

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Submission from Chris Commins to General Purpose Standing Committee No 5 Wambelong Fire.

My name is Chris Commins and I write this submission as a person with a lifelong interest in Public Land Management.

The issues and concerns of those concerned with the Wombelong fire are not dissimilar wherever you go in Australia. The overriding common factor is excessive fuel loads.

I am a past President of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV), currently the MCAV representative on the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industry (DEPI) Land and Fire Roundtable. I am also a member of the National Parks Alpine Advisory Committee (ACC).

I was born in 1954 and have lived and worked almost all my life in the High Country of Eastern Victoria, near Omeo.

Mountain cattlemen and their families have intergenerational skills in the management of our high country. We are well qualified to comment on and explain fire fuel mitigation alternatives on our public land. As the owner of earthmoving equipment I am also contracted to DEPI as a Primary Fire Fighting Contractor and have been involved with every major fire in Eastern Victoria over the last 40 years, as well as numerous minor fires. I am also a member of the Country Fire Authority, with 40 years service. I have extensive experience in fire, fire behaviour, fire control and fire mitigation.

Fire has been an integral part of the Australian landscape for millennia and is little understood by most Australians. This lack of understanding has been manifested by almost a century of

bureaucratic ignorance and mismanagement. 'Bushfire' is a misnomer when describing wildfire. Bushfires should be seen as our friend, and wildfires, variously described as feral fires or mega fires, as our enemy. It is important to learn from our history.

Mountain cattlemen have a healthy respect for their environment. They survived because they were good observers of nature, learned from the Aborigines and continued the practice of firestick farming. Lightning was allowed to run its course. Over the years, the cattlemen continued with the Aboriginal fire regimes and kept the grass trimmed down on their selections and, very importantly, on their runs. Grazing cattle did this in the higher altitudes, while cattlemen concentrate their burning on the lower, scrubbiest sections of their runs. The grazed grasslands therefore remained short and green throughout the summer, and the cool fires reduced fuel loads and kept the land as open as the cattlemen found it left by the Aborigines. This in turn reduced the intensity of an inevitable wildfire, which cattlemen knew had the potential to threaten the grasslands with hot damaging fire events if fuel loads were not well controlled.

In 1890 Alfred Howitt, naturalist, scholar and explorer, delivered a document, *The eucalypts of Victoria*, to the Royal Society of Victoria. It was a paper on the changing forest patterns and declining arboreal vitality. Driving the transformations, he said, was the cessation of burning by Aborigines, 'to whom we owe more than is generally surmised'. Forest were open and well grassed before Europeans arrived, Howitt said, because of regular burning by the Aborigines, either accidentally or intentionally, when traveling or for the purpose of hunting. The annual bushfires tended to keep the forest open and prevent the open country from being overgrown. However, the influence of these bushfires also acted in another direction- namely, as a check on insect life, destroying, among others, those insects which prey upon the eucalypts.

With closer settlement, the practice of firestick farming was reined in. In about 1920, patch burning was banned by the newly formed Forests Commission of Victoria. This was ignored for many years by the cattlemen, who knew the directive was not sound management. Eventually, stronger application of the no fires rule meant cattlemen gradually ceased the practice. Many abandoned their runs as the land scrubbed up and became impractical, overgrown and dangerous.

Those who lived and worked in the high country have always known that, under modern management- which arguably began in 1920- some areas become unsuited to even cool burning because they have increasing fuel loads. Hot fires in these areas would destroy the environment. In the absence of Aborigines, the cattlemen knew the answer was grazing and cool fire.

The areas not particularly suited to cool burning under modern management include most of the higher snowgrass plains in the mountain and alpine ash country. Where those areas were grazed, however, they enjoyed reduced fuel loads in the event of a wildfire. As outlined earlier, before settlement these higher, sensitive areas were burnt regularly, but mostly only with cool fires. Now that the lower areas do not have a regular cool burn, as the Aborigines carried out or were done by nature, the higher areas needed intervention and management of fuel. It is needed because hot wildfire from the lower altitudes in the middle of the summer will carry across the upper level grasslands that are not grazed, with disastrous environmental results.

After 1920 the build-up of fuel began, especially on the non-grazed areas of the high country. The lack of patchwork burning and cattle grazing mean that vegetation grew unchecked and gradually choked the forest with a scrubby understory which shaded out the grasses and changed the viable landscape and environment forever.

Wildfires, which still occur regularly, increased in intensity, causing increased environmental damage because they were too hot.

Today the greatest threat to the alpine park is another mega fire. I hate to say it, but it is coming sooner rather than later. It is not climate change that is the problem; it is fuel loads. It is the only factor we can control. In many areas, and that includes Kosciusko National Park, I see fuel loads many times greater than prior to the 2003 fires. To help mitigate this threat, government and people opposed to alpine grazing need to take their blinkers off and return cattle to the park. Every tool in the management toolbox should be used. Grazing and cool fire are complimentary and go hand in hand with good management.

As stated, the greatest threat to any National Park and surrounding areas is wild fire. Fuel loads are the only factor we can control. Governments must increase the areas of prescribed burning.

To this end, I urge the Standing Committee to read The Peoples Review of Bushfires 2002 – 2007. In Victoria, Final Report 2009. This was compiled by two eminent scientists, Professor Peter Attiwell and David Packham along with Tim Barker and Ian Hamilton. The report has advice and recommendations Governments Australia wide could disseminate and learn from.

Sincerely,

Chris Commins