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Victorian Division
545 Gilbert Road
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Hon. John Pandazopoulos, MP
Chairman
Environment and Natural Resources Committee
8/35 Spring St.
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear John,

Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria

Thank you for inviting the Institute of Foresters Australia (IFA) to make a submission to this inquiry. Please find attached the two IFA policies relevant to fire management and the role of fire in the landscape. In addition to the policies we would like to make the following additional comments relevant to the specific terms of reference for the inquiry.

There are calls coming from many sources for more fuel reduction burning in Parks. We support this call but wish to put into a context of proper land management and ecological impacts. It is an over simplification to say that the problem is only in the amount of park burning. There are key elements of the current management that must be retained in other words don't change the good things that are not working but make them work as intended. The key elements that must remain are:

- Integrated fire protection planning across all tenures as currently practiced by Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE).
- Make the land owner responsible for the fuel loads on its land as currently applies with DSE and Parks Victoria.

The things that can be improved are to ensure that burning in parks is done for two objectives, either simultaneously or singularly. These objectives are asset protection and ecological outcomes. The IFA believes that there is insufficient burning in Parks for ecological objectives and it is this program that requires funding for research, development, training and implementation.

The large strategic firebreaks are not considered to be practical long term solutions to protecting Melbourne's water catchments in the experience of the IFA. They are expensive to maintain and usually fall into neglect as government funding progressively dries up during the wet years when fire protection becomes a lower priority. They will not stop a large fire that is usually throwing spot fires several kilometres ahead of the main fire. They will be useful to do fuel reduction burns from but these can be done off any tracks as fire conditions are always manageable during at these times. They may assist in back burning operations but fire planners lose flexibility when the breaks are already

chosen in advance of the fire situation. They are permanently affecting the biodiversity on 750 ha of forest. The repeated disturbance will alter the vegetation. This area is around 10% of the forest area clearfelled each year in Victoria's forests. A further 150 ha of the Otway's forests will be permanently affected by being made into a strategic fire break. This is hypocritical at a time when none of these forests are allowed to be regenerated by timber harvesting.

The terms of reference consider timber harvesting as a traditional land use. This is important recognition of the role it has played in shaping our forests and communities. The post war housing boom was made possible by the large quantities of affordable structural timber could be sourced from Victoria's forests. It is also important to look back to learn what will affect us in the future. The work of Judge Stretton in his Royal Commission into the 1939 Black Friday bushfires should not be discarded. Times have changed but the forests are constant.

The IFA believes that active management is the key to protecting our forests, biodiversity and communities into the future. Active management produces a diverse landscape that is more robust and capable of recovering more rapidly from fire. Fires are going to continue to occur and we should ensure more of them occur under controlled condition such as slash burning, fuel reduction and ecological burning. Timber harvesting in the 1960s and 1970s was consolidated along the major roads and the resulting regeneration became an asset which could be protected from fire with fire. In the 1980s concerns were raised about consolidation and the new Code required diversification and logging coupes were spread all over the forest and regeneration could no longer be used as a strategic break nor protected from fire. In the 1996 code review the CSIRO identified fragmentation as an issue and suggested larger coupes so that greater consolidation could be achieved. The government did not accept this recommendation fearing a green back lash and we are still spreading coupes all over the forest making integrated fire and forest planing a nightmare.

The IFA recognises the key role that fuel reduction and high intensity slash burning play in the training and accreditation of fire fighting staff. The role of DSE, VicForests and Parks Victoria in these controlled fires ensures they have the experiences needed for uncontrolled fires. Foresters make up the bulk of the experienced fire fighting pool and this should continue to be the case.

The simple arguments put up for more landscape burning are cautiously supported by the IFA. Nothing is simple in the forest landscape. Burning all of the forest every year will not stop wildfires. The 2007 wildfire burnt back through the forests burnt in 2003. Landscape burning in autumn burns the northerly ridges only and the southern slopes will only burn in the height of summer. The best arguments for landscape burning are the ecological advantages to the forest ecosystems that need periodic fire and the mosaic of burnt and unburnt fuel it creates. This mosaic then ensures that when a landscape wildfire does occur its impacts are reduced and the forests can recover more rapidly from the unburnt areas. Occasionally a wildfire does occur in an area recently controlled burnt and can be suppressed more rapidly but this is uncommon and should not be the only objective for the controlled fires. If it was all of the forest would have to be burnt every three years which is not achievable and would cause widespread loss of biodiversity and ecological change.

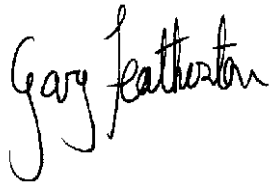
The other main advantage of actively managed forest is that they have a viable adequately maintained road network. The timber industry has traditionally maintained the major road network.

The role of active management should be extended to Melbourne's water catchments. It is unrealistic to think that fire can be excluded from these catchments in perpetuity. Planning must include actions

to cope when the fires do occur. Commercial thinning of fire regrowth should remain a tool for catchment managers to increase water yield. This should also be considered for Adelaide' water catchment, the forests of North East Victoria. The ecological ramifications of excluding fire from Melbourne's water catchments should also be considered. If fire can be excluded for 400 years then the mountain ash forests will disappear and so will Leadbeater's Possums. Controlled harvesting to provide a small and continuous supply of young forest is the only way to save mountain ash forests and the Leadbeater's Possum if fire is excluded. The more likely scenario is that in one of the next ten year droughts all of the catchment will burn over a two day period and Melbourne will need to introduce a major water treatment scenario. All of the work to save the catchments from the small amount of logging that occurs will have been fruitless because nature will destroy in days what foresters could have managed and nurtured over centuries.

Thank you again for this opportunity and the IFA will take the opportunity to present these views at the public hearings. Good luck in your deliberations and where ever possible look for evidence based solutions and proven policy outcomes.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Featherston". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gary Featherston
Chairman Victorian Division
Institute of Foresters Australia