

Let's avoid a National Disaster

- Extracts from Harry Treasure's presentation to the 1946 Stretton Enquiry

I am a grazier and work in conjunction with my sons on the Dargo High Plains. I have been there following this pursuit all my life. We rent about 100,000 acres of rough mountainous country from the Crown, 5,000 acres of which we have fenced into nine paddocks with good substantial wire fences, erected under permission from the Lands Department. We have stable, garage, nine lots of stock yards, huts for camping and two dwelling houses.

From the seventies until the year 1918 I do not remember a bad bush fire.

Then the ridges and gullies were quite open and comparatively clear underneath the growing timber. Grass was everywhere from the rivers to the mountain tops. There were miners, diggers, prospectors, and stockmen all through the hills, and bush fires were very common, but they never killed any timber. The prospectors lit fires to clean up the country so that they may find reefs, while others seemed to start fires in the rough places for the purpose of cleaning it up. Restrictions on burning did not seem to be enforced until about the year 1910. It was impossible for a fire to burn far or fierce, and no growing timber was ever destroyed.

During the year 1918, after a period of little or no fires, we had a very bad fire during mid-summer, fanned by a north-west wind. This fire was travelling easily 30 miles a day, and it burned a lot of our fences about the Dargo Plains and killed a lot of good woollybutt timber; but fortunately the cattle seemed to escape.

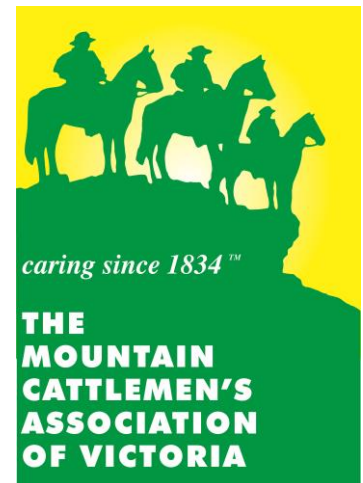
During the summer of 1926 we had another bad fire, which came from we don't know where, and fanned by a north-west wind. This fire was going through the air in leaps of from five to eight miles by pieces of burning bark driven in the wind. It killed a lot more of the woollybutt timber, along with a fair amount of snow gums. It burned more fences, but very few cattle were caught in it.

The next and most disastrous fire that I ever knew or heard of was during January of 1939, after a period of 13 years in which was accumulated a great amount of debris, such as dry grass, leaves, bark, fallen timber, undergrowth, etc. This fire almost cleaned up the balance of the woollybutt timber, including the young saplings that had grown after the 1926 fire. It also killed a large percentage of snow gum timber, and scarcely left a green leaf on any tree in its path. It destroyed considerably over 1000 head of cattle belonging to my sons and myself. It burned the greater part of our fences and it was with great difficulty that we saved the homestead, through the strenuous efforts of eight men. This fire travelled at from 50 to 80 miles in one day. Apart from the great loss of timber and lighting up many miles ahead which will take from 80 to 100 years to grow up again, the mountain country through which this fire spread is practically ruined from a grazing point of view, as wherever the timber was killed the seedlings and suckers have grown so densely that it is impossible to ride through a lot of it, and cattle will not stay on it.

I wish to point out that the woollybutt and mountain ash timber will, after being killed, only grow from seed - it never suckers. After a fire the young seedlings come up in millions and if a second fire takes the young saplings before they are old enough to flower and shed more seed, the timber would be finished for all time. At the present moment the country burned by the 1939 fire is covered with millions of seedlings, which are from eight to fifteen feet high and it would be most disastrous if another, fierce summer fire took them now.

A light fire, however, would protect them; I would suggest that for the high mountainous country - that judicious burning be resorted to.

For instance, during the autumn and spring (mostly in the autumn) that many patches and breaks be burned; and tills to be done by the grazier. I firmly believe that it will be impossible to prevent fires altogether. They will start, and if by no other cause lightning will start them. I can honestly state that I know of a dozen different fires started by lightning, four of which were in my paddocks. If debris is hoarded up through the bush for a number of years we are only making a cane for our own backs, and paving the way for a national destruction, namely, our forest timber.



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