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Submission Of: John Kotsiaris

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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?

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

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

See attachment

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

Supporting material provided:

John Kotsiaris submission.doc

John Kotsiaris

Thank you for accepting public submissions into the tragic and historic 2019/2020 fire season.

This submission is based on my own personal views and is not necessarily reflective of the views of any organisation.

I have a background and education in conservation, ecology and public policy. In particular I have a knowledge and interest in policy surrounding fire management.

Recommendations

Given the very large-scale footprint of the 2019-20 wildfires and the potential for rapid post-fire young regrowth to increase wildfire risk, there is an urgent need to strategically counter rising challenges by shifting focus from fire-based fuel management to other methods of reducing wildfire risk. This includes working towards:

- the intensification of ignition control and aerial firefighting capabilities to suppress fire in both urban and remote landscapes
- the intensification of wildfire preparedness for citizens in towns and cities
- strategic and regulated mechanical fuel reduction of understorey vegetation along key roads and around towns
- reducing the long term flammability of the landscape by setting targets to protect and promote the growth of older vegetation in those forest types where older growth is historically less flammable than younger post-fire growth
- the incorporation of the ecological and associated flammability outcomes of planned burns into wildfire risk assessment.

Accompanying letter

I am making this submission because I am deeply concerned that the underlying main causal factors of the historic 2019/2020 megafires are going to remain under the radar. As a result, the urgent policy and program reforms that are needed will not be made, and as post-fire regrowth establishes, the disaster could repeat itself on a grander scale in the very near future, putting many lives at great risk as well as having extraordinary impacts on our natural heritage and wildlife.

In my view, the underlying cause of the 2019/2020 fires was excessive recent fire in the landscape – fire both planned and wild.

The ecological outcomes of fuel reduction burns are inherently tied to flammability outcomes. Fuel reduction burns and ecological burns are *not* mutually exclusive. Managing for risk outcomes and managing for ecological outcomes are *not* mutually exclusive.

Fire encourages the growth of grasses and other fire loving plants. Furthermore, in many forests types, post-fire young regrowth is more flammable than older growth.

In my view, the cause of these fires is that our relatively high rainfall, south-eastern forests have entered a fire trap, caused by excessive planned burning compounded with wildfire in the landscape, which had encouraged the growth of vast areas of young post-fire regrowth, grasses and other fire loving plants that promote the spread of wildfires. I am suggesting that excessive recent fire has resulted in ecological and flammability changes that have made the landscape more fire prone – developing a vicious cycle.

That is my view. And in some forest types, there is recent ecological science that could support it.

In my state of Victoria before this event, because of so much recent planned burning and wildfire in the landscape most of the vegetation on public land was in an adolescent or younger growth stage. This was particularly the case in Gippsland. In addition, the Snowy District of East Gippsland, as indicated by Victoria's 2018 State of the Environment Report, has had more recent planned burning than any other district in the state. East Gippsland was severely impacted by the 2019/2020 megafires.

The flow on effects of native forest logging on flammability dynamics and increased fire risk should also not be underestimated. Logging and burning in Victoria's wet forests has been occurring for decades and dries out the landscape.

For such vast areas of Australia's temperate forests to go up in flames in the one fire season is not only extremely unnatural and unprecedented, but it goes well beyond the predictions of wildfire risk assessment models or climate science models. This indicates that there are other unconsidered significant factors at play that demand serious ecological investigation. I believe that the ecological impacts of the location, extent and

timing of planned burns compounded with wildfires in different forest types and the associated effects on flammability dynamics are among these factors.

The failure in Australian wildfire management to close the adaptive management loop and incorporate ecological and associated flammability outcomes of planned burns into wildfire risk management is reflected by the amount of inappropriate planned burning that has been occurring in recent decades. Some forested areas in Victoria naturally have no recorded fire history due to chance and/or low flammability. According to data in the 2018-19 Fuel Management Report, 47% or 3.52 million hectares of public land in Victoria in 1980 had no recorded fire history. However, by 2019 this figure had dropped to just 22% or 1.66 million hectares. The report states that “this proportion has been declining steadily since 2003, corresponding to the increase in large bushfires and fuel management over the last decade.” And now, after last summer we had ancient rainforests and yet more areas of no recorded fire history tragically burn in these fires.

The scale of the 2019/2020 fires were massive, with huge impacts on Australians and our natural heritage. These fires have affected the ethos of the Australian nation. Yet, there appears to be no specific governmental interest in investigating the underlying causal factors of the historic 2019/2020 summer megafires. Instead it seems that the response is going to be, as Australian responses to significant wildfires always seem to be, based on simplistic causal assumptions and influenced by self-serving propaganda from special interest groups, particularly from foresters and graziers. Sadly, the extent and location of historic Aboriginal burning practices is greatly exaggerated to support the foundation of this self-serving propaganda to promote broad-scale burning of public land.

I'm unsure how an independent ecological investigation into the 2019/2020 fire season would happen but I feel there is a huge public need for it to happen – Australians and our natural heritage have been severely impacted and public perceptions on why the fires happened are dangerously staunch and simplistic. Few are questioning the ecological and evolutionary consequences of the millions of hectares of planned burns and wildfires happening across Australia's temperate forests, let alone the fact that our unique and iconic wildlife are being treated as collateral damage. Many people falsely believe that not enough burning is happening. Others just blame climate and pretend that fuel isn't a factor.

There needs to be a serious ecological investigation into why these fires spread like they did including giving particular regard to the role played by planned burns, wildfires and the consequential effects they had on vegetation and flammability dynamics in different forest types.

The Superb Lyrebird is one of Australia's most ancient and iconic animals, a bird which has been scratching around in the moist leaf litter of Australia's south-eastern temperate forests for millennia. With a preference for damper, wetter, shadier forests, I like to think that as a general management rule **“logging and burning should never stir, in a forest where a Lyrebird has been known to occur”**.