

THE HOWITT SOCIETY

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Advocating for healthy and safe landscapes

27/10/2020

Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister of Australia

Dear Prime Minister,

The Bushfires Royal Commission – providing no hope for the future

The Royal Commission's interim observations and the draft propositions give cause for grave concerns.

Conditions leading to Black Summer were not unprecedented. Equally atrocious conditions have been recorded periodically since the Settlement Drought, starting in 1790, when thousands of flying foxes and lorikeets dropped dead at Parramatta during three days of extreme heat and searing winds. Aboriginal fires were constantly burning, but Europeans were able to contain any that reached their settlements, because fuels were light and discontinuous. Our first known megafire occurred about 1820 in the Strzeleckis, after local Aborigines were decimated by smallpox. When Aboriginal management was disrupted across Victoria, 5 million hectares exploded on Black Thursday 1851. By the start of the 20th Century, before any manmade warming, megafires were delivering unprecedented quantities of charcoal in 70,000 years of sedimentary records.

By mid-century, we realised that lack of mild burning causes both pestilence and holocaust. Landscape management was reinstated. Forest health and fire safety improved. Charcoal in sediments declined against a trend of rising temperatures. More than half a century of data from WA shows that mild burning and quick response aid control of wildfires, reducing their number and extent, and maintaining biodiversity. A minimum 8% of the native landscape must be treated annually to guard against megafires. Treatments are effective for 6 years. The maths are simple. At least half the landscape must have recent maintenance to avoid disasters in extreme conditions.

Around 1980, academics erroneously claimed that mild burning threatens species which thrived through 40,000 years of Aboriginal management. They tried to restrict burning to suburban fringes. Millions of hectares were burnt by megafires in 2003. Canberra had a wide buffer of eaten-down paddocks, but 500 homes were lost. The Nairn Inquiry heard from land and fire managers across Australia, that landscape management was the answer. Bureaucracies and emergency services in the southeast didn't contribute, and there was a dissenting report based on a Professor's opinion that "*broad scale hazard reduction is threatening biodiversity conservation*".

COAG employed him with another Professor and a Fire Chief to conduct another inquiry. They've given us emergency response and evacuation instead of sustainable land management. After Black Saturday, a Victorian Royal Commission recommended mild burning of at least 5% of the forested landscape. This is not enough. Fuel reduced fringes cannot stop wide fronts from developing in remote areas. They don't stop firestorms or long-distance ember showers. In any case 5% was never

achieved, but Academics are using computer models to persuade us that a little bit of burning can reduce risk to 'acceptable levels'. We say that ongoing death and destruction is unacceptable.

Your Government's Inquiry into land management and bushfires gave way to the Bushfires Royal Commission. This started from a false premise, that megafires are natural disasters. The Commission is set to endorse an approach that has visited ongoing disaster upon us. If your Government adopts the recommendations without taking measures to reinstate sustainable land and fire management, socioeconomic and environmental destruction by megafires will continue unabated.

Black Summer highlighted these ongoing issues. We urge you to reinstate the Inquiry into land and vegetation management and request the state/territory governments in the south east, to make their Emergency Chiefs, Bureaucrats and Academic advisers available to respond to the issues identified in *A Nation Charred*, alongside the experienced land and fire managers who informed that Inquiry

Sincerely,



Garry Squires
Secretary
The Howitt Society

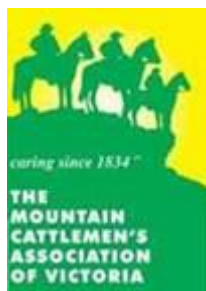
and on behalf of the community organisations listed below representing 5705 members, 500 associate members and 14 Regional Councils



The Bushfire Front of WA
Roger Underwood
Chairman



Sandy Kam
National Co-ordinator



Bruce McCormack
President



South East Timber Association
Peter Rutherford
Secretary



Justin Law
Managing Director



Volunteer Fire Fighters Assn
Mick Holton
President



Viv Forbes
Executive Director

