

Inspector General Emergency Management Submission

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NB: I give permission for this submission to be published as is, when the final IGEM report is tabled.

Preamble

We have owned a property of 400 acres of forest, 12kms to the east of the Buchan Township, for 6 years. We have lived there permanently for four years. The property is on the Buchan Orbost Rd, in an elevated situation overlooking the Snowy River and Valley to the north and the Buchan River and Valley to the west.

In November of 2018, there were a number of lightning strikes about 15kms to the west of Buchan with the result of an out of control fire developing in the Timbarra region. These fires were clearly visible to us, and we formed the opinion at that time, given the nature of the forest around us (dry and heavily vegetated with thick undergrowth and debris on the ground), it was only a matter of when and not if that there was going to be a catastrophic fiery conflagration that would envelope the area and perhaps us. So we installed two certified (*Wildfire Safety Bunkers*) 6 person underground fire bunkers at the house site.

The “when” happened 54 weeks later.

There are six broad issues that I would like to raise concerning the recent 2019-2020 fire event covering “Preparedness” and “Response”.

1. Landscape vegetation management
2. Early intervention in fire events
3. More local decision making on the fireground
4. Communication
5. The so called Designated Safe Assembly Area
6. Telecommunications and essential service backup

The Preparedness

Landscape Scale Vegetation Management.

In the six years we have been in Buchan, it became obvious to us through conversations with the older folk in the district, that the nature of the forests around Buchan had dramatically changed over the last 100 years. This change has been described more broadly across the Australian landscape (and especially the eastern seaboard) by various authors in the books; *Australia Burning Fire Ecology, Policy and Management Issues*, (2003) edited by Cary, Lindenmayer and Dovers; *Firestick Ecology* (2015) by Vic Jurskis and *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2012) by Bill Gammage. The last two books used as evidence, the journals of the early explorers, who described vast areas of eastern Australia as open grassy woodland. These areas are now impenetrable forest.

As you would know, there have been a number of Royal Commissions and enquiries over the last 50 years that have all made recommendations, in various guises, in which the government land managers needed to allocate more resources to controlling forest fuel loads.

I however doubt that the reader of this submission will have had the time to read the three books mentioned previously.

A summary of the last two books mentioned, can be found below. And here, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Below is a copy of a lithograph of a landscape painting done in 1867 by the well-known artist, Eugene du Gerard, of the view of the Snowy River Valley from the site of our (now destroyed) house. As an artist he was renowned for his accuracy to detail, of taking what was in the view in front of him and putting it on to the canvas accurately. He captured an image of open grassy woodland.



The next image is of the same view, but as it was prior to the evening of the 30th of December, 2019.



You will notice that the landscape is no longer open grassy woodland. Grassy woodlands are generally described in Australia as ecosystems which contain widely spaced trees, in which the crowns do not touch, with a grassy understory. It is now forest (generally defined in Australia as a landscape dominated by trees with a crown cover more than 20%), and at the time of the fire, it had a dense understory of Manuka, wattle and fallen debris. This area was still described as being open woodland in the early 1900s by the early occupiers of Buchan.

It was now a dense, explosive, gunpowder keg waiting for an ignition point.

Its original open woodland structure was a result of eons of “Firestick Farming” by the local indigenous people. The open woodland structure reduces the incidences/impact of crowning fires.

Under the First Peoples, fire was tamed and used to tame the landscape. Under our current “white fella” landscape stewardship, fire has gone “feral”.

The next image is taken a week after the evening of the 30th.



Because of the underlying fuel loads, in vast areas, the fire was so hot and intense, that it has incinerated all the organic matter (including the seeds) on and in the ground and killed most of the mature and younger trees, leaving the landscape now exposed to severe erosion.

Cool fires have been an essential and natural part of the Australian landscape. Fires of this scale and intensity are not! And importantly they are impossible to control.

As a result of the first two images, and because of a fear of an outcome of the third image, I had developed a plan for our (400acre) block, to start a cool burn clearing of the undergrowth, as I feared that a hot wild fire would damage the forest (trees) severely if not permanently. As the past three years had been exceptionally dry, and being a bit of a novice with this process, the circumstances didn't allow any burning. In early July 2019, I purchased a small bulldozer to start a process of clearing the undergrowth and ground debris mechanically and burning the resulting windrowed heaps.

I was able to do around 25 acres before fire restrictions in mid-October put a stop to it. Ultimately in due course, I had hoped to complete as much as was physically possible on the 400 acres, (limited by landscape constraints (steepness of slope)).

I was aware that I was likely to “butt heads” with the Local and State Government bureaucracy (because of the current vegetation laws) if what I was doing came to their attention. I would have dealt with that on an “as needs basis” if that had eventuated. The threat of that was not going to stop me. The fire event has now removed all evidence of my so called illegal activities.

On the evening of the 30th, our forested block and house were destroyed. We stayed on site (because of the presence of our fire bunkers) and were able to save most of our shed, machinery and vehicles.

The forest (not just ours but for hundreds of square kilometres) unfortunately suffered as I thought it might, because of the intensity of the fire, basically as a result of the huge fuel load it carried. Those areas that I had cleared suffered also, but not as severely in terms of total tree loss or ground burn.

There is an extensive section of the Tara Range State Forest, directly to the south of us that was cool burnt about three years ago. The fire came to and through our property via a crown fire through this area. The previous cool burn did not prevent the explosive crowning fire that came in and devoured our block. It went on to burn through almost to the border. Although that section of the Tara Range Forest has burnt, it appears at first glance and this early in the piece, that the trees and the ground did not suffer as badly. Time only will tell on this.

Unfortunately these so called cool burns in forests to reduce fuel loads will not stop crown fires, the likes of what happened on the evening of the 30th. The only way to do that is to reduce the stems per hectare, down to an open woodland structure.

If the land managers aren't going to or can't control fuel loads within these large contiguous “natural” landscapes (a realistically likely long term outcome given past history), then they need to look at returning significant strategic sections of that landscape back into open woodland (like that depicted in the du Gerard painting), which they can then more easily maintain through burning/grazing or combination of both. These areas would also allow some attempt to then control such conflagrations the like as we have just witnessed. These areas would remain still as native vegetation, and so still maintain essential and viable wildlife habitat and “corridors” for native animal movement, as they have been and done for the last 50,000 years. The landscape around communities and other essential assets need also to be converted back to open woodland, with grassy understory, both of these aspects lowering the risk of “crowning” fires.

Costly? Definitely! But only a fraction of the short term and long term cost associated with this last fire event. And once converted to open woodland, the cost of maintaining them would be significantly less and carry less risk to escapee fires than fuel reductions in a forest.

The reality is that if this fire had started somewhere east of the Dandenong Ranges, it would have burnt in one contiguous fire to the border, because there was nowhere and no way to stop it.

The other major issue surrounding vegetation management relates to the roadside verge. The road between Buchan and the Red Knob intersection runs through 40kms of heavy forest on both sides of the road, running down to its edges. These roadsides should have been cleared of trees, back a distance equivalent to their heights, years ago.

Because these roadsides had not been dealt with properly prior to the fire, Buchan was effectively shut off from the world for about 10 days, as the fires left fallen burnt and burning trees across the road for

20kms. After the fire event, the verge trees were in fact felled on both sides of the roads, as they should have been 20 years prior. Closing the gate after the horse has bolted! The only thing stopping ingress to and egress from Buchan after the fires was the state of the fallen and falling trees onto the road.

All of the above issues stem directly from poor and unscientific Local, State and Federal Government vegetation laws, including the Commonwealth EPBC Act.

In recent times significant fuel reduction burns have been cancelled due to pressure from environmental groups, based more on emotional grounds and “noise” than objective science. A prime example of this was at Nowa Nowa in late 2019, where a 370ha planned burn was reduced to 9 ha because of applied “green” pressure and much ranting.

There has also been a lot of argy bargy recently about the shortening of the time available to do the cool fuel reduction burns. If this restricting timing window is the case then clearly more resources need to be put into the narrowed time frames for it to happen.

There is no one or thing to blame for the extent of the catastrophe but the State and Federal land managers, by their inactions and skewed view of what was the natural landscape, year after year having added gunpowder to that landscape until the inevitable happened.

The Telstra Tower

At around 8am on the 31st, the telecommunications for the Buchan area went out. Apparently the tower had the capacity to run on batteries for 10 hrs, and this was when the 10hrs was up.

Given that the power lines for the Buchan Valley, up to and beyond Gelantipy run up through a forested area for a distance of about 40kms south of Buchan, this was always going to be a weak link in the event of a fire coming from the west, in the area anywhere south of Buchan. I had raised this issue at one of the community fire meeting after the 2018 Timbarra fires, but clearly to no avail.

With the loss of the telecommunications (for more than a week), Vic Emergency notices were no longer possible, as well as communications out of the district by locals.

Full control and monitoring communication with the Buchan Water Treatment Plant by East Gippsland Water also became an issue.

Town Water

Because the town water supply required power, and the town lost its power supply, and entry to the district was difficult, the Water Treatment Plant power back up unit eventually ran out of diesel. This required an overly complicated procedure to refuel, mostly finding “a suitably qualified person” to do so.

The Response

The early days of the fires

We were at our house in mid-November when the lightning event went over, that set this catastrophe in train.

During the next six weeks we watched (literally) the progress of the fires to the north (about 20kms away) and the west (about 20kms) of our house. We had a bird’s eye view of it all during all this time.

It did become obvious that the Vic Emergency updates were sometimes (days) behind what was happening on the ground especially what was happening to the north and east of us.

There was also an element of the “Chicken Little” story developing, with numerous warning and advice to leave being issued and then rescinded, to the point there may have been the temptation by some to become sceptical of them in due course. Given the nature of these events, there may be no way around this happening. But it does need to be in the minds of those making the calls.

I am also aware that DWELP put significant ground resources into trying to contain the fire in very inaccessible country in the beginning.

However I do wonder if aerial resources had been used very first up, to attack the fires in the first place, within the first 24 hours (given the close proximity of river water in both cases), and given the difficult terrain, I wouldn't be sitting here writing this submission! I am aware that it would be much more expensive in the first place, but given it was early in the season, the dryness of the forest, the likelihood of the fire escaping and then running (which it did) was likely to be high and probable in the coming months, it should have been the option taken. And it would have been a miniscule fraction of what was spent after that horse had bolted.

During the Timbarra fires in 2018, there were a number of additional lightning strikes that occurred in very remote spots (one directly on the hill to the north of us) whilst the Timbarra fires were being dealt with. The helicopters were quickly dispatched to the area and quickly killed the outbreaks whilst they were all still relatively small.

I also wonder, if some in DWELP hierarchy had actually considered as a part of their rationale, that, as the fires were out of harm's way, and only forest was likely to burn, then perhaps the aerial resources were not a priority at that time, and perhaps to just let it burn.

I have been reliably informed that when the fire crossed over into the Snowy River NP, in the Yalmy area, much of the strategic decision making occurred off site (Melbourne), and days were lost in the process of sending info up the line and then waiting for a response. It was left for days when it may have been contained when conditions eased, if assets were engaged on the ground, in a more timely manner. Unfortunately in due course the horse bolted, again!

By the 30th of December the fires were no longer remote and it was all too late.

It has also become apparent from our discussions with other residents, that there appears to have been a lack of local information going out in the days before, and in particular the day of the 30th, about the seriousness of the local (Buchan) situation. From our perspective and mainly because we had a birds eye view of Buchan and the Snowy River Valley, and had also found the information Vic emergency warnings not terribly reliable in terms of timing and detail, and had also considered ourselves to be safe (bodily) from harm because of our bunkers, we took very little notice of the warnings that were issued through the Vic emergency site.

However there were many individuals who were in areas where they could not see what was happening, (The Basin, Bete Bolong North, Buchan East), who have indicated they were in the dark about exactly what was happening on the day of the 30th, and especially in the late afternoon and evening of that day.

[The days before and the evening of the 30th](#)

In the days leading up to the 30th, the VicEmergency site had broadcast advice that the Buchan residents who wanted to leave, needed to leave via the Buchan Orbost Rd to a safe area set up in Orbost.

The advice to go to Orbost was based on the fact that the fire was likely to impact on the Buchan to Bruthen Rd to the south. It was also based on the fact that Buchan didn't have an appropriately certified “Designated Safe Assembly Area” as such.

This Designated Safe Assembly Area to all within the district is and has always been the Rec Ground and attached building. However the bureaucrats at some time past had considered that those facilities were not up to (their) scratch, presumably because it did not tick all the boxes (potential low level flooding from the Buchan River, being one issue). The reality of the situation however, given the nature of the valley, was that flooding would never require a mass evacuation to a Safe Designated Assembly Area. The only serious threat to the Buchan area was only ever wildfire.

This advice to leave via the Buchan Orbost Rd did cause the locals to scratch their collective heads in the circumstance. If anyone had decided to leave on the night of the 30th, or if conditions on the 30th had occurred some days earlier, there would have been a massive coronial inquest as well as the Royal Commission. That route would have been a death trap. It is 40kms of narrow, winding, densely forested road. On the night of the 30th, the fire ripped through the area (about 20kms) in less than 15 minutes, with winds in excess of 100kms an hour driving it. If you were on that road at that time, you would have had no way to escape a dreadful and fatal outcome.

The reality on the night was that the people of Buchan headed for the Rec Ground (which as already stated didn't meet the tick boxes), but it served its purpose, although strained. Even in the unlikely event that the building burnt down (unlikely as there were 150 CFA members and units sheltering there at the time and it was beside the Buchan River), the oval had been watered in the previous weeks, was green, and was a safe place to be if the worst came to the worst.

Conclusions

Given that a similar fire event could reoccur, at any time beyond 3 to 5 years, (with the build-up of forest floor debris, wattle, Manuka and eucalypt regrowth), I believe the following issues highlighted by the recent events need to be addressed.

1. More time/money needs to be spent on reducing fuel loads across government land.
2. Thought needs to be given to breaking up the contiguous nature of these National Parks, State Forests, and Conservation Parks with "open woodland" breaks. The areas around communities and other essential assets need the same treatment.
3. Roadsides need to be clear of undergrowth and tall trees to allow safe and timely access before, during and after a fire event.
4. The outbreak of a fire within the isolated forested areas need to be hit harder with aerial firefighting equipment right from the beginning.
5. More local on the ground fire decision making/responsibility in State Forests and National Parks.
6. More up to date locally relevant Vic emergency information about the impending impacts on locally.
7. Given the access problems (two forested roads) in and out of the Buchan area, Buchan needs to have an appropriately equipped and approved Designated Safe Assembly Area.
8. The telecommunications within the area need to be upgraded with more batteries and/or a diesel back up, to last in the order of a week with a grid outage.
9. Some suitably qualified individuals in town need to be "ticketed" to keep fuel up to the two essential services (telecommunications and water) in the event of a similar event.

I hope that when the next fire event comes, the authorities will have learnt their lessons and implemented change. However, looking back through history, I am not hopeful.