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SUBMISSION TO NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

Introduction:

The Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition (CVCC) is a community group based in the Clarence Valley in the NSW Northern Rivers. Formed in 1988, the CVCC has been involved with environmental issues – both locally and further afield – since that time. It has an ongoing interest in bushfires and their impact on the natural world. A number of its members were impacted by the bushfires in the Clarence Valley.

Clarence Valley Impacts:

The Clarence Valley was seriously impacted by the bushfires during the last months of 2019.

- The most significant human impact was at Nymboida, 44 km south-west of Grafton, which was devastated with around 80 homes and many outbuildings lost to the Liberation Trail fire. Other areas to the south, west and north were also threatened and sustained mostly outbuilding loss.
- The Sydney-Brisbane rail line to the north was closed on several occasions¹ because of the fires.
- Many local roads were closed as well as major roads, some for extended periods², because of fire activity. This resulted in disruption to commercial transport as well as community movement.
- For months residents in the Clarence Valley and other Northern Rivers LGAs suffered from the heavy smoke pollution which lay across the region.
- Both the Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour were forced to go onto Level 4 water restrictions for a short time in November because of the fire-related interruption to the power supply to Shannon Creek Dam near Coutts Crossing.
- The impact on biodiversity in our area has been substantial because of the extent of the burning – particularly of natural vegetated areas. In an area recognized by the

¹ The rail line was closed in August and again in October 2019 because of fires in the Rappville area north of Grafton.

² Major roads closed for extended periods were the Gwydir Highway to the west and the Armidale Road.

Australian Government as part of one of Australia's 15 National Biodiversity Hotspots³, this impact has been devastating.

Climate Change:

For years Australia and its leaders have been warned of the risk of more intense bushfires and longer bushfire seasons driven by climate change. Unfortunately these warnings from years ago and the more recent ones from former fire chiefs like Greg Mullins were ignored. And this is why we were unprepared for the catastrophic fires that have caused so much damage to so many people as well as to our natural environment. Hopefully the lesson has finally been learnt.

The major lesson is that we cannot continue to ignore the steadily increasing impacts of climate change. In early January Ross Garnaut, one of those who issued earlier warnings, pointed out that Australia has a stronger interest in moving to net zero emissions than any other developed country in the world because it is the most vulnerable of all developed countries.⁴

This means that all levels of government must take effective action to curb carbon emissions. "Effective" means that business as usual and cosmetic tinkering with the status quo will not produce the emission cuts that are necessary.

Even if all levels of Australian governments adopt radical measures to curb emissions – and other countries also significantly lower theirs – it will be years before there is an appreciable change in the heating of the globe and a turnaround in all the other climate change impacts.

So, given that the extreme bushfire situation is very likely to continue, effective preparedness for what is to come in ensuing bushfire seasons is vital.

Obviously this Inquiry will be able to provide the NSW Government with a range of scientifically based options that, if adopted, could assist in minimizing the effects of future fire seasons.

Hazard Reduction:

The CVCC recognises that hazard reduction is essential in protecting built and other assets from fires. However what the CVCC does dispute is the fact that hazard reduction has become synonymous with fuel reduction burning.

Mechanical hazard reduction and maintenance of asset protection zones is often forgotten in the debate. Consistent with the NSW Planning for Bushfire Protection, these asset protection zones are best located proximate to the assets requiring protection. But they

³ <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/conservation/hotspots/national-biodiversity-hotspots#hotspot3>

⁴ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/how-a-climate-change-study-from-12-years-ago-warned-of-this-horror-bushfire-season>

need to be maintained by slashing/mowing. The fact that asset protection zones throughout the pine plantations close to Whiporie supported vast swards of long dry whiskey grass (*Andropogon virginicus*) possibly contributed to the loss of these important public assets.

Support for mechanical hazard reduction should not be construed as support for logging (or ‘thinning’) of our forests. This mechanical damage within forests would open up the canopy to wind and sunlight and cause a significant drying of the environment. It would also encourage a dense layer of regrowth which would increase fuel loads and more readily support fire. It should be noted that some of the fires this season (e.g. the Border Fire in the far south of NSW and the Long Gully Fire in the far north) more readily burnt in areas of post-logging regrowth.

Hazard reduction burns in areas remote from the assets and properties which need protection does not assist in the protection of those assets. Simple hazard reduction targets based on the area burnt is meaningless. It simply puts pressure on public land management agencies to carry out large and remote hazard reduction burns involving a large number of hectares. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has consistently carried out between 75%-80% of the state’s hazard reduction burns over the past decade, even though it manages only 9% of the state. Burning in strategic fire advantage zones to remove flammable fuels needs to be done close to the assets at risk. Such burns need to be carefully planned and implemented.

One of the recurring issues in the Clarence Valley is the seemingly uncontrolled application of fire on rural holdings in the weeks leading up to the introduction of the permit season on 1 September. Many of these become out of control and evolve into wildfires. In 2019-20, the local Bushfire Management Committee decided against introducing permits on 1 August. Within a week there was the first of the fire emergencies declared under S.44 of the Rural Fires Act and we had the first of many visits from the new very large air tanker (VLAT) to control a fire at Whitemans Creek near Copmanhurst.

The Opportunity for Hazard Reduction Burns is Diminishing:

The inquiry will receive submissions from those claiming that “greenies” and environmentalists have somehow prevented fuel reduction burning. This claim is made by those with an agenda to deny climate change.

Climate change is the single biggest factor in limiting planned burns: higher temperatures, drier fuel and strong winds in autumn and spring making it unsafe to burn. A shorter timeframe for safe burning – not “debate by environmentalists” – is the overwhelming factor.

With this shorter timeframe any hazard reduction burning needs to be targeted to achieve the maximum benefit for asset protection – and that is another argument against setting any areal target.

Effectiveness of Hazard Reduction Burning:

There have been concerns about the general effectiveness of hazard reduction burning.

Listed below are comments on its effectiveness by two individuals with experience in the recent bushfires.

Dailan Pugh, North East Forest Alliance, in “A Fiery Future”, November 2019

“There is a belief that we need to burn forests more frequently to reduce fire threat, though it only takes 2-4 years for leaf litter to build up, and in extreme events prescribed burning does little to stop the spread of fire. It is telling that 150,000 ha of the area burnt this year has been burnt either in wildfires or prescribed burns in the past 3 years, with 73,000 ha burnt in the previous 12 months.”⁵

Carol Sparks, resident of Wytaliba and mayor of Glen Innes Severn Council, in “We’ve been in bushfire hell in Glen Innes – and the scientists knew it was coming.”

“Already there are armchair experts ready with free advice about meeting with disaster. Let it be made perfectly clear that all the area that burned has already been a fire ground for two months. There were hazard reduction and backburns under state authority last month and last year. The properties were all well-prepared and extensively defended. People who have lived with fire risk for decades knew exactly what to do, and they did it. The full expertise and advice of fire controllers has been heeded at every turn.”⁶

The experts are also wary about regarding hazard reduction as the panacea. Media articles⁷ over recent months have highlighted the view of RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and others⁸ who have pointed out that hazard reduction does not always work and that extreme weather will often render it ineffective.

The CVCC believes that it is crucial that decisions about mitigating bushfire risk are based on current scientific evidence rather than on the simplistic (“This is the way we’ve always done it.”) views of non-experts.

⁵ Published in two parts on the Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition Blog on Monday 9 December 2019 - <http://clarencevalleycc.blogspot.com/2019/12/a-fiery-future-part-2.html> (Originally emailed on the North Coast Environment Council Friends list.)

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/11/weve-been-in-bushfire-hell-in-glen-innes-and-the-scientists-knew-it-was-coming>

For more on Wytaliba hazard reduction see also <https://www.gleninnesexaminer.com.au/story/6492701/opinion-we-did-burnoffs-badja-sparks-hits-back/>

⁷ Shane Fitzsimmons’ views are stated in https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/08/hazard-reduction-is-not-a-panacea-for-bushfire-risk-rfs-boss-says?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

⁸ Two further examples: Brian Gilligan, former Director-General of NSW NPWS, discusses hazard reduction in <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/6503844/hazard-reduction-debate-simply-frustrating/> Professor Brian Lamont in <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/why-prescribed-burns-dont-stop-wildfires-20200122-p53t19.html>

Bushfire Strategies and Resourcing

Time and time again this season, fire containment strategies failed. Drought-ravaged rainforests were no longer fire advantages, backburns escaped and led to even hotter and more expansive fires, and retardant drops were made too far in advance of the fire front and when dried had no effect in stopping fires in high fuel areas. The toolbox of fire suppression tactics needs to be updated and properly resourced. Of key importance is air-attack and remote area firefighting teams in the initial stages of a fire – when they are small and can be contained.

During the lengthy fire season there was some debate about whether the front line fire fighters had the appropriate equipment for the difficult job they were undertaking and whether government funding had been cut to these important services. Obviously this needs to be investigated during this inquiry as do the claims made by Greg Mullins about the government ignoring warnings about the heightened fire risk and calls for leasing additional air tankers.⁹

Building standards:

Of key importance to protect built assets from fire are the promotion and strict implementation of building standards to withstand fires. Our housing stock in all rural areas (and other fire-prone areas in suburbia) needs to be built and maintained with a view to minimising both their susceptibility to ember attack and direct flame. This requires simple rooflines, enclosed subfloor spaces, windows of toughened glass and metal flyscreens. It also requires maintenance of surrounding gardens in a low fuel state.

The CVCC membership includes those whose houses followed these simple principles and survived even though their properties were subject to hot wildfire attacks. One member recounts the surprise of the RFS Building Impact Assessment Team that their house survived unscathed even though there was no attempt to defend it.

The role of invasive weeds:

As noted in Hazard Reduction above, whiskey grass (*Andropogon virginicus*) is a highly flammable weed. It has successfully invaded habitat on nutrient-poor soils in much of eastern NSW due to its low requirement for phosphorus. As a perennial, it dries after setting seed and remains excellent fuel for fires. It not only alters the natural fire regimes in grasslands, woodlands and forests, its spread is stimulated by fire, so its coverage increases with each fire. It should be identified as a priority for control as a means of reducing the intensity of future fires.

⁹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/come-with-me-to-the-mega-blaze-scott-morrison-and-see-what-we-re-up-against-20191216-p53kcp.html>

Of increasing concern is the spread of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris* syn. *Pennisetum cenchroides*) in arid and semi-arid parts of New South Wales. This is setting these parts of NSW for a major conflagration.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity, which has been under threat for multiple reasons in recent years, has been heavily impacted by the fires.

For this reason it is important that special measures be taken to minimize future fire risks to our biodiversity as much as possible.

There is a need for a comprehensive inventory of environmental assets, including the locations of threatened species and endangered ecological communities which are then included as environmental assets in Bushfire Risk Management Plans. Treatments to reduce the risk to these assets must be identified where possible.

Following major fires, post-fire environmental recovery actions needed include targeted recovery for threatened species and ecological communities which are listed as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. These recovery actions must consider pest species, weeds, minimizing erosion and maintaining water quality.

Regrettably this post fire activity referred to in the last paragraph has not happened to the extent required after the recent fires. It would have made sense to have had a moratorium on all logging in forests impacted by the recent fires to allow assessment of the biodiversity impacts.

Instead the Forestry Corporation has been engaging in business as usual.

The CVCC is particularly concerned about its logging of the unburnt habitat of the endangered Hastings River Mouse in the Styx River State Forest east of Armidale. This species was identified by the NSW Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment as the third most fire impacted threatened animal in NSW with 82% of its known localities burnt. The federal Wildlife and Threatened Species Bushfire Recovery Special Panel has also identified this species as being in need of emergency action over the coming weeks and months. It identified 'protecting unburnt areas within or adjacent to recently burnt ground that provides refuges' as 'essential'. The Styx River State Forest provides very important habitat for the Hastings River Mouse with 200 of the 1,000 localities ever identified for this species within its boundaries. The fact that the Forestry Corporation has been permitted to log in the only five locations that escaped burning in the Styx River State Forest is a disgrace.

In Brief – Some Other Matters Requiring Attention in Bushfire Planning

Health Issues – A couple of examples :

- the demands on RFS volunteers (many of whom are not young) during an extended bushfire season

- the general community in relation to the dense pall of bushfire smoke suffered for months in some cases (e.g. in the Clarence Valley).

Critical Infrastructure Issues –

- Water supply - contamination of dams
- Power supplies
- Communications – mobile phone issues

Conclusion:

The Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition looks forward to a report from this inquiry that will enable the NSW Government to better prepare for the next bushfire season as well as encouraging it to adopt stronger long term measures to curb the carbon emissions which are fueling climate change and leading to longer and more intense bushfire seasons.

Leonie Blain
Hon Secretary