

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Australian Forest Products Association

Date received: 20/01/2014

20 January 2014

The Director (Mr Stewart Smith)
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

(e) gpscno5@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Stewart,

Submission on the NSW Parliament's Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire

The Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the NSW Parliament's Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire.

AFPA is the peak national body for Australia's forest, wood and paper products industry. We represent the industry's interests to governments, the general public and other stakeholders on matters relating to the sustainable development and use of Australia's forest, wood and paper products.

AFPA has provided input into several bushfire inquiries over the past 5 years. In keeping with the approach taken in our previous input this submission is nationally focused, applicable to all fire-prone environments, and identifies issues of direct relevance to this inquiry.

AFPA member organisations include significant land and forest managers (of plantation, native forest and other land) across Australia, including the Forestry Corporation of NSW, Hume Forests, Murray River Forests, New Forests, South East Fibre Exports and the NSW Forest Products Association, all based in NSW.

These members have a significant current and historical role in fire management on a landscape scale (across differing land tenures, land uses, and fuel types) including fire detection, fire suppression, fire policy input, fire planning and fire management on land directly managed by them and on adjacent land tenures. These activities require significant ongoing investment and resources, commensurate with forest asset value and fire risk.

AFPA member organisations' general fire planning and management philosophy includes the following objectives:

- active protection of intensively managed, high value plantation and native forest assets sensitive to fire;
- minimising ignition from forest operations by implementing a graduated scale of operations' closures based on the forecast fire danger index;
- active fire prevention strategies such as fuel reduction programs, fire access trails, and fire-breaks to enable access and to reduce the intensity of fires;
- active fire suppression (including detection) on forest (both plantation and native forest) and the adjacent landscape;
- investment in fire resources including trained people, infrastructure, and plant and equipment;
- close involvement in the adjacent rural community to build and maintain relationships; and
- co-operative landscape-based fire management with neighbours, relevant stakeholders, and other fire agencies.

AFPA members with their depth of fire management experience and practical application are in a unique position to comment not only on fire management as it directly affects their businesses but also on fire management as practiced by other organisations and land managers.

In contrast to other interest groups who have sold Australia the nonsense that to 'lock it up' is the most environmentally friendly approach to our naturally regrowing forests, AFPA supports the proposition that a carefully but actively managed multiple use forest is a win-win for the community, where trees are carefully removed and used by forest industries, opening up roads for firefighting operations and reducing fuel load, along with well-planned and targeted preventive fuel reduction burns.

The International Panel for Climate Change¹ says "Forest fire prevention and suppression capacities are rudimentary in many developing countries, but trial projects show that with sufficient resources and training, significant reductions in forest fires can be achieved".

During the election campaign, the Prime Minister announced that \$15 million would be directed into a 'National Bushfire Mitigation Program'. AFPA argues that this should include better suppression and fuel reduction activities, including the role of fuel reduction burns and active management via the physical removal of fuel loads.

¹ Nabuurs, G.J., O. Masera, K. Andrasko, P. Benitez-Ponce, R. Boer, M. Dutschke, E. Elsiddig, J. Ford-Robertson, P. Frumhoff, T. Karjalainen, O. Krankina, W.A. Kurz, M. Matsumoto, W. Oyantcabal, N.H. Ravindranath, M.J. Sanz Sanchez, X. Zhang, 2007: Forestry. In Climate Change 2007: Mitigation. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [B. Metz, O.R. Davidson, P.R. Bosch, R. Dave, L.A. Meyer (eds)], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA (Chapter 9 – Page 569).

In the United States, the Californian 'Rim' fire and the Arizona fire which tragically claimed 19 lives in 2013, sparked community anger. The question that was asked over and over is "what could have made these fires more manageable?"

John Buckley, the executive director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center told Reuters that if the US National Park Service had a tree-thinning process it, "would have inarguably made the Rim Fire far easier to contain, far less expensive and possibly not even a major disaster".

This is the truth we need to listen to, learn from and act on accordingly. We can't go on pretending the answer is a choice between 'lock it up and hope for the best' and just 'set it on fire in winter and pray the wind doesn't pick up.' We must reduce the fuel load, particularly near human settlement so that when bushfires happen, they don't become the raging infernos that we see too often. Best practice sees fuel reduction burns combined with mechanical fuel reduction - literally taking the fuel away from the living forest.

AFPA has long advocated that ongoing active fuel reduction in identified priority areas, is critical to long-term bushfire mitigation in Australia. Further, there has been too strong a focus on fire suppression in isolation, rather than the associated importance of active fire prevention activities conducted on a landscape scale.

These issues are discussed in more detail in AFPA's 'Brief on Bushfire Mitigation and Fuel Reduction' (Attachment 1). This outlines international and national approaches to fire management and lists a range of recommendations in the context of the Federal Government's current policy initiatives, for consideration by the inquiry and potential adoption and/or support by the NSW Government.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment to the NSW Parliament's Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire.

ATTACHMENT 1:

BRIEF ON BUSHFIRE MITIGATION AND FUEL REDUCTION

Background

- Bushfires are a major issue for the environment, public safety, communities and the forest based industries. For example, the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria tragically resulted in the death of 173 people, the loss of over 1 million native and domestic animals and the burning of \$600 million of commercial eucalypt ash forests and destruction of five sawmills.
- Over the past decade there have been numerous state and national public inquiries² into the inadequacy of bushfire mitigation including inadequate levels of fuel reduction, particular in formal conservation areas (e.g. national parks).
- The average annual area burnt from bushfires in Australia has doubled over the past decade, largely as a result of a number of very large hot fires, while the area treated for fuel reduction has declined over the same period (refer Figures below).
- AFPA has advocated for better fuel reduction activities across all forest tenures (i.e. national parks, state forests and private land). Most recently, AFPA presented evidence to the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Bushfires (2010)³ regarding the inadequacy of fuel reduction and the lack of a strategic approach to the use of preventative land management measures.

Overseas and Western Australian experience

- Research in Western Australia⁴ and the United States⁵ has shown that fuel reduction can be effective at reducing the severity and extent of future wildfires (and associated reductions in wildfire carbon emissions) if undertaken at the right spatial scale and time intervals.
- The United States and Canada have adopted a more active approach to fuel reduction over the past decade in recognition of the risks from increasing forest fuel loads and hotter and drier conditions (i.e. climatic trends). There is also public concern regarding the recent trend of very hot 'mega-fires'.

² Parliament of New South Wales Inquiry into the 2001/2002 Bushfires; House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires 2003; Council of Australian Governments National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management 2004; Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission 2009; Senate Inquiry into Bushfires in Australia 2010.

³ Stephens M (2010). Bushfire, forests and land management policy under a changing climate. *Farm Policy Journal* 7: 11-19.

⁴ Sneeuwjagt RJ et al (2013). Opportunities for improved fire use and management in California: lessons from Western Australia. *Fire Ecology* 9: 14-24.

⁵ Hartsough BR et al (2008). The economics of alternative fuel reduction treatments in western United States dry forests: Financial and policy implications from the National Fire and Surrogate Study. *Forest Policy and Economics* 10: 344-354.

- In the United States there has been strong bipartisan support for the Healthy Forests Initiative since 2003 and subsequent Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Programme (CFLRP), which aims to restore forest lands to more fire-resilient ecological conditions and reduce suppression (i.e. fire-fighting) costs and losses to natural assets and property.
- These US initiatives have:
 - streamlined planning requirements for fuel reduction activities on US federal lands (primarily the National Forests reserve system);
 - devoted significant financial resources to forest restoration and fuel reduction activities (including the \$400 million CFLRP); and
 - promoted the combined use of prescribed burning and harvesting of excess trees and forest biomass. The pro-active removal of biomass is undertaken to reduce fuel loads, produce renewable bioenergy and promote the development of relevant forestry industries and regional economic development.
- A system of 'stewardship' contracts has been put in place to ensure contractors deliver the required forest conditions, while the products harvested help offset the net costs of treatment for the land management agencies.
- If implemented appropriately, fuel treatments can:
 - reduce the predicted frequency and severity of future fires;
 - restore forests and woodlands to more fire-resilient ecological conditions;
 - reduce fire suppression costs;
 - reduce wildfire carbon emissions, and
 - promote the use of renewable bioenergy and regional development⁶.

AFPA national recommendations that the NSW Government can support and implement:

- Holistic fire management on a landscape scale stands the best chance of reducing the number of fire incidents, fire intensity, the rate of spread of fires that do occur, and consequently the community impacts.

⁶ See: Stephens S et al (2012). Fuel treatment impacts on estimated wildfire carbon loss from forests in Montana, Oregon, California, and Arizona. *Ecosphere* 3 (5): 1-17.

Thompson et al (2013). Quantifying the potential impacts of fuel treatments on wildfire suppression costs. *Journal of Forestry* 111: 49-58.

Attiwell PM and Adams MA (2012). Mega-fires, inquiries and politics in the eucalypt forests of Victoria, south-eastern Australia. *Forest Ecology and Management* 294: 45-53.

- The \$15 million of new investment over three years announced by the Federal Government to implement a National Bushfire Mitigation Programme (NBMP) including long term bushfire mitigation strategies and better fuel reduction programmes is strongly supported.
- It is critically important that the fuel reduction targets of the state land management agencies be maintained and increased to be effective at landscape and local levels (e.g. close to high value assets such as rural population centres at the forest 'interface').
- The NBMP should also evaluate the US approach as a model that could be adopted and modified to suit Australian conditions, given similar issues and challenges for long term bushfire mitigation. These issues include:
 - increasing biomass fuel loads and vegetation thickening;
 - predictions of increases in extreme fire rating danger days in Australia of up to 25% and 70% by 2020 and 2050 respectively; and
 - a previous history of regular Aboriginal burning.
- A pilot scheme should also be established to look into the greater use of combined biomass harvesting and prescribed burning treatments as in the case in the United States and Canada. The advantages of a combined treatment approach include:
 - better air quality from lower prescribed burns;
 - reduced risks of fire escape from prescribed fires (recognising the increasingly narrow window for effective burn days);
 - the promotion of renewable energy from the available biomass and associated economic development; and
 - the potential for lower net carbon emissions.

Figures: Area of wildfires and prescribed burns in Australia (1990-2010)

