

**Submission Number: NND.001.00809**

**Submission Of: Kevin Higgins**

**Your Details**

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Preferred means of contact: Phone

What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation?

**Your Submission**

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

I have spent more than 50 years living and working in the high country of Victoria to the outback desert country in northern Australia. I have also spent a number of years working on the summer crews, fighting fires with the forest service departments. The one thing that stands out above all else in our forests is the amount of fuel build up in crown land. In national parks and wilderness areas, we are currently looking at fuel loads per hectare that have never been as high as they are today. The overall fuel hazard may be defined as very high to extreme throughout much of Victoria's crown land, where there is little to no fuel reduction burning, year to year. The old forest scientists commonly believed that before colonisation, all of Victoria was burnt out around every 7 years, on average. To achieve what those scientists describe and take the state of the forest to what it was before colonisation, we would need to complete fuel reduction burning every year, to just over 14 per cent of crown land. In recent times, we have been lucky to achieve little over 1 per cent burnt each year. The decrease in light, mosaic type fuel reduction burning has led to extreme fuel build up and it is at a stage where we have a national disaster (time bomb) on our hands.

Over time, with the 1998, 2003, 2006, 2013 and 2019 alpine fires, I have seen the degradation of Victorian forests. The decline in biological diversity and the deterioration of topsoil with great sheet erosion is most prevalent. This cannot be sustained as it takes centuries to develop one inch of topsoil in Australia. Frequent severe bushfires may mean that forests may not be able to regenerate. On a recent visit to the Wellington High Plains, I observed that 95 per cent of the moss beds have been destroyed by the 2019 high country fire. This is unprecedented, as these moss beds have always been there after light burns, previous bushfires and cattle grazing which occurred for 140 years. The sheet erosion on the Wellington Plains is approximately 30 cm, which has a devastating effect on the environment. A significant decline in biological diversity has occurred. A dozen trees are left alive on the High Plains; old growth forest has been largely destroyed on 600 hectares of land. Poor forest management practice over the past 30 years has caused this.

What we have now is hot fire, on top of hot fire. We need to break this cycle by completing light, patchwork burning. The Aboriginal people used to achieve this before colonisation with great success; this type of burning created safe havens for wildlife and humans alike. However, all of the Aboriginals knowledge about burning is largely ignored and patchwork burning no longer occurs in the way it once did. The only way forward is with more consultation with Aboriginal people. Today's Aboriginal people want more frequent patchwork burning but are continually ignored by governmental departments. Forest management practice must change; increasing fuel reduction burning and increasing consultation with Aboriginal people is vital to prevent further destruction of our forests.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

Wellington high plains.jpg

Wellington high plains1.jpg



