



**International Association
of Wildland Fire**

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Submission of the International Association of Wildland Fire

To the

Parliament of Victoria, Australia
Environment and Natural Resources Committee

**Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on
Bushfires in Victoria**

May 2007

The International Association of Wildland Fire (I.A.W.F.) is a non-profit, professional association representing members of the global wildland fire community. The purpose of the association is to facilitate communication and provide leadership for the wildland fire community.

I.A.W.F. maintains a keen interest globally in all issues relevant to the management of wildland fire and in particular in how local and regional communities address fire related issues.

I.A.W.F. would like to wish the Victorian Inquiry well with its important task, and offers to following brief comments in the hope that they may be of some assistance to the Inquiry;

Year round land management: Around the Western World over the last 30 years, significant areas of lands previously managed for a range of purposes have been set aside as conservation reserves. Often such redefinitions have been followed by less active forms of management – this can include closure or poor maintenance of access roads and tracks and reduced attention to fuel management. In many jurisdictions, governments have not increased the budgets of the conservation agencies in the same proportion as the increase in their land estate.

There is also considerable anecdotal evidence of reductions in public land management workforces over the past 30 years, and particularly in terms of those residents in rural towns close to the forest who have previously played important roles in fire management. Often, associated reductions in the native forest timber industry have also reduced the resources and skills available for forest firefighting. Quantifying this decline and the apparent deskilling in forest and rangeland management workforces is often difficult, for a variety of reasons. Further here, relevant skills shortages are currently being exacerbated in a number of locations by increasing numbers of skilled and experienced fire management personnel approaching retirement age.

Experience from the USA and its experience with *mega-fires* in recent years indicates that there are three key factors that need to be addressed if the wildfire threat is to be managed in fire-prone regions:

- Ongoing rapid and effective suppression of all forest fires;
- More active land management, including prescribed burning, pre-suppression activities and access maintenance, in fire dependent forests; and
- Improved planning, cooperation, and control of the growth of developed assets in the urban interface zone.

There is an increased appreciation world-wide that fire protection is a shared responsibility.

Considering the significant occurrence of large devastating bushfires in south-eastern Australia over the past four years and the thematic issues identified during the various reviews of these fires that have been undertaken at national and state level in Australia, there seems to be considerable similarity between the Australian and situations elsewhere.

The establishment in recent years of a Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre, the increasing role being played by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, and by relevant Ministerial Councils seem to represent positive steps in the development of a truly national approach to wildfire management in Australia. With global warming likely to further complicate the wildland fire management task in the future, it is increasingly important that nations develop comprehensive approaches to the issue and thus position themselves to contribute effectively to the growing international forums.

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation's *Fire Management Voluntary Guidelines* - contained within the *Strategy to Enhance International Cooperation in Fire Management* provide an international framework for considering fire management issues, outline cross-sectoral issues, detail the principles and attributes needed to balance the social, cultural, environmental and economic dimensions of fire management, and prescribe key actions for the planning and management of fires. The framework supports the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly Goal 1 (to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), Goal 7 (to ensure environmental sustainability) and Goal 8 (to develop a global partnership for development).

Governments, international bodies, and non-governmental organizations have been urged to promote an understanding of the *Fire Management Voluntary Guidelines* among those involved in resource protection, air and water quality, community protection, and ecological restoration and rehabilitation. Where practicable, this support can be best achieved by the introduction of schemes which would promote acceptance of the Guidelines and their effective application. Although non-binding, the United Nations is encouraging Governments to adopt the *Fire Management Voluntary Guidelines* in their policy, legal and institutional frameworks and their planning and implementation standards in wildland fire management. The I.A.W.F. understands the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and Australia's Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre have signed the related Fire Management Action Alliance. The I.A.W.F. urges the Victorian Inquiry to consider recommending such a course of action to the Victorian government.

The Legal Framework and Fire Management – Internationally, within the fire and land management community there are increasing concerns that the cumulative effect of changes to worker safety legislation, and the increasing involvement of the legal system in the 'fire' and 'prescribed fire' workplaces, may have moved the emphasis from a focus on 'safety' to one of 'risk minimization'. In terms of wildfires, where the aim is to bring an 'out of control' situation 'under control' as quickly and as safely as possible, a 'risk minimization' focus is seen as perhaps resulting in less aggressive firefighting tactics, and consequently larger bushfires. This concern has also been linked to failing rates of fuel management in a number of jurisdictions.

It is understood that a number of recent wildfire investigations and Inquiries in Australia have considered this matter in recent years. As you may be aware the recent charging with manslaughter, of a US Forest Service Crew Leader over the deaths of four firefighters in 2002, is being watched with considerable interest across the wildland fire community. The deliberations of your Inquiry in relation to this matter will also be keenly monitored.

Further Assistance to the Victorian Inquiry – The I.A.W.F., together with its Australian partners (AFAC and the Bushfire CRC) remains ready to assist your Inquiry as appropriate, particularly in helping place some of the matters facing Victoria into an international context.

Mr. Gary Morgan, the Manager, Strategic Implementation at AFAC's office in East Melbourne, is a current Board member at I.A.W.F., and he has been asked to serve as our official representative and therefore should be your first point of contact. Mr. Morgan can be contacted on 03 – 9418 5227, or at gary.morgan@afac.com.au

Yours sincerely,

Gary Morgan
for Chuck Bushey

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