



# Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria

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## ***Submission by the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission***

*"The Mountain Cattlemen warn that the eventual result of the lack of protective burning management will result in a holocaust on a scale never seen before. Fuel reduction burning has not taken place in many parts of the Eastern Ranges for 30 or 40 years and now dry matter lies on the forest floor 20cms or more thick. Before European settlement much of the area was burnt naturally every few years.*

*Any good farmer will make sure that sheep and cattle are concentrated in the paddocks near his home and buildings to remove excess pasture growth before the onset of summer. The same fire-retardant effect is obtained in forested and alpine areas at no cost to the taxpayer."*

Manifesto of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, 1987

May 2009

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## **1 Summary**

The fundamental point of this submission is that the cattlemen have always supported fuel reduction burning. They practised it themselves in the early days, up to the 1920s. Cattlemen still practised mosaic burning after 1920s either illegally or on land not managed by the Forests Commission. Fuel reduction burning was supported by the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission. During the period of the demise of fuel reduction burning from the 1980s, the cattlemen were vocal and active in seeking a return to former higher levels. The cattlemen have said this over and over again. In the 1980s and 1990s the cattlemen predicted the recent holocausts. It is now essential to increase the amount of fuel reduction burning. It seems that everyone now agrees. Even the green groups are falling over themselves agreeing that fuel reduction burning is necessary. Let's have the discussion on the amount, location, timing, technique and frequency and get on with it.

### **1.1 Recommendations**

#### **Fuel reduction burning**

- 1.1.1 Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Parks Victoria (PV) should significantly increase the amount of fuel reduction burning on public land. To some extent we should seek to replicate the regime of the indigenous populations that involved continual patch burning. This was the regime that was replicated by cattlemen in the first 50 or so years of their cattle grazing.
- 1.1.2 Management plans with a strong emphasis on fuel reduction burning should be drawn up with a real and early involvement with the local communities, especially local groups such as Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigades and the mountain cattlemen who know and understand the area. This does not mean consultation processes which are polite, but take no notice and have no impact. The local community should be involved in drawing up the plans - not just commenting on them when they are finished.
- 1.1.3 Increases in local fuel reduction burning programmes must be matched with the appropriate funding.
- 1.1.4 Local public education programmes should be instigated to explain the issue of fuel reduction burning and the use of cattle grazing in conjunction with fuel reduction burning.
- 1.1.5 Some fires started during non-hazardous weather by lightning strikes should be allowed to burn as long as they just trickle about.

#### **Utilising cattle grazing to lessen fire risk**

- 1.1.6 Well managed grazing can assist in fire management by controlling regrowth, and that grazing is a viable method of reducing fuel loads.
- 1.1.7 Grazing should be used as a management tool and incorporated into fire management plans developed by local management committees.

- 1.1.8 Cattlemen operating grazing licences maintain a close link to the topography and environmental conditions and this adds to the extent of local knowledge that is so important during bushfires.

**The management of National Parks**

- 1.1.9 That the Royal Commission recommend a wide ranging review of the management of Victorian public land and National Parks in particular.

**State wide non-government organisation representing people involved in the use, management and conservation of public land**

- 1.1.10 That the Royal Commission recommend that seed funding be made available to the Victorian Lands Alliance. (See Section 8 for more information on the Victorian Lands Alliance.)

## **2 The mountain cattlemen**

This submission is prepared and presented by members of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

In many cases the current cattlemen are from third and fourth generations of families who have grazed their cattle in high country for more than 150 years. These cattlemen have lifelong experience of this public land and the manner in which it has been managed. History has been handed down within these families and the current cattlemen's experience is the sum total of the preceding generations of their experiences.

Mountain cattlemen have been involved with:

- discussions with governments about fire preparation,
- ongoing debates about land management for fire and the need for fuel reduction burning,
- annual preparations for fire,
- fighting fires, and
- recovery from devastating burns.

The mountain cattlemen were closely involved with and affected by the massive 2003 and 2007 alpine fires as well the 2009 Beechworth - Library Rd (31,000 ha) and Dargo - White Timber Spur (13,640) fires.

### **2.1 The mountain cattlemen today**

In 2005 all grazing licences in the Alpine National Park were cancelled. The cancellation of licences about halved the number of cattle being grazed in the alpine area. There are still about 30 cattlemen grazing about 4000 cattle on State Forest licence areas, mostly in areas south and east of the Great Dividing Range. These cattlemen carry on the great traditions of alpine grazing.

The MCAV continues to campaign strongly for a return to grazing in the Alpine National Park. It is expected that once the value of alpine grazing in terms of fuel reduction, preservation of traditions and heritage, the maintenance of local knowledge are properly appreciated, grazing will return to the Alpine National Park.

### **2.2 Appendices and support**

The statements in this submission are supported by an extensive list of appendices that attaches to this submission.

### **2.3 People's Review**

The MCAV supports the recommendations of *The People's Review of Bushfires, 2002-2007, in Victoria*, and commends this report to the Commission.

### 3 Background

The management of public land has been a source of constant debate since European settlement.

Almost from the start, the views on land management of the people living and working in the country have differed from those of people living in urban environments.

In the early 1900's cattlemen holding Crown Land leases burned parts of their leaseholdings each year as they believed appropriate. The cattlemen were following the practice of the aboriginal people by using fire to keep the forests open. These "cool burns" are fires that trickles about with a flame height that does not reach the canopy or scorch the bark which results in epicormal growth.

Reports from early settlers and explorers described the Australian bush as being similar to the open parkland of the English countryside.

In the early 1900s this 'patch burning' practice was disapproved of by the Government, and by the early 1920's, was banned by the Forests Commission altogether.

The 'no burn' policy was also adopted by the Crown Lands Department which administered areas not under the control of the Forests Commission. The policy was not rigorously enforced by this Department and cattlemen holding Crown Land leases continued their fuel reduction burning programme.

Ultimately however, the 'no fires' directives were effectively policed and the practice came to an end.

The effect was to force some of the cattlemen to abandon their grazing leases due to excessive vegetation. Cattlemen considered these areas worthless unless they were periodically subjected to patchwork style burning.

However during the terrible fires of 1939 cattlemen were able to shelter in areas which had been previously burned, in defiance of government policy, and grazed. These sanctuaries were also shared by native birds and animals.

The 1939 Stretton Royal Commission blamed the fires on cattlemen, miners, timber workers and indeed all those who lived and/or worked in the bush. Judge Stretton wrote:

*"Settlers, miners and graziers are the most prolific fire-causing agents. The percentage of fires caused by them far exceeds that of any other class. Their firing is generally deliberate. All other firing is, generally, due to carelessness."*

He stated quite simply that, '*These fires were lit by the hand of man.*'

There was virtually no mention of lightning either as a cause of the 1939, or other, bushfires. The only comment the Judge made regarding lightning was in one sentence where he said, "*... the real but rare occurrence of lightning*". We now know that this is not the case, and that lightning is a major cause of bushfires.

The dismissal of mountain cattlemen's evidence in this and the later Royal Commission into forest grazing further cemented the feeling amongst mountain cattlemen and most other country people that they were being progressively excluded from fire and land management decisions.

The 1939 Royal Commission did however get it right with this recommendation on fuel reduction burning and the utilisation of local knowledge:

*"5. The Forests Commission must recognise the necessity for protective burning in its areas and should respect local forest lore. ... It is essential that forest officers who manage fire practices have a thorough knowledge of local forest lore and of the district in which they have authority."*

The otherwise dismissive attitude the authorities and strident ecological lobby groups towards country people still exists today. Furthermore, the animosity between some country and some city viewpoints has been highlighted again when the fires of 2003, 2006/7 and 2009 are dissected and debated. Importantly, in recent decades, decisions on land management have been made in Melbourne.

The fact is that country people who live and work in, and adjacent to, Victoria's public land know the country and how it works. Previous enquiries have recommended the use of local knowledge. However this opportunity has not been fully utilised.

The views of people with vast generational experience must be given due recognition.

## 4 Brief Responses to the Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference are in *italics*.

1. *The causes and circumstances of the bushfires which burned in various parts of Victoria in late January and in February 2009 ("2009 Bushfires").*

The Commission will have forensic evidence on the cause of fires. Some, in the north east of Victoria and Gippsland were the result of lightning, a cause not accepted by the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission..

2. *The preparation and planning by governments, emergency services, other entities and community and households for bushfires in Victoria, including current laws, policies, practices, resources and strategies for the prevention, identification, evaluation, management and communication of bushfire threats and risks.*

The major problem has been the lack of fuel reduction burning over the past 20 years. The Government has been urged on many occasions to increase the amount of fuel reduction burning but this has been largely ignored.

There is a major concern amongst country people that Green and urban centric views are accepted, probably to gain the votes of inner urban Green voters. The views of people living in the country seem to be routinely ignored.

**Consultation has become part of an institutional process rather than a genuine attempt to understand and take notice of the viewpoints of country people. Country people need a much stronger say in the management of land in Victoria. "Consultation" at the end of a process of Government agency policy development is inadequate and has not worked. There needs to be a non-government organisation that represents country views, including those of the mountain cattlemen, that is involved in policy development**

There needs to be agreement on the type of fire regime appropriate for Victoria. The MCAV considers:

- There should be significant fuel reduction burning to lessen fuel loads and create a mosaic of protection on a landscape level.
  - To some extent we should seek to replicate the regime of the indigenous populations that involved continual patch burning. This was the regime that was replicated by cattlemen in the first 50 or so years of their cattle grazing.
  - Fires started during non-hazardous weather, by lightning strikes, should be allowed to burn as long and they just trickle about.
3. *All aspects of the responses to the 2009 bushfires, particularly measures taken to control the spread of the fires and to protect life and property, including but not limited to:*
    - (a) *immediate management, response and recovery;*
    - (b) *resourcing, overall coordination and deployment; and*
    - (c) *equipment and communication systems.*

The People's Review covered these issues in detail and it is almost certain that this report could be applied to the 2009 fires.

4. *The measures taken to prevent or minimise disruption to the supply of essential services such as power and water during the 2009 Bushfires.*
5. *Any other matters that [the Commission] deem appropriate in relation to the 2009 Bushfires.*

An unbiased review of the impacts of cattle grazing on public land is being undertaken within the Bushfire CRC. The results of this work should have to influence future fire policy. See further comment on this below and in appendices.

6. *The preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks, particularly the prevention of loss of life.*

See comment below on fuel reduction burning, cattle grazing and The People's Review

7. *Land use planning and management, including urban and regional planning.*

There needs to be a review of native vegetation regulations.

8. *The fireproofing of housing and other buildings, including the materials used in construction.*
9. *The emergency responses to bushfires.*
10. *Public communication and community advice systems and strategies.*
11. *Training, infrastructure and overall resourcing needs.*

See The People's Review on these issues.

## 5 Fuel reduction burning

Three things are abundantly clear about fuel reduction burning:

- everyone - Government, CFA, mountain cattlemen, country people, green environmentalists - **agrees that fuel reduction burning is an essential tool** in Victoria's fire regime,
- since the 1980s there has been a **collapse in the amount of fuel reduction burning in Victoria**. (See chart from Athol Hodgson's COAG submission in appendix),
- there is significant **disagreement in amount, location, timing, technique and frequency** of fuel reduction burning.

It is odd indeed that a practise so highly supported in general can be the subject of such disagreement in its detail.

How is it that something so essential can be utilised so little? The answer would seem to lie in:

- some groups, although now professing support for fuel reduction burning have worked to restrict its use, on 'ecological' or 'environmental' reasons,
- occupational health and safety considerations that have limited its use,
- the litigious nature of our society that has reduced the number of days considered to be safe for fuel reduction burning,
- distant bureaucratic decision that has worked against fuel reduction burning, and
- financial constraints.

### 5.1 Mountain cattlemen support more fuel reduction burning

The mountain cattlemen have always supported fuel reduction burning.

Prior to the alpine fires, local cattlemen have made their views, about the need for fuel reduction burning, known to local authorities including the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Parks Victoria (PV) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA), but were generally ignored. Other cattlemen have felt that it was pointless raising issues about fuel reduction burning with the relevant agencies. See appendices on comments by cattlemen

### 5.2 Concern about statistics on fuel reduction burning

Some fuel reduction burning has been unsuccessful with only small areas being burnt. MCAV also believes the areas claimed in fuel reduction burning programmes are an over estimation of area actually burnt. These calculations seem to be based on a block target area rather than the area actually burnt.

### 5.3 Fuel reduction burning is not the sole solution to bushfire issues

Fuel reduction burning is a major, but not the only component of an appropriate fire regime. We seek an increase in fuel reduction burning but we do not promote fuel reduction burning as the only solution to the current bushfire issues.

There are some who say, "*You could never have stopped a fire like that*" - referring to the worst blasts of fire on the "*blow-up*" days. Cattlemen consider that if fuel reduction burning had been

adequate along with the appropriate use of backburns and firebreaks, then the ferocity of the fire would have been reduced.

#### 5.4 Funding for fuel reduction burning is loaded with spin

It seems that the Government has learnt little about funding for fuel reduction burning from Black Saturday.

In its response to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee (ENRC) bushfire and land management report the State Government promised (4 December 2008):

*"In response to the report, the Brumby Government has also committed \$10 million to work with the community to develop and implement large scale, planned burning."*  
(premier.vic.gov.au)

Since Black Saturday, on May 3 (Herald Sun) the Government has stated that,

*"More than \$52 million is expected to be set aside for a five-year fuel reduction program."*

Clearly this is still only \$10 million per year, virtually the same as was promised in its response in December 2008. In other words, in terms of funding for fuel reduction burning, the Government has learnt nothing from the Black Saturday experience.

It would be expected that the Royal Commission will take the Government to task over this poor response.

#### 5.5 The State Government on fuel reduction burning in December 2008

In its December 2008 response to the Victorian Parliament's Environment and Natural Resources Committee report on "*Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria*", the Government stated:

*"The adequacy of the planned burning program was a key focus of the Inquiry and several submissions acknowledged that burning is a powerful tool in managing the state's vulnerability to large fire events.*

*"I have asked the Department of Sustainability and Environment to develop a plan to continue the expansion of large scale, **mosaic** burns and monitor their effectiveness.*

*"Hectare-based targets are not considered to be the best way of measuring effectiveness of the planned burning program.*

*"There is a need to begin to move away from hectare-based targets and start thinking about reduction of fuel loads across the board, understanding community sensitivity to planned burning and better mirroring nature through the effective use of fire as a land management tool."*

***Mosaic** burning provides positive fire protection and a better ecological result by breaking up age classes of vegetation and retaining more habitat across a broad area.*

*It complements existing asset protection burning which aims for more complete coverage."*  
(our emphasis) (premier.vic.gov.au)

It needs to be noted that mosaic burning is exactly what cattlemen were doing from the early days of taking cattle to the high country.

Regardless of what type of fuel reduction burning is employed it will inevitably be assessed in terms of hectares burnt or protected. It is a nonsense to suggest moving away from "hectare-based targets" when the only measurement of land is in hectares.

Nevertheless the support for the recommendations of the ENRC report were welcomed even though the strength of the endorsement was very weak. (See The People's Review) This highlights the point that although everyone now agrees that fuel reduction burning is necessary, there is still intense debate about how, when and where.

## **5.6 Recommendations**

- 5.6.1 DSE and PV should significantly increase the amount of fuel reduction burning on public land. To some extent we should seek to replicate the regime of the indigenous populations that involved continual patch burning. This was the regime that was replicated by cattlemen in the first 50 or so years of their cattle grazing.
- 5.6.2 Management plans with a strong emphasis on fuel reduction burning should be drawn up with a real and early involvement with the local communities, especially local groups such as CFA brigades and the mountain cattlemen who know and understand the area. This does not mean consultation processes which are polite, but take no notice and have no impact. The local community should be involved in drawing up the plans - not just commenting on them when they are finished.
- 5.6.3 Increases in local fuel reduction burning programmes must be matched with the appropriate funding.
- 5.6.4 Local public education programmes should be instigated to explain the issue of fuel reduction burning and the use of cattle grazing in conjunction with fuel reduction burning.
- 5.6.5 Some fires started during non-hazardous weather by lightning strikes, should be allowed to burn as long as they trickle about.

## 5.7 Photographs illustrating the need for fuel reduction



The photograph above is of a trial plot on the Nunniong Plateau. The area on left has been fenced off from all grazing animals. The surrounding area (foreground and background) has been grazed. The left side indicates what happens when there has been no grazing and no fuel reduction burning. It is indicative of what happens in our National Parks when these management regimes are excluded. If all the surrounding area had this fuel load, a fire would have a flame height of 5 to 7 metres thus causing a crown fire in the surrounding tree canopy.



In the photograph above, the late Jim Commins is inspecting old dead snow grass that is a fire hazard that can be avoided by cattle grazing.

## 6 Utilising cattle grazing to lessen fire risk

A program of fuel reduction burning in conjunction with well-managed grazing should be used as primary management tool in reducing the possibility of wild fire.

Over the past 20 or so years a small but vocal group of environmental scientists has produced papers that argue that cattle grazing does not reduce fires. The MCAV has shown that this so-called 'scientific research' is based on an underlying philosophical belief that cattle grazing should be removed from Victorian public land, especially forests and the alpine area. This is abundantly clear from the repetitive nature of the research and the fact that it never shows even the slightest beneficial impact of cattle grazing.

In 2000, an independent panel established by the former Department of Natural Resources and Environment heard evidence from Dr. Dick Williams, one of more prolific contributors to the scientific literature and strident opponent of alpine grazing. The Panel found that it needed to take a "guarded" view of his evidence. The Panel put it this way:

*"Though we have accepted various parts of Dr. Williams' evidence as is set out above and further we accept that Dr. Williams has impressive qualifications and has written widely in the field, nevertheless, the Panel does take a guarded view of his evidence bearing in mind his expressed opinion that the presence of domestic livestock is inconsistent with the basic objectives of national park management."* (T.58). (Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Independent Panel on Alpine Grazing Licences, Mr Tony Graham QC, Chairman, Mr Neville Walsh, Mr Jim McColl, 2000.)

Now, to the relief of the cattlemen, the most highly valued source of bushfire information has found that all this so-called research is "**scant and inconclusive**". An April 2009 "Fire Note" published jointly by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre and the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council states:

***"The existing evidence about whether the combined effects of fire and grazing are effective in managing fuel loads and fire risk was scant and inconclusive."***

### 6.1 Cattle grazing has lessened the impact of fires

Mountain cattlemen have always argued that well-managed grazing can assist in fire and land management.

#### 6.1.1 Grazing reduces fuel loads

Grasses that are not grazed regularly grow long, then dry and rank, and form dense mats of dead grass. This dry, rank and unpalatable grass is then avoided by cattle and native animals. Kangaroos, wallabies and wombats are often seen grazing the short, green grass on roadsides. This is testament to their dislike of the old, dry, rank grass in the bush and on the high plains.

Any build-up of dense, dry grass becomes part of the fuel load that can keep bushfires burning.

On the other hand, native and introduced grasses that are grazed regularly remain short, green, fresh and attractive to all grazing animals.

Cattlemen have observed that green, grazed areas of their licences generally do not burn during bushfires. If they do burn, the intensity is much less than on ungrazed ground. Rather the fire comes to the perimeter of the grazed area then slows and trickles around before going out.

Grazing keeps grass short and green and this reduces potential fuel loads. When the fire has come up onto high plains areas, it has trickled around and gone out.

In fact, cattlemen facing the alpine fires elected to leave their cattle on licenced land, feeling they were safer than they would be on lower freehold land.

### **6.1.2 Grazing protects mossbeds and wildlife**

Cattle keep grass around mossbeds short and therefore green. This has prevented fire from getting into mossbeds and this has provided a refuge for wildlife to shelter during the passage of fire. Cattlemen, especially the late Jim Commins talked about sheltering on these green areas along with the local native wildlife.

### **6.1.3 Grazing enhances biodiversity**

After cool scattered burns, the landscape becomes a mosaic of short, green, grass areas amongst longer, drier and scrubby areas.

This means there are areas with plants of different age, size and development rather than whole landscapes to the same age which occurs after major fires.

It also enhances the biodiversity of the area by allowing the less dominant plant species an opportunity to reproduce against the more dominant species.

### **6.1.4 Grazing reduces soil erosion.**

Grazing and cool burning protects the land from one of the most ravaging effects of wild fire - massive soil erosion during post-fire rains. A particularly graphic example of this was at Licola following the 2007 bushfires.

Grazing stimulates root development, improves soil aeration and stability. Grazing also strengthens the plant structure above ground, encouraging plants to grow in a more horizontal nature culminating in less exposed bare ground.

### **6.1.5 Enhanced water catchment values**

Snow packs more densely on grazed land with short grass. The snow lasts longer and is absorbed more efficiently into the ground and water courses. On the other hand, snow does not pack down densely on overgrown senescent snowgrass. As a result much of the snow evaporates into the atmosphere or is absorbed into the dead mass of vegetation and does not reach the water courses.

### **6.1.6 Grazing is a source of revenue to the Government**

Grazing provides the State Government with revenue as opposed to burning which is a direct cost to the taxpayer.

### **6.1.7 Grazing has been supported by Government agencies**

More than twenty years ago a former Government agency, the Land Conservation Council, produced a report on the Alpine Area which acknowledged that: "*In some areas, grazing can assist in management by reducing the build up of dry plant residues particularly when exotic pastures have been introduced, thus lessening fuel available for fires*". (Our emphasis) In this context grazing referred to public land generally and not the Alpine National Park specifically.

In its 1988 report "*Statewide Assessment of Public Land Use*", the Land Conservation Council stated that "*well managed forest grazing can also provide community benefits through weed control and fire-fuel reduction*".

### **6.1.8 Grazing reduces fire**

The cattlemen claim that grazing *reduces* fire, not that it *prevents* fire. Just as fuel reduction burning is not the sole solution to fire issues, the cattlemen do not argue that cattle grazing is a cure-all. However, fuel reduction burning and cattle grazing together can help reduce the intensity and severity of hot and destructive bushfires.

### **6.1.9 Cattlemen's papers**

Over many years the MCAV members have written papers on the part grazing plays in fuel reduction. These are contained in the appendices to this submission. Members also have photos showing how bushfires reduce in intensity or even go out when the fire reaches areas that are grazed. See photographs below.

## **6.2 What about the Esplin Report?**

Following the 2003 fires the MCAV spent a day with the Commissioner for Emergency Services, Mr Bruce Esplin in the high country and felt he understood and accepted the points being made during the day.

The section on cattle grazing in the subsequent Esplin report stunned the cattlemen with its rejection of their submissions and discussions. Importantly, the cattlemen did not have an opportunity to discuss the issue with co-authors of this section, Malcolm Gill and Neal Enright. No opportunity was given to comment on this misleading section. The report talks about "*Grazing prevents blazing*", the MCAV sticker says "*Grazing reduces blazing*". Our emphasis. There is a big difference between *prevent* and *reduce*.

## **6.3 The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry supported the use of grazing**

The impact of cattle grazing was considered by the Victorian Parliament's Environment and Natural Resources Committee in its "*Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria*". The Committee:

*"received evidence from a significant number of stakeholders who argued in favour of grazing on public land as an effective fuel reduction tool. A number of these stakeholders were particularly critical of the Government's decision in 2005 to end grazing in Victoria's Alpine National Park and argued that this had contributed to an increase in fuel loads and the severity of recent bushfires. While the Committee notes that grazing continues in some*

*Alpine areas outside of the Alpine National Park, the timing and duration of grazing access, as in other areas of public land, is significantly more regulated than in previous years.*

*A number of stakeholders also argued that there is a close association between grazing and effective prescribed burning, both in Alpine and non- Alpine areas. Stakeholders argued that an inadequate level of prescribed burning had altered forest vegetation from a relatively open and grassy condition to a more closed and dense environment which is no longer suitable for grazing. In relation to Alpine areas, stakeholders also argued that grazing had previously maintained Alpine vegetation at a level which allowed the safe conduct of prescribed burning."*

In conclusion the Committee noted, "*the scientific evidence that grazing may not be an effective or preferable bushfire mitigation strategy alone **but believes that it can be used as a tool to complement other fuel reduction strategies on public land.***" (Our emphasis)

#### **6.4 Recent Victorian Government science on grazing**

In a paper on Fire (Ecological Burning) in Native Grasslands, Glen Johnson, Flora Fauna and Fisheries Coordinator, DNRE, Parks Flora and Fauna Division at Wodonga wrote:

*"It has long been recognised that native grasslands are adapted to fire. However, only in the last decade has it been recognised that to maintain healthy native grasslands the use of fire (as one form of management) needs to be more frequent than previously considered and that the key to achieving this is proactive ecological burn planning and implementation.*

*However, not all native grassy ecosystems need or can tolerate (frequent) fire. Key attributes to consider in the decision making process are: the sites fire history, dominant (tussock) grass and (if present) overstorey species type, floristic diversity, and presence, abundance, fire response and ability to manage rare or threatened or exotic species on site.*

*Common to most native grasslands is the need for "Biomass Reduction" to maintain structure (open, dominant tussock grasses with plenty of inter-tussock spaces) and maximum floristic diversity (lilies, orchids and other 'wildflowers').*

*Fire, **grazing** (native and or introduced herbivores) and even slashing/mowing have been successfully used to achieve this state."* (Our emphasis)

#### **6.5 This is a matter for the Bushfires Royal Commission**

The value of cattle grazing in assisting in fire management is clearly a matter that the Bushfires Royal Commission needs to consider.

In a letter to the Rivers & Red Gum Environment Alliance, the Premier's Chief of Staff wrote:

*"In terms of allowing cattle grazing as a means of preventing fires, this is a matter for the Bushfires Royal Commission to consider. The Royal Commission has very broad terms of reference to investigate the recent fires and may make recommendations with implications for fire planning across the State. When its findings are delivered, Government will consider the relevant recommendations for all public land."*

**6.6 Recommendation**

- 6.6.1 Well managed grazing can assist in fire management by controlling regrowth, and that grazing is a viable method of reducing fuel loads.
- 6.6.2 Grazing should be used as a management tool and incorporated into fire management plans developed by local management committees.
- 6.6.3 Cattlemen operating grazing licences maintain a close link to the topography and environmental conditions and this adds to the extent of local knowledge that is so important during bushfires.

**6.7 Photographs illustrating the beneficial impact of cattle grazing on stopping and slowing fires**



Bogong High Plains following the 2003 fires. The foliage burnt was on land from which cattle had been excluded for about 10 years. The sharp fire edges are the boundary fence between grazed and ungrazed land. The fire has gone out on the boundary and the grazed part of the Bogong High Plains has been saved from devastating fire by the grazing of cattle.



Cattle grazing on the right, no grazing on the left. Raspberry Hill, Bogong High Plains, 2003



2009 Dargo - White Timber Spur bushfire. The still burning fire stops at grazed, short and green pasture.

## 7 National Parks needs complete review

The mountain cattlemen, along with many other groups have been alarmed and apprehensive about National Park management for many years.

The concern has related mainly to the removal of commercial and recreational activities from National Parks. There has also been considerable unease about the way political parties, the ALP and Greens in particular, have promised ever increasing numbers of National Parks and increases in their size. In campaigns leading up to elections there has been a scoreboard approach to Parks with each Party trying to outdo that other in numbers of hectares committed to National Parks. In the 1990s and 2000s it reached the point of ordinary Australian "bush" being proclaimed just to get the hectares on the board. The MCAV acknowledges that the slogan "lock it up and leave it" goes a bit far in describing management regimes, but it is not far from the truth.

The 2009 fires again highlighted the need to review National Park management. The MCAV was delighted to see the former Police Commissioner and now Chief of the Bushfire Reconstruction Authority also suggesting our relationship to National Parks needs to be reviewed. Under the headline, "Nixon calls for rethink of national parks" The Age (April 29, 2009) reported:

*"Bushfire reconstruction chief Christine Nixon has questioned the size of national parks and called for a fundamental "rethink" of the community's relationship with them. ... Ms Nixon continued, "The size of national parks is something we need to think about. We need to fundamentally rethink the way we deal with national parks and our relationship with them."*

The Age continued:

*"National parks were hard hit by the February 7 bushfires. Since then, bushfire victims who live near national parks have raised questions about their management and the sufficiency of controlled burns.*

*Fires burnt 100 per cent of the Kinglake National Park, 50 per cent of Wilsons Promontory National Park, 20 per cent of the Yarra Ranges National Park and 20 per cent of the Bunyip State Park. In total, nearly 1000 park assets were hit. The Kinglake National Park remains closed, while Wilsons Promontory was closed for seven weeks."*

There are many good reasons to review Victoria's National Parks and their management. These include:

- As Ms Nixon indicated, the size of many National Parks is just too large for the style of management that restricts commercial and recreational utilisation and limits fuel reduction burning.
- The notion of National Parks has lost meaning in Victoria. They were initially proclaimed to preserve scenic grandeur. The reason then switched to protecting conservation values. More recently it has been to protect biodiversity. Many large areas of land have now been set aside for reasons that have substantially differed over the past decades.
- There seems to have been little or no fuel reduction burning in National Parks. Over recent years there have been savage bushfires in National Parks. To the list in *The Age* can be added the Alpine National Park in 2003 and 2006/07 and the Grampians in 2006. Bushfires have started in Parks, swept through them and escaped from fuel reduction burns. Oddly, despite

the reticence to have fuel reduction burns, after the fires, the land managers have lauded the virtues of fire in terms of invigorating the landscape.

- Prior to its proclamation as National Park, much of the land was managed for multiple use which included commercial and recreational use. Interestingly, the National Park agencies have been gradually reintroducing some of these commercial and especially recreational uses, to assist with management and to facilitate visitations by the public.

The focus is clearly back on the National Park areas, management and their involvement in bushfires.

This is a vast subject and probably beyond the immediate scope of the Royal Commission. Clearly the issue of land management needs separate, detailed and close attention.

### **7.1 Recommendation**

That the Royal Commission recommend a wide ranging review of the management of Victorian public land and National Parks in particular.

## **8 A State wide non-government organisation representing the country viewpoint on fires**

It is noted that the Commission has been directed to make ‘*such recommendations*’ as it considers ‘*appropriate, including recommendations for ... the community*’.

The MCAV supports The People's Review recommendation for a State wide non-government organisation representing the country viewpoint on fires and involving local viewpoints on fire management.

The People's Review was particularly firm on the need for the community to have a much greater role in fire policy. It said:

*“In many fields of endeavour, the main location of knowledge is in institutions created to maintain and develop that knowledge. In the case of fire, however, much of the basic knowledge about local topography, fire and wind conditions lies not with city-based institutions, but with the local people themselves. This is why the people need such a strong voice.*

*The development of fire prevention and suppression policy must be in the hands of people of all ecological persuasions. There is undeniably strong anecdotal evidence that the staff of Parks Victoria and Department of Sustainability and Environment is, simply put, seen as being too green. Fire policy must broaden from bureaucratic control and city-based politics to reflect the views and aspirations of the community, especially of rural communities. After all, it is they who live in the area, respond as volunteers to fight fires and bear massive social and economic cost of bushfires.”*

The People's Review went on to recommend the “*establishment of a State-wide peak fire forum for the people, which we shall call the People's Fire Forum*” to give the people adequate voice. (See summary of *The People's Review of Bushfires, 2002-2007*, in Victoria attached to this submission.)

The MCAV supports this recommendation.

Since the People's Review the Victorian Lands Alliance has been established. This is a non-government body of which the MCAV is a member.

### **8.1 Recommendation**

That the Royal Commission recommend that seed funding be made available to the Victorian Lands Alliance.