

Submission to NSW State Inquiry into bushfires

From Christopher Crump, Mathoura Red Gum Sawmills, MATHOURA 2710.

Thank you for the opportunity of offering some comments on the management of fire hazards in our state. I am the last remaining river red gum sawmiller in New South Wales and have spent all my working life in the timber industry.

The journals of early explorers and settlers frequently mention the park-like appearance of the Australian countryside, a theme examined in great detail by Bill Gammage in *The Biggest Estate on Earth*. (Allen & Unwin, 2011.)

Professor Gammage argues that the Aborigines maintained the landscape by regular burning, sometimes accidentally but most often by deliberate, managed firing designed to assist in attracting game by encouraging regrowth of grasses and other plants.

Edward Curr, a squatter who lived side by side with Barmah forest tribal Aborigines for 10 years in the mid-19th century, was one of the first to comment on this so-called “firestick farming”, writing in his memoir:

Living principally on wild roots and animals, he [the Aborigine] tilled his land and cultivated his pastures with fire; and we shall not, perhaps, be far from the truth if we conclude that almost every part of New Holland was swept over by a fierce fire, on an average, once in every five years.

Curr, Edward M: *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*: First published 1883.

There are many descriptions of aboriginal landscaping in the diaries and publications of early explorers. There are very few which describe dense forest and it is well accepted that widespread use of the firestick brought about huge changes across the continent long ago.

It occurs to me that we have now an opportunity to return our forest lands to a modified version of the forests as they were when white men first saw them by controlling the regeneration that will follow the first decent rain on the vast fire damaged forests throughout the state.

In the interest of brevity I will comment on just one aspect in the terms of reference for this inquiry; the role of fuel loads which says:

*The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, **fuel loads** and human activity.*

Following the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in which he lost a house, a then well-known anti-Green activist, the late Ray Evans summed up the fuel problem neatly, writing in the July-August 2009 edition of *Quadrant* magazine:

The firestorms of Black Saturday are a stark reminder of the incompatibility of pagan beliefs about trees and the demands of twenty-first-century life. As the Victorian parliament's report of July 2008 demonstrated, any program of bushfire control in Victoria's eucalypt forests which has any chance of success must rely upon continual and sustained fuel reduction as the basis of policy.

Of the often-quoted three requirements for bushfire (oxygen, ignition and fuel) the only factor we can control is the fuel load – the fallen wood, bark and leaves that accumulate on the forest floor

Victorian fire scientist David Packham had this to say of the same fires in the *Australian* newspaper, February 10 2009:

The science is simple. A fire disaster of this nature requires a combination of hot, dry, windy weather in drought conditions. It also requires a source of ignition. In the past, this purpose has been served by lightning. In this disaster, lightning has not played a big part, and for this Victorians should be grateful. But other sources of ignition are ever-present. When the temperature and wind increase to extreme levels, small events – perhaps the scrape of metal across a rock, a transformer overheating or sparks from a diesel engine – are capable of starting a fire that can in minutes become unstoppable if the fuel is present.

The third and only controllable factor in this deadly triangle is fuel: the dead leaves, pieces of bark and grass that become the gas that feeds the 50m high flames that roar through the bush with the sound of jet engines.

This idea of removing excessive woody debris from our forests is not new. It was part of the earliest management plans practised by the state's first forest ranger, John Manton, who was in charge of the Murray River red gum forests at the end of the 19th century. Early photographs, even as recent as World War 2, show open forest with a clean forest floor. Forestry workers were instructed to gather debris and when conditions were safe to initiate cool burns. During that time big forest fires were rare. But these days when academic claims are allowed to outweigh practical common sense, our luck (for that's all that is stopping a big blaze) is all we have to save us. Living as I do on the edge of Australia's largest river red gum forest I worry about the accumulating levels of woody debris which began in 2010 when most of our former state forests were declared a national park. Weeds and fallen timber have been allowed to increase to dangerous levels and have been dried out by the ongoing drought. So any plan to reduce the threat of more fires in the state needs to include major reductions in fire fuel.

Please, when you are making recommendations, remember those of us who are under threat because the green lobby have had too much say in drafting rules for forest management and the input of experienced foresters and timber workers have been ignored in the past.

We are beyond cool burns as a solution to the problem. We have got to get the basal area (the "footprint" occupied by forest trees) down. That means thinning the state-wide forests – taking them back to the open woodland that the first explorers described. Of course there will be an outcry from the environmental brigade but the recent disasters have shown how dangerously wrong their theories are. We need to thin because only when that is done will it be safe to introduce cool burns. The alternative is more of the same destruction we have just witnessed when the next climate-induced drought comes along.

Chris Crump