

Senate Bushfire Inquiry speech 2010

Speech given by Graeme Stoney

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting our President and me to this hearing and my notes are available to Hansard.

My family has run cattle on the Victorian High Plains since the 1940's.

I spent years in the saddle, droving and mustering on our run.

In 1992 I was elected to State Parliament with my main interest being Public Land management. My remarks today therefore are based on my observations, my records and my research before, during and after the 14 years I spent in the Victorian Upper House.

When I was about twelve or fourteen, I once mustered with an old cattleman named Jack Ware.

Jack, as a young man, mustered with the first cattlemen to run cattle on the mountain ranges now known as the Bluff, Mt Eadley Stoney, Mt Lovick, King Billy and Mt Clear.

The cattlemen's names were Jack Bullock and James Barclay.

The run ranges in altitude from 4500 feet to nearly 6000 feet. A section of it is part of the Great Divide.

On the Autumn muster I went with Jack, we were in the mid range altitude country of this large run just in the Snow Gums.

I was riding a little behind him when suddenly there was a fire spreading around my horse's legs.

I yelled, "Jack there's a fire!"

Jack didn't even look back but just called out: "don't worry about it sonny."

I watched - Jack was carefully flicking matches every few hundred yards as he rode along.

Jack was one of the last cattlemen to burn.

To know when and how to burn was a skill he had learnt as a boy from Bullock and Barclay.

The fires he lit that day burnt around quietly and went out that night. The timing was perfect; as it has to be, or the Snow Gums die from the fire.

I have never forgotten that experience and its stays with me today.

The effect of Jack's burn was a patchwork of cool burns among the snow gums which left the country open and with little fuel loads.

As I went back each year, I watched the open country revert to scrub; the cattle eventually stopped going to those particular areas and the fuel loads built up.

When the 2006 fires went through, every ancient snow gum where Jack had dropped a match was destroyed - it will take a hundred years to recover.

When cattle were present, mainly in the higher grassland sections of the run, the fuel loads were always low due to grazing.

Cattleman Jack Lovick used to boast that no fire would ever cross the high divide between the Jamieson, Howqua and Macalister rivers while the cattle were there.

He was right.

We had many fires in the valleys and none ever crossed the range. The cattle were removed by the Government in 2005. In early 2007 all those Mountains burnt fiercely - including our hut.

I now want to go back to the 1970s and 1980s.

As the pressure against cattle built from conservationists, I became involved in the bitter fight to retain Alpine grazing.

I watched as the fresh-faced graduate Dick Williams gradually built a case on the Bogong High Plains to remove cattle. It was clear to the Cattlemen that he was using outrageous statements and selective science to back his personal beliefs.

Williams was carving himself a career on this issue and the cattlemen were helpless to combat this.

Other scientists such as Wilson, Oxley and Van Rees, who made more balanced findings, were ignored by the environmental groups who promoted the Williams line because it suited them.

The Williams line became conventional wisdom in the cities because of the third-party endorsement and contrived publicity, generated by environmental groups.

In defense the Stoney's, the Lovick's, the Commins' and the Treasure's - along with other Mountain Cattlemen's families - organized many rallies around the state and rides on Parliament.

The Mountain Cattlemen became a household word.

This was a campaign of conviction. It was based on our knowledge and belief that the cattle should stay in the High Country for good management.

The campaign resulted in a deal with the Labor Government and the Opposition on the floor of Parliament about 1989/ 90 to create an Alpine National Park.

Part of the deal was to grant 7-year renewable licenses to graze cattle in part of the new park. The licenses were legislated - a unique situation.

This lasted until 2005 when the Bracks Government broke the agreement, changed legislation and kicked the cattle out of the Park.

The fires culminating in Black Saturday didn't really affect the High Country, or the formerly grazed areas.

We had already been through the 2003 and then the 2006/2007 fires.

The MCAV hasn't been involved in the Royal Commission except to put in a general submission.

However, in the last 6 months it has produced a paper called "The links between grazing and fuel reduction in the grazing zones of the High Country."

This paper is available on this website under "Research Articles".

We have sent the committee a copy of that paper.

Firstly, I wish to explain why we produced the paper and quickly read some sections into the record.

The MCAV has become very concerned that the fuel reduction debate has concentrated on prescribed burning when there are other options, as well as burning, to reduce fuel.

We claim that in the higher Alpine grasslands and in the Redgum forests grazing is a viable option to reduce fuel.

We understand that Parks Victoria is hesitant to allow cool burning above 1200 meters - in fact, we get the impression that will never happen.

It is concerning that the total politicization of grazing in the Alpine grasslands and Redgum forests means grazing to reduce fuel is not even on the agenda.

This means there is a vacuum in the Authorities fuel reduction strategies for the High-Country grasslands and Redgum forests.

This is because neither of these areas can be cool burnt reliably by a bureaucracy.

Unfortunately, any bureaucracy hasn't the ability to adapt a burning program to what nature dictates in these sensitive areas

The Aborigines and then the early Cattlemen observed and used Nature because they could wait for the perfect afternoon and then light up.

The influence of a self-described group of "collaborative scientists" with personal beliefs has not assisted a mature debate about the value of grazing to reduce fuel.

These scientists have given sought advice to several inquiries, including the Esplin report.

Then later, to strengthen their overall case against grazing, they build a case in other forums by quoting these "independent" reports which contain their own scientific findings.

Conveniently the issue of using grazing for fuel reduction management is ignored or fudged.

One only has to Google these people to get the full picture of their personal agendas and how they collaborate in publications such as the CSIRO bushfire publication "Alpine grazing and fire 2006."

I asked a very senior DSE fire officer the other day about all this. He confirmed that the authorities are concentrating on burning for fuel management. He confirmed that the grazing option is not on the horizon.

He then quietly rolled his eyes which indicated that I knew why - and I did.

Given this situation, it is clear some independent outside source has to re-ignite the debate.

Perhaps this is where this inquiry may lead?

