

Committee Secretary,
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires,
Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT. 2600

8 May, 2003

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

The Forest Industries Association of Tasmania (FIAT) is an industry association formed in 1983 to represent the interests of processors of Tasmanian forest products. Our members' activities are diverse and include the production of veneers, hardwood and softwood timber, pulp and paper, woodchip production and plantation forestry.

FIAT's 18 member businesses include all of the State's larger processors of forest products, including a significant proportion of the crown sawlog output, as well as all of the veneer produced in the State. FIAT Members' activities account for more than 75% of the gross value of production in the forest and wood products industry in Tasmania.

FIAT's submission to the *Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires* addresses two of the Terms of Reference which specifically impact on the activities of our Members. These are:

- 1) The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in National Parks, State Forests, Other Crown Land and Private Property; and,
- 2) The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires.

RISK FACTORS

The CSIRO's principal research scientist, Phil Cheney, Australia's foremost bushfire researcher, blames the intensity of the recent fires in NSW, ACT and Victoria on the fact that "for the last 30 years there has been a continuing decline in operational prescribed burning". He says: "The January fires were a truly historic event [producing] probably the most extreme, widespread and continuously burnt area in living history."

FIAT Members are concerned that, as a result of 40% of Tasmania's forests being reserved, there is an increasing build-up of large fuel loadings in these areas. These fuel loadings have built up due to a reduction in land management practices in these areas – namely prescribed burning, and pose a massive threat to the biodiversity in Tasmania's forest resource and adjoining multiple use forest should large scale wildfire occur.

The advantages of prescribed burning lie in reducing the intensity of bushfires and consequential damage to vegetation, life and property. Rates of spread of fire and fire intensity are both impacted upon by fuel loadings which are reduced through prescribed burning operations. Other conditions being equal, if the fine fuel on an area has been reduced by 50%, rates of spread should be 50% lower, while the fire intensity and the area burnt should be reduced by 75%. As heat intensity is 75% less, vegetation suffers far less damage (*Bushfires In Australia – RH Luke and AG McArthur*). It is important to note that hazard reduction does not prevent fires but it does keep them manageable and assists in lessening the prospect of landscape-wide wild fires such as were experienced this last summer.

There is also an advantage in developing strategic access to create management units. This could be undertaken in a way that restricts general access to protect other values but still allows emergency access.

FIAT recommends that there be a Statewide review into planned burning and hazard reduction in Tasmania.

BUILDING CODES, URBAN DESIGN AND LANDUSE PLANNING

Regarding land use planning and property development, there is concern from within the industry that current approaches are too simplistic and there needs to be a multi-faceted approach to be effective in reducing the risk to houses in bushfire prone areas. This approach must address issues such as planning, design, building, maintenance, education and enforcement and must be based around sound scientific evaluation.

With respect to urban design and land use planning, authorities need to use a combination of strategies to protect life and property from bushfire. A co-ordinated plan should be developed to deal with urban planning, house/building design and construction, maintenance, education and finally enforcement as a unit. In the past, urban development was often surrounded by a cleared rural buffer. Now urban development is pushing into natural vegetation. In addition there has been a tendency to subdivide large bush blocks on the urban fringe. Environmental controls often prevent the clearing of native vegetation. Where rural land is subdivided, revegetation with native species creates the same environment. Future disasters in these areas are inevitable unless adequate precautions are taken.

Take for example AS3959 - 1999: *Building in Bushfire Prone Areas*. This Standard identifies the requirements for the design and construction of buildings in 'bushfire prone areas' in order to improve their performance when subjected to burning debris, radiant heat and flame contact generated from a bushfire. This Standard is considered to be overly simplistic for a number of reasons.

- The Standard only applies to houses being constructed in areas that have been designated as bushfire prone areas. This usually involves the declaration of an area by the municipal council, rural fire authority or a committee of interested parties. This approach can be regarded as 'all or nothing' and does not recognize the importance and changing nature of the urban-rural interface.
- The Standard contains a procedure for classifying building sites for hazard category. The Standard is only enforced at the time of construction. This in itself could potentially be hazardous as the vegetation conditions surrounding the house will change with time, therefore the house site will not necessarily remain in the same hazard category.
- Existing houses are not necessarily compliant.
- The Standard specifies that timber used externally in fire prone areas must use fire retardant timber, however, there is currently no fire retardant available to meet performance standards. While some timber (e.g. high density and in larger sizes) will meet these performance requirements, testing is needed to confirm compliance. Some testing has been completed, confirming that a small number of Australian timber species comply with current performance standards.

Maintenance of vegetation around buildings is critical to bushfire survival. This will reduce the level of hazard, in particular the risk of attack by flame contact and radiant heat. It is critical that fire hazard reduction through vegetation maintenance is carried out routinely to avoid the risk of unexpected fire threats.

Education of the public is also critical to implementing the holistic approach to fire protection that is suggested in this submission. Property owners need to be aware of the three main elements that will aid the survival of their house in a fire. These are:

- House design and construction;
- Reduction of the fire's potential around the home both through vegetation maintenance and through removing debris build-up around the house, e.g. leaves/branches on roofs, build-up of leaf litter around the house; and,
- Having someone there to put out small fires that start from burning embers.

FIAT recommends implementing a holistic approach to bushfire protection in property management in Australia. We recommend the formation of a Federal and State "Working Group" that would draw upon expertise in areas such as the forestry, building design and construction, science, fire behavior and control, and urban planning areas. This group would draw together existing knowledge and resources and carry out the necessary research to develop a framework that could be adopted nationally to address urban planning, house/building design and construction, maintenance, education and finally enforcement from a holistic viewpoint.

RESERVE CREATION "RULES"

Fire in the Australian context poses a significant risk to both property and life unless appropriate strategies are engaged to reduce or remove this threat. This continent has lived for centuries with the constant interaction of fire and forest but since European settlement the competing forces between modern high density living and the retention of the natural environment has increased dramatically. In this context, we refer to community decisions to live in densely forested areas surrounded by bush and reserve vast tracts of forested land without any or adequate fuel reduction strategies.

It is trite to observe that any recommendations arising from this review should address these twin evils to the extent that any Government, whether Federal or State, that intends to proclaim additional reserves must be compelled to put in place an adequate management regime and to ensure sufficient funding to manage such a reserve for all of its values. Any outcome short of this will ensure an exacerbation of the current unsatisfactory situation where reserves have been proclaimed and insufficient funding exists to manage our reserved forests.

As a nation it is imperative that we take reasonable steps to protect our property and, even more importantly, the lives of our people, and it would be negligent if we were to ignore this ongoing and growing problem.

It is our view that the implementation of the holistic approach we have advocated, along with the additional protection of “rules” that can be applied as a precondition of any new reservation, will provide an avenue for the best possible protection of our forests and all of the diversity they contain.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make these observations and indicate that if required we will be prepared to either supplement or clarify any issues raised herein for the benefit of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Terry Edwards

Chief Executive