



Media Release

Institute calls for National Inquiry in Bushfire Management (200203)

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) today called on the Prime Minister to initiate a national inquiry into bushfire management in Australia

IFA President Ian Barnes said 'the events of this fire season, and of the previous, have tragically demonstrated that there are serious deficiencies with bushfire management practices in Australia'.

'While we celebrated Australia Day this year, more than 2 million hectares of prime forested land was burning, with large fires active in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia.' Barnes said.

Barnes said 'Contrary to the opinion of some State governments, and some government officials who mimic the claim, these fires are not solely due to drought and lightning. Although the current drought has exacerbated its potential, the extent and intensity of these fires are largely the inevitable result of State governments' policy of declining use of prescribed fire, for various reasons, as a land management tool'.

'Some governments and their officials know they are vulnerable to criticism for their lack of attention to prescribed burning, and are already resorting to 'spin doctoring' to deflect difficult questions about their lack of performance. They tend to focus debate on extreme weather scenarios, with the argument of 'no amount of hazard reduction could have stopped these fires burning in these extreme conditions'. This is misleading Barnes said.

'Whilst there may be little that fire fighters can do during the few hours of extreme weather even in closely grazed pastures, hazard reduced areas allow rapid and safe response in the immediate hours and days which follow. Their success results in a reduction in both the ultimate extent and severity of the damage' Barnes said.

'Our State governments are in denial about the issue of prescribed fire use in our forests. Coronial and parliamentary inquiries have been ineffective in objectively reviewing State's fire management practices and bringing about necessary change. Even hard learnt lessons in other similarly fire prone countries such as the USA have been discounted'.

There are other fire management issues between States that can be usefully examined such as the capacity of land management agencies to carry out rapid initial attack. An objective national review of fire management practices on our forested lands, particularly public lands, is needed.

It is ironic how 2 Governments recently established immediate Inquiries for railway accidents, yet more tragic fire devastation resulted in mere acceptance by these Government leaders as a by-product of the drought' Barnes said.

Ian Barnes has informed the Prime Minister that The Institute of Foresters of Australia would fully support a proposal by the Federal Government to initiate a national inquiry into bushfire management in Australia.

Media Contact: Mr Ian Barnes, President, Tel (02) 4472 6211

For further information about the Institute contact Adrian O'Loughlin, IFA Executive Director, Tel (02) 6281 3992