FIRE AND THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION: TWO SUBMISSIONS

FOBIF draws attention to two submissions made to the Commission by conservation organizations. These are not designed to argue the point about the matters before the Commission, but contain valuable information on what happened on Black Saturday, and what management issues arise from these events.

The VNPA/ACF/WS Submission.

This is a joint effort by the Victorian National Parks Association, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society. You can get it by going to www.vnpa.org.au and clicking on Reports.

It is a careful review of what exactly happened in February this year. The following points are of interest:

- Most fires started on private land.
- The area burnt across Victoria comprised state forests (43 per cent), timber plantations (5 per cent), private land (29 per cent) and National Parks (23 per cent).
- Fires that started on private or leased land on 7 February were uncontrollable by the time they arrived at the boundaries of National Parks (e.g. Kinglake and Yarra Ranges).
- Fires that started within parks and protected areas (e.g. Wilson's Promontory and Mt Riddell in Yarra Ranges National Park) were mostly contained within National Parks; the exception being the fire in the Bunyip State Park.
- The condition of vegetation plays a significant role in the intensity and spread of fire (i.e. there is evidence fire spreads more readily in modified and disturbed vegetation. The report notes that older, undisturbed forest patches resisted the fire better than logged, thinned stands).
- The number of extreme fire danger days already exceeds those predicted to occur in 2050.
- The probability of previous prescribed burns slowing a head fire significantly decreases with increasing Forest Fire Danger Index.
- On 7 February many areas of forest that had been treated with prescribed burns were still severely burnt because of the extreme conditions.

The IUCN/WCPA submission.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature/World Commission on Protected Areas submission is to do with fire history and management issues more generally. It may be viewed at

Worth noting:

"Prescribed burning is exactly what the term says – it is the application of low intensity fire to an area under a planned, prescribed or defined set of weather conditions, for a prescribed or defined outcomes (fuel reduction and / or ecological purposes). If the outcome is for fuel reduction then the prescriptions include a defined level of fuel removal, which is generally in the order of 25% to 50% of the fuel load existing. From experience, even where well determined weather conditions are defined for a burning program confusion often prevails as to whether a burn is to remove a percentage of the fuel by weight only or a defined percentage of the fuel over a defined percentage of the proposed burn area, or a fuel reduction from some presumably high level eg 20 tonnes per hectare to a defined low level generally being in the order of 8 to 10 tonnes per hectare .

"The science behind prescribed burning is sound but it is the repetitive, frequent application of prescribed burning to any one area during the cooler months of the year, that leads to the continual (and polarised) debate over the use of prescribed burning. All too often the weather conditions and the planned outcomes of the burning are not determined and stated even in part, prior to a burn and hence burning programs are generally implemented on so called 'experience'. Unfortunately this 'experience' has all to often, resulted in excessive crown scorch of trees due to fire intensities well in excess of those appropriate to prescribed burning (500 to 2500 kilowatts per metre); damage to habitats and excessive removal of ground cover resulting in soil instability and even fire escapes that have become wildfires themselves. A high percentage (15 – 20%) each year of all bushfires in the south eastern States are a result of poorly planned and implemented prescribed burns and other 'planned burns'.

"As a result of the all-to-often failure to define the weather conditions required to achieve acceptable prescribed fire intensities, not only does crown scorch of the overstorey trees occur but excessive amounts of fuel are removed with exposure of the soils to erosion from any subsequent storm events that may follow the burning. This issue is particularly important in the mountain water catchments of the Brindabella Ranges (Canberra water supply); the natural areas including national parks and other protected areas around Melbourne, (Melbourne water supply) and the Alps catchments of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Snowy Rivers (Alps National Parks).

"Almost all prescribed burning programs are stated in planning documents to be for 'fuel reduction purposes to provide protection for life and property'. This in itself is incorrect as fuel reduction does not provide 'protection for life and property' but if correctly and effectively implemented does reduce the ground litter loads from a high level to a lower

level and in so doing reduces the fire intensity of a bushfire that may subsequently burn through an area during the summer months. The reduced fuel loads contribute to lower wildfire intensities which in turn, provide a greater opportunity for fire fighting personnel to suppress a subsequent bushfire but as history shows and as has been recorded – prescribed burning does not stop a very high to extreme intensity bushfire, as experienced in the disastrous 2003 bushfires that burnt across large tracts of mountainous country in Victoria, NSW, and the ACT and the 2009 wildfires in Victoria.

"Protection of life and property from the impacts of all wildfires (high intensity fires) therefore cannot be guaranteed through the implementation of prescribed burning, and to assert that it does would be grossly negligent by anyone who states that this can be achieved. The immediate post-fire call by many from the public including several researchers and academics, *to do more prescribed burning*, is therefore ill-considered, and inappropriate. If such was to be considered, the extent (area and locations) of past and recent prescribed burns would need to be quantified such that the appropriateness and possible benefits of any additional prescribed burning could be ascertained. The question to those calling for more burning is: more than what, more where, more when and how to achieve it?"