

Title

First name john

Last name arentz

I am making this submission as Other

Submission type Personal

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Your position in the organisation (if applicable) property owner and part time resident.

Consent to make submission public Public

Your story

I own a property on [REDACTED], Nurenmerenmong about 30 km South east of Tumbarumba. The area was impacted by fire on New Years Eve 2019. My house there sustained some fire damage including serious damage to the attached garage/carport. I lost two buildings completely and machinery.

My property lies about 700 metres from what was a private pine plantation, "Maragle Park", established in 2005. The altitude is 938 metres asl. The intensity of the fire coming out of the densely packed plantation was horrific.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

I believe that the string of pine plantations which stretched from the Hume Motorway to the Mountains contributed greatly to the spread of the initial fire and consequently contributed to the

extensive damage that can be observed in what was the fire's path.

At "Maragle Park" the plantation planning regulations under the Plantations Act allowed the Forest Company to effectively cut off the only means of egress from the part of the valley up hill of their pines. The pines were planted right along the only road out. On the day of the fires people in a neighbouring dwelling had great difficulty finding a way out that was not going to lead them into the burning pine forest, they ended up having to bush bash their way out through neighbouring properties to exit via the "Powerline Road". It is a public safety matter that really needs to be reviewed.

It would have been a relatively straightforward and low cost process to reinstate the former creek crossing and that part of Moody's Hill road which connected to the "Powerline Road" to provide an exit towards Tooma on the south and towards the Elliott Way on the North. That part of the road, which is in the Maragle State Forest, has fallen into disrepair and the extremely deep erosion ruts have made it completely untrafficable. Those repairs should have been done and subsequently maintained from day one of the plantation.

The area around Tumbarumba has had very few catastrophic bushfires over the years. The closest thing I can think of in relation to that is the fire that burnt from the Elliott Way through the Tumut Gorge and on towards Canberra in 2003. There was a lightning strike near my place that created another fire on the same day. That fire was controlled quite easily by the local RFS and a bulldozer....and neither of the fires I refer to had the characteristics of this year's blaze. My property is bordered by the Maragle State forest. Preparation on my place was confined to extensive removal of low scrub to the west of my house during 2018/2019 and removing fallen leaves from the yard and the gutters.

I have been involved with the property since 2002. From observations of the forest on my property and talking with the previous owner I would have to say that the last major fire through it may well have been the 1939 mega fire. In relation to "preparation and planning" and the pine plantation, the word minimal applies. There was no obvious attempt to prepare the pine forest for the event of fire apart from the inadequate non "fire breaks" around its borders. Even though there is a substantial water storage in the middle of it there was no attempt made to bring that up to a standard where tankers could refill and turn. Also there was no signage that would guide tanker drivers to the water point. There were no tankers deployed there during the fire but if they had been, refilling the things would have been really difficult, as access to the Maragle Creek is fairly steep and the depth of water at points where the road crosses it is quite shallow. In the 14 years of the "Maragle Park Plantation" the forest owners and their managers did not ever share their bushfire management plan (if they actually had one) with the adjoining residents and property owners.

It would be reasonable for the current streamlined approvals process to actually involve the community and also to produce a realistic public risk assessment in relation to fire for any new approval application.

Because the Maragle Plantation straddled the only road out of the upper section of the Maragle valley, on New Years Eve people on a neighbouring property had great difficulty finding a way out that was not going to lead them into the burning pine forest. It is a public safety matter that really needs to be

reviewed. It would have been a relatively straightforward and low cost process to reinstate the former creek crossing and the part of Moody's Hill road which connected to the "Powerline Road" that would at least provide an exit towards Tooma to the south and towards the Elliott Way to the North. That part of the road is in the Maragle State Forest. It has fallen into disrepair and the extremely deep erosion ruts have made it completely untrafficable over the years since 2006. I do not believe that the Plantation should have been approved without requiring the provision of a trafficable exit for people effectively cut off by it in the event of fire coming from the West. (the most likely direction).

I also have concerns that the compliance inspection process set up under the Plantations Act does not sufficiently enforce the obligations of plantation owners and managers under the Act, particularly in the area of forest road maintenance and effective measures to control erosion and its impact on waterways.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The area around Tumbarumba has had very few catastrophic bushfires over the years. The closest thing I can think of in relation to that is the fire that burnt from the Elliott Way through the Tumut Gorge and on towards Canberra in 2003. There was a lightning strike near my place that created another fire at the same time. That fire was controlled quite easily by the local RFS and a bulldozer....and neither of the fires I refer to had the characteristics of this year's blaze. My property is bordered by forest. Preparation there was confined to extensive removal of low scrub to the west of my house during 2018/2019. I have been involved with the property since 2002. Having walked through the forest on it regularly and talking with the previous owner I would have to say that the last major fire through it may well have been the 1939 mega fire. In relation to preparation and planning and the pine trees, I would have to say that the word minimal applies. There was no obvious attempt to prepare the pine forest for the event of fire. Even though there is a substantial water storage in the middle of it, there was no attempt made to bring that up to a standard where tankers could refill and turn. Also there was no signage that would guide tanker drivers to the water point. There were no tankers deployed there during the fire but if they had been, refilling the things would have been really difficult, as access to the Maragle Creek is fairly steep and the depth of water at points where the road crosses it is quite shallow. The Forest Owners and their managers did not ever share their bushfire management plan (if they actually had one) with the residents. It would be reasonable for the Approvals process to involve the community and also to produce a risk assessment in relation to fire. The strategy employed by the RFS for the most part was to protect the towns and surrounds where possible. The pine forests were largely left to burn. I think that the RFS plan was fair enough, on the other hand in the period up to and including New Years Eve the only aerial fire fighting capability for the entire Dunn's Road fire front was said to be a single helicopter and one smaller "crop dusting" type aircraft. Quite clearly that was grossly inadequate when attempting to fight what was rapidly becoming a mega fire.

The Forest Managers had insufficient resources to effectively deal with a major fire. I believe that if plantations continue to encouraged that the owners and managers need to have in place fire fighting resources sufficient to cover their plantations. Activities like bulldozing fire breaks may have helped prior to New Years Eve. Talking to my neighbours they basically say that, like me, they weren't expecting a catastrophic fire and were caught short by it's pace. Emergency warnings were received early in the morning on New Years Eve and many people just evacuated immediately, others stayed. The fire got to Tumbarumba in the early afternoon, by 3.30pm it was heading through the Maragle Valley and my place which is 30km by road from Tumbarumba,

1.3 Response to bushfires

The strategy employed by the RFS for the most part was to protect the towns and surrounds where possible. The pine forests were largely left to burn. I think that the RFS plan was fair enough, on the other hand in the period up to and including New Years Eve the only aerial fire fighting capability for the entire Dunn's Road fire front was said to be a single helicopter and one smaller "crop dusting" type aircraft. Quite clearly that was grossly inadequate when attempting to fight what was rapidly becoming a mega fire.

The emergency warning phone calls early on the morning of the 31st Dec were effective but the lack of more detailed info was a concern to some of the people I spoke to after the fires.

The response to Dunn's Road fire was inadequate. This was partly due to it's rapid speed as it spread through timber plantations from the area close to the Hume Motorway into the high country. The inadequacy of any plan to control the fire in softwood plantations really raises a major issue of public safety and the need for a lot more resources to be available across a wide area in order to have some chance of containing outbreaks in plantations. There are implications as to how plantations should be laid out and what distances constitute an effective fire break. By and large there was no response in our local plantation, even when it was clear that the Dunn's road fire was moving in. Realistically given that there were no large aircraft available despite the size of the fire event, the only thing I think the Forest owners and managers could have done to ameliorate the situation would have involved bull dozing substantial breaks around and through the plantation. The time was there but perhaps the earth moving resources were not. Certainly across the whole fire ground human resources and equipment was stretched extremely thin. Having said that I think that applicants for plantation establishment should be required to demonstrate at substantial fire fighting resources committed to the actual plantations being established. They are large scale financial investors which should not be relying on the RFS to fill in the gaps.

1.4 Any other matters

On the day of the fires people on a neighbouring property to me had great difficulty finding a way out that was not going to lead them into the burning pine forest. It is a public safety matter that really needs to be reviewed. It would have been a relatively straightforward and low cost process to reinstate the former creek crossing and the road connecting to the "Powerline Road." The "Powerline Road" provides an exit towards Tooma to the south and towards the Elliott Way to the North. That road is in the Maragle State Forest, it has fallen into disrepair and the extremely deep erosion ruts have made it completely untrafficable since 2006. I do not believe that the Plantation should have been approved without requiring the provision of a trafficable exit for people effectively cut off by it in the event of fire coming from the West.

I am attaching pics from the weather station on my property looking down the valley to the west on New Years Eve after the fire front had passed through.

A Video of the Fire Front emerging through the pines and into my property can be found at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEdje2r7M8c>

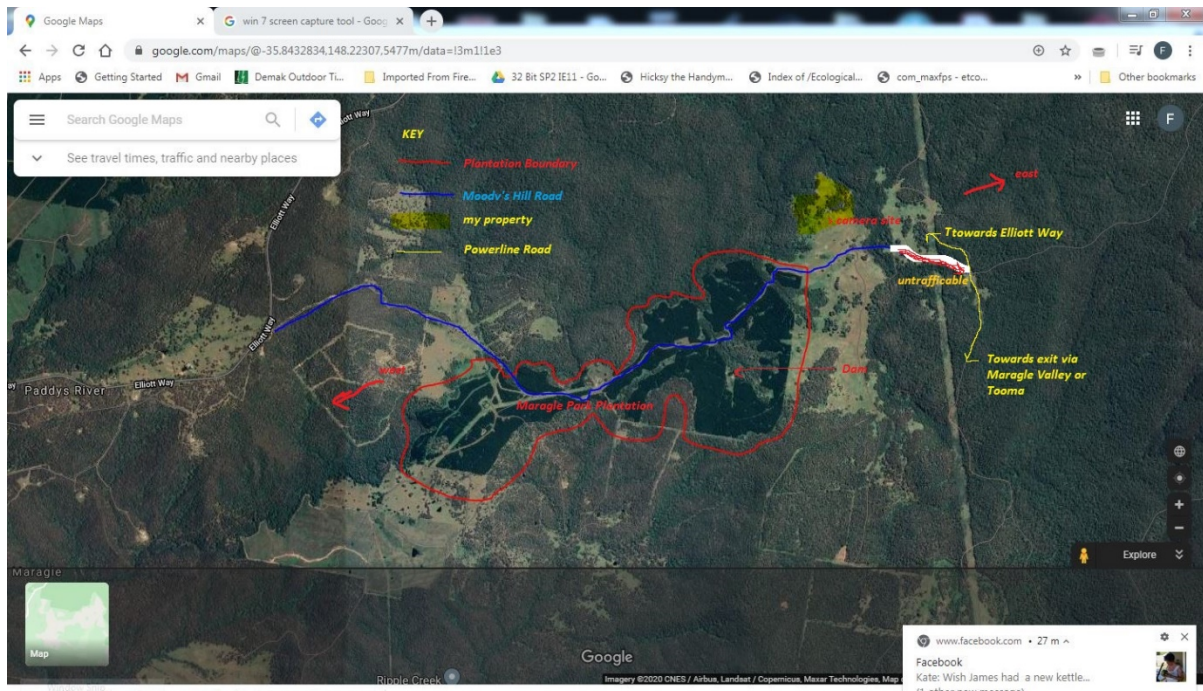
The camera is automated. I left the property on 23 December intending to be back on January 2nd....

Attached satellite map shows the locations discussed in this submission, particularly "the one way in no way out" road through the pines.

Upload files

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