

Submission Number: NND.001.00993

Submission Of: Cornelis Versteeg

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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?

The impediments on fighting the fires in some places, e.g use of seawater on Kangaroo Island

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

Our response is mainly about mitigation as set out in our letter below

Dear members of the Royal Commission, please find our submission below. It has contributions from myself, my wife, a well qualified and experienced forester friend in Canada and a wise elder friend in South Australia

Background:

In the middle of January 2020, we sent an annual newsletter to friends and family, mostly overseas or interstate. Of the 2 pages, about half a page was dedicated to reporting on the bushfires from our perspective. We got some interesting feedback from a professional forester friend in Canada, [REDACTED]. (MSc Forestry, Wageningen University, the Netherlands) with more than 40 years comprehensive forestry experience in Canada. We also received a one paragraph feedback from a friend in the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia. The relevant parts of our newsletter and the feedbacks received are included below. We believe them to be highly relevant to your Royal Commission in terms of reducing the national disasters from bushfires. At the end we included some further observations and conclusions

Part of the newsletter sent to family and friends

.... There were many and still are some very big bushfires in several areas around Australia, but thankfully not close to us. We had several days of heavy smoke, with visibilities like what one of us experienced some years ago in Beijing. It has been very dry and warm up till very recently. Most of the media, on the bandwagon of the climate change activists, blame the Australian government for insufficient reduction of greenhouse gases action as the cause. Neither the dry or the fires are unique in Australia and there have been several times during the last 150 years with similar situations. And if these phenomena are aggravated by climate change, then no matter what Australia with 1.3 % of global emissions has done or is going to do in isolation will make any difference. Real experts predicted that the fire would be moving much faster and are much more intense because of unprecedented high fuel loads. The historic annual reduction of the fuel load by selective cool burning of the undergrowth in winter has been greatly reduced over the last decades because of protest of the same green activist that now blame the government. More and more national parks are created, further restricting recreational access, resulting in overgrowing of tracks thus also limiting access for firefighters. No productive uses, such as forestry, grazing of cattle and collection of firewood, which reduce the fuel load, are allowed. The Aboriginals used fire stick farming over thousands of years with controlled burns to manage the land, promoting biodiversity and preventing large out of control fires such as are happening now. Now many more animals and vegetation are lost than might occur during controlled cool burning, as well as more pollution of the atmosphere. But that does not get much mention or is strongly denied in the media. There may be a change of attitude coming though, as the media latched on a new term 'cultural burning'. It may provide an opening for some possible changes whilst saving face.

Response from [REDACTED] (MSc Forestry, Silviconsult, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada).

...."We have been inundated with images and stories about Australian wildfires. All that looked quite familiar with what we in Canada had experienced with the wildfires in Alberta and British Columbia and the destruction of many houses and other structures. It has been easy to blame climate change for that, but the main reasons for these fires could well have been weather-related anomalies, lack of rain, and in many cases the traditional practice of trying to suppress all burns in the past (Smokey the Bear in the US – "Only you can prevent fire"). The result has been a massive build-up of fuel in the forests. Couple this with the urge of people to live near or in the forested areas (forest-urban interface) and voila, you have a recipe for disaster, as we have experienced many times in the BC Interior and Alberta, where natural fires had always been the norm. The native Indians knew how to manage fires, much like your aboriginals, who used that 'firestick' farming method. Our Indians used fires to create grazing areas, so they could hunt and put meat on the table. With the advent of white civilization with its urge to prevent all fires, that intentional burning practice was abandoned a long time ago, resulting in a build-up of fuels and thus wildfires.

I personally have burned logged-over areas as part of fire protection and site preparation for subsequent planting. That was a common practice in BC and Alberta. However, getting a permit from the Forest Service to do so is getting more and more difficult, and environmental concerns are the main reason. People simply do not like to have smoke in the air and object to foresters wanting to burn, especially spring burning, which is the safest time to burn without impacting the soil too much by deep burns (too wet) and keeping the fire from adjacent timber or young forest (also too wet). Summer prescribed burning is simply not done any longer; that was not always the case, resulting deep burns and out of control fires. We have also been fighting environmentalists who were against burning at all times and who now criticize the Forest Service and companies for not managing the forest properly, which would have to include prescribed burning; you can't win. For that reason, I

do like what you termed 'cultural burning'; can't discriminate, can we?

I will quit now with my lecturing on the 'Forestry' 101 course and climb off my high horse. We hope you have a great rest of the summer with the hope that the burning will come to a speedy end"...

Further response from [REDACTED] (translated from Dutch), received about a week later.

"A few days ago I received an email from a former colleague with a link to one of our local papers, the Vancouver Sun (<https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/designing-a-more-resilient-forest-team-of-scientists-takes-aim-at-source-of-b-c-s-catastrophic-fires>). It states that we (the forest managers) have been too good in preventing all fires (Smokey the Bear not helpful at all), with all the terrible consequences".

Response from [REDACTED], BSc Dairy Technology, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia.

..... "It must have been frustrating to go thru all the problems of your move to the coast. It's all very hard putting up with the "green movement" that have infiltrated every government department. The fire on Kangaroo Island is a good example of what's going on. You need a permit to fight a fire with seawater or fire retardant even with the fire burning half the Island. Fresh water is limited on the Island".

Final comments and observation.

The future incidence, speed and intensity of bushfires cannot be affected by any action or inaction on climate change by Australia. Even if the whole world would take drastic climate action and it would reduce aspects of some bushfire risks, it would take many decades before impact would be noticeable and it would not reduce the fuel loads.

However, the bushfire risks can be impacted by forest management.

Obvious measures are:

- Greatly increased controlled cool burns (e.g. as shown by Christine Finlay in Australia)
- Open national parks for more fuel reduction activities and improved access
- Do not make more national parks and consider de-nationalising parts of some
- Revegetate wild forest and plantations with a variety of species to include fire retarding ones and open grazing areas (for kangaroos and/or farmed animals)

Yours sincerely,

Dr Cornelis Versteeg (PhD Food Science) [REDACTED] (MSc Phytopathology)

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

We have a strong interest in the prevention and reduction of the impact of bushfires because of where we live in Darley near Wombat State Forrest and Lerderderg Park. Furthermore both are of them are about to be confiscated from the local people to become a national parks, allowing less access and even more bushfire risks.

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