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VFBV Response: Land & Fuel Management, Planned Burning

2009 Bushfires Royal Commission Submission

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria makes the following submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION**Letters Patent issued 16 February 2009**

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**RESPONSE TO SUBMISSION OF COUNSEL ASSISTING
LAND AND FUEL MANAGEMENT
PLANNED BURNING**

1. VFBV makes this brief submission in response to the submission of Counsel Assisting the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission ("the Commission"), titled 'Land and Fuel Management, Planned Burning'. VFBV supports the findings and proposed recommendations set out in that submission.
2. VFBV contends further that where public land adjoins residentially developed communities fuel reduction measures should be undertaken with the sole and specific objective of affording maximum protection to that community. This is consistent with the views of a number of the Expert Panel (Cheney, et al) who acknowledge that in these circumstances "*trade-offs*" may be or are necessary to achieve the priority of protection of lives.
3. VFBV also supports the recommendation made by Counsel Assisting at paragraph 10.19 to increase the annual target for planned burning on public land. VFBV is of the strong belief that a significant increase in planned burning is necessary to reduce the impact of wildfire on lives, private property, and community infrastructure. VFBV made submissions in relation to this issue, amongst other matters, to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee's Inquiry into the Impact of Public

Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria in May 2007. A copy of this Submission is attached.

4. Further, VFBV has expressed on several occasions a willingness on the part of the CFA brigades to assist the DSE in undertaking prescribed burning on public land, as well as assisting private landholders who may need to burn off vegetation fuel on their land. However, as previously outlined to the Commission, this support is dependent on a degree of flexibility in relation to when burning occurs.
5. The majority of the evidence adduced at the Commission to date, including that of the Expert Panel has been focussed on prescribed burning as a fuel management tool on public, rather than private, land. VFBV is concerned that in focusing on public land, the following points have largely been ignored;
 - There are significant tracts of private land throughout Victoria that are not just comprised of grass or crop as is suggested by Dr. Tolhurst.¹ That is to say, there are large tracts of private land throughout Victoria that are comprised of forest, or are otherwise heavily vegetated. VFBV is of the view that a debate about fuel reduction that does not seek to address fuel management on private land is almost meaningless;
 - The damage caused by wildfire and the risk posed by wildfire to life, private property and public infrastructure is not exclusive to wildfire that occurs on public land;
 - The CFA's responsibility for fire prevention and the protection of life and property on private land embraces more than 50% of all land within the State;
 - The CFA is responsible for the protection of life and property against bushfires regardless of the whether the relevant fire started on private or public land.
 - The CFA is a major stakeholder in determining appropriate measures to reduce the spread of fires on both public and private land, however there has been very limited debate, if any, in relation to fuel management on private land;
 - Whilst the initial impact of fire in any particular community may in some cases be transmitted from public land, the continued propagation of fire within a

¹ Tolhurst T15214

particular community occurs from either vegetation within the community, predominantly on private land and from ember attack resulting from these and other urban fuels (house to house or structure to structure). Hobart 1967, Canberra 2003, Marysville 2009.

- Fuel management on private land is a serious issue that must be addressed. Wildfire spread through private land poses a significant threat to communities during serious wildfire events. Fuel reduction on public land is obviously beneficial. However, if fuel reduction on private land within residentially developed communities is not addressed, once wildfire reaches private land within those communities it can and does spread quickly and in a manner that is extremely difficult to abate. This point is evidenced by the history of fires in the Dandenong Ranges, Macedon Ranges, Hobart (1967), Western District (1977), Ash Wednesday (1983), Canberra 2003 and the Victorian fires of the 2008/09 fire season and many others;
6. Any debate on the issue of fuel management that does not consider the issue of fuel reduction on private land is seriously lacking as it fails to address the principal source of fire spread (and resulting property damage and loss of life) from uncontrolled fire in the urban rural interface.
 7. VFBV draws the attention of the Commission to proposals that emerge from the strategic intent of the Integrated Fire Management Project. The intent is to treat the landscape holistically, rather than managing private and public areas of land according to disjointed regimes determined by the particular land management agency (and the primary objective to be achieved in managing that land, according to the particular agency). This holistic objective is highlighted in the statement of Mr. Fogarty.²
 8. VFBV considers that there is an opportunity for more integrated fire prevention planning which embraces both private and public land. This could be achieved by vesting in a single agency clear lines of authority and responsibility for fire prevention planning across the whole landscape. The powers and responsibilities of such a single agency should be created by legislation rather than in inter department agreements or statements of policy.

² Supplementary Statement of Fogarty (WIT.3024.005.0143 [31])

9. VFBV submits that fire prevention planning objectives for which such a single agency would be responsible should be driven by clearly established priorities which include, as the highest priority, the protection of human life.
10. VFBV considers that the CFA should be the single agency responsible for fire prevention planning across the whole landscape. The CFA is impartial and independent from any organisation or individual who owns or manages land and has ultimate responsibility to deal with the residual risk treatment strategy of fire suppression when fire threatens communities, life and property.
11. Public land managers should remain responsible for the implementation of fire prevention measures and risk mitigation in accordance with the directions set by the single agency after consultation with the public land managers. Such an arrangement would provide clearer lines of accountability for the implementation of planning and mitigation objectives.

8 April 2010