



11th May 2020

RE: NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

The SWG welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry. We have read the terms of reference for the Inquiry, and have presented our views in terms of the recommendations to be made arising from the Inquiry.

Introduction

This submission is being made by the **Softwoods Working Group (SWG)** which is a joint, plantation-based, timber industry & community body that has been in existence since 1987 and serves the interests of the SW Slopes (SWS) region of NSW. The SWG also incorporates the **South West Slopes Forestry Hub (SWSFH)**, established in 2019 under the Federal Government's National Forest Industry Plan.

Current members of SWG/SWSFH include senior representatives from:

- The major forest growers – **NSW Forestry Corporation**, and private growers, including **Hume Forests** (part of the GFP Group) and **Hancock Victorian Plantations** (private grower in NE Victoria).
- The product manufacturers (timber processors) – **AKD Softwoods*** (sawn timber products, including dressed and treated timber), **Hyne Timber*** (sawn timber products) **Visy Industries** (packaging materials including cardboard and liner board).
(Note that these companies are privately owned, unlisted Australian Co's)
- Local Government (Snowy Valleys Council, Greater Hume Council, Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council, and Albury City)
- Regional Development Australia committees for Murray and Riverina
- Various relevant NSW State Government agencies (Department of Regional NSW, and Transport for NSW)
- The Forest Industry Council (FIC), who represent the operational, training and safety issues for the industry workforce.

The SWG is widely regarded as a unique and effective forum that examines strategic issues and prepares plans to focus on regional community development based on the local plantation industry.



By way of background and to put the softwoods industry into a socio-economic context, the benefits of the industry *within the Hub region* are:

- ***It is the most significant economic driver in the region, including the SW slopes region of NSW and NE Victoria, supporting \$1.1 billion of Gross Regional Product (GRP)***
- ***Total employment (direct & indirect) - approx. 6,650 people***
- ***Annual activity supported in local economy - \$2.5 billion per annum***
- ***Contribution to household income - \$0.53 billion per annum***

It has been well documented that the softwood plantation-based industry of the South West Slopes region was severely affected by the *Dunns Road* and *Green Valley* fires which burnt around 40% of the total plantation resource on which this industry depends.

In the North East Victorian plantations, approx. 6000ha was burnt by the Abeyard and Upper Murray (Walwa) fires.

Based on the extensive experience & knowledge of members of the SWS Forestry Hub, our submission addresses many of the areas where **recommendations** are sought from the Inquiry. These recommendations follow from comments made at the 'Snowy Region' community meeting held on April 29.

1. Causes, preparation and planning for bushfires.

There are many elements that adequately prepare an organisation for effective fire management. These include:

- Training
- Planning
- Hazard reduction
- Human resources
- Lessons from the past.

During the SWG meeting in November 2019, I noted my concerns regarding the deficiencies that I was observing in fire management practices in NSW. These concerns were based on nearly 60 years' experience in forest management throughout NSW. At this stage there had already been significant resource losses due to past fires, and I considered that any further losses of our local plantation resource, due to bushfire, would be catastrophic for our regional industry.

Regrettably, this has now turned out to be the situation we are now confronting.



In my opinion, current bushfire management is deficient and 'accepted' assumptions and practices must now be urgently reviewed. In particular, attention must be paid to prevention, detection, and response capabilities of the forest owners. It is a fact that unacceptable fuel loads have been allowed to build up in both government and privately owned forests and road easements, making fire prevention almost impossible. The managers of both public and private forests should be reviewing and amending their fire management practices. E.g. it appears that the NP&WS has done very little to prevent fuel load build up in Parks and Reserves (which often border or surround commercial forests) and private forests in NSW have no legal requirement to have any minimum fire protection protocols in place.

Fire control is important for the whole community, not just the timber industry. In addition to potential loss of assets such as homes and other buildings, forest fires can also cause impacts on water quality and quantity when large areas of important water catchments are burnt. I understand that the responsible agencies are just doing what they have been asked to do in terms of fire management. What I would query is the adequacy of the standards that are applied.

It is paramount that a strong focus is applied to fire detection and response procedures along with the reduction in fuel loads within and adjacent to the forests. Unless this happens, we are condemned to repeating the tragedies of 2020 with huge costs imposed on the plantation-based industry as well as local businesses & communities and regional, state and national economies. It is acknowledged that the current drought has exacerbated recent events, however, this is not an unusual situation – we urgently need change in accepted fire management procedures.

In the area of preparedness, the SWG would make the following **recommendations**:

- Training
 - ✓ Revise and review training programs, to ensure that the content is adequate and relevant for all personnel involved in land management.
 - ✓ Design programs to recognise the specialty skills that are necessary for the different landscapes associated with rural areas – e.g. grassland/pasture, native forests, and plantations.
 - ✓ Ensure local operators are fully aware of the needs for fire prevention , detection, and timely response.
 - ✓ Ensure opportunities that provide practical skills are implemented and practiced regularly prior to the onset of the fire season.



- Planning
 - ✓ Review planning processes to ensure protection measures are considered on a 'whole of landscape' basis.
 - ✓ Acknowledge the importance of protecting industrial assets such as plantations and other commercially based forests in addition to houses and buildings.
 - ✓ Ensure areas prone to bush fires, or areas considered to be at risk from fires, are adequately mapped with agreed fire trails (access) and fire breaks clearly defined.
 - ✓ Processes for early fire detection and immediate response under all weather conditions are documented and understood.
- Strategic Hazard Reduction
 - ✓ Land management practices should involve the assessment of hazards, and the ongoing reduction of such hazards at a strategic level. Hazard reduction is especially important within retained native forest areas within and around the plantations (including riparian zones).
 - ✓ Hazard reduction strategies can include both fire-based techniques (i.e. controlled burning) and mechanical techniques (i.e. physical removal and/or mulching of understorey debris.)
 - ✓ Fire trail and fire break planning and maintenance reviewed and updated on an annual basis.
 - ✓ Review approval process (i.e. the 'red tape') associated with the conduct of hazard reduction burning. A more opportunistic-driven approach based on local experience and wisdom needs to be adopted to ensure ideal times of the year can be utilised quickly, safely, and efficiently.
- Human Resources
 - ✓ Adequate & skilled, agency-based human resources are pivotal to being able to provide effective fire control. All land management agencies should ensure that they have sufficient and adequately trained local staff, who are able to implement preventative measures outside the fire season and respond rapidly to incidents during the fire season.



- Lessons from the past

There have been numerous Inquiries held following major fire events that have occurred in the last 20 years. These need to be re-examined to determine :

- ✓ What was recommended, and which recommendations were implemented?
- ✓ What were the results of changed practices on the severity of any subsequent fires in the same area?
- ✓ What recommendations were not implemented, and why?

2. Emergency response to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing

The SWG would urge the NSW Inquiry to recommend that, in any future response to bushfires, all fire-fighting activities must regard plantations as **essential industry infrastructure**. The wood delivered from plantations supports industrial activity in the same way that 'traditional' infrastructure such as roads, bridges, buildings, and power are essential infrastructure.

Decisions on a focus for protection (during fire-fighting periods) must therefore consider the economic value of a plantation resource, and its role in supporting regional economies. While the protection of lives will always remain a first priority, it must be recognised that the protection of plantation areas, forest resources, catchments, and wildlife will maintain economic activity in the region which would otherwise be lost or seriously compromised for more than 30 years.

The importance of protecting plantations from loss can be demonstrated by considering the role of the SW Slopes industry as a major 'driver' of the regional economy. Detailed analysis conducted by SWG with University of Canberra (Schirmer, Gibbs, et al, 2017) has revealed that the industry of the SW Slopes supported nearly \$2 billion of economic activity in the region each year, and also supported nearly 5,000 jobs. These figures should be borne in mind when responding to bushfires in the pine plantations!

In considering adequate response to fires, we would also recommend that:

- The importance of swift detection and response by **on-ground** fire fighting personnel must be recognised. If aerial support is also provided, this must be recognised as being simply support, and not a substitute for on-ground resources.
- Response activities should be able to cope with unusual circumstances (e.g. low visibility situations), and adjust response practices accordingly.
- The Inquiry would benefit enormously by gathering thoughts, ideas and feedback from non-institution based fire fighters in key locations. There is a relatively large cohort of fire fighters that are not aligned with any of the agencies, such as the RFS.

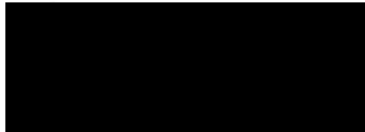


These individuals often have **long experience** within their local areas, and their views could provide a very useful resource to assist the Inquiry in its review.

- The value of a ‘**stay & defend**’ fire-fighting strategy should be assessed. In the SW Slopes, at least, this non-sanctioned approach saved a lot of properties and arguably some smaller townships.

We would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry to discuss these issues with you further.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Crowe
Chair
Softwoods Working Group

Mob: +61 [REDACTED]

email: [REDACTED]

References

Schirmer, Gibbs, et al, 2017 : ‘*Socio-economic impacts of the softwood plantation industry, South West Slopes and Bombala region, NSW*’. Second edition, December 2017.