efficacy of past and current vegetation and land management policy, practice and legislation and their effect on the intensity and frequency of bushfires and subsequent risk to property, life and the environment.

Past and current practices of land and vegetation management

The committee should be aware that the general public has a distorted view of where hazard reduction is relevant. In SW Victoria, the local newspapers are inundated with complaints about the lack of control of grass on roadsides, with the implication that this is the cause of fires (and particularly the horrific forest fires in eastern Australia).

Roadside vegetation is one area that the committee should investigate, to get the facts. I believe that there is little evidence that roadside vegetation has been responsible for damaging fires. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence in the Hamilton region that damaging fires have resulted from fires on farms (burning of animal carcasses, welding, use of angle grinders, harvesting etc). And some of those fires have spread into Crown Lands and created considerable damage. I can think of at least 5 instances in the past few years. There is also evidence of fires starting from electricity poles, many of which are situated in paddocks and not roadside reserves.

The committee should establish the facts and then publish them. The problem with the public's distorted view of causes of bush fires/grass fires (and their recommendation for fuel reduction as the sole answer) is that there is pressure to enforce regulations that cannot really have much impact on reducing the hazard on severe fire danger days and may well have serious negative impacts environmentally.

There is a constant complaint that the burning of road reserve has effectively almost stopped in many areas of rural Victoria. That appears to be a consequence of fewer people now on the land, and thus a difficulty in getting enough labour to actually do the work. What can be done about that? Because of the problem, there has been agitation to allow farmers to graze the roadsides – or to allow drovers with stock from drought-affected areas to do that. The latter is not actually welcomed by most farmers because of animal health issues, pressure on fences and water supplies. Environmentally, such activities would severely damage areas of currently pristine native grasslands, which are extremely scarce in Victoria. Drivers on the roads also have concerns about safety.

The science and research behind activities such as hazard reduction burning, clearing and rehabilitation

As above, there is a real need to establish the facts about the effectiveness of prior fuel reduction burns in controlling the forest fires under varying environmental conditions.

The current evidence appears to be that when the conditions are extremely severe (high temperature, high windspeed, low humidity, drought conditions) then the condition of the forest floor has little impact on the progression of the fire. There must be plenty of evidence from the current fires to establish the reality. And then to publish it, so that everyone knows the score. Granted, there are anecdotal stories from isolated incidents that get publicity (and influence the beliefs of some individuals) but the real story comes from the overall scene.

While it is popular to consider the case for Aboriginal fire control methods, the reality is that their methods are not likely to be followed by us. They approach the matter carefully, selecting days and weather conditions that do not allow escapes. On the contrary, there are

damaging fires every year started by fuel reduction burns by the authorities, who have limited time and a lot of work to do in a small window of time. That is added to by adherence to criteria for burning that relate to a past era, before the drying of our climate. Thus, the burns reach flame height of 10 m or more, severely damaging even Stringybark forests. There is a need to recalibrate the indicators that are followed to determine when a control burn may be safely conducted that will not create extensive damage to the forest.

In any case, the Aboriginal burning practice did not really extend to the tall, wet forest of Gippsland and other areas of eastern Australia. The myth that they regularly burned such forests has been extensively assumed and promoted but where is the evidence? However, there is plenty of evidence that they operated in woodlands and grasslands.

Legislative capability at local, state and federal levels requiring landholders to reduce fire risk on their properties

A critical legislative issue here appears to have been missed, and that is the need to restrict the lighting of fires in the open during the fire season. That should apply to private property as well as all public lands. There is no such requirement in Victoria, which possibly has the highest danger. Some other State do have restrictions, as in WA, where fires may not be lit in the open in many Shires from October to April... Surely, reducing fire escapes from camp fires, burning of rubbish and animal carcasses, using angle grinders and welders in open paddocks, etc, is something that could make a significant difference.

Finally, although this may be outside the terms of reference, the greatest single tool for controlling bushfires would be to vastly improve the early attack capability when lightning or arsonists strike. As we have all seen, the failure to attack the fire in the first half an hour makes it improbable that the fire can be stopped before it does a great deal of damage. This capability will require much greater investment in people and aircraft. Yet, it really is the most effective way of dealing with future fires.

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