



## THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ON THE FREQUENCY, SCALE AND INTENSITY OF BUSHFIRES IN VICTORIA

A submission to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee



TCA member Peter Panozzo is appalled at the devastation

“Every year over the last ten, the nation’s forests, farmlands and even suburbs have been ravaged by large, high intensity fires. The damage from these fires, the wastage, the loss of resources and the economic and ecological costs has been astronomical. There have also been great but immeasurable psychological impacts on the people in the bush who have suffered from the fires, or who have been forced to turn out, over and over again, to fight them.

The sorriest aspect is that it is all so needless.” - Roger Underwood, FIFA, MACFA

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## **THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ON THE FREQUENCY, SCALE AND INTENSITY OF BUSHFIRES IN VICTORIA**

Timber Communities Australia is the peak national grassroots community support group for those that depend upon our sustainable forest based industries. Supporting and representing rural communities and their people, who rely to varying degrees on timber and timber products for their viability.

TCA is proud of our 13,000 strong membership database and openly acknowledge that we not only support our membership but the wider rural community through our extensive national branch network.

Our members represent forest growers (native and plantation), millers, forest harvesting and haulage contractors, forest nurseries and most importantly their staff and families. In addition our membership represents the broader community including doctors and hospital staff, teachers and local schools, family businesses and people who are supported by the flow on effects that arise from a vibrant, healthy and wealth creating forest sector.

Nationally TCA has 82 branches throughout Australia with 14 Branches in Victoria. Timber Communities Australia believes that through proper management of resources based on sound scientific reasoning rural towns reliant on forest generated industries can achieve prosperous economies and sustainable futures for generations to come.

The management of fuel loads and our ability to prepare for the inevitable fire in our forests is an issue at the forefront of our communities' aspirations.

In introducing this Submission, the committee is asked to first consider this quotation:

The year ... had been one of exceptional heat and drought. Pastures had withered; creeks had become fissured clay-pans; water-holes had disappeared; sheep and cattle had perished in great numbers, and the sun-burnt plains were strewn with their bleached skeletons; the very leaves upon the trees crackled in the heat, and appeared to be as inflammable as tinder.

As the summer advanced, the temperature became torrid, and on the morning ..., the air which blew down from the north resembled the breath of a furnace. A fierce wind arose, gathering strength and velocity from hour to hour, until about noon it blew with the violence of a tornado.

By some inexplicable means it wrapped the whole country in a sheet of flame —fierce, awful, and irresistible. Men, women and children, sheep and cattle, birds and snakes, fled before the fire in a common panic. The air was darkened by volumes of smoke, relieved by showers of sparks; the forests were ablaze, and, on the ranges, the conflagration transformed their wooded slopes into appalling masses of incandescent columns and arches.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst this quote could apply to the 2006/07 fires it is actually written about the bushfires of 1851. Fires that occurred just months after the colony separated from NSW and before it was named Victoria.

Since that time there have been massive and devastating bush fires impacting on the State. Red Tuesday in 1889, Black Friday in 1939, Ash Wednesday in 1983, the Eastern Victorian (Alpine) Fires 2003 and countless fires in between these days that have not been named.

This history of major bush fire confirms to the community that bushfire is part of the Australian Bush and that we need to prepare for next major fire. It is not just a recent phenomenon due to climate change or global warming but a frequent event in Victoria's history.

In the absence of fire, dead wood, leaf litter, bark and under storey plants in our forests builds up. This accumulation of forest debris provides a ready fuel source for bushfires. As a general rule, the greater the amount of fuel, the more intense the fire. Intense fires are very difficult, if not impossible, to control and can be very damaging to our assets and the natural environment.

Each summer, bushfires in our forests pose a significant threat to communities in rural areas, and on the rural-urban fringe <sup>2</sup>

TCA is concerned that after each major bushfire season there is a tendency to hold inquiries rather than introduce practical measures. Perhaps all Governments could benefit from the comments of American Luke Balcombe of the World Forest Institute when he explained his Nation's approach:

Wildland fires are a natural part of forests. They only become destructive and dangerous when they get out of control or burn near structures. Both situations can be avoided with careful fuel management. The US government recognizes three ways to manage fuel in forests: prescribed burns, thinning and logging.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romsey Chronicles <http://home.iprimus.com.au/fo07/fire1851.html> accessed 24 May 07

<sup>2</sup> Tasmanian Fire Service, 2007, Brochure 'Bushfire reducing the treat to your community'

<sup>3</sup> Balcombe L, 2003, Fire Management on Public Lands, FWPDRRC Melbourne

The recommendations and findings of the House of Representatives Select Committee into the recent Australian bushfires are also still very much supported by Timber Communities Australia. TCA was disappointed that State Governments did not participate in this 2003 inquiry. Perhaps if they did so, there may have been an opportunity to reduce the impact of this summer's bushfires.

A key recommendation supported by TCA that is relevant to this inquiry was:

**Recommendation 12**

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth through the National Heritage Trust, offer assistance to the states and the Australian Capital Territory to develop specific prescribed burning guides, at least to the quality of Western Australia, for national parks and state forests through out the mainland of south eastern Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Timber Communities Australia is also concerned at the impact of the change in land tenure of many areas of public forest. In the last two decades there has been a change from multiple use production forest to National park and conservation reserve. Not only has this brought a change in management philosophy but also a change in resources in terms of people and machines to immediately be able to combat a fire outbreak. Whilst this process is ongoing the Department of Sustainability and Environment reported:

In 2003 Victoria's total land area was approximately 22 million hectares. Of this, about 8.3 million hectares or 36 per cent was forested. Approximately 3.4 million hectares was classified as State forest and 3.7 million hectares classified as national parks and other reserves. Privately owned forest accounted for 1.2 million hectares of largely native forest and 360,000 hectares of plantation. Of the 3.4 million hectares of State forest, approximately 1 million hectares was protected in conservation reserves and will not be harvested. Of the remaining area, approximately 740,000 hectares was available for timber harvesting.<sup>5</sup>

This has meant a reduction of workers and machinery in our forests, resources that would be immediately available to combat bushfire and employed by businesses that had a vested interest to protect the commercial value of the forests.

Athol Hodgson - chief fire officer with the Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands from 1984 to 1986 – publicly warned that the state was at risk from feral fires due to “flawed policies and blinkered politics”.

In *the Australian* newspaper Mr. Hodgson said

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<sup>4</sup> Select Committee into the recent Australian bushfires, 2003, A Nation Charred: Report on the inquiry into bushfires House of Representatives Canberra

<sup>5</sup> Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005, State of the Forests, DSE Melbourne

“that in 1985 there were 111 lightning strikes in mountainous country that were “remarkably equivalent” to the current bushfire crisis. But in 1985 there was a different outcome.

“They flared into about 50,000ha in the alpine area and we stopped them at that acreage without the aid of rain,” he said.

“We did it because at that time there was a very significant number of people who worked in the forests and parks earning their daily bread. The difference now is that when fires start, that workforce is not there.”

Mr. Hodgson said about 3000 people worked in the forests in the early 1980s, in forestry, the electricity commission and saw-milling. It was a condition of the saw-milling licenses that if a fire broke out, the workers had an obligation to fight it.

“They stomped on fires very quickly and very, very effectively, and that has all changed.”

Mr. Hodgson said firefighters now had to be brought in from outside, causing a catastrophic delay. “Instead of having four or five fires running out of control, on this occasion they had about 50, and it became too big a job.”<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Hodgson comments were supported by Rod Incoll, chief fire officer for the department responsible for Victorian forests and national parks from 1990 to 1996, who said “ funds have been stripped from fire management, skilled foresters have virtually disappeared, and the culture that knew how to manage fire has totally changed.”

This season saw bush workers leave harvesting coupes and equipment behind to fight fires significant distances away from their workplace or home base. In once case, as the attached photographs show, with disastrous results.

Even with the industry’s reduction and relocation, the forest sector and community made a significant contribution to the fire fighting effort. On 13 Dec 2006, TCA estimated that close to \$30 million in harvesting contractor’s equipment were fighting the fires (dozers, excavators, skidders & floats). Trained fire fighters from the industry were able to join DSE, VicForests and CFA to bring an expert knowledge of the forests and also the heavy duty machinery and bush operational skills to fight the fires.

The battle to protect Melbourne’s water catchments highlighted the importance of the timber industry. There is no doubt that without the presence of harvesting contractors to establish control lines around the edges of the catchments that Melbourne would be in a disastrous situation regarding water supply. It is somewhat ironic that the majority of people opposed to timber harvesting are the ones who have benefited the most from the unselfish actions of timber harvesting contractors

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<sup>6</sup> *The Australian* (Wednesday, 13 December 2006) ‘Empty forests blamed for crisis’

Comment on Each Term of Reference is provided:

***(1) the extent, timing, resourcing and effectiveness of prescribed burning on both crown and freehold land;***

TCA consider that what prescribed burning that was carried out was effective locally, but much more needs to be undertaken across all tenures, especially where timber harvesting has been excluded.

The DSE provides the following table on its web site<sup>7</sup>:

**Prescribed Burns: Area Treated to date**

<b>Burn Status</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Planned Area (Ha)</b>	<b>Treated Area (Ha)</b>
PLANNED	9	3295	378
READY	9	2092	1085
IGNITION AUTHORISED	1	2301	21
IGNITION	5	4700	1643
UNDER CONTROL - 1	35	75965	31950
UNDER CONTROL - 2	76	18671	15511
SAFE	315	73765	68733
PART COMPLETE	10	2068	398
COMPLETE	151	15137	15368
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>611</b>	<b>197994</b>	<b>135087</b>

This table shows burns that have been recorded as ignited since July 1st  
Information last updated: 24 May 2007 16:12

There is no indication of the prescribed burns undertaken prior to December. However a planned target of less than 200,000 ha of the State's 8.3 million hectares reflects the minimal nature of this program.

In an interview with National media, the Department of Sustainability's Chief Fire Officer admitted that only 7,000 hectares was burned between last autumn and spring in fuel reduction low-intensity fires<sup>8</sup>.

This compares to a yearly average of 225,000 hectares burnt in fuel-reduction burns in the decade from 1974-75 to 1983-84. Until about five years ago, the figure had averaged just 80,000 hectares, which fell to 40,000 hectares by 2003.

Peter Westmore, national president of the National Civic Council, in an editorial in January this year stated

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<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf/LinkView/6C2D26AA2F05B332CA2571E600184C768234596C0DA9C1ADCA256EF60010E43F> accessed 24 May 2007

<sup>8</sup> SBS News, December 8, 2006

With dismaying predictability, bushfires in south-eastern Australia have devastated some of the country's state forests and national parks, put at risk the lives of thousands of firefighters who have heroically sought to contain them, and caused substantial loss of property, particularly in Victoria and Tasmania.

Undoubtedly, the current drought has aggravated the problem; but the almost total absence of fuel-reduction burns - now part of the policy pursued by bodies such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales and the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Victoria - has contributed to the crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Decision making processes for prescribed burning need to be done from a regional level. Whilst technology has allowed more accurate assessment of climatic conditions for fuel reduction burns it has also reduced the parameters for the "right conditions" and removed the decision making process from a local level to a computer modeling program located hundreds of kilometers away.

It is people who are on the ground and in the bush who have the best understanding of all the conditions to perform a successful fuel reduction burn. To give these people more control over the decision to light up would see a more successful fuel reduction program.

The issue of decision making process for fire management being made from computer modeling rather than using the knowledge of foresters and firefighters on the fire front was a common complaint, from those on the fire line, throughout the course of the bushfires.

***(2) the manner in which prescribed burning is conducted, including how applicable codes of practice are employed;***

The fire agencies, including DSE, VicForests and the Fires Service are skilled in their conduct of prescribed burning, and have adequate codes of practices and procedures. Private landowners have access to this expertise, but with recent trends of "tree change" e.g. seeking a residential lifestyle within the bush there needs to be greater focus on private land.

The role of local government in restricting burning off, particularly in the urban areas could see a fire disaster like the ACT fires. It is these areas that people need the ability to burn off excess fuel loads as this is the only affordable way to remove this litter. There needs to be provisions within their regulatory framework to allow landowners to conduct fuel reduction burns.

The Victorian Government could follow the lead of the Tasmanian Government, who has immediately introduced an expanded fuel reduction

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<sup>9</sup> Westmore P., 2007, Bushfire crisis: a state of denial, News Weekly Melbourne

burning program that includes State Forests, National parks and Private Landowners.

***(3) the impact of prescribed burning and recent wildfires on Victoria's biodiversity, wildlife and other natural assets including water quality and quantity;***

TCA considers that prescribed burning has minimum impact on Victoria's biodiversity and wildlife. Unlike uncontrolled bushfire and mega wild fire the prescribed burns are undertaken at optimum times, over minimum areas and are not as intense allowing animals to keep out of harms way.

Victoria's forests are well understood by forest managers and scientists. They are found in a range of elevations, tenures, climates and geographic areas, and they represent a variety of age-classes. Some, such as the Cool Temperate Rainforests, are remnants of a forest type which covered wider areas when our climate was substantially different from today. Other forests reflect an evolutionary adaptation to fire, or the change in land use since European settlement. The knowledge of our professional managers is sufficient to ensure prescribed burning is carried out to minimize impacts on biological diversity, provided they are given the resources and support by Government.

Prescribed burning needs to be recognised for its benefits to biodiversity. Indigenous people have known the benefits of controlled burning. They burnt forest and woodlands on a regular basis to encourage new growth that would become a food source for native animals. When there is a plentiful and stable food source then animal numbers would increase giving indigenous communities a reliable food source.

It was this practice that helped shape our landscape, and it can be, if there is an acceptance of the importance of burning, the greatest tool available to protect and enhance our unique biodiversity assets.

The State government has spent thousands of dollars on attracting tourists to the Grampians and Alpine areas after the fires. This has been done by showing them new growth on flora and the return of native fauna.

This is the case after a prescribed burn with the burnt areas becoming the area in a forest where there is new growth and an abundance of wildlife. The richness in biodiversity after a burn is testament to the way that good management can enhance the health of forest ecosystems.

TCA believe that there is sufficient evidence to show that it is major wildfire, not prescribed burning, that has greatest impact on Water quality and quantity. Prescribed burning is a controlled event and managed so as not to affect water quality and quantity. Wildfires do not discriminate and don't burn within boundaries.

The money put forward after the fires to help rural communities with water issues is money well invested. With better forest management, including fuel reduction burns we can ensure a water quality equal to our city cousins.

#### ***(4) the reporting process applicable to prescribed burning programs;***

The DSE web site referred to above

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf/LinkView/6C2D26AA2F05B332CA2571E600184C768234596C0DA9C1ADCA256EF60010E43F> provides reporting of prescribed burning by DSE, but appears not to be duplicated on land designated National Parks and Conservation Reserves. Whilst a web site is an effective means of communication provided it is maintained, not all have access to the internet, and therefore monthly or weekly reports need to be published in hard copy. These should be available at State agencies, libraries and through Victoria's network of Regional newspapers.

Whilst there has been great improvements in informing the general public on the situation of burns there is a vast gap in the public's awareness as to the necessity of regular burning.

There needs to be more emphasis on the benefits of fuel reduction burns highlighting not only the safety factor, but the benefits to forest health. Being predominantly a forest issue, prescribed burning has been painted with the same brush as other forest activities that the environmental movement does not agree with. To this end controlled burning has portrayed as an extremely negative impact on forest ecology

To address this TCA would like to see a media campaign that explained the science behind fuel reduction burns as well as monitoring flora and fauna changes after a burn to use in educating the public of the benefits.

#### ***(5) the legislative and regulatory arrangements for prescribed burns and bushfire management;***

In 2002 a voluntary organization formed by groups with an interest in access for recreational and commercial use of public land throughout Victoria published a report critical of the legislative and regulatory framework. The Bush Users Group Victoria Inc concluded:

It is clear that contemporary policies for protecting forest environments are not working. They are misdirected, underfunded and waste scarce resources that should be used on more urgent environmental or social problems. They are also alienating hundreds of thousands of people whose traditional recreational and cultural pursuits are threatened.<sup>10</sup>

This conclusion remains valid today.

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<sup>10</sup> Bush Users Group, 2002, Flaming Parks – The Neighbours from Hell, BUG, Melbourne

In a report on the 2003 fires an organization comprising eminent fire fighters, scientist and ecologists, Forest Fire Victoria offered the following opinion that TCA considers to be still relevant today:

The law currently compromises best practice forest fire management. Fire prevention and fire suppression are inextricably linked and whoever is responsible for fire suppression must be responsible and accountable for fire prevention. The idea that a park manager can use strategies that do not conform to best practice forest fire management or refuse to use strategies that do conform to best practice and yet not be accountable when the strategies contribute to poor forest fire management is absurd. It not only leads to the possibility that land use strategies on parks may be developed and applied by people with inadequate knowledge of forest fire, it puts the manager responsible and accountable for fire suppression in an intolerable position.<sup>11</sup>

A common story amongst firefighting personnel that highlights a vast difference between approaches to fire management between firefighting agencies is of earthmoving equipment being turned away from fire line work because the officer in charge of a particular fire sector believes that the machinery is too big and will do excessive damage to the landscape.

This mentality has been present within firefighting agencies for many years and has lead to countless hectares of forest being needlessly burnt. In times of fire there needs to be a clear understanding for all involved that under utilization of heavy firefighting equipment because of personal beliefs is not acceptable. It is all of the forest that needs protecting in a fire situation and the establishment of a control line, whilst it may have a negative impact on a small area, could save thousands of hectares.

***(6) the effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed fire breaks and containment lines throughout public land areas;***

Permanent Fire breaks, access roads and containment lines are essential tools in fighting wild fire and must be maintained. The fire line along the Monda track, in Toolangi, is a perfect example of what the new system of firebreaks will look like in a couple of years. Most people would not be aware that the track is a strategic fire break and is a result of forward thinking. TCA commends the government for their commitment to undertaking a fire break system and hope to see the program expanded to ensure a better fire fighting system for the future.

Mr. Cheney a recognized expert in fire management has outlined the requirement of effective fire fighting. In the inaugural oration to the Stretton Group he outlined the basic firefighting principles:

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<sup>11</sup> Dexter B & Hodgson A, 2003 The Facts Behind the Fire, Forest Fire Victoria, Melbourne

- Forest fire must be controlled by a bare-earth fire line, burned-out, mopped-up and patrolled for at least three days before the onset of extreme fire weather.
- Fire is easiest to suppress when it is small by fast concentrated initial attack.
- Initial attack will have a better chance of succeeding if it is undertaken by people who have been trained and are skilled in techniques that are appropriate to the fuel being burnt.
- Fuel reduction makes firefighting safer and easier and extends the window of weather conditions under which effective firefighting can be conducted.
- Heavy earth moving equipment is essential for direct firefighting in forest fuel if the fire exceeds the few hectares<sup>12</sup>.

The Stretton Group is an apolitical, not-for-profit group established in December 2003 following the disastrous south east Australian bushfire crisis in 2002/3. The Stretton Group comprises a disparate association of volunteers who support the protection of the natural environment though greater transparency of the public sector processes involved. Named after the respected Royal Commissioner into 1939 Victorian Bushfires, Justice Leonard Stretton, the group proposes that government managed national parks and forests should be provided with a balance sheet value which encapsulates the environmental, cultural and economic value of these assets.

Their views are worthy of consideration in this inquiry.

A gentle reminder of the importance of the timber industry in the provision of fire services is appropriate in this response. At the time this inquiry is taking place it is the timber harvesting contractors who are still working towards establishing permanent fire lines.

It is the knowledge and skills of this diminishing workforce that have kept much of Victoria's forest safe for almost a century. Through pressure from green groups to lock up resource the size of the industry has been quite significantly reduced in turn reducing the number of operators and machines available to fight fires.

It has been the drive for timber products that has opened up the forests, with the majority of forest roads built by the industry. It is this same road network that skiers, bushwalkers and 4w drivers use to pursue their recreations.

Whilst it can be argued that motives for harvesting crews are a financial one, it is their desire to protect the forest to protect their livelihoods that drives harvesting contractors to fight fires.

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<sup>12</sup> Cheney P, 2004, the Green Inferno- The Politics of Bushfires and Conservation, The Stretton Group, Melbourne.

A further reduction in timber resource will mean that harvesting contractors will not be able to supply the personal or the types of equipment that has become a necessity for combating wildfires

***(7) the provision and maintenance of large water points on crown land to assist with bushfire aerial taskforce operations;***

Since the 40's up until the early 80's there was a system of water points in most areas of state forest. Over the course of the last 30 years many of these water points have been filled in or removed as it was believed that with the modernization of firefighting that these dams were no longer necessary.

Whilst these can be of assistance, more emphasis needs to be placed on prevention rather than suppression. Forest fire fighting can never be water dependent. The most effective method of fighting forest fires is constructing containment lines and back burning operations as well as regular fuel reduction burns.

With government opposition to the construction of dams for water consumption it is hard to understand why they would consider constructing large water storages for firefighting purposes. To clearly understand this question the size of water points needs to be clarified.

***(8) the impact of traditional land uses such as timber harvesting, grazing, four-wheel-driving, hunting, camping, mining and prospecting on the scale and intensity of bushfires and the ability of relevant agencies to respond;***

TCA believes that the downsizing of the timber industry has had a significant impact on Victoria's fire management capabilities.

Over the past two decades the number of departmental personal with real knowledge and understanding of the bush has been drastically reduced because of the downsizing of the timber industry in Victoria.

Last December Tricia Caswell, CEO of the Victorian Association of Forest Industries:

“Just fifteen years ago in Eastern Gippsland there were more than 150 forestry staff who knew their patch well and had the equipment and expertise to handle fires in parks and state forests. There are now fewer than 40 experienced departmental staff with considerably less fire management expertise, and the availability of funding, roads and equipment have all seriously diminished”.

“Timber workers make great fire fighters – they know their patch, value the assets of the forest and have a direct interest in its wellbeing. Lightening strikes caught early are much easier to put out if there is access, expertise and equipment available,”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Caswell T, 2006, Media Release Timber Downsizing Impacts Fire Management, VAFI, Melbourne

As a result of the inquiry into the 2003 Victorian fires, the panel noted that

Historical accounts from southern Australia, and direct evidence from central and northern Australia, support the argument that Aborigines used fire as a land management tool. Evidence also suggests that some areas of Australia may not have been subjected to this managed fire because of low human population density and resource availability. Other areas were not burned due to their cultural significance or because they were difficult to burn.<sup>14</sup>

The inquiry failed to make a recommendation in relation to using this traditional knowledge, TCA consider it is appropriate for fire managers to learn from these traditional practices.

There are differing opinions on the contributions of forest user groups. Scientists can be found in support of more active management and others vehemently against it. There can be no denying that when you have user groups that are actively engaged in forest activities they can provide positive assistance in fire prevention.

The maintenance of tracks throughout the forest system is assisted by bush user groups with all user groups contributing many hours in clearing debris and repairing tracks. This ensures access on many tracks that cannot be maintained by government departments.

These groups also contain vast amounts of forest knowledge through their membership and every time there is a forced reduction or negative policy shift that effects any of these groups there is an inevitable flow on effect that means less people actively helping with forest management and a diminishing pool of local knowledge.

The shift to an 'asset protection' mentality has meant that thousands of hectares of forest were burnt unnecessarily. TCA believes that forests are an asset. Not only do they provide jobs and an economy for our members but they are an asset in terms of the biodiversity and environmental benefits forests produce.

It was unjustifiable that many timber communities are now left without a clear picture because their asset and indeed all Victoria's was deemed to be only worth saving when they threatened Melbourne's water supply.

TCA admires the work done to protect private assets but in rural Victoria what good is a house if there are no jobs to pay for your home. A situation many will face over the coming years.

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<sup>14</sup> Dept. Premier & Cabinet, 2003, Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires, DPC, Melbourne

**(9) the provision and maintenance of serviceable access tracks and signage to assist with recreational and emergency requirements;**

Refer comments for Term of Reference 6 and 8

**(10) the impact of climate change on bushfires and public land management practices;**

The Bushfire CRC has recently published a paper on this issue.

A key finding of this study is that an increase in fire-weather risk is likely at most sites in 2020 and 2050, including the average number of days when the Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) rating is very high or extreme. ... The increase in fire-weather risk is generally largest inland.

Importantly the study also “indicates that the window available for prescribed burning may shift and narrow. It is likely that higher fire-weather risk in spring, summer and autumn will increasingly shift periods suitable for prescribed burning toward winter.”

The CRC also qualified their report:

A number of uncertainties remain when assessing potential changes to fire-weather risk associated with climate change. These uncertainties relate to:

- the quality of data for some weather variables
- the possibility of different results arising from the use of other climate models
- changes in seasonal indicators used for fire preparedness planning
- changes in rainfall thresholds required to control fires
- changes in ignition and fuel load
- changes in El Niño-Southern Oscillation events under climate change<sup>15</sup>.

Forestry by growing trees is a major contributor in reducing green house gasses. CO<sub>2</sub> is removed from the atmosphere by trees as they grow and is stored in the forests and in wood products. Growing more trees and placing a value on forests to slow or halt land clearing contributes to the State's ability to combat greenhouse gasses. Whilst Victoria's total greenhouse emissions have increase by 12.6% from the Kyoto base year to 2005, emission due to land clearing have decreased by 30% and for forestry from nil emissions to removing a massive 6.7 Mega tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent gas.<sup>16</sup>

As intense bushfires burn, a large amount of carbon enters the atmosphere - adding to the levels of CO<sub>2</sub> which are contributing to global warming.

The National Association of Forest Industries has identified that

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<sup>15</sup> Hennessy K. et al, 2005, Climate change impacts on fire-weather in south-east Australia, CSIRO, Canberra

<sup>16</sup> Australia's National Greenhouse Accounts, 2007, State and Territory Greenhouse Gas Inventories 2005, Australian Greenhouse Office, Canberra

The 2002-03 bushfire seasons were responsible for the emissions of around 130 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. This is equivalent to around a quarter of Australia's annual greenhouse emissions. Over the 2006/07 season in Victoria alone, around 40 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> has been released into the atmosphere.

This is in stark contrast to carefully managed forestry operations, where only small areas are harvested each year, in varying locations across the landscape. Low intensity prescribed burning is routinely carried out to encourage regeneration of forests and to reduce the risk of damaging high intensity wildfires. This active management approach mimics the natural state of Australia's forests and ensures sustainable biodiversity outcomes through the creation of multiple-aged forests

The key to understanding the full benefits of forestry in the climate debate is realizing that to maximize carbon storage in trees it is necessary to cut them down and use them in wood and paper products. Trees release carbon when they reach a certain age. In our forests the best age for maximization of carbon storage is around 80 years making the placement of a strong timber industry in our native forests a positive in the debate. The presence of this workforce ensures a ready response to any fire situation.

Climate change is a natural occurrence and unfortunately the majority of the public have swallowed the environment movements doomsday scenario and been duped into believing that we must halt this natural process. What must be done is accept that climate change is going to happen and establish practices that enable us to better adapt to the situation.

Locking up vast tracts of forest is of little benefit to anyone and we need to be adopting a more pro active management regime for the sake of our environment.

***(11) whether additional measures are required to provide a mechanism for the skills, knowledge and interests of local communities, and appropriate scientific expertise, to be better represented in the management of bushfire risk on public land;***

What TCA members find frustrating is that the long established rural community and the forest sector seem to know what is needed, but our input is often ignored.

Forest Professional Roger Underwood, summed up our frustration in a paper delivered to the 2007 TCA National Conference:

Australia does not need more helitaks, more water bombers, more infrared gizmos or more overseas fire fighters. What is needed is a fundamental change in bushfire philosophy and governance. Forest managing agencies and fire services must shift their focus from

suppressing running fires to the critical long-term work of pre-emptive and responsible land management. Their job is to make the task of the fire fighter easier and safer, not harder and more dangerous. Arson, Acts of God and possible Global Warming can all be anticipated and steps can be taken to minimise their impact. We know what to do and how to do it.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately too many political decisions are made with the interests of city based voters as the driving force and the impacts to rural communities overlooked. There were two instances during the past fire season that have clearly defined the lack of understanding for rural communities.

The first of these was when the power went in Melbourne. People in bush fire affected areas had spent days without a regular electricity supply or phone communication. Throughout this period it was just a 'can't do much about it, get on with it' attitude. When power supplies were interrupted in Melbourne due to heavy smoke causing an emergency shut off switch to trip the cries of uproar began instantaneously in the suburbs.

The swift response was amazing to this 'disaster' that disrupted coverage of the tennis and cricket. People with no air conditioners complained all the while countless rural communities suffered silently knowing that their minor inconvenience was nothing compared to the greater disaster that was unfolding

As the fire advanced towards Melbourne's water catchments all efforts were thrown into constructing fire lines to stop this happening. Again it was timber harvesting contractors who provided the bulk of the machinery and expertise to build these lines in an effort to help their city cousins.

The fire was checked and did not spread into the catchments but it was amazing to see such a concentrated effort to make sure that the impact on Melbourne was minimal. Many rural communities have been left with inadequate drinking water supplies and if the same effort was put into protecting their catchments they may have remained relatively unaffected.

Travelling through many of these communities and discussing fire related issues, TCA found that the belief of how country people were treated in comparison to their city counterparts a real issue.

### ***(12) the involvement of local communities in the management of fire;***

The local community is a major stakeholder in bush fire management; however they need to be listened to by Government. Often community consultation is about telling rather than listening, as Roger Underwood explained:

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<sup>17</sup> Underwood R, 2007, Bushfire management in Australian forests – confronting a changing environment, TCA, Canberra available at [http://www.tca.org.au/TCA\\_repsub/National/Roger%20Underwoods%20Conference%20paper.pdf](http://www.tca.org.au/TCA_repsub/National/Roger%20Underwoods%20Conference%20paper.pdf)

We are not brand new settlers on this continent. Australian land managers, land owners, foresters and rural workers have been confronting the threat of bushfires for over 200 years, and wild land fire has been the subject of very high quality scientific research over the last 50.

It has been a common point of concern the lack of local input into fire management issues. This was addressed after 2003 and it seems that very little of the measures have been adopted. TCA through its network has been informed of numerous incidents of local foresters and parks staff not being listened to resulting in dangerous situations.

Many contractors have spoken of the lack of willingness, from departmental personal, to use their machinery and instead of asking the contractor how to construct an effective containment line they were directed to build fire lines in terrain where the lines were less than useless.

Local communities can be an asset in fire protection but there needs to be real steps taken to utilize this knowledge and expertise. TCA believes that there is scope to set up a volunteer fire fighting force that would be there for forest fires only.

There are many people who have trained as project firefighters for only one or two seasons as well as many timber industry personal that have vast amounts of fire fighting experience. Many of these people are not members of CFA crews due to time commitments. If a system was put in place that could allow these people to be utilized in an extreme bush fire situation it would alleviate the workload on limited resources.

There is an untapped pool of machinery operators, foresters and project firefighters who would gladly assist in a bushfire crisis if they were permitted. Training requirements would need to be determined although once or twice a year to ensure that a minimum standard is met should be adequate.

The mobilization of this forest fire unit would only occur when a fire met certain criteria. This would avoid any demarcation between paid firefighters and CFA crews and also ensure it was not over utilized.

The establishment of this forest firefighting would allow for a greater level of participation for rural communities.

***(13) any other matter that impacts on the scale and intensity of bushfires in Victoria.***

Roger Underwood again sums up succinctly:

This experience and science have revealed that there are three basic alternative approaches to bushfire management: you can let fires burn, you can try to suppress them, or you can try to replace

“feral” fires with controlled fires. All of these approaches are applicable and appropriate singly or in combination in different parts of the country. The trick is to get the most effective mixture for a particular place at a particular time

This submission cover page refers to the trauma of the community facing the bush fire threat, a personal experience relates to a former manager of Timber Communities Australia in both the 1993 fires and the ones in December 2006. In 1993 it was documented that the community responses included:

Victorian communities rallied to support the fire fighters and those affected by the fires. In areas where the forest industries have a major presence (for example, East Gippsland where 40% of jobs were directly or indirectly dependant on the timber industry), industry members and their families were a significant part of that support.

For example, Bob Humphreys (then VAFI vice president) was Cann River district controller for the State Emergency Service during the fire. Most of the Marysville CFA is employed in the timber industry, a not uncommon occurrence in tightly-knit, self-reliant rural communities.

Helen Hoppner is the Victorian co-coordinator of the Forest Protection Society (FPS), a timber industry support group. She and her husband operate a logging contracting business. Helen is also a local Red Cross emergency services volunteer.<sup>18</sup>

Last December the current TCA Victorian Manager, Scott Gentle, advised members:

Yesterday afternoon was a very scary time for people in the line of the Coopers Creek fire heading in the Glengarry, Toongabbie, Cowwarr, Hefield and Maffra region. We received so many calls from people inquiring about the safety of Helen Hoppner (former TCA State Manager and of course the owner of the TCA/Timbertrek Bash Car) who owns the pub with her husband Terry in Cowwarr. We also had people ringing inquiring about the safety of the ITC Mill in Heyfield.

To save on phone calls we thought we would just let you all know that both Helen and the Heyfield mills are fine. Unfortunately this isn't the same case for many in the region with houses and sheds lost.

I spoke to Helen this morning, who said she has never felt so helpless. For anyone that knows Helen, you would know this is very the case with her as she is always leading any fight, but in this instance she said the sky was black in the afternoon, you couldn't see anything except the lights from the fire trucks and the choppers flying around. Helen said it was like you would imagine doomsday or

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<sup>18</sup> Victorian Association of Forest Industries, 1993, Forests, Fire and the Timber Industry, VAFI, Melbourne

Veitnam, she was standing the front lawn of the pub with a hose that she said "*she could piss harder than*" and had people around her completely at a loss of what they could do.

Helen opened the pub up to families who were warned to leave their properties as their husbands were off fighting fires in other parts of the state. She said she had women, kids and 'bloody dogs' everywhere in the pub and she cooked until 4am this morning.<sup>19</sup>

This example has been selected as it spans to the two fires, it is representative of the leadership shown throughout the community by many Victorians as they faced the fire threat.

The community depends on the efforts of volunteer fire fighters and TCA requests that this review also endorse the recommendations from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management in 2004. Section 12 of that report<sup>20</sup> made a number of recommendations including volunteer representation, legal protection, taxation concessions, employer support, training, recruitment and retention.

Timber Communities Australia invites the Committee to visit the bush fire prone areas, and seek to host committee members on a tour of the region and to meet community members to gather information and to hear first hand the opinions of our members.

Timber communities are first affected by bush fire as they live near and work in our forests. The positive role that the forest industry can play in the management of forest fires is best summed up in a Statement made over twenty years ago (1985) by forest workers, harvesters, saw millers and professional foresters-

"Australia is one of the most fire prone areas in the world. The Forest Products Industry has played a vital role in the management of these forests having built or contributed to the building of several thousand kilometres of forest roads - a state asset which permits access for fire suppression.

The industry also provides readily available on site machines and experienced operators for fire fighting."

"In Victoria the most productive hardwood forests are fire climax species which rely on widespread intense wildfire for regeneration. Timber harvesting operations can offer a controlled, small scale alternative method to the regeneration of these fire climax species without the hazards associated with wildfires"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Gentle, Scott TCA Vic Manager, Email to Members 15 Dec 2006, Fire Update

<sup>20</sup> The Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2004 Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management Australian Government Canberra

<sup>21</sup> VAFI, 1993, Forests, Fire and the Timber Industry, Victorian Association of Forest Industries, Melbourne

## Summary

The fires of 2006/7 burnt mainly in forested areas. Be it dumb luck or good management only one life was lost. Successive dry years may have added fuel to the fire but it also restricted fire movements as many pastured areas were only stubble and not the long dry grass of most years.

This committee into the issue of fire management has an opportunity to review many of the procedures regarding the fires. I have only scratched the surface as to the many complex issues around fire management but there has been a clear message from many of our members.

They believe it is time to look at changing management practices for all the forest estate and bring in a system that allows for active forest management. It is time that communities in these areas are given a greater say in decisions that directly place their communities in jeopardy.

The voice of country people is often drowned out by the noise of the city. You have an opportunity to make sure their voice is heard within Government.

If there is an opportunity to discuss these complex issues further TCA would appreciate the chance as this paper does little justice to the angst and pain felt in many rural communities.

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